

GUINEE

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# FICTIONS OF AFRICAN DICTATORSHIP

Cultural Representations  
of Postcolonial Power

Edited by Charlotte Baker  
and Hannah Grayson

PETER LANG

# RACE AND RESISTANCE ACROSS BORDERS IN THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Fictions of African Dictatorship* examines the fictional representation of the African dictator and the performance of dictatorship across genres. The volume includes contributions focusing on literature, theatre and film, all of which examine the relationship between the fictional and the political. Among the questions the contributors ask: what are the implications of reading a novel for its historical content or accuracy? How does the dictator novel interrogate ideas of veracity? How is power performed and ridiculed? How do different writers reflect on questions of authority in the postcolony, and what are the effects on their stories and modes of narration? This volume untangles some of the intricate workings of dictatorial power in the postcolony, through twelve close readings of works of fiction. It interrogates the intersections between real and literary space, exploring censorship, political critique and creative resistance. Insights into a wide range of lesser known texts and contexts make this volume an original and insightful contribution to scholarship on representations of dictatorship.

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# Fictions of African Dictatorship

RACE AND RESISTANCE ACROSS BORDERS  
IN THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY

Volume 4

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## Introduction: Fictions of African Dictatorship

Since the rise to power of autocratic leaders across Africa in the early years of independence, artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, photographers and song-writers have been preoccupied with the compelling figure of the dictator, placing him at centre stage in their work. Their concern with the question of dictatorship requires little speculation, for African dictators and their regimes have defined the postcolonial period in Africa. Within a decade of independence, nearly all African states had evolved into dictatorships or single-party regimes, and the consequences of their autocratic regimes are still felt across the African continent today. Christopher Miller points to the irony that, having demanded nationhood, Africans found themselves subject to nationalism of quite a different sort: 'The arbitrary borders between African states, which had been ignored or critiqued [...] by the theory of Pan-African nationalism, were reasserted as the armatures of a more familiar state nationalism at the service of new elites.'<sup>1</sup> However, in his study of writing and authority in Latin American literature, Roberto González Echevarría reminds us that 'It is not simply a matter of arguing that, since there have been and still are dictators [...] literature ought to reflect that fact.'<sup>2</sup> Instead, he contends, power and rhetoric are bound up and cannot exist independently of one another.

The Latin American dictator novel has received considerable critical attention, with some critics asserting it as a genre that is 'specific' to Latin

- 1 Christopher Miller, 'Nationalism as Resistance and Resistance to Nationalism in the Literature of Francophone Africa', *Yale French Studies* 82.1 (1993): 62–100 (65).
- 2 Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 65.

America.<sup>3</sup> A subgenre of Latin American historical fiction, the dictator novel can be divided into three general waves, although it can be traced back as far as the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century accounts of Bernal Díaz del Castillo's and Fransisco López de Gomara of Hernán Cortés' conquest of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Josaphat B. Kubayanda demonstrates in his article 'Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa' that modern African dictator novels share with their Latin American counterparts the same concerns about post-independence disillusionments and new performances of tyranny, whether social or political. Kubayanda argues that literary works from both Africa and Latin America 'portray totalizing codes that pinpoint an unfinished business of decolonization'.<sup>5</sup> Patrice Nganang goes further, to argue that the *roman de la dictature* (dictatorship novel) points to dictatorship in the postcolony as the clearest embodiment of the continent's experience of tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe, Nganang describes dictatorship novels as texts that lay bare the tragedy of dictatorships which leave little room for opposition. As Mbembe explains in *On the Postcolony*:

[In] the postcolonial historical trajectory, the authoritarian mode can no longer be interpreted strictly in terms of surveillance, or the politics of coercion. The practices of ordinary citizens cannot always be read in terms of 'opposition to the state', 'deconstructing power' and 'disengagement'. In the postcolony, an intimate tyranny links the rulers with the ruled [...]. If subjection appears more intense than it might be, this is because the subjects of the *commandement* have internalized authoritarian

3 Moira Fradinger, *Binding Violence: Literary Visions of Political Origins* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 177.

4 See Echevarría, 'The Dictatorship of Rhetoric/the Rhetoric of Dictatorship: Carpentier, García Márquez, and Roa Bastos', *Latin American Research Review* 15.3 (1980): 205–28 (206).

5 Josephat Kubayanda, 'Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa', *Research in African Literatures* 28.4 (1997): 38–53 (38).

6 Patrice Nganang, *Manifeste d'une Nouvelle Littérature Africaine* (Paris: Homnisphères, 2007), p. 200.

epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life.<sup>7</sup>

For Mbembe, the very intimacy of tyranny is precisely what prevents resistance, entangling as it does the ruler and the ruled within a convivial space.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the Latin American dictator novel, the African dictator novel genre remains under-discussed by scholars, and only a few works, including Nuruddin Farah's trilogy of novels 'Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship' (1980–1983) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) have received significant critical attention.<sup>9</sup> Fictional representations of dictatorship beyond the dictator novel have received less attention still, barring perhaps Wole Soyinka's play *A Play of Giants* (1984). The absence of Soyinka from this volume indicates the impossibility of providing a comprehensive account of such a vast, and growing, corpus. While this volume contributes to the wider discussion of African dictator fiction, it recognizes the breadth of fictional representation of the dictator across genres, eras and nations, and aims to underline that range in its diversity. It includes chapters that examine the representation of the dictator in the short story, the novel, film, photography, the documentary and the essay, which focus on dictatorships across North and sub-Saharan Africa, from Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Morocco, Nigeria, Somalia and Swaziland. Work remains to be done on others genres, such as poetry, and portrayals of other contexts, such as

7 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 128.

8 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 129.

9 Studies include Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (2014), Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, *Dictates of Authority: Aesthetics with Politics in the Spanish American and African Dictator-Novel*, Unpublished thesis, New York University, 2014, Josef Gugler, 'African Literary Comment on Dictators: Wole Soyinka's Plays and Nuruddin Farah's Novels', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 26.1 (1988): 171–7, Gitahi Gititi, 'Ferocious Comedies: Henri Lopes' *The Laughing Cry* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* as "Dictator" Novels' in Charles Cantaloupo (ed.), *Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o: Text and Contexts* (1995): 211–26, and Robert Spencer, 'Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the African dictator novel', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47 (2012): 145–58.

Mugabe's recently ended thirty-seven-year reign in Zimbabwe; we hope in turn that this volume will lead to further investigations in these areas. Some contributions, such as Mari and Solis' chapter on diaspora, explicitly state the transnational focus this volume establishes, in order to point to the wider global significance of dictatorship. The collection of essays highlights both the creative potential and the expansive nature of African cultural space. Styles, tropes and concerns vary across borders, but also recur in strikingly similar ways from context to context, indicating that writing the dictator remains a transnational project. Importantly, this forms part of a wider transnational move among African writers and critics to wrest control of African representation and memory for themselves. Within this, *Fictions of African Dictatorship* includes studies of a number of lesser-known fictional representations of dictatorship, including works by In Koli Jean Bofane, Eric Sibanda, and Tiyambe Zeleza alongside high-profile figures such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Ahmadou Kourouma.

The volume's attention to the multiple intersections between fiction and dictatorship necessarily raises questions about the efficacy of fictional representation as a mode of representing and resisting authoritarianism. Several contributors point to the strategies employed by dictators to fictionalize their own representations in order to portray a particular image of themselves, while others focus on the potential of art to interrogate the performance of dictatorship. While the authors of some chapters focus on the aesthetic techniques used to circumvent censorship or to operate political critique, others bring the question of language to the fore, pointing to its central importance in depicting and contesting regimes built on discourses of unanimity and exclusion. Far from drowning everything out, here these tirades find themselves creatively manipulated in textual form: with satire or irony. Fiction is also examined as a potential space of resistance, a space in which alternative versions and visions of reality can be presented. The range of writing here in turn challenges any fiction that experiences of power and politics across the African continent are uniform. As such, contributors interrogate the multiple, intersecting layers of fiction in a diverse range of real and literary spaces, which include the visible and aesthetic, the linguistic and discursive.

While many of the figures and events portrayed in the works of fiction examined here are based on historical events, the line between the two is often blurred. In *History meets Fiction*, Beverley Southgate reminds us of the difficult relationship between history and fiction when she remarks that ‘historians have long prided themselves on producing works that specifically *contrast* with fiction – that are “historical” works precisely by virtue of *not* being fiction, that are verifiably “true” in a way that fiction does not aspire to be.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, contributors to this volume examine a number of points of contact between fiction and history, which include the use of fiction as historical evidence, as a means of revisiting the past in fresh ways, presenting figures and events from alternative perspectives, and as a way of posing difficult questions.

The chapters in Part I, ‘Portrait of a Dictator’, examine the fictional representation of the dictator, focusing particularly on the image of the dictator as symbolic of a wider imaginary. This chapter brings to the fore the particular impact of all that is visual: how power holders manipulate what is perceived and visible to their gain, and how aesthetic interventions can constitute forms of visual resistance. In the opening chapter, Angie Epifano focuses on the importance of image and the role of photography in building a nationalist imaginary around dictator figures. Centring on the reign of Sékou Touré in Guinea, Epifano expertly demonstrates how daily life is manipulated to display the ideology and power of this leader. Touré’s policies and practices are carefully contextualized in this chapter, which reveals how particular images were intentionally circulated to feed into a specific cultural ideology. Epifano examines postures, clothing, symbolism and setting in these images, each of which was imbued with layers of meaning to cement Touré’s nationalist aims. In contrast to Epifano’s specific focus on Guinea, Khalid Lyamlahy reflects in his chapter on the transnational reach of the volume’s theme, placing his analysis of Bensalem Himmich’s *Le Calife de l’épouvante* in a corpus of dictatorship texts from Latin America and the Arab world. Lyamlahy unpicks the inherent complexity in this corpus, namely regarding the ambivalence of

10 Beverley Southgate, *History meets Fiction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 2.

the term dictatorship, and the limitations or ‘impouvoir’ (impotence) of dictatorial literature in terms of its political efficiency. Himmich’s historical fiction narrates the tyranny of Al-Hākīm bi Amr Allāh, sixth Fatimid caliph who ruled Egypt from 996 to 1021. The use of parody and the trope of madness constitute Himmich’s ‘resistance by sarcasm’, which Lyamlahy (a novelist himself) demonstrates with close attention to the text. Then, turning the focus to film, Rita Keresztesi examines Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s *Le Président* to place Bekolo in a lineage of filmmakers who approach pressing, violent political situations from the perspective of comedy. Keresztesi shows how the genre of documentary has been reworked, using fiction and the imagination to better represent the complex forces of necropower at work in the postcolony. In the case of Paul Biya’s Cameroon, Bekolo’s film enacts a kind of taking-back of the screens that were otherwise so dominated by the president’s own media. Keresztesi examines a whole range of cinematic devices used by Bekolo here to put on show the ‘unfreedom’ of Cameroon and the nonetheless persistent presence of hope that artistic production will somehow usher in the end of Biya’s regime.

Those in power act out various roles which include, among others, benevolence, intimacy, omniscience, and omnipotence. The chapters in Part II, ‘Performance and Myth-making’, draw attention to these performances, to the very staged nature of many power practices, and to the traditions that inflect them with particular significance. Eline Kuenen’s chapter, ‘Creation through Inversion: The Carnavalesque Postcolonial State in the Novels of Alain Mabanckou and In Koli Jean Bofane’, argues for the disruptive qualities of writing by the new generation of francophone African writers to which Mabanckou and Bofane belong. However, she also sets these two authors apart because of their uniquely paratopic position, as well as their questioning of the very position of the francophone writer (and she traces their own shifting positionalities). The chapter examines the roles of theatrical elements and the carnivalesque in creating an alternative version of reality that points to the performative tendencies of the banality of power in the postcolony. The juxtaposition of the serious and the comical, she argues, reveals the arbitrary nature of much postcolonial politics, and indeed, the many fictions at work within it. In Chapter 5, Maria Muresan provides an original reading of the well-known novel *Wizard of*



*the Crow* by Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o. Muresan unpicks specific rituals in the novel to outline the author’s thinking about democracy in the context of post-independence inequalities. The layers of allegory and myth that Muresan analyses are shown to fictionalize various aspects of Daniel arap Moi’s politics. Sorcery and witchcraft are at the heart of this, critiquing racial discrimination, highlighting spiritual and moral crises, and shedding light on those neglected within patriarchal traditions. Muresan brings together her close reading of two scenes with insights from a broad critical and literary corpus to provide here a new reading of a familiar but rich text. In Chapter 6, Bindi Ngouté Lucien turns her attention to Ahmadou Kourouma’s post-1990 novels, illustrating the use of myth and totem in the creation of heroic images of the dictator. Drawing on examples from *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998) and *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000), Lucien explores the wider links between dictatorial power and myths in Africa. The chapter examines the appropriation of animalistic attributes, including strength, speed, violence and fecundity, and the reliance on mythical elements, to interrogate the performance of power by African dictators, both real and fictional.

The chapters in Part III, ‘Compromised Freedoms’, shift the focus to the consequences of dictatorship and the role of fiction in reclaiming liberty by opening up the possibility of alternatives and providing the opportunity to reflect on the possibility of their realization. In ‘The Author and the Authoritarian: Gamal al-Ghitani’s *al-Zaynī Barakāt*’, Alya El Hosseiny analyses Gamal al-Ghitani’s *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, which depicts the fall of Cairo to Ottoman invaders in the early 1500s. Themes of sight and surveillance indicate that this novel constitutes rich textual territory for exploring dictatorial power, in this case in Egypt. In the face of the oppression of state authority, El Hosseiny demonstrates the power of the dissident potential and creative dynamics of orality (*ḥadīth*) and writing. El Hosseiny’s attention to the multiple narrative approaches and perspectives in the text highlights what is in evidence across this volume of essays: that a broad and varied range of textual and filmic creative strategies are required to contest the single-minded, tyrannical control critiqued in each of the texts. Kerry Vincent’s chapter turns to the detective story and, against a backdrop of the language politics of Swaziland, traces the publishing history of Eric

Sibanda's siSwati story, 'Sagila Semnikati' (The Owner's Knobkerrie). By assessing the subtle editorial differences between the editions of the story, Vincent demonstrates the roles literature and drama can play in cementing or challenging particular narratives of guilt and innocence. Plot is given priority over character to reveal how the detective story genre can intertextually play on events happening in the real-life context of production. Vincent provides fascinating insights into this kind of fictional capturing, and the political stakes involved in literary critiques of state practices. In the next chapter, "My characters, my plots, are under my pen": Authority as Dictatorship in King-Aribisala's *The Hangman's Game*, Madeleine Wilson details the critique of postcolonial Nigeria that is effected through an inversion of the common trope of a larger-than-life patriarchal figure. Multiple layers of fiction reveal damaging addiction to control, as the self-referential novel explores contests over body, agency, and word.

Finally, Part IV, 'Forms of Resistance', turns to a focus on the local and the transnational as a form of resisting nationalist agendas. As Miller remarks, 'As the objective of most writers moves from anticolonialism to antineocolonialism, the relation of the writer to the African state shifts, and exile becomes directly proportional to the radicalism of critique'.<sup>11</sup> This part opens with F. Fiona Moolla's comparative reading of the work of Nuruddin Farah and Ahmed Omar Askar, which illustrates and argues for the contemporary relevance of such literary representations. Moolla draws interesting parallels between Siad Barre and other authoritarian rulers, carefully contextualizing her analysis and thus underscoring the transnational concerns of this volume as a whole. Whilst assessing the strengths of quite different approaches to the same theme in terms of genre, she pinpoints a fascinating paradox between presence and absence, and provides additional insights into the processes of textual production. In Chapter 11, Asante Lucy Mtenje focuses on two novels by Malawian writers to illustrate how their characterization of female subjects goes against the norm, in multiple ways. Mtenje shows that although not in the foreground, or depicted as central protagonists, the female characters in Tiyambe Zeleza's

11 Miller, *Nationalism as Resistance*, p. 94.

*Smouldering Charcoal* and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* constitute sites of political resistance. The agency with which they use their sexuality challenges ideas of propriety within and beyond the texts. Mtenje's chapter draws out the importance of such examples by building a clear picture of the socio-cultural and political context, in particular the policies and codes imposed within the strict regime of Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Finally, in their chapter, 'Mighty Mouth, Minor Literature: Siad Barre's Dictatorship in Italian Postcolonial Literature', Lorenzo Mari and Teresa Solis immerse us in literary responses to autocratic rule in Somalia. They argue for the value of reading 'minor literatures' (in this case Somali literature written in Italian) in order to find the most vivid representations of his dictatorship. These texts, the authors suggest, are where greater nuance is to be found regarding women's resistance to Barre's regime, for example. Intergenerational divergences in literary representation are well traced in their analysis of texts from the Somali diaspora. The ambivalence they reveal in this corpus leads the authors to conclude that any 'active solidarity' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari remains, at least for now, far on the horizon for Somali literature.

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PART I

Portrait of a Dictator



ANGIE EPIFANO

## I The Image of Sékou Touré: Art and the Making of Postcolonial Guinea<sup>1</sup>

From outward appearances, President Touré is the living national hero for Guineans. He supposedly knows everything and everything stems from him and passes through him. He sets the standards.

— LANSINÉ KABA, 1981, p. 53

*Le Responsable Suprême de la Révolution* [The Supreme Leader of the Revolution], *Silly*, *Le Commandant en Chef des forces armées populaires et révolutionnaires* [The Commander in Chief of the Popular and Revolutionary Armed Forces], *Le Président* [President] – are just a few of the many titles that Sékou Touré (1922–1984) earned during his lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Often described as one of the most charismatic men in modern history, Touré was the lifeblood of the Guinean independence movement and postcolonial government.<sup>3</sup> Touré manipulated every aspect of Guinean

1 This research was supported by grants from the Lewis & Clark College Student Academic Affairs Board and the University of Chicago's African Studies Workshop. I would also like to thank the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal, as well as the archivists at the Archives Nationale in Conakry, Guinea, for their support. I am also grateful for suggestions from Ben David, Cécile Fromont, Matt Johnson, Nora Lambert, and Dawn Odell.

2 'Silly' is Susu for 'elephant'. The mascot for the Guinean national football (soccer) team is the elephant. This has led to deep contestations between Guineans over the use of the elephant as a national symbol, since many Guineans still read the elephant as a representation of Touré.

3 The photographs reproduced here are orphan works and I have done my due diligence to try to determine the original owners and producers of these images. If anyone has

life to be a perfect reflection of his ideologies and fabricated persona. He imagined postcolonial Guinea as a direct descendent of the precolonial Wassoulou Empire, ruled by Samory Touré (c. 1830 to 1900), and articulated a desire to regain this empire's lost power.<sup>4</sup>

A body of remarkable photographs produced throughout Touré's reign illustrates his endeavours to transcend the boundaries of time and space, appropriating past glories for his present aims. These photographs of Guinean citizens and material culture, ranging from clothing to festivals to streetscapes, collectively reveal the dictator's strategic manipulation of the country, and form the basis for analysis here. As this chapter will demonstrate, at the heart of Touré's power was his ability to craft, perform, and maintain a cohesive cultural narrative that united the new nation. This chapter examines this body of material in order to understand how photographs affected the development of nationalism in this West African state. I argue that the essence of Guinean identity became the image of, and mythology surrounding, President Touré.<sup>5</sup> National ideology was visually circulated through public displays of portraits of Touré and coded allusions to his persona.<sup>6</sup> This circulation contributed to a metonymic relationship in which Touré stood in for the Guinean people and nation,

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any further information regarding the makers of these photographs, please contact me at the University of Chicago.

4 Throughout this chapter I regularly discuss Samory Touré and Sékou Touré. In order to avoid confusion, I will refer to Samory Touré as 'Samory' and to Sékou Touré as 'Touré.' Wassoulou is also often spelled 'Ouassoulou' in French documents; I will exclusively use the Anglophone spelling for consistency.

5 République de Guinée, *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux* (Conakry: République de Guinée, 1977).

Under Touré's regime, Guinea held annual cultural festivals to celebrate aesthetic achievements from the past year. Dignitaries and artists from across the communist world were invited to participate and watch. The festivals were not only intended to bolster Guineans nationalist identities, but also demonstrate the glory of the Guinean nation on an international scale.

6 Julie D'Andurain, *La Capture De Samory (1898): L'achèvement De La Conquête De L'Afrique De L'Ouest* (Paris: Éditions Soteca, 2012), 1–27. The Wassoulou Empire stretched across Eastern, South Eastern, and East Central Guinea; it extended into contemporary Mali, and had close ties with contemporary Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia,



while the Guinean people also stood for Touré himself and his vision of the new nation.

From the earliest existence of the colony, Guinea was a thorn in the side of French colonial authorities, which constantly struggled to maintain peace and order in the seemingly lawless colony.<sup>7</sup> French governors and military officials in the late nineteenth century repeatedly discussed the difficulties at maintaining peace in Guinea. The colony was one of the last to be officially pacified, in 1898, and even after this point insurrections continued to break out for several decades. The most notorious of these insurrections was led by the Peul leader, Alfa Yaya of Labé, who continued to fight the French into the late 1910s. The Guinean hero Almamy Samory Touré was the most famous nineteenth-century revolutionary, and today is considered to exemplify Guinea's fierce sense of independence.<sup>8</sup> Samory Touré founded, presided over, and defended the last African-ruled empire in precolonial Guinea, the Wassoulou Empire.<sup>9</sup> He is internationally viewed as one of the greatest heroes of West Africa, but is especially important to the people of Guinea and his visage dots Conakry to this day. The story of Samory exists in an ambiguous realm between fact and fiction; his accomplishments and origins continue to be reimagined and elaborated upon to this day. The publication of a 1963 American children's book exemplifies the dissemination of narratives about the Almamy on an international scale. Although written in English and sold in the United States, the story is based on research that was financially supported by Sékou Touré's regime.<sup>10</sup>

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and Sierra Leone. Samory and his subjects were primarily Malinké and today the empire is a special point of pride for Malinké Guineans.

7 K. Madhu Panikkar, 'Guinea: A Case Study' in *Revolution in Africa* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), 139–95.

8 'Almamy' is an Arabic title given to Muslim West African leaders that roughly translates to 'Commander of the Faithful.' Samory received this title in the late 1870s. He was often lauded for his faith and knowledge of the Quran, and is often visually depicted holding pages from the Quran.

9 Panikkar, 'Guinea: A Case Study', 139–95.

10 Matthew Meade, Rolland Snellings, et al., *Samory Touré* (Brooklyn, NY: Nommo Associates Inc., 1963).

As the story goes, Samory was born in 1830 to ‘humble beginnings’ in Bissandugu, Guinea.<sup>11</sup> By the age of thirteen, he was already widely renowned for his ‘military skills, regal bearing, and splendid physique,’ and quickly rose to power.<sup>12</sup> From the 1860s onward, Samory steadily began to gain control of more land, wealth, and people, and ‘founded’ the Wassoulou Empire – the first and last independent Malinké kingdom in West Africa.<sup>13</sup> During this period, the French annexed ‘Guinea’ and placed the region under their control.<sup>14</sup> The French first encountered Samory in the late 1870s, yet the two sides did not come into conflict with one another until 1881 when the French ordered Samory to leave several key ports on the Niger River.<sup>15</sup> For the next seventeen years, conflict reigned in Guinea.<sup>16</sup> Samory’s army held out until 1898 when they were finally defeated. Samory himself was captured and exiled to Gabon, where he died under contentious circumstances in 1900.<sup>17</sup>

The tale of Samory marked the beginning of a power struggle between Guinea and France that lasted for decades, which eventually came to a head

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This book was part of Guinea’s involvement with the American Black Panther movement and black American liberation struggles in the 1960s. There is tangential evidence that a similar children’s book was published in French in Guinea, however, I have not found a copy of such a document. The story told in the children’s book does match up almost identically with stories recorded by the French and Guineans in the 1930s, which are housed in the national archives in Conakry. Further, the Guinean state newspaper published a similar account of Samory’s life in 1968 to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of independence.

11 Meade et al., *Samory Touré*, 2.

12 Meade et al., *Samory Touré*, 3.

13 Meade et al., *Samory Touré*, 4. Meade claims that, at its height, the Wassoulou Empire included over 100,000 miles of Niger River delta land. Population estimates vary, but some Guineans claim that Samory controlled tens of thousands of people.

14 J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1–12.

15 Les Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar, Senegal.

16 *Samory Touré*, 6–9.

17 Panikkar, ‘Guinea: A Case Study.’ There is debate over whether Samory died of natural causes or was executed by the French.

with the famous ‘Vote for No’ campaign.<sup>18</sup> In 1958, French president Charles de Gaulle attempted to reaffirm African colonies’ commitment to the French state by calling an election across French West Africa that would determine whether colonies would remain connected to France or would leave the empire. African voters were given two options: yes, remain part of the empire, or, no, leave the empire. On 28 September 1958, Guinea shocked the world by becoming the first French colony to declare independence.<sup>19</sup> The French withdrew from Guinea, and in the process, destroyed a large portion of the infrastructure in and around Guinea’s largest cities. In the following months, the charismatic politician Sékou Touré was elected president. His political party, the Parti démocratique de Guinée [PDG, Democratic Party of Guinea], consolidated power and declared itself the only party in the new République de Guinée [Republic of Guinea].<sup>20</sup> Touré and the PDG faced the monumental role of simultaneously uniting the nation, maintaining a balance of power between ethnic groups, and validating their nation’s right to exist on a global scale.<sup>21</sup> These difficulties bore heavily upon the country and contributed to Touré’s formation of an autocratic dictatorship. Although Touré’s policies were far from liberatory they were perceived as necessary to ensure that Guinea would survive and thrive. Guinea’s complex history shaped Touré’s political decisions, which affected national cultural policies, which, in turn, further influenced Touré’s politics.<sup>22</sup>

After gaining independence, almost overnight Guinea became an extension of Touré himself. National cultural policies were enforced that monitored and controlled art making and consolidated creative thought into Touré’s hands.<sup>23</sup> These policies were Touré’s brainchildren that were implemented

18 Elizabeth Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939–1958* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005), 1–20.

19 Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 1.

20 Schmidt, *Mobilizing the Masses*, 1.

21 Elizabeth Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea, 1946–1958* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), Chapter 1.

22 Daughton, *An Empire Divided*, 260–2.

23 Mike McGovern, *Unmasking the State: Making Modern Guinea* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3–5.

by government agents and other politicians. He used these policies to reify Samory and vilify the French. For Touré, this endeavour was of utmost importance. Its gravity is best exemplified in the 1968 national cultural festivities honouring ten years of Guinean independence. After weeks of celebrations revolving around Samory and the Wassoulou Empire, the dénouement of these activities comprised a series of ceremonies marking the return of Samory's remains to Guinea.<sup>24</sup> This monumental event was at the heart of Sékou Touré's identity as a ruler and desired identity for Guinea itself. From the start of his rule, Touré had maintained that he was a direct descendent of Samory. Later, Touré would go so far as to claim to be the reincarnation of Samory.<sup>25</sup> This physical connection allowed Touré to place postcolonial Guinea within a lineage of African independence fighters, thereby shoring up his own validity and that of the nation.<sup>26</sup> The narrative was transformed into a communal history that bypassed ethnic differences and concretely defined the Guinean people and a Guinean identity.<sup>27</sup> Over the following decades, Touré used the image of Samory to visualize Guinea as an extension of the Wassoulou Empire, with himself as the Samory-like nucleus.<sup>28</sup>

Cities and villages were encoded with visual and textual references to Touré, making it impossible to escape his image. Touré's daily outfit of stunningly white slacks, a short-sleeved shirt, and a somewhat boxy hat became so famous that the hat itself is now simply called a 'Touré hat' (Figure 1).<sup>29</sup> These sartorial choices were reminiscent of Samory's own

24 Les Archives Nationales. Conakry, Guinea.

25 Panikkar, 'Guinea: A Case Study', 150.

26 D'Andurain, *La Capture De Samory*. Touré's biological connection to Samory is debated to this day. There is a possibility that Touré was a distant relative of Samory, however, there is almost no way that he could have been a grandson or great-grandson, as he typically claimed.

27 Combatting ethnic differences was, and still remains a huge concern for Guinea. The country is comprised of a number of different ethnic groups that are each culturally and historically distinct. The primary groups are the Peuhl, the Malinké, the Susu, and the Forestière, with almost a dozen smaller ethnic groups living in Guinea as well.

28 Les Archives Nationales. Conakry, Guinea.

29 Claude Rivière, *Guinea: The Mobilization of a People* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 30–40.

costuming, and linked the two men through time. Touré's fame was not produced by mistake, but was part of the leader's carefully crafted agenda of decolonizing, modernizing, and uniting Guinea. After the mayhem caused by France's violent withdrawal from the country, Touré recognized that Guinea's success as a nation necessitated unity. In order for this to happen, Guineans had to put aside ethnic differences and begin defining themselves first as *Guinean*. This proposal necessitated the implementation of a national cultural system that would create 'horizontal comradeship' between ethnic groups.<sup>30</sup>



Figure 1: Photograph from *Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, page 112. Caption reads, 'Le Président Ahmed Sékou Touré et son hôte de marque au Palais du Peuple.'

Between 1959 and 1961, Touré implemented a 'demystification' programme that was ostensibly meant to 'civilize' the rural population by rooting out

30 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 7.

‘detrimental’ cultural practices.<sup>31</sup> The PDG described demystification using positive language that focused on the ‘backward’ and divisive nature of non-Western cultural practices.<sup>32</sup> Further, the PDG claimed that there would be economic benefits to demystification, since the programme would theoretically modernize the country and eventually foster international trade partnerships.<sup>33</sup> In reality, demystification was an iconoclastic movement that destroyed an untold number of objects and eradicated centuries-old traditions.<sup>34</sup> As part of demystification, Guinean soldiers were deployed across the country, where they destroyed ‘pagan’ material culture and forcibly converted entire villages to either Islam or Christianity.<sup>35</sup> The final deathblow to polytheism and traditional arts was a law passed circa 1959 that made it illegal for Guineans to practise any ‘discriminatory cultural development.’<sup>36</sup> It was specifically aimed at outlawing any custom that was determined to be unique to a specific ethnic group – activities deemed ‘individualistic,’ anti-Guinean, and detrimental to the nation itself.<sup>37</sup> A wide range of activities were made illegal, including the carving of masks, the production of ethnically relative literature, and the practising of polytheistic religions. Along with demystification, this law led to the near eradication of highly developed cultural activities and, from the mid-1960s onward, limited freedom of expression more broadly.

The problems caused by demystification were either lost on or ignored by Touré, who, in 1961, declared that Guinea was successfully and sufficiently

31 Victor David Du Bois, *The Independence Movement in Guinea: A Study in African Nationalism*, PhD dissertation (Princeton University, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1962).

32 McGovern, *Unmasking the State*, Note 1 for Chapter 1, 245.

33 McGovern, *Unmasking the State*, Note 1 for Chapter 1, 245.

34 McGovern, *Unmasking the State*, Note 1 for Chapter 1, 245.

35 Although Samory was Muslim, he gave Guineans the choice of converting to either Islam or Christianity. This was quite unique and is still celebrated by Guineans today as a sign of their country’s progressive attitudes toward religion.

36 Guinea National Commission for UNESCO, *Cultural Policy in the Revolutionary People’s Republic of Guinea* (France: UNESCO, 1979), 31.

37 Ibid.

modernized.<sup>38</sup> Around this time, Touré began to develop a model for a 'liberatory' culture that was a mixture of traditional arts and his own persona.<sup>39</sup> The most famous example of this was the dance troupe *Les Ballets Africains* [The African Ballet], whose performances blended different ethnicities' traditional dances and Western dance styles.<sup>40</sup> Touré's hodge-podge of cultures was almost seamlessly integrated into daily life through bureaucratic structures that touched the lives of every Guinean.<sup>41</sup> Touré imagined a 'correct' and an 'incorrect' way to enact culture, which created a dichotomy between those who were 'genuine' Guineans and those who were not (Figure 5).<sup>42</sup>

Guineans condemned as Western, or non-genuine, were charged with crimes under the 'discriminatory cultural development' law, and were labelled anti-Guinean conspirators. Often these 'individualistic artists' would be charged with attempting to assassinate Touré or leading a military coup to overthrow the PDG.<sup>43</sup> Although there were probably attempts against Touré's life, many of these tales were fabricated to discredit

38 Les Archives Nationales. Conakry, Guinea.

39 Guinea National Commission for UNESCO, *Cultural Policy*, 72. Touré's cultural policies were marred by seemingly bizarre inconsistencies. During demystification Touré decried the negative effects of polytheism and tradition on the Guinean people and nation. However, just a few years later he had claimed that Guinea had to embrace its precolonial, African past in order to modernize. He is now best remembered for his pan-Africanist and pro-African rhetoric that in many ways oppose his demystification-era ideology.

40 Ramon Sarro, *The Politics of Religious Change on the Upper Guinea Coast: Iconoclasm Done and Undone* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, 2009).

41 Les Archives Nationales. Conakry, Guinea. Touré's bureaucratic structure was modelled after the USSR and Cuba; in the early years of independence, PDG officials worked closely with officials from these nations to build a political system that supported a single-party, single-ruler state. Due to Guinea's small size and Touré's incredible ability to mobilize people, these systems were implemented in a short period of time and were effectively involved in the lives of every citizen within less than a decade.

42 Guinea National Commission for UNESCO, *Cultural Policy*.

43 Les Archives Nationales. Conakry, Guinea. Lansiné Kaba, 'The Cultural Revolution, Artistic Creativity, and Freedom of Expression in Guinea,' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, no. 2 (1976): 201–18.

artists and political opponents. The conspiracies offered the double benefit of eliminating anti-PDG persons, while also keeping the nation in a perpetual state of paranoia and arrested political development.<sup>44</sup> Touré's heroic, god-like ability to constantly escape near death situations solidified his Samory-like mythos and iconicity.

Touré purposefully raised himself to this superhuman level in order to justify his rewriting and manipulation of Guinean culture, and his iconic visage was propagated by state sponsored art that played on these ideas (Figure 1). Such imagery included photographs from the 1977 book *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux* [The 9th and 10th National Cultural Festivals], which documents the 1977 Guinean National Cultural Festival that was attended by hundreds of thousands of Guineans.<sup>45</sup> These important photographs reveal Touré's complete domination of Guinean life and art, and are representative of Guinean art from the postcolonial period. The image of Touré did not just refer to Touré the man, but was instead a simulacrum that made reference to an idealized image of Guinea. Guinean nationalism was defined by these layered imaginings and imagings of Touré.

Touré's central position in Guinea is immediately reflected in his prominence on the cover of the book *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, published by the République de Guinée in 1977 (Figure 2). A large, closely cropped image of Touré dominates a montage that includes similarly clipped photographs of performers in the middle of their acts. The photograph of Touré is highly contrasted, which transforms his crisp, white suit into a stark highlight that jumps off the page. He stands in a firm, yet humble pose, with one arm hiding behind his back as the other is raised in a gesture of greeting or acknowledgement. The images of performers in the background suggest that Touré is celebrating their performances, while simultaneously welcoming us to the festival. On a coded level, Guineans are reminded of Touré's centrality in defining and judging culture. His presence signifies that the artistic productions contained in the book are *genuine* and should be consumed. Within the book, viewers encounter

44 McGovern, *Unmasking the State*.

45 République de Guinée, *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux* (Conakry: République de Guinée, 1977).



several types of photographs that reinforce Touré's nationalist ideology. Two particular types are most prevalent: Touré as a physical background and Touré as an invisible reference.

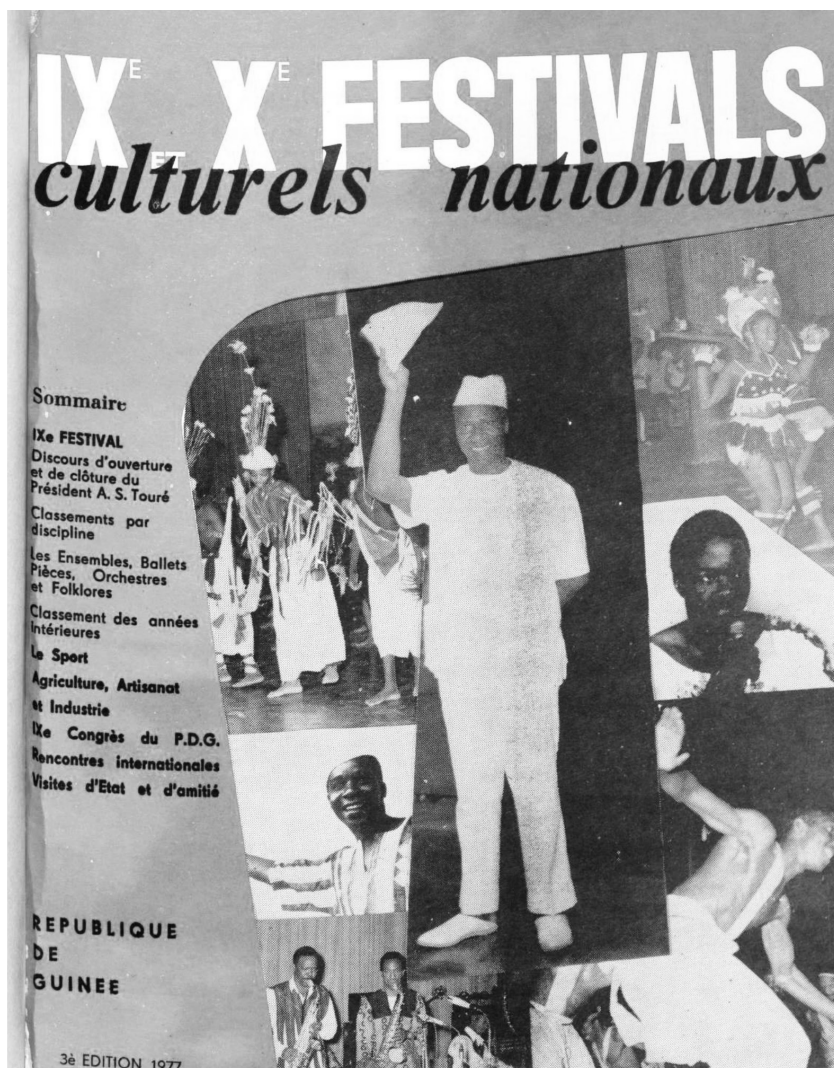


Figure 2: Cover of the book *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux* by the République de Guinée, 1977.

Touré appears as a physical background in countless photographs from *Festivals Culturels* and other postcolonial images (Figures 1 and 3). Often Touré's image is positioned as the backdrop of a city street, performance, or public speech. In one noteworthy image, Guinea's national choir performs in front of a gargantuan print of the president, which dwarfs the seemingly miniscule singers. Other photos reveal that the portraits of Touré are often massive products that physically dominate its environment, whether a discrete interior or an entire landscape. Touré's presence is forcibly unavoidable.



Figure 3: Photograph from *Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, page 98. Caption reads, 'Son entrée dans la salle des Congrès après sa brillante réélection. Le chef de l'Etat à gauche fait.'

In other photographs, Touré himself dominates the foreground, while his portrait provides the background (Figures 1 and 3). These images allow us to compare the portrait with the man, and the differences are startling. The portrait captures a youthful, effervescent Touré who appears unfazed by the fast paced, complicated world surrounding him (background of Figure 1). Perhaps this portrait was made immediately after Touré took office; it certainly alludes to the bright spirits of a newly born nation. The

real Touré, however, bore the weight of age and a difficult presidency. In later portraits his face is lined and his body is small and vulnerable compared to his iconic self. This face was not plastered across the nation.

Touré's portrait is imbued with many layers of meaning, most notably religious and historical connotations. Touré, like Samory before him, was seen as a religious figure comparable to the Prophet Mohammed and the Archangel Michael.<sup>46</sup> The use of portraiture across Guinea supplemented Touré's divine status and visually reinforced his primary position in religious ideology. Art and daily activities performed in front of the portrait inherited a connection to these themes, which validated their position as genuine nationalist actions. Guineans could thus be reassured that the art they practised and viewed was nationally acceptable. Art performed or created away from the watchful eyes of Touré became anti-Guinean, colonial, and individualistic (Figure 5). Even when not physically present, Touré's image was a constant, which policed culture and inspired proper nationalist sentiment.

In a 2012 article, Benjamin Ngong argues that clothing bears a social code in postcolonial African nations that reinforces the values of a certain political group.<sup>47</sup> Using Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Ngong demonstrates how,

Le vêtement participe d'un processus de légitimité du pouvoir et d'instauration de la violence symbolique qu'un groupe politique dominant impose à l'autres.<sup>48</sup>

46 *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux* is part of a class of books and pamphlets published by the Guinean government in conjunction with the nation's annual cultural festivals. The genre consists of a combination of poorly printed black-and-white photographs, brief captions, essays typically by Touré himself, and tables listing the various participants and winners in the year's competitions. No authors or photographers are listed in any of these books, and I have yet to find documentation on this information. Every aspect of the book is set forward as a product of the state itself, and individual identities are erased.

47 Benjamin Ngong, 'Costume et pouvoir: La Fonction comminatoire du vêtement dans la politique postcoloniale en Afrique,' In *Imaginary Spaces of Power in sub-Saharan Literatures and Films*, Edited by Alix Mazuet (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 88–91.

48 Ngong, 'Costume et pouvoir', 93.

[Clothing participates in a process of legitimating power and the establishment of a symbolic violence that a dominant political group imposes on others.]

In Guinea, Touré used clothing as an ideological tool comparable to a ‘un glissement sémantique’ [a semantic shift], which was integral to maintaining power and oppression in African nation-states.<sup>49</sup> Clothing had the ability to travel through space and remind Guineans not only of proper cultural practices, but also of the consequences of improperly performing culture.<sup>50</sup>

A photograph published in tandem with Guinea’s 1970 National Cultural Festival visualizes the dramatic importance of clothing under the Touré regime (Figure 5).<sup>51</sup> Almost every government-issued image of Touré shows him wearing his signature white suit and hat. Immediately after Touré consolidated his power, the Guinean people were encouraged to emulate their leader’s fashion choices. Everyone, from students to PDG officials to generals, began to wear the white suit and Touré hat (Figure 4). Even women took part by wearing copious amounts of white, often with images of Touré’s face printed on the fabric. In this political landscape, clothing was heavily policed; men’s clothing was especially regulated, and was the subject of propaganda campaigns.<sup>52</sup> In Figure 5 we see a striking image of a Guinean man wearing a European-style suit and hat that functioned in this propagandistic milieu. The corresponding caption tells us that the man has turned his back on African civilization, and exemplifies the main ills of Western influence on Guinea and on Africa.<sup>53</sup>

49 Ngong, ‘Costume et pouvoir’, 114.

50 Ngong, ‘Costume et pouvoir’, 100–4. Although Ngong does not use Guinea in a case study, many of the elements that he discusses in relation to other African dictators are mirrored in the case of Touré.

51 République de Guinée, *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, 37.

52 The Touré regime’s fixation on clothing has often been perceived as a copy of Leninist social rhetoric. However, this understanding is based on an essential misperception of Touré as a simple copycat, and does not consider the uniquely Guinean context of his policies.

53 *Le Festival Culturel National De La République Populaire Révolutionnaire De Guinée*, 37.



Figure 4: Photograph from the *9e et 10e Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, page 124. Caption reads, 'Le Commandant Fidel Castro et le Président Ahmed Sékou Touré devant les couleurs.' Note that the individuals in the background are dressed identically to Touré.

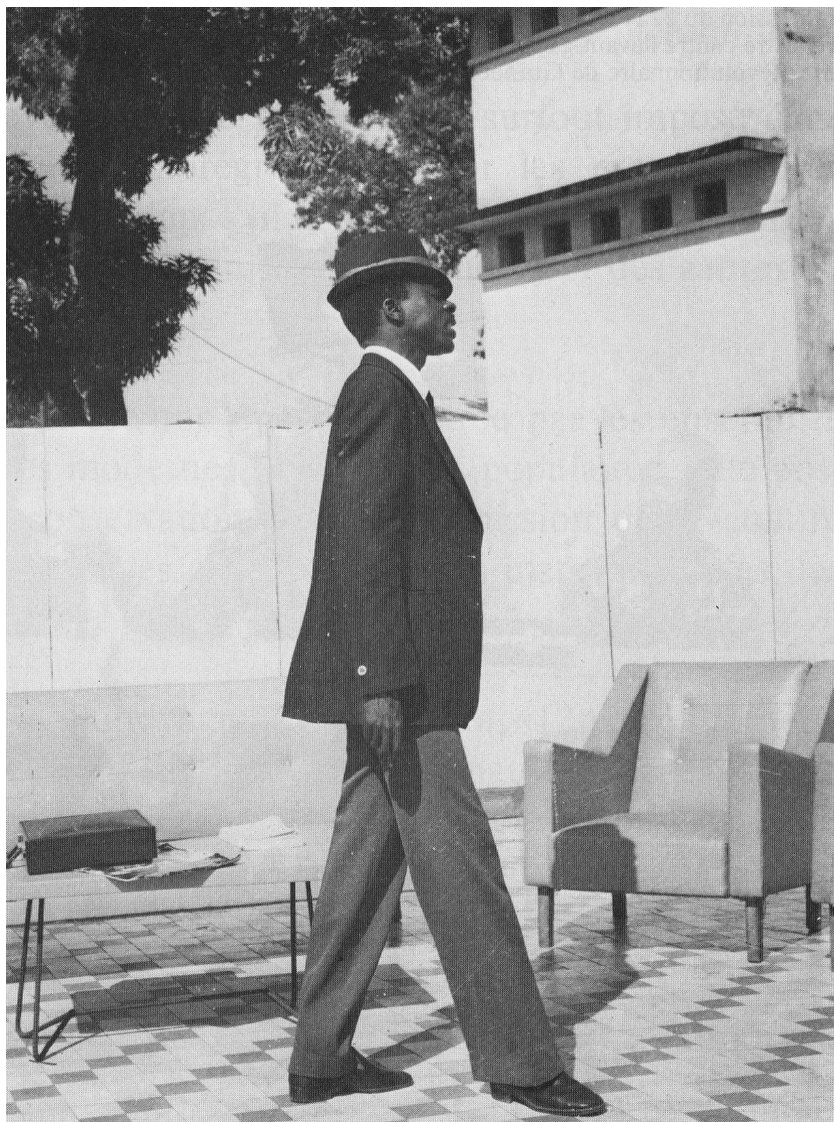


Figure 5: Caption, 'C'est le prototype de l'intellectuel qui a tourné le dos aux valeurs de civilisation africaine. Parti de l'Afrique qu'il ignore, il va pour un Paradis qu'il n'atteindra jamais.' Photograph taken from page 37 in the accompanying book on Le Festival Culturel National. Photographer unknown, taken in Conakry.

The man's dark three-piece suit and fedora stand in sharp visual contrast to the crisp, white two-piece suits and Touré hats that were worn by other Guinean men (compare Figures 4 and 5). The man's sartorial duplicity played the double role of reminding Guineans what not to wear, as well as what to wear. This photograph reflects Touré's belief that clothing choices could reveal a person's political and national leanings.<sup>54</sup> Simply by wearing the wrong clothing, men could be read as malicious and anti-Guinean. This photograph would have been an effective visual tool for maintaining control over Guinea's population and functioned in two semantic languages described by Ngong as, 'l'un, visuel, est le langage d'autorité propre aux dominants' [one that is visual, it is the dominant language of authority].<sup>55</sup> Touré's cultural policies were, in part, incredibly effective due to their local specificity that made use of long-standing Guinean concerns and beliefs that stretched back to the days of Samory.

One of the last known photographs taken of Samory after his capture and before his exile in 1898 shows him in his iconic outfit.<sup>56</sup> Samory wears white slacks and top with a boxy white hat – an oddly familiar combination of garments. In a drawing from the 1979 book *Festival National*, the government-sponsored artist imagined a dreamy monument to Samory where a bust of the hero wears a white top and boxy, white hat. These images of Samory were not coincidental. Touré's clothes were directly based on photographs of Samory, which created a visual connection between the two men. This was furthered by state produced art that purposefully imagined Samory in this signature style. Clothing allowed Touré to physically embody Samory, and allowed any rendition of the president's clothes to act as direct, visual reminders of Samory.

The second type of photograph – Touré as an invisible reference – further solidified his hold on Guinea's cultural landscape (Figure 6). In

54 Ngong, 'Costume et pouvoir', 104–14. Ngong makes the point that clothing was a system that connected people around a central source of power and wealth, typically in the form of the singular dictator.

55 Ngong, 'Costume et pouvoir', 105.

56 Unknown, 'Samory, Prisoner in Gabon,' photograph, circa 1898, Digital *International Mission Photography Archive*, University of Southern California Libraries.

Figure 6, we see a choir performing in front of a massive mural of an anonymous, young soldier who waves the military triumphantly forward. The masculine mural is a powerful, dramatic, and heroic scene, the intensity of which is heightened by the female singers in the foreground. Here, the image of the military acts as the singers' protector, or saviour. Although the image is striking, there is no aesthetic reason why this background scene – designed for a supposedly peaceful cultural festival – had to be of a conquering military. The reason for this choice lays predominately in the nationalist agenda of Touré and the PDG that was played out in the National Cultural Festivals.



Figure 6: Photograph from *Festivals Culturels Nationaux*, page 50. Caption reads, 'Beyla: L'ensemble choral exécute son chant.'

Touré acquired dozens of titles that were well known across the country. His most common and important titles involved his connection to Guinean independence and his role as commander of Guinea's armed forces, such as *Commandant en Chef des forces armées populaires et révolutionnaires* [Commander in Chief of the Popular and Revolutionary Armed Forces]. Although Touré was never in the military, his connection to Samory Touré reinforced the idea that he was a military genius comparable to Samory. Touré's anti-individualistic laws decried artists who produced anti-Guinean art. As discussed earlier, Touré invalidated and destroyed these artists by



disseminating conspiracy theories regarding threats against himself. In the official narratives, military intervention unfailingly countered these threats.<sup>57</sup> The conspiracies fostered national fear and paranoia that made Guineans dependent on military protection and Touré's 'heroic' leadership. Touré and the military became interconnected, interchangeable symbols that existed in a fluid state of metonymy. Images of Touré, the part, stood in for the military, the whole, while the military also stood in for Touré.

The military image in the background of Figure 6 is therefore a form of reverse metonymy, in which the military is meant to evoke Touré. Here, the female singers are not only protected by the military, but are also protected by Touré. Since his image defined postcolonial Guinea, images of the military and Touré also conjured up ideas of the entire nation. In this schema, the singers are backed by the military, which stands in for Touré, who then refers to the entire Guinean nation. In this way, images in postcolonial Guinea became deeply encrusted with national meaning that always referred back to the ideal state.

In another photograph from the book, we see this at play, but instead of the military in the background the military is brought into the foreground in the form of a dance troupe of boys wearing military costumes. The clothing, gesture, and posture of the young dancers are nearly identical to that of the soldier in Figure 6. The only major difference is the direction of their gestures, the boys gesture outward to the audience, while the painted soldier gestures backwards to the troops behind him. In a photograph of young boys dressed in uniform, the boys use mimesis to become the military in their performance. The boys become soldiers in the Guinean military through their clothes and gestures. Their actions are not just their own, but are connected to the larger body of the military, Touré, and the Guinean state. This reflects how Touré was able to seamlessly incorporate Guineans of all ages, especially the youth, into his fabricated notion of the Guinean state. Through mimesis and a fluid use of metonymy, Guineans themselves became referents to Touré as man, ideology, and nation. Touré validated his power through cleverly crafted

57 Kaba, 'Guinea: Myth and Reality of Change.'

images that connected himself, contemporary culture, and the entire nation with Samory Touré and the Wassoulou Empire.

In response to Guinea becoming independent, Touré had to imagine narratives that would inspire nationalist dedication and fervour in Guinea. As the first nation in French West Africa to gain independence, Touré had the eyes of the world on his back and its weight atop his shoulders. 'Western' expectations of nationhood had to be met in order to verify and validate Guinea's right to independence. Failure on its part would have reaffirmed Western stereotypes of 'Non-Western' inferiority.<sup>58</sup> Nationalist ideology was therefore a matter of independence or slavery for Guinea, as well as the other colonies in West Africa. In Guinea, art was the most effective way to imagine, specify, and spread nationalist ideology to the nation's masses. The imagery and cultural performances discussed in this chapter were integral to solidifying conceptions of national identity in Guinea through the repetition of key historical and religious elements.

In Guinea, references to Touré were a daily occurrence across the country. Similarly, Samory's history was a household narrative that paralleled the image and ideas of Touré. The nearly universal presence of Samory and Sékou Touré in Guinea, allowed Touré's nationalist ideology to circulate to every corner of the postcolonial nation. Popular art, in the form of photographs and clothing, acted as keys that unlocked Guinea's means for decolonization. However, freedom from oppressive colonization did not come without a price. The violence of the colonizers *upon* Guineans eventually bred violence upon others *by* Guineans.

In Guinea, Touré broadly conceived of the intelligentsia, artists, and anti-PDG activists as the 'other.' PDG language portrayed cultural policies as reformulations of Wassoulou-era practices, which reinforced notions of postcolonial Guinea's *genuine* qualities. However, the idealized image of Guinea that Touré disseminated on a national and international level hid the bloody reality of PDG policy.<sup>59</sup> Touré's policies suppressed independent

58 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11; Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', 126–8.

59 Kaba, 'The Cultural Revolution', 210.

cultural production by expounding the ‘eradication of the individual.’<sup>60</sup> ‘Eradication’ was not just a euphemism, but was physically enacted. It is unknown how many Guineans were punished, executed, or exiled for their political beliefs or artistic creations; some scholars estimate that tens of thousands of people were sent through the country’s concentration camps and prisons. The use of violence against artists and political opponents was imagined as a natural, necessary aspect of postcolonial nationalism, and allowed Touré to maintain rigorous control over the young nation.

Certainly, Guinean art was controlled and dominated by Sékou Touré. Demystification and the implementation of Touré-sponsored, cultural ideology transformed Guinean art from creative, individual expression into a series of government-sanctioned images with both implicit and explicit references to Touré. Touré used this art to imagine himself as the precolonial, Guinean hero Samory Touré, and to imagine postcolonial Guinea as a descendent of the Wassoulou Empire. In the face of a cultural void, Guineans held onto Touré’s fabricated imagery and internalized his vision of postcolonial Guinea as a return to an empiric past. Postcolonial nations have been forced to find ways to cope with their subordinated position in global politics, while simultaneously uniting their populations. In Guinea, art was a source of national agency that has acted as an enduring bond that, to this day, continues to unite the nation.

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60 McGovern, *Unmasking the State*, 260. Although not often discussed outright, political prisoners and their families were held in a concentration camp and prison system located in the heart of Conakry. The camps and prison are now Camp Boiro, a military facility located on the Route de Donka across from the Grande Mosquée Fayçal.

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## 2 From Dictatorship to Self-Constitution: Historical Fiction and Aesthetics of Tyranny in Bensalem Himmich's *Le Calife de l'épouvante*

### On fiction and dictatorship

In his introduction to a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* exploring the question of dictatorship in a series of African literary texts, Josaphat B. Kubayanda notes that the different articles in the collection suggest that 'there is in the literary discourse of post-independence Africa, a realist strategy that allows readers and critics to remap and redirect attention to the dictatorial and oppressive space of the real Africa and the poet's Africa.'<sup>1</sup> When investigating the figures and representations of dictatorship, this strategy, which operates more specifically in novels and fictional writings, unveils 'a crucial link between ethics, aesthetics, and politics' and ends up creating 'complex problems of interpretation.'<sup>2</sup> One of these problems originates in the fact that the efforts by African postcolonial writers 'to remap and redirect attention' to the dictatorial space have often been misunderstood or at least underestimated in their very complexity. Far from being specific to African writings, this problem finds similar echoes in the interpretation and reception of what was called 'the dictator-novel genre' in Latin American literature. Often dated back to Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias' seminal novel *El Señor Presidente* (1946), the Latin

1 Josaphat B. Kubayanda, 'Introduction: Dictatorship, Oppression, and New Realism', in *Research in African Literature*, 21.2, Dictatorship and Oppression (Summer 1990): 5–11 (6).

2 Kubayanda, 'Introduction', 8.

American dictator novel had its crucial moment in the mid-1970s with subsequent works by Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), Gabriel García Márquez (Columbia), Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), and Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes (Mexico). In *The Voice of the Masters*, an acclaimed collection of essays about writing and authority in modern Latin American literature, Roberto González Echevarría refers to the Arabic background of the dictator figure in the Hispanic tradition. He outlines its very intricacy as it becomes, in modern literature, 'a figure as complex and, if one wants, abstract as Don Juan, and perhaps just as original and philosophically rich.'<sup>3</sup> The parallel with the figure of Don Juan is compelling as it opens up the representation of dictatorship to the field of theatrical performance and hints at the rewriting of literary myths. This manifold complexity of dictatorial literature is reinforced by two further factors. The first has to do with the ambivalence of the term 'dictatorship' itself and the type of regimes it designates in political science. As noted by Juan J. Linz, the term, from its original Roman meaning referring to a limited and extraordinary emergency rule, 'has become a loosely used term for opprobrium', increasingly 'hard to distinguish from other types of autocratic rule when it lasts beyond a well-defined situation.'<sup>4</sup> To return to literature which might be less sensitive to this semantic ambivalence, the second factor is generated by a form of conceptualization since 'novels dealing with dictators do not establish clear-cut distinctions between the various types that appear in history but tend to deal more abstractly with authority figures and with the question of authority.'<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the intersection between fictions of dictatorship and postcolonial power throw into question the efficiency of literary strategies in resisting authoritarianism, notably the metaphorical techniques used to circumvent censorship, and the fictional portrait of the dictator as a device for political critique. While fictions of dictatorship often mobilize the subversive power of description, parody, and humour

3 Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters. Writing and authority in modern Latin American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), p. 6.

4 Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), p. 62.

5 Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters*, p. 65.



to deform the rhetoric of dictatorial power, there is a risk of reproducing the idioms and aesthetics of the ruler's discourse, leading to 'a form of reciprocal paralysis,'<sup>6</sup> which was described by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe as 'impouvoir' [impotence].<sup>7</sup> In short, dictatorial literature remains a very challenging subject not only in its definition and strategies of representation but also in its ethical, aesthetical and political interpretations.

As Josaphat B. Kubayanda demonstrates in another article, modern African dictator novels share with their Latin American counterparts the same concerns about post-independence disillusionments and new performances of tyranny, whether social or political. Grouping together African and Latin American experiences of dictatorial literature, Kubayanda argues that 'literary works from those regions portray totalizing codes that pinpoint an unfinished business of decolonization.'<sup>8</sup> This idea of an unfinished business of decolonization – which requires a permanent reworking of literary materials to explore, denounce and tackle the persistent discourses of tyranny and despotism – can be compared to the experience of dictatorial literature in the Arab world.

According to Housam Aboul-Ela:

although there has not been a moment of explosion in the genre of the Arabic dictator novel like the Latin American moment of the mid-1970s, the specter of dictatorship has pervaded most of Arab (or at least North African) fiction as a theme in the past several decades. (2011)

Egyptian fictional writings, for instance, have constantly included representations and performances of authoritarianism: from Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz's seminal *Children of Our Alley* to Gamal El-Ghitani's allegorical *Zaynī Barakāt* and more recently Alaa Al-Aswany's acclaimed

6 Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (London : MHRA/Legenda, 2014), p. 84.

7 Achille Mbembe, *De la Postcolonie* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 142.

8 Josaphat B. Kubayanda, 'Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa,' in *Research in African Literature*, 28.4, Multiculturalism (Winter 1997): 38–53 (38).

*The Yacoubian Building*. More generally, in the Arab world, both the ‘realist strategy’ and the ‘unfinished business of decolonization’ identified by Kubayanda have been shaping a dictatorial literature that, albeit lacking ‘a singular moment’<sup>9</sup> similar to the Latin American one, continues to develop a critical discourse that investigates and reveals ‘the intrinsic fallibility of power’.<sup>10</sup>

At the crossroads of African and Arabic experiences of dictatorial literature, Bensalem Himmich’s *Majnūn al-ḥukm* (literally ‘Mad of Power’) stands as a unique and rather original piece. First published in Arabic in 1990, the novel received the ‘Al-Nakid’ award (Prize of the Arab Critique) and was chosen by the Author’s Union in Egypt as one of the best novels of the twentieth century. Himmich’s work gained international success following its translations into Spanish (*El Loco del poder*, 1996),<sup>11</sup> French (*Le Calife de l’épouvante*, 1999),<sup>12</sup> and English (*The Theocrat*, 2005).<sup>13</sup> Himmich’s novel provides an original insight into the life and reign of Al-Hākīm bi Amr Allāh (literally ‘the ruler by order of God’), the sixth Fatimid caliph who ruled Egypt from 996 to 1021. As suggested by the title, Al-Hākīm’s reign was largely dominated by madness, excess and a paradoxical if not ambiguous exercise of power. In the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the entry on

- 9 Hosam Aboul-Ela, ‘Imagining more Autumns for North Africa’s Patriarchs: The Dictator Novel in Egypt’ in *Words without borders*, 2011. <<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/imagining-more-autumns-for-north-african-patriarchs-the-dictator-novel-in-e>> [1 August 2017].
- 10 Spencer, Robert, ‘Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and the African dictator novel’, *The Journal of Commonwealth literature* 47.2 (2012): 145–58 (146).
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- 12 Translation by Mohamed Saad Eddine El Yamani, Editions Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999. All the following French quotes are from this source. A second edition is published in 2010 by Moroccan and French publishers La Croisée des Chemins and Atlantica-Séguier.
- 13 Translation by Roger Allen, The American University in Cairo Press, 2005. The volume includes an introduction by the translator. All the following English quotes from Himmich’s novel are taken from this source. Elsewhere, translation is my own unless otherwise noted.

Al-Hākīm admits that ‘it is difficult to form an exact idea of his personality, so strange and even inexplicable were many of the measures which he took, and so full of contradictions does his conduct seem.’<sup>14</sup> While Al-Hākīm’s political regime is defined as ‘a tyrannical and cruel despotism, with intervals of liberalism and humility’, his personality ‘remains an enigmatic one’ as ‘he seems to have been several persons in succession or even simultaneously.’<sup>15</sup> Building on this complex and rather pathological portrait of the Fatimid ruler, Himmich’s work weaves together history and fiction to offer an original approach to dictatorial literature.

The novel is organized into four chapters introduced by a short preface, ‘Préambule de la fumée’ [Prelude to the Smoke], itself formed of two sections offering a brief third-person account of Al-Hākīm followed by a fictional fragmentary text credited to the ruler. The first two chapters, as rightly noted by Roger Allen, ‘provide ample evidence of the problematic nature of Al-Hakim’s personality.’<sup>16</sup> Chapter 1 offers an extensive record of Al-Hākīm’s contradictory decrees and arbitrary interdictions, culminating in the way he used a giant slave named Massoud to sodomize any merchant found to be cheating people in the market. Chapter 2 investigates Al-Hākīm’s councils where he respectively enjoyed sessions of violet oil treatments, had his delirious sayings recorded in writing, chaired court sessions asking the culprits to surprise him in order to gain forgiveness and discussed with his devotees the dissemination of his claims to divinity. The third chapter, which is surprisingly the longest of the novel, offers a detailed account of the revolt of Abū Rakwa, an Umayyad prince who won the support of North African tribes and tried to invade Cairo in an attempt to topple the Fatimid ruler. The fourth and final chapter describes Al-Hākīm’s burning of the old Cairo to take revenge on the population

14 Marius Canard, ‘al-Hākīm Bi-Amr Allāh’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs <[http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2066/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_SIM\\_2637](http://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2066/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_2637)> 1 August 2016 [accessed 20 April 2018].

15 Canard, ‘al-Hākīm Bi-Amr Allāh’.

16 Roger Allen, ‘Translator’s introduction’ in Bensalem Himmich, *The Theocrat* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), vii-xv (ix).

that attacked him with slanderous statements, and ends describing how his sister, Sit al-Mulk, plotted his assassination, crushed all opposition and took control of power.

Drawing on Echevarría's work and other theoretical material about historical fiction and aesthetics of tyranny, my aim is to assess the efficiency of Himmich's novel in representing and reflecting on the question of dictatorship. After exploring the inherent limitations of historical fiction, I propose a critique of the *topos* of madness as a feature of the dictator figure. I then show how parody and language are used both to promote and resist the dictatorial discourse. Finally, I argue that Himmich's work features an implicit call for self-constitution as a potential way out of dictatorship and despotism.

## Towards a critique of the historical novel

One of the first questions raised by Himmich's work in relation to the subject of dictatorship is that of the ability of a historical novel, informed by fictional and allegorical rewritings, to develop an efficient counter-discourse to despotism and authoritarianism. At first, the author's recourse to history is not surprising given both his cultural background and overall literary production. Born in Meknès in 1949, Himmich completed a PhD in Philosophy at Université Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle (1983), worked as a Professor at Mohamed V University in Rabat and was the Minister of Culture of Morocco from 2009 to 2012. Writing in both Arabic and French, he produced a wide range of publications, including novels, poetry and philosophical essays. His non-fictional works are widely informed by philosophical and historical sources, more specifically the works and legacy of North African historian Ibn Khaldūn. In Himmich's equally erudite novels, history and fiction are often blended to render the life of eminent figures such as Ibn Khaldūn himself in *Al-'Alaama* (translated as *The Polymath*) or Sufi philosopher Ibn Sab'īn in *Hadha Al-Andalusi!* (translated as *A Muslim Suicide*). In one of his articles, Himmich claims his attachment to

what he calls his ‘triptyque favori (philosophie, histoire et littérature)’ (103) [favourite triptych (philosophy, history and literature)], but he admits his recent inclination for the novel ‘comme genre total exigeant recherche et réflexion et sollicitant le concours du souffle poétique, ainsi que des formes d’expression scénique et dramaturgique’ (104) [as a totalizing genre that demands research and reflection, and necessitates the support of poetic inspiration as well as scenic and theatrical art forms]. This conception of the novel as a space of erudition and poetic staging is at the core of Himmich’s fictional works. In *Le Calife de l’épouvante*, which is advertised as ‘a novel of historical fiction,’<sup>17</sup> Himmich cannily subverts the subgenre of the historical novel to propose a personal reflection on the figure of the despot and the performances of tyranny. This process of subversion can be seen as a continuation of Himmich’s numerous articles on the novel and historical writing that reveal ‘not merely the breadth of his reading in literature and philosophy, but, more specifically, his familiarity with the interesting generic blending that is reflected in current discussions of historical fiction.’<sup>18</sup> Among those discussions, English novelist A. S. Byatt, quoted by Roger Allen in his ‘translator’s introduction,’ suggests many reasons to explain novelists’ recourse to history. These include ‘the fact that we have in some sense been forbidden to think about history,’ the quest for ‘a new possibility of narrative energy,’ the attempt ‘to find historical paradigms for contemporary situations,’ ‘the aesthetic need to write coloured and metaphorical language’ and ‘the political desire to write histories of the marginalised, the forgotten, the unrecorded.’<sup>19</sup> While these different reasons can be potentially used to support Himmich’s project, they might seem at odds with the ‘realist strategy’ and what Kubayanda terms the ‘unfinished business of decolonization’.

On the one hand, *Le Calife de l’épouvante* stands as an overt invitation both to reread the history of dictatorship in North Africa and the Arabic-Islamic world, and to re-appropriate the lessons of the past in order to tackle

17 Allen, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ viii.

18 Allen, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ xii.

19 A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories. Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

the persistent challenges of the present. On the other hand, the intrinsic complexity of Himmich's novel and its dizzying blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction could hamper this process of rereading and recovery, leading unavoidably to those 'complex problems of interpretation' flagged by Kubayanda. An illustration of this paradox can be read in Wen-chin Ouyang's hesitations regarding Himmich's work in her *Poetics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel*. Ouyang defines the novel as an 'essay on tyranny' and 'a synthesis and assessment of the historical records' but not 'a straightforward modern historical narrative.'<sup>20</sup> She also describes it as 'a historiographical treatise on the nature of political authority' and 'a study of power' but not 'a fictionalised biography of the Fatimid ruler.'<sup>21</sup> These successive attempts at defining Himmich's work reveal the challenging intricacy of the text and the difficulties it entails in terms of understanding and appropriation. This problematic aspect becomes even more disturbing if one compares Himmich's overt calls to promote history as 'the best gateway to strengthening the mind for the purpose of comprehending and internalizing [present] reality'<sup>22</sup> to the more circumspect warning he chose to add as a foreword to the second edition of the French translation: 'Tout renvoi à l'Histoire (faits, récits) est strictement référencé et marqué en italique. Le reste, c'est-à-dire l'essentiel, est littérature et fiction' (2010, p. 7) [All references to history (facts, narratives) are rigorously noted and highlighted in italics. Everything else, that which is essential, is literature and fiction]. While sounding like a belated clarification of the boundaries between history and fiction, Himmich's foreword strengthens the fictional aspect of the work and pushes the historical dimension into the background, therefore relegating or at least minimizing any purported 'realist strategy' in the process of exploring the figure and the performances of dictatorship. Interestingly, Himmich associates this dominant fictional feature with the discourse of the despot himself: 'Al Hakim, comme d'ailleurs presque tous les autres personnages du roman, n'ayant rien écrit, tout propos que

20 Wen-chi Ouyang, *Poetics of Nostalgia in the Arabic Novel. Nation-State, Modernity and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 115.

21 Ouyang, p. 116.

22 Ouyang, p. 116.

je lui fais tenir n'est qu'allégation, supputation ou hypothèse, fruit d'un essai de descente dans la psyché perverse, ambivalente et complexe du despote' (2010, p. 7) [Since Al Hakim, like most of the other characters in the novel, has not written any work, every statement I make his own is nothing but an allegation, a guess or a hypothesis, a result of an attempt at diving into the perverse, ambivalent and complex psyche of the despot]. Thus, any political reading of Himmich's novel should bear in mind the very hypothetical reconstructions of history suggested and framed by the author. This is confirmed in Himmich's text when Al-Hâkim's chronicler Moukhtar al-Mousabihi explains that his historical account, which works as a reflected image of the novel itself, is 'élaboré par l'imagination et la poésie [et] se transformera lentement en un document vrai, qui sera reproduit par tous les historiens' [created through imagination and poetry [and] it will be gradually turned into a genuine document to be reproduced by historians for all time] and will be read 'comme d'autres documents qui commencent comme des fantaisies et deviennent Histoire' (185) [like other documents that start as poetry but later become history]. In other words, history is a space for manipulation that seems as suspicious as fiction. In this respect, *Le Calife de l'épouvante* is nothing but a personal attempt at reading and reusing the complex material of history in the process of creating a fiction about despotism, tyranny and madness. In his introduction to a volume of essays exploring the politics of novels and novelists, Robert Boyers notes that 'if we understand the significance of politics in a given novel as central, or marginal, that understanding has much to do with our sense that we have been invited to read that novel in a particular way'.<sup>23</sup> The problem with *Le Calife de l'épouvante* is that the obscure and wavering linkage between history and fiction disrupt the invitation to read the novel in a particular way. Therefore, it forces the reader to be extremely cautious when dealing with interpretations and drawing inferences from the novel's discourse about despotism and tyranny.

23 Robert Boyers, *The Dictator's dictation. The Politics of novels and novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 4.

## Madness as a problematic *topos*

The challenging if not disorienting nature of Himmich's 'dictatorial novel' becomes even more significant with the treatment of the ruler Al-Hākim. As suggested by the Arabic title, the novel draws on the *topos* of madness to elaborate a complex and rather colourful portrait of the despot. Starting with the second section of the prelude, which takes the form of a first-person manifesto, Al-Hākim details his political vision and promotes the founding principles of his regime, based on excess, extremism, and conflict. After claiming 'je suis enclin à l'extrême et au conflit des contraires' (13) [I am inclined to the ultimate and the clash of opposites], he goes on to promote a warlike culture in which 'la politique et le despotisme vont naturellement de pair' (15) [tyranny is an intrinsic feature of politics]. Some fragments are directly addressed to the people – and by extension to the reader – turning the ruler's madness into a series of terrifying and aggressive threats: 'Craignez-moi et ne cherchez pas à me fuir. Je guette vos actes et vos intentions' (20) [So fear me and do not ask to be rid of me. I am ever watchful of your deeds and intentions]. Throughout the novel, Al-Hākim's madness is reworked to elaborate what Ouyang defines as 'semiotics of tyranny',<sup>24</sup> reinforced by the rhetoric of his contradictory decrees and the inconsistency of his unpredictable mood swings.

In *Le Calife de l'épouvante*, this focus on madness as a fundamental feature of the despot's portrait extends not only to the community of his devotees but also to the oppositional figures of the rebel Abū Rakwa and the ruler's sister Sit al-Mulk. With both characters showing equally alarming symptoms of excess as they seize power and work to quash opposition, it becomes evident that Himmich 'sees despotism as a formalism of power unpinned by a regime of signs that may be thought of only as madness'.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Himmich's novel not only discredits those potential 'lines of escape'<sup>26</sup> from tyranny but also shifts the reading of dictatorship from

24 Ouyang, p. 117.

25 Ouyang, p. 120.

26 Ouyang, p. 120.



politics to psyche. One could argue that Himmich is simply following the historical accounts about Al-Hākīm's attested pathological personality or one might agree with Echevarría that 'authority figures coalesce the historical and psychoanalytic realms' (1985: 65). However, Himmich's fictional and rhetorical reworking of madness in the novel remains problematic, to say the least. Unlike Wen-chin Ouyang who suggests that madness works as 'a convenient trope around which Himmich structure[s] his inquiry into contemporary political despotism in the form of allegory',<sup>27</sup> it is my contention that the emphasized focus on madness weakens at once the allegorical, political, and ideological dimensions of the novel while hindering any concrete juxtaposition of history with contemporaneity. As Robert Boyers warns, 'there is a danger in fictions resistant to ideas and ideologies' since they 'may unfold as spectacle or as reflections of historical patterns that have no specific weight and no possibility of yielding to any conceivable political initiative'.<sup>28</sup> The initial originality of Himmich's novel becomes politically ineffective as the text strives between the vertiginous combination of history and fiction and the overemphasizing of madness. One should note with Boyers that 'the very resonance of terms like [...] 'the irrational' will often disarm political thinking and make politics itself seem thin or trivial'.<sup>29</sup> I would argue that the trope of madness in *Le Calife de l'épouvante* works first and foremost as a lever for Himmich's imagination and creativity. Before being a cruel despot, Al-Hākīm is a fascinating character who reminds us that 'we like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive'.<sup>30</sup> Being 'both subject and mechanism of creative writing',<sup>31</sup> madness stands as a dominant *topos*, overemphasized to the point of neutralizing any literary strategy of resistance to dictatorship. Building on this idea, I would argue that the efficiency of Himmich's novel

27 Ouyang, p. 117.

28 Boyers, p. 6.

29 Boyers, p. 7.

30 A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories. Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 31.

31 Ouyang, p. 136.

in representing and reflecting on dictatorship needs to be sought rather in the literary virtuosity of the text, as evidenced by the use of irony and the metaphorical power of language and writing alike.

## Writing between parody and symbol

Spanish poet and novelist Juan Goytisolo sees the section about the slave Massoud and his sodomizing punishments as ‘un concentré d’humour qu’on dirait sorti tout droit des pages des *Mille et Une Nuits*’ [a mass of humour that appears as stemming from the pages of the *Arabian Nights*], and notes that ‘l’ironie se distille finement’ [irony is finely distilled] in the account of Al-Hākīm’s councils.<sup>32</sup> As extensively shown by Echevarría in his reading of Carpentier’s *El Recurso del método*, Marquez’s *El otoño del patriarca* and Roa Bastos’ *Yo el Supremo*, parody is a constant feature of the dictator novel, often used to demystify the authority of the despot by undermining speech, rewriting foundation myths or recreating the radical power of the text. Throughout the novel, Himmich similarly uses parody to dismantle the logic of fear produced by the discourse and the power of the despot. As suggested by the subtitle of the second edition of the French translation, ‘au pays des peurs et du rire’ [in the country of fears and laughter], humour works as a counterweight to the symbols and performances of tyranny. The portraits of Al-Hākīm’s devotees are particularly comical. Hamza Ibn Ali, said to be their elder, ‘se distinguait par un front large et proéminent, sur lequel il comptait souvent pour convaincre l’auditeur et confondre l’adversaire’ (88) [whose hallmark was a broad forehead, something he relied on to convince his listeners and defeat his adversaries]. Meanwhile, Hassan al-Farghani holds the nickname ‘Akhrām Narine fendue’ [Akhrām Split Nostril] in reference to ‘une blessure de son nez, par ailleurs aplati et

32 Juan Goytisolo, ‘Préface’ in Bensalem Himmich, *Le Calife de l’épouvante. Au pays des peurs et du rire* (Casablanca – Paris: Editions La Croisée des chemins – Atlantica-Séguier, 2010), p. 11–14 (14).

énorme' (89) [an enormous snub nose with a split nostril]. The physical defects of Al-Hākīm's devotees contrast with their pompous honorary titles ('le doyen des adeptes' [the Respondent's Guide]; 'l'Assistant du Guide' [the Guide's Assistant]) and thus work metaphorically to deconstruct the very body of tyranny and the instruments of its promotion.

Another example of parody is provided in the last chapter as the Egyptian people throw at the ruler 'un torrent véhément de brochures et de billets satiriques, qui injuriaient sa lignée, ses titres de noblesse et ses actes' (174) [an angry torrent of manifestos and pamphlets, all of which ridiculed Al-Hākīm and cast aspersions on his origins, lineage, and deeds]. Himmich's text emphasizes the effect of people's caustic and satirical statements by noting that 'ces écrits transformaient l'être entier d'Al-Hākīm en une mémoire avilie, ballottée par la morbidité et la peur, attirée par un tourbillon magnétique vers l'abîme de la destruction' (175) [these texts [...] had a dire effect on Al-Hākīm's entire mental state; they triggered a sordid retrospective beset by the foulest of memories and a sense of sheer panic]. Interestingly, fear shifts from the population to the ruler as satire and irony seem to succeed where the rebel Abu-Rakwa and his military action have ultimately failed. A symbol of this destructive fear pervading the figure of the despot, one of the satirical letters is handed over to Al-Hākīm by a veiled woman who appears as 'un épouvantail bourré de morceaux de tissu et de papier' (175) [a statue made out of strips of paper]. Thus, in *Le Calife de l'épouvante*, parody and irony seem to be embedded both in history and literature, opposing to the power of tyranny and dictatorship that of rhetoric, creativity, and humour.

Beyond this 'résistance satirique' (176) [resistance by sarcasm] that operates in both the historical and literary space, Himmich's text can also be read as an enthusiastic celebration of language, writing and rhetoric against dictatorship. The numerous excerpts of historical sources and biographical accounts used to introduce the chapters or to support the narration work to unveil the very complexity of Al-Hākīm's personality and rule. These written fragments, which 'apportent des matériaux que le récit de fiction prolonge ou contredit' [introduce material that fictional narrative

develops or refutes],<sup>33</sup> offset the written materials produced by the despot, including not only his decrees but also his sayings transcribed by secretaries, historians, and devotees. To borrow Echevarría's words, one can concede that in Himmich's novel 'it is not the voice, but writing, it is not the dictator-author, but the secretary-writer, who reigns'.<sup>34</sup> The symbolic power of writing is reinforced by the originality of speech as characters are constantly crafting ingenious utterances to resist and undermine the power of tyranny. In the section about Al-Hākim's court sessions, scientist Abou Ali Ibn al-Haytham and poet Ibn al-Sa'sa' le Qarmate escape death by means of their rhetorical discourses which seduce the ruler. Moreover, the Prophet's message reported by the Soufi sounds like an implicit call to champion the power of language and creative reasoning: 'O homme de Dieu, fasses que ta parole ne soit pas du même ordre que la réalité des tyrans [...] Laisse ton imagination miner la tyrannie par la patience et la réfutation créative' (83) [Man of God, do not adjust your words to the world of tyrants. Let your imagination weaken tyranny through patience and creative denial].

The same use of rhetoric and linguistic creativity is a fundamental feature of the rebel Abu Rakwa. Throughout the lengthy third chapter, his eloquent speeches - supported by lyrical, spiritual and metaphorical references - help him to earn the confidence of the tribes and to organize the rebellion against the despot. Interestingly, he uses the power of metaphor to legitimize his actions as he claims in one of his speeches: 'Nul prêche ni avertissement ne sert avec la tyrannie. Comment serait-ce possible alors que la peau du porc est inutile au tannage?' [Neither advice nor preaching can prevail against tyranny. How could it when pig-skin is never to be tanned?] (129). The implicit comparison of the ruler to a pig is significant as it introduces the idea of illegitimacy by referring to an animal that symbolizes prohibition in Islam. Here again, the linguistic creativity of the rebel and his talent as an orator work to counterbalance Al-Hākim's poetic utterances and the legitimizing rhetoric of his devotees. In this

33 Federico, Arbós, 'Postface' in Bensalem Himmich, *Le Calife de l'épouvante. Au pays des peurs et du rire* (Casablanca – Paris: Editions La Croisée des chemins – Atlantica-Séguier, 2010), 245–51 (249).

34 Echevarría, p. 76.

respect, Himmich's work, like Latin American dictator novels, seeks to undermine or at least to resist 'the metaphoric foundation of this rhetoric of power', since 'both power and rhetoric are generated together and cannot exist independently of each other'.<sup>35</sup> It is as if the military struggle against tyranny and dictatorship has no choice but to perpetuate and extend to both spaces of language and writing.

## Towards self-constitution

The problem with Himmich's novel is that neither strategy proves to be sufficient in wiping out despotism and tyranny. In a letter addressed to Abu-Rakwa, Hussein Ibn Jawhar, the head of the Fatimid army, reveals that the Egyptian people are helpless and 'même l'humour ne leur apporte que la vengeance du despote, suivie de malheurs et de souffrances' (145) [even their jokes bring only vengeful attacks from the tyrant, and misery and suffering as a consequence]. Despite their immediate impact, parody, irony and humour all remain ineffective measures in the face of the overwhelming burden of tyranny. With regard to language and writing, the failure of Abu-Rakwa's rebellion is particularly compelling. His spiritual and pacifying approach, which seems initially to resist Al-Hākim's rhetoric of dictatorship, ends up leading to more blood and savagery as he chops off the head of Yanal le Turc, the commander of the ruler's garrison, and stands powerless before Al-Hākim's revenge. The rebel's dramatic failure culminates in 'les milliers de têtes coupées que l'on promenait dans les rues et sur les places' [thousands of heads in every alley and square] and 'les prisonniers qu'on décapitait à coups de sabre' (165) [an endless succession of prisoners killed by the blows of a sword].

The advent of Sit al-Mulk, the ruler's powerful sister who plans the assassination of her brother and rides to the rescue of the Egyptian

35 Echevarría, pp. 1–2.

population, does not seem to reverse the trend. Her exercise of power, based on manipulation and secret manoeuvring, not only perpetuates tyranny but also unveils the dilemma of any ruling dictator: 'pour stopper l'hémorragie, il fallait répandre le sang' (225) [in order to stem the haemorrhage, yet more blood had to be spilled]. In this, Himmich's novel seems to suggest that there is no concrete way out of tyranny and dictatorship. Connecting Himmich's novel with Deleuze and Guattari's reading of power, Wen-chi Ouyang claims that the Moroccan author 'may be interested in deterritorialisation elsewhere but not in *Majnūn al-ḥukm*. He is concerned rather with the type of despotism prevalent in the Arabic-Islamic world from which there are no detectable lines of escape' (2013: 120). The final pages of the novel would encourage such a reading: the persistent shadow of Al-Hākīm continues to haunt the streets of Cairo and even after his total disappearance, Egyptian people find themselves submitted to another form of excess, that of Al-Hākīm's successor Al-Dhaher and his immoderate passion for entertainment and debauchery. In other words, the history of dictatorship and tyranny 'seems to repeat itself in a vicious cycle, as if the regime of signs that is madness has so tightened its noose that no lines of escape from it may be found'.<sup>36</sup>

However, as evidenced by the totally unexpected eruption of the Arab Spring in 2010, the contemporary reader of Himmich's novel may argue that indecision and uncertainty are fundamental features of the anti-dictatorial movements and discourses in the Arab world. That would be a justified reading but I would go further and argue that there is still a hidden line of escape which Himmich's novel alludes to, that of the return to the self and the elaboration of a new self-criticism based on introspection and solidarity, a form of 'literary self-constitution'<sup>37</sup> that precedes any political or social performance. In this way, Himmich's novel appears to depart from the model of Latin American dictator novel that 'deconstructs the assumptions about the power of self and its representation in fiction'.<sup>38</sup> I would

36 Ouyang, 120.

37 Echevarría, 11.

38 Echevarría, 84.

give three examples of this line of escape that hinges on the individual and collective reconstruction of the self.

In his final days, Al-Hākim reflects on his reign and admits having no problems save with 'mon âme totale, qui m'interroge et me tourmente sans cesse' (195) [my entire soul, which incessantly tortures me with questions]. His self-critical discourse is quite compelling as he finally concedes: 'La vérité [...] c'est que je me suis mêlé des contradictions et m'y suis abaissé, jusqu'à en être partie, et non plus maître' (195) [The truth is that I have involved myself in contradictions, so I now see myself brought so low that I am a mere part of things and no longer master]. This belated avowal implicitly suggests that a good ruler is one who masters his very self and manages his own contradictions while seeking elevation and transcendence. This individual approach to the self as a potential way out of dictatorship takes a collective dimension in Abu-Rakwa's final legacy left to Egyptian people before his death:

Si la violence des tyrans de votre temps vous submerge [...] ne vous effondrez pas! [...] Marchez sur les flancs de la terre, grandissez parmi les faibles et les affamés, car chez eux la tristesse fleurit avec les âmes et les corps qui grandissent en même temps que la colère [...] faites de votre vie une arme consciente, toujours active.

[if you are submerged by the violence of tyranny in your time [...] do not despair [...] Go forth into the world and flourish among the weak and hungry. It is among such folk that sorrow grows in heart and body, and anger along with them [...]. Keep yourselves forever alert and ready for action.] (169–70)

Abu-Rakwa's call for the rise of self-consciousness and social solidarity hints at the necessity to promote the collective self as an oppositional tool to tyranny and despotism. Finally, the focus on the self needs also to be understood as a primary subject of writing. More than a historical fiction on dictatorship and madness, Himmich has delivered a novel about the self with its very intricate web of contradictions and inner secrets. Like Al-Hākim's chronicler Moukhtar al-Mousabihi, the writer should be one who reworks his art to unveil the identity of the despot and lay bare his hidden thoughts. As the despot suggests to his chronicler, 'Alors, écris l'histoire de ma mélancolie et de ma tristesse, tu comprendras ma tendance à innover [...]. Fais donc la chronique de mon silence et de ma plongée profonde en lui, tu verras comment mes actes fermentent et mes œuvres

naissent' (186) [So, write the history of my melancholy and misery. You will come to understand my penchant for innovation [...]. So record my silence then! You will see how my deeds ferment and my innovations fare in their labour pains]. A few pages later, Al-Hākīm reveals his yearning for another life in which he could write his own memories, namely 'tout ce que cet historien ne comprend ni ne perçoit, tous les cris latents, les déchirements et les vérités absents de ses gros livres' (193) [all that historians do not see or appreciate, all the secret cries, rifts, and verities that are missing from their weighty tomes]. History is nothing without those little histories of the self that escape official manipulation and spring from the innermost territories of the subject. Writing or rewriting the self is a fundamental step towards the recapturing of global history and the creation of a potential way out of tyranny.

If one reason behind Himmich's recourse to historical fiction is 'an eagerness to escape the self as a subject matter',<sup>39</sup> it has to be acknowledged that the question of the individual and collective self ultimately comes back as possibly the last resort to resist the perpetuation of dictatorship and tyranny. Since rhetorical, linguistic and narrative strategies fail to tackle the persistent power of despotism, the subject needs to seek other alternatives, starting his quest with an examination of the self. A. S. Byatt suggests that writers who return to historical fiction are probably 'attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self'.<sup>40</sup> If this is true then the production of those writers, such as Himmich's *Le Calife de l'épouvante*, adds another valuable contribution to the process of rebuilding the self and promoting the necessity of an inward reconstruction before tackling the hydras of dictatorship and despotism.

39 Allen, xii.

40 Byatt, p. 31.



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RITA KERESZTESI

## Bekolo's 'Dictator' – Televised

'Our president was betrothed to Cameroon with great love and passion, yet over the years the fire has died. He spends more time in Switzerland than in Cameroon. What is he - too good for us now?'

— JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO, *Le Président*

'There is a joke about Angola: 'Who is the public in Angola?', 'The President'. 'Where does all the money go?', 'To the public'.

— SEAN JACOBS and CAMILLA HOULAND,  
'The 'Big Man' Syndrome in Africa'

The Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo's recent film *Le Président* (2013), labelled a 'mockumentary' by its critics, exposes the absurdity of power by the 'Maximum Leader.' Bekolo uses humour to level with the real-life dictator of Cameroon Paul Biya, who has been one of the longest-ruling presidents in Africa. In line of the cinematic traditions of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (USA 1940) and Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (Senegal 1975), Bekolo's *Le Président* exposes the absurdities of dictatorial power in fiction and through humour. Contemporaneous with Bekolo's *Le Président*, Abderrahmane Sissako's film *Timbuktu* (Mali/Mauritania 2014) also addresses and fictionalizes African dictatorship, though with a focus on Islamist extremism à propos the public stoning of an unmarried couple by the group Ansar Dine in Mali in 2012. In an interview with Danny Leigh of *The Guardian* Sissako explained that the film was originally planned as a documentary, but he realized it would be impossible to make a truthful film when most of the gunmen were still at large. 'You can't make a documentary where people aren't free to speak. And the risk is that you make a film for the jihadists – because they're the

ones who are going to do the talking' (Leigh, *The Guardian* 5/28/2015). Indeed, when the couple in Aguelhok were killed, a video was posted online. Sissako countered their 'documentary' with his own fictional depiction. In a memorable scene of *Timbuktu*, when sports are banned and soccer balls confiscated, a planned match goes ahead anyway – with the pantomime of an imaginary ball. A similar goal motivates Kathryn Bigelow's new film *Detroit* (2017) where she fills the gaps in information, because of the abuse of police power, with fictional details (Lang, *Variety* 8/1/2017). All of Bigelow's films skirt the boundaries of documentary and fiction. Politically committed film directors often counter the excess of power with the moral force of art and imagination.

What these films and filmmakers share in common is their fictional approach to real-life events to defy absolute leaders and dictatorial power: Chaplin plays Adolf Hitler to a fool, Sembène chose an amateur actor with an uncanny resemblance to Senegal's first president Léopold Sédar Senghor for the role of the President, and Bekolo's film is an unabashed take on Paul Biya's ongoing presidency in Cameroon. While documentaries in the African context have occupied a precarious role since outsiders used the genre to their own agendas, several African filmmakers have made it their own, such as the Cameroonian/French documentary filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno who had reworked the genre to empower and correct colonial historiography. Sembène and Bekolo have turned to fiction and the imagination to better represent reality and counter foreign-made documentaries. Since its European invention, filmmaking had been fused with the colonial project; but the technology also allowed, to quote Melissa Thackway, Africa to 'shoot back.' Ousmane Sembène, in the documentary film with Manthia Diawara and Ngūgī Wa Thiong'o, names Chaplin as one of his teachers in establishing and Africanizing the technology of moving images (Diawara and Wa Thiong'o 1994). Bekolo himself had paid tribute to the hundredth anniversary of cinema with his *Le Complot d'Aristotle* (1997). In his recent film *Le Président*, he returns to filmic satire and the mixing of documentary with fiction to expose the dictatorship of Paul Biya.

Carl Schmitt's theory of the 'state of exception' explained the legality of sovereign authority during the rise of the Weimar Republic. Schmitt recognized the productive concentration of power in the presidential branch of governing. The move to dictatorial power justified through legal means, such as the evocation of a state of emergency to institute a state of exception in leadership, or its recent examples in Africa to amend the constitution to suspend presidential term limits, has been a modern phenomenon to respond to nominal demands for democracy. 'Democracy' has been the norm to legitimate political entities, re-dividing the globe to two political camps, dictatorships and Western-style democracies. After 1989 the new political-constitutional paradigm of dividing the globe into democracies and dictatorships, though still on the logic of the West and the Rest, replaced previous Cold War demarcations. The politicization of the human condition, away from economic factors of wealth distribution and dignity (manifest and measured in access to 'freedom' and 'liberty'), dominates the current world-scape. The West condemns all not deemed democratic while tolerating and normalizing economic inequalities and 'precarity.' The 9/11 terrorist attack on US soil in 2001 and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism enabled a rhetoric of political efficiency to protect Western-model democracies at the price of freedom. The efficiency model of modern dictatorial rule, even when it aims to defend 'democracy,' has been the *modus operandi* to modern political leadership models. The US has utilized the tool of suspending privacy rules justified by the normalization of crisis and fear of terrorist attacks, so did African leaders of late. Recently, dictatorial presidents seek amendments to their country's constitution to stay in power in order to 'sustain' political and economic stability: in Burkina Faso, now ex-president Blaise Compaoré evoked the clause of 'state of exception' to legally stay in power for the imagined benefit to his country. Corruption is the price paid for continued but unpopular power, therefore leaving is a dangerous option for a dictator, as the examples show: Charles Taylor of Liberia, Laurent Gbagbo of Côte d'Ivoire, Abdulaye Wade of Senegal, Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic

of the Congo, or Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia. They each faced criminal charges and even imprisonment.

In Giorgio Agamben's definition and reworking of the notion of the state of exception, sovereignty is the power to decide the instauration of state of emergency to create a new Constitution (Agamben, 52–55). The instrumentalization of state of emergency as a permanent condition legitimizes a 'state of exception' as the dominant paradigm for governing in contemporary politics. Agamben observes that crisis and state of emergency have become the predominant forms of life of modern nations. Agamben's *State of Exception* (2005) investigates the increase of power by governments which they employ in supposed times of crises. Agamben defines the 'state of exception' as follows:

In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos claims to realize an enunciation* without any real reference. (Agamben, 40)

The political power over others acquired through the state of exception places the government outside of the laws. During such times of extension of power, certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others and the circulation of information is limited. The suspension of democratic rule comes at the price of intelligible and meaningful discourse. Physical violence instigates semiotic violence.

Power and agency are morphing into newer forms that cannot be completely captured by notions such as the 'state of exception' (Giorgio Agamben) or 'biopower' (Michel Foucault). Achille Mbembe furthers our understanding of an all-out-violence through his notion of 'necropower' (Mbembe 2003). Mbembe's necropower explains technologies of control through which life is strategically subjugated to the power of death. In Henry Giroux's more hopeful revision of necropower, it operates alongside technologies of discipline and the power to make live. For an increasingly authoritarian politics which governs through economics and with the aid of images, as Henry Giroux explains:

Power now resides as much in the production of images as it does in the traditional machineries of violence colonized by the state. At the same time, terrorist spectacles illustrate how important it is to speak to the very forces that undermine them that is, to engage in struggles to defend democracy and reclaim the social from the death-dealing necropolitics of state-sanctioned and stateless terrorists. (Giroux 2015: 68)

For Giroux, the emancipatory role of culture aids the 'force of social power':

[T]he spectacle of terrorism makes clear that culture deploys power and is now constituted by a plurality of sites of domination and resistance, offering up not simply ideological machineries of death but also new ways for progressives, not only terrorists ... to nurture the development of new forms of solidarity and modes of critique ... (ibid)

Recent forms of resistance to terrorist acts and totalitarian rule have made use of the power of culture as evident in the works of African filmmakers and musicians.

In an interview, Jean-Pierre Bekolo commented on the power of popular culture for post-independence generations in Africa: 'It was through the small screen that he [Biya] punctuated every moment of my life!', referring to television and news media that had influenced generations of Cameroonians. Banned in Cameroon, Bekolo's film questions the phenomenon of African 'dictators for life' (see Murray, 'Review'). The young Cameroonian filmmaker Richard Djimili was kidnapped and tortured for his film entitled *139 ... The Last Predators* (2013) that critiques a dictator who has been in power for 139 years (see Rossman, 'Review'). Jean-Marie Teno, the Cameroonian documentarian also addresses the imprisonment and harassment of those who critique the president. Teno's documentary *Chief!* (1999) chronicles daily life under dictatorship.

Bekolo's film continues the experimental style of his previous films, *Quartier Mozart* (1992), *Aristotle's Plot* (1996), and *Les Saignantes* (2005). He was the creator of the video installation *Une Africaine dans l'Espace* at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, 2009. His

latest film also uses techniques of multiple perspectives and the mixing of genres and media; this time, he splits the movie screen to three, five, seven, and eight TV-like screens simultaneously projecting conflicting perspectives on the same event: the disappearance of the long-ruling president of a fictitious Sub-Saharan country, much like Paul Biya of Cameroon. The simultaneous screens speculate the president's location and suspect his death according to the formula of a crime story that features a criminal, a victim and a series of detectives to find out the truth. Bekolo often uses the formulas of film history to publicly ponder issues specific to Africa. In *Le Complot d'Aristote* (Aristotle's Plot) he referenced the urban gangster movie formula of Hollywood films to satirize and celebrate the hundredth's anniversary of moving images and the coming of age of African cinema.

*Le Président* is a mix of genres and perspective and a cacophony of voices. The movie opens with the puzzling news that the President disappeared, only a few days before the elections. The disappearance is so fantastical that there is no logical explanation for it, therefore rumor circulates that he had gone to heaven to be with his late wife. In response to the mysterious disappearance, Cameroonians are free to comment on corruption and the lack of opportunities to make a living during his long presidency. Bekolo all but names Paul Biya and the Big Man syndrome of Africa in general. Another long-ruling president, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, was deposed by a popular movement led by musicians, unions, and the military in 2014. The film's soundtrack features the song 'Le chapeau du chef' (the chief's hat) by Burkinabé rapper Smarty from his album *Afrikan Kouleurs* (2012) musically linking the two dictators.

Bekolo's film is set during the 50th anniversary of Cameroon's independence, less a celebration than an accusation: 'Why are all the unemployed youth driving motor-taxis? Why are babies being stolen in public hospitals? Why does no local hero still have their name on streets or monuments dedicated to them? Why is such a beautiful country in so much despair? Why has the old president never been to Soweto or to Harlem?' Similar



questions have been aimed at dictators in Africa elsewhere by filmmakers, musicians, and revolutionaries, such as the rappers, Didier Awadi of Senegal, Smockey of Burkina Faso, Billy Billy of Côte d'Ivoire, or General Valsero in Cameroon. The fusion of cinema and music has been an effective tool to get across revolutionary critique and to mobilize the youth in West Africa. Bekolo's film is an attempt to mobilize the masses by mixing fiction with reality, image with music.

While the reference is specific, the phenomenon of African dictatorship after independence from European colonization is not. Agamben explains the normalization of modern 'states of exception' in Europe and the US through a legal and discursive manner while similar cases in Africa are given to explanations through culture, custom, and tradition. Agamben views rule by the 'state of exception' as generalized and the product of modernity, but in Africa it is diagnosed as the pathology of the 'Big Man' syndrome. The syndrome is suspected to be a left-over of pre-modern models of leadership and tribalism. This discursive divide between Europe and Africa is the tired continuation of Hegel's dismissing of Africa from world history, repeated again by Nicolas Sarkozy in a speech to university students in Dakar in 2007 or in a press conference by current French president Emmanuel Macron at the G20 summit in July 2017 in Hamburg, Germany. As the writers for the blog *Africa Is a Country* Sean Jacobs and Camilla Houeland explain:

One ready-made explanation usually trotted out to explain this behaviour [of the oft-repeated habit of African leaders to extend their mandate and break or change electoral rules], is that of the so-called 'big man' syndrome, which sources it to African 'culture.' However, this disease is rather a product of recent African history. Colonial administrators utilized African traditional structures for 'indirect rule,' but deformed them by promoting the power of the chief or the traditional leader at the expense of the precolonial checks and balances mechanisms. Post-independence African presidents have just perfected these systems. (<http://africasacountry.com/> March 11, 2016)

They also comment on how internal and external circumstances influence African leaders' breach of power:

The Presidency [in Africa] is a family business and there is no future or monetary gain outside politics. Accumulating wealth and business opportunities are tied to controlling the state. So, is the economic fortunes of your allies, party officials and, crucially, the President's family. Once you are out of office, you lose your ability to steer contracts or get a cut from profits. After tenure, the then former President—or, even more so, his allies—also risk prosecution either for embezzlement or human rights abuses. (<http://africasacountry.com/> March 11, 2016)

The writers for the blog list several recent successful or failed attempts by African presidents to stay in power after their terms ended, in Uganda, Rwanda, the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), or in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Hence, in the African context, the permatized condition of social precariousness of the masses, preconditioned by colonial intrusions into economic, political and social fabrics, facilitates dictatorial political models, not the other way around. Similarly, Achille Mbembe dedicates a chapter entitled “The Aesthetics of Vulgarity” in *On the Postcolony* to the “banality of power in the post-colony,” specifically discussing the semantic and physical violence of the phenomenon of the “President for Life” of Paul Biya, and others (Mbembe 2001: 102–141).

Smarty's song lyrics of ‘Le chapeau du chef’ (The Chief's Hat) synch the body politic with the body of the leader: ‘Our sovereign king is sick’ – his imminent death would cause deadly civil war. Smarty, whose song became the rallying anthem of the 2014 revolution in Burkina Faso, warns of a looming civil war:

Little by little like a magic effect  
 Every notable discovered his ethnic difference  
 Each child was told the ingratitude of the race coming from the north or that coming  
 from the south  
 Between wise and notable – two camps  
 The sons the brothers the cousins of the king – two camps  
 Between aboriginals of the village – two camps

No one was going to the fields anymore  
The machetes were sharpened every morning.  
(Smarty, 'Le Chapeau de chef')

Bekolo uses songs by Smarty and the Cameroonian rapper General Valsero as commentary on excessive of power.

As the opening credits of *Le Président* roll, the viewer watches three simultaneous screens: one with busy streets and motorcycles, another with the President watching from a hill top above the city, and the third, with the city celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of independence. The juxtaposition of the bustle of the city and the quiet of the President's environs up high escalate the disconnect between the president for life and his subjects. Eventually, the three screens are further fragmented and speculate the absence of the President. The news reporter Jo Wood'ou of 'Canal-D' leads the broadcast competing with Info TV *Le JT* (a mockery of the real French TV channel Canal +). Because the center of power is vacated, news organization can only broadcast rumors and commentary: the opposition charges that France and the UN were asked to intervene in the turmoil of the leaderless state, while others report that there was a sighting of the President on his way to NYC. The sensational headline of the Info TV *Le JT* flashes: 'Turmoil at the palace after the President's sudden disappearance.'

To explain the disappearance, the camera turns to the serene countryside where the President arrives in his kidnappers' car at the village of his birth and family. The President was kidnapped and taken back to his village before the elections. The President's old comrade who is now in prison takes on the role of the omniscient narrator. The Old Man and the President, who studied law together in the 1960s, 'dreamed to change this country where everyone would have a place; we had just won independence, we could finally decide our future' (Bekolo) – a theme revisited again at the end of the film.

Besides the economic differences enabled by the dictator, there are also generational differences. The youth, un- or under-employed represented by footballers and musicians (played by the rapper Valsero) or the MTV-style

reporter Jo Wood'ou, know dictatorship as normalized and have seen the President only on television. The disconnect between the population and the 'President for Life' is emphasized through his virtual overexposure to Jo Wood'ou's generation:

You speak of this man as if you knew him, through TV, the Internet, you knew the President, my friends... Through the small screen he punctuated every moment of my life. When I was born, he was already the president, all the way through university, now I am on television too and the President is still the president. His disappearance is important for a whole generation. (Bekolo, *Le President*)

Wood'ou represents the youth that inherited independence along with a President: 'The first choice of a new generation; a television choice, which, in turn, is a presidential choice' (Bekolo). Since they only know the dictator through TV, he is much like a celebrity: 'television means star: our president is a star; he has the most beautiful women, the nicest car, all the country's money, he has groupies, security. Being president here means living the Hollywood dream' (Bekolo). The youth have no access to historical perspectives, Jo Wood'ou's generation only sees the present through TV and popular culture. Dictatorial rule flattens the past into the present and erases the future. Under dictatorship reality is mediated through televised images, truth through fiction, documentary in feature film.

Following in the tradition of Sembène's revisionist historical filmography (most poignantly his *Camp de Thiaroye*), Bekolo also uses art to mend the gaps in colonial and dictatorial historical storytelling. The voices of the President and the Old Man add the missing historical perspective to Jo Wood'ou's generation who only see synchrony and surface. The Old Man comments on the President: 'He wanted the status quo, I wanted serious reform' (Bekolo 2013). The film uses the colors of blue and yellow to punctuate the emotional and moral values of the plot. The President and power wear blue while the youth are associated with yellow and the tricolor of the Cameroonian flag. Since dictatorship flattens the past into a single-story in the present, Bekolo appropriates the narrative formula of the 'whodunit' detective fiction to call attention to the missing past and the intangible future. Reality and fiction are a mash-up of

speech without a referent. Space is a labyrinth. The President's driver cannot find the familiar route to the village where his first wife awaits him: 'I feel like we're turned around,' to which the President responds: 'Yes, it is like we're lost' (Bekolo).

The President revised the constitution to stay in power after his mandate would end. The film points to the change of the constitution of Cameroon in 1996 that named the President of the Senate to take power in case of a power vacuum: but the film informs that after the 1996 revision 'the Senate was never established.' Jean-Marie Teno's documentary *Chief!* (1996) focuses on the constitutional change and its consequences on daily life. In Bekolo's mockumentary, discussions about the disappearance of the President rage on TV, in prisons, on the streets, and in the nominal places of power. Administrators in the President's Cabinet look in vain for documents that would spell out a smooth transition in case of an emergency. In fact, by not naming a governing body to circumvent absolute power, the President made the exception the rule. A female administrator, when asked about the succession of power: 'What is in your file?', remains silent. Academia, played by the real-life academic 'Mathias Owona' comments on INFO-TV that in a case where the president is no longer able to govern, a provisional leadership would be named: 'The President should not name his own replacement' (Bekolo). The TV news concludes: 'In reality, this President is a sovereign; acts like a monarch.' The real-life Eric Mathias Owona Nguini is a Cameroonian political scientist who has a widely publicized career of critiquing Paul Biya's regime. There were several attempts on his life. Others have also suffered for openly critiquing Biya's continued rule, among them Jean-Marc Bikoko, a Cameroonian Unionist, who has been arrested, beaten, imprisoned, his pay forfeited, threatened to be dismissed from his teaching position, and whose car was burned and office burglarized over the years. Most recently, June 26<sup>th</sup> of 2016, his residence was set on fire while he and his family were sleeping. The Burkina Faso based human rights

organization that films and reports violations interviewed Bikoko on *Droit Libre TV* in Ouagadougou (Njikam 2016).<sup>1</sup>

When political public discourse is unreliable, rumor and hearsay take hold, hence the telling name of the reporter Jo Wood'ou that I interpret as a play on words: the name is a reference to Hatian Vodun that communicates between the dead and the living and explains what is not explainable, such as zombies or the sudden disappearance of a president. The reporter is tone deaf as 'wood' 'where/où?', since he understands politics as a packaged TV script: 'The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime' (Bekolo). The logic of 'deontology,' what the D stands for in 'Canal D' of a fictional French news channel, guides the dissemination of public information. Wishfully, Jo Wood'ou considers news reporters 'soldiers of truth.' The role of modern day griots who are less praise singers and more critics of the status quo falls onto activist journalists, musicians, and filmmakers. Bekolo's film adds to the visual and informational cacophony via an accompanying soundtrack of English and French language rap. Smarty's song comments:

Our sovereign is sick. The king's crown floats in the air, heads bump to see who shall wear it. Little by little public figures discover ethnic differences; two camps, machetes sharpened, problem of the king, the distance between his truth and what the people think of him. (Smarty in Bekolo)

Simultaneously with the lyrics, Bekolo juxtaposes the music with a graffiti image of Paul Biya to bring the message home.

General Valsero, a real-life Cameroonian rapper (also known as Abe Gaston), becomes the expert on politics for the MTV generation on the fictional Canal-D and is interviewed by Jo Wood'ou in search of *any* information on the state of affairs of the country. Valsero wears the national

1 See link: Emmanuel Njikam, 'Cameroun : le syndicaliste Jean-Marc Bikoko et sa famille échappent à la mort dans un incendie criminel' *droitlibre.tv* <<http://droitlibre.net/cameroun-le-syndicaliste-jean-marc-bikoko-et-sa.html>> (28 June 2016) accessed 19 January 2018.

team's football jersey with the team's mascot the lion in the middle. Rappers and footballers are the new heroes and heirs to the aging generation of Independence. Valsero's appearance on TV is the result of his real-life song 'Lettre au Président' in which he lampoons President Biya's policies that had left Cameroon's youth without opportunities for education and employment. Valsero raps:

Excuse president, your policies have excluded us the youth from national life; I have spent years studying only to be met by unemployment upon graduation. Did you still remember you told us there was light at the end of the tunnel...? (Interview with Continental Radio Station – June 26, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

The song 'Letter to the President' appears on the album *Politikement Instable*.

Valsero's latest album *Motion de Soutient* [Motion of Support] (2016) is a collection of eleven songs that enumerate the misery, poverty, unemployment, corruption, nepotism and tribalism that ensued after Paul Biya took power in 1982. The title song of the album is accompanied by a music video that mixes documentary footages with cartoons that comment on the current state of Cameroon.<sup>3</sup> Valsero laments, Cameroonians are left with no alternative but revolt or drown their misery with '33 Export', Cameroon's popular beer: 'Don't compromise your future, cast your vote or else you will never be heard'. The song entitled 'Hold Up' on the same album, Valsero condemns Paul Biya for his thirty-three years in power: 'Biyatism has been 33 years of waste and drunkenness' (CRS interview). Reactions to his album have been mixed, some view *Motion de Soutien* as an anthem of despair, while others claim Valsero has given them the support to take matters in their own hands through voting or even violence. He is respected as the local Bob Marley of Cameroonian politics, referring to the heightened political message that characterized Bob Marley's career before his untimely death.

- 2 See link to the interview with General Valsero on Continental Radio Station: <<http://www.continentalradiostation.com/news/general-valsero-does-autopsy-on-president-biya-of-cameroon/>> (June 26, 2016) accessed 19 January 2018.
- 3 Clip of General Valsero, 'Motion de soutien': <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owkrqczdI\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owkrqczdI_Y)> accessed 10 May 2016.

The real Valsero has been in hiding since his first album *Politikement Instable* [Political Instability] (2008) catapulted him to prominence. His second album entitled *Autopsie* (2009) contains the song 'Rèponds' in sequence to the emblematic song 'Lettre au Président' of the album *Politikement Instable*. His latest album *Motion de Soutient* [Motion of Support] (2016) was released on YouTube and other social media platforms.

Mashing up reality with fiction, Bekolo imagines a meeting between Valsero and the President where the rapper dressed as a footballer is offered the responsibility of the presidency. The filmmaker joins the rapper in his demand to find a solution to giving the youth the means to live in their country: 'If eighty percent of them are unemployed,' Valsero in the film declares, 'the system failed.' The film zeroes on the skewed priorities of the current regime: while prisons are full, the country has only one run-down sports stadium, no concert halls or cinemas. The economy runs on informal businesses, like motorcycle taxi drivers or street vendors who make 100–500 CFAs (less than \$1) a day. The demands on the government mount from the mundane to the absurd when a woman turns to the camera and asks: 'How can a child go missing in a hospital? The Government is unable to find him?' (Bekolo). Valsero, now wearing a Tupac Shakur T-shirt, concludes his monologue for the TV camera with the condemnation of the dictator:

In Africa, is it the ability to decide between life and death, or to decide who should live well and who shouldn't? In Cameroon and most African countries power has been reduced to dictatorship and the ability to manipulate a people. But we have the power to stop it... Excuse me Presi, but I have I've got to talk to you. (Bekolo)

With reality mimicking fiction, recent events follow Bekolo's script: President-elect of Liberia, George Weah, is a former international football star, who tapped into a yearning for change and widespread discontent to win Liberia's presidential runoff in a landslide in December 2017. On his agenda: to boost the economy, since many of his supporters – young, perennially unemployed or underemployed, and struggling financially – are those most in need of opportunities, as commented Robtel Neajai



Pailey, a Liberian academic (Kester-D'Amours, *Al Jazeera* December 30, 2017). Valsero and Bekolo echo the philosopher Achille Mbembe's reassessment of power and sovereignty in postcolonial states as 'Necropolitics' (Mbembe 2003).

Mbembe addresses the most extreme form of biopower, the power to decide life and death: 'To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power' (12). Mbembe defines 'necropolitics' in terms of ethnic, racial, and tribal conflicts and economic violence, such as life in the shantytowns and townships of South Africa. Mbembe relies on Franz Fanon's biopolitics in the colonial context, the specialization and compartmentalization of colonial occupation he describes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, cited by Mbembe (26). The colonized space functions on the premise of 'reciprocal exclusivity'. Mbembe understands necropolitics as the postcolonial form of unfreedom and deformed subjectivity, void of agency and sovereignty: 'In this case, sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not' (Mbembe 27). Using Fanon, Mbembe defines necropower in the 'special reading of colonial occupation, the late-modern colonial occupation in Gaza and the West Bank' (Ibid.). In line with Mbembe's notion of subjectivity through death, Judith Butler coins the use of the term precarity as the vulnerability or precariousness of the subject (Butler 2009). Franco Barchiesi re-defines vulnerability as the now permanent state of social precarity: 'the result of an entire normative, political, and discursive order forcing persons and communities to depend for their survival on uncertain and unrewarding employment prospects' (Barchiesi 2016: 876).

Mbembe's theory accounts for the zero-sum definition of subjectivity under the conditions of necropower in the act of martyrdom, as 'the relation between terror, freedom, and sacrifice' (Mbembe 2003: 37). To make sense of slavery and colonial occupation where 'death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven' and where 'terror is a defining feature of both slave and late-modern colonial regimes' (38), necropower goes beyond

state-sanctioned discipline and biopower. The current state of politics, given the extreme examples of unfreedom, focuses less on manifestations of and access to human potential: “To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’” (39). Citing Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*, Mbembe relates the practice of suicide by slaves (also noted by C.L.R. James in *The Black Jacobins*) as the extreme form of agency. For Mbembe, late-modern notions of sovereignty are narrowed to ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics)’ (Ibid.). He reworks Foucault’s biopower that sees agency even in extreme circumstances to necropower that renders subjects to zombies, the ‘living dead,’ or freedom in death (Mbembe 40). He concludes: ‘under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred’ (Ibid.). Bekolo’s film literalizes the postcolony that is still run as colony. Achille Mbembe locates necropower in places like Palestine, Rwanda, Angola, Liberia or South Africa – with mention of Cameroon in the chapter on “The Aesthetics of Vulgarities” in *On the Postcolony*. He was also the consultant to the documentary film by Valérie Osouf and Gaëlle Le Roy, *Cameroun: Autopsie d’une Indépendance* (France 2008). *Cameroun: Autopsie* takes a critical look at the mockery of independence in Biya’s Cameroon. The uncanny of Cameroon’s ‘unfreedom’ is addressed in Bekolo’s film and Valsero’s music. But unlike Mbembe, they still see hope for retaliation and survival. According to the reporting of the fictional Canal-D:

The President used power to destroy the elites, chased all thinkers out of the country. We no longer think here. The President intentionally made poor appointments in order to crush the competents; Cameroonians now demand excellence. If the President used disorder to better manage the people, Cameroonians now demand order. He pitted the elites of villages against one another; unite them. Pitted the old against the youth; tied down the brilliant; now he should set free the geniuses of Cameroon; increase production to eat! (Bekolo)

Valsero defiantly responds: ‘Break the chains of this infernal system!’ (Bekolo).

Bekolo concludes his visual manifesto by panning the camera on the new leader of Cameroon he imagines for his country: a woman president who would distribute wealth justly and eliminate the territorial boundaries between the poor and the rich, who would 'stop relying on men and on God' and make Cameroon a 'normal country':

No stealing, I shall deliver you to the owners of embezzled goods. Homage to those who served name the streets ... All those who attack the diaspora, no one deserves his nationality more than anyone else; even foreigners with the heart to work with us on our plantation are welcome. (Bekolo)

Since the youth grew up with tightly controlled television images and soundbites under circumstances of 'unfreedom,' they have to take control of their own future. The film ends with the suggestive note:

Jo Wood'ou and Canal-D are to invent the future that was stolen from us forty-two years ago.  
When will it end?  
1982 to 2017? (Bekolo)

With the question-mark after the hoped-for end to Biya's regime within the decade, the film cuts to the credits. Bekolo's film literalizes the post-colony that is still run as a plantation. The film ends with the suggestive message that the new generation 'are to invent the future that was stolen from us forty-two years ago' (Bekolo). With that, the film ends and names its locations for filming: Yaoundé, Douala, and the village of Ebogo. Ebogo is advertised on the internet for tourists as a model for sustainable development and an eco-tourist site. Jean-Pierre Bekolo's docu-fantasy echoes the message of the late Burkinabé revolutionary leader, Thomas Sankara, urging young people to be audacious and 'dare to invent the future' (Harsch 2017). The work of culture answers to Mbembe's apocalypse in an alternative universe of hope.

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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,<sup>1</sup> are proposing a new form of engagement that, as Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier have similarly posited,<sup>2</sup> is tentative and often expressed to disturb instead of to transform.<sup>3</sup> This disturbance consists of representing what Achille Mbembe has described as the ‘banality of power’ in postcolonial Africa.<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin linked carnivalesque elements to ‘non-official’ cultures in early modern Europe,<sup>6</sup> 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’,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Like other authors of the new generation, they live in exile, and their ‘Africanity is accessory’, as Abdourahman Ali Waberi states.<sup>9</sup> Yet, both also participate in colloquia and public events<sup>10</sup> to interrogate the position of the francophone African writer and the necessity of engagement.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.'<sup>13</sup> 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'.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> He implies here that postcolonial societies – like all societies – are predetermined by myths, rituals and liturgies.<sup>16</sup> 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'.<sup>17</sup> Myths may also promote the historical and legendary story of a nation-state.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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', *Diogène* 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 [...].]<sup>21</sup>

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*)<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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,<sup>24</sup> 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',<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 Bishop<sup>27</sup> 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”’.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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].<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.’<sup>33</sup> 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.’<sup>34</sup> 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'.<sup>35</sup> As in the novels of Sony Labou Tansi<sup>36</sup> and Ibrahima Ly,<sup>37</sup> 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)'.<sup>38</sup> 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].<sup>39</sup> 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, *Mémoires 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*.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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'.<sup>43</sup> 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?'<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> The trickster-view enables a form of what cultural critics van den Akker and Vermeulen have described as metamodernism or ‘new sincerity’,<sup>46</sup> 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 trickster<sup>47</sup> 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,<sup>48</sup> 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?’<sup>49</sup>

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].<sup>50</sup> *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:<sup>51</sup>

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,<sup>52</sup> 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,<sup>53</sup> 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').<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.’<sup>5</sup> Gichingiri 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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].<sup>10</sup>

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.]<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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'.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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: Ngũgĩ 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 Ngũgĩ, *Wizard*, 77.

18 Ngũgĩ, *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,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.'<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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 apparaît 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.]<sup>27</sup>

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'.<sup>28</sup>



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.'<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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].<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup>

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.<sup>34</sup>

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 Kourouma<sup>1</sup>

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].<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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].<sup>4</sup> 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.]<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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].<sup>8</sup> 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].<sup>9</sup>

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].<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.]<sup>12</sup> 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].<sup>13</sup> 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].<sup>14</sup> 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.]<sup>15</sup>

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].<sup>16</sup> 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.]<sup>17</sup>

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.]<sup>18</sup>

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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PART III

Compromised Freedoms



## 7 The Author and the Authoritarian: Gamal al-Ghitani's *al-Zaynī Barakāt*

In the early 1970s, Egypt experienced a period of major transformation. The sudden death in 1970 of Gamal Abdel-Nasser (known simply as Nasser), the charismatic leader of the 1952 coup d'état, national hero and defender of the Suez Canal against European powers, and pioneer of Arab nationalism, meant a sea change in the way the Egyptian state operated: from a tightly controlled state-socialist autocracy, proudly leading the non-alignment movement, to a looser police state, and eventually an America-friendly free market economy, under Anwar al-Sadat.<sup>1</sup> While the transition was never to a democratic regime, the atmosphere of surveillance and fear did let up, and political opponents, mostly mollified by then, were afforded some breathing space outside Nasser's notorious prisons.

Critics such as Samia Mehrez, Roger Allen, and Céza Kassem Draz have described the emergence of a 'young generation' of writers in the 1960s in the Arab world, a generation that will express its 'dissatisfaction and disgust with the state of Arab society' (Allen 57) both before and especially after the Six-Day War of 1967. In the face of widespread censorship and political repression, writers of this generation often constructed symbolic narratives; along with al-Ghitani, writers including Son'allah Ibrahim and 'Abdel Hakim Qasem drew on historical events, folk culture, and their own experiences of repression – al-Ghitani and Ibrahim had both been incarcerated under the Nasser regime – to compose allegorical tales for the suffocating political atmosphere of their time, taking advantage of the

1 While I follow standard transliteration for most Arabic words, including names, in the case of historical figures and internationally known writers I have opted for a simplified transliteration already widely in use.

slim margin of freedom of expression afforded to them. Gamal al-Ghitani's writings, in particular, were strongly influenced by medieval historiography and sometimes tend towards the mystical, and his best-known work, *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, stands as a sophisticated example of the parabolic style that he and his contemporaries favoured, as well as of al-Ghitani's own preoccupation with language, especially medieval historiographical style. Widely considered a masterpiece of Egyptian literature, it was published in 1970–1 in serial form in the magazine *Rose al-Yūsuf*, and then as a book in the mid-seventies. It is set in Cairo in the years 1506–16, and tells the story of the fall of the city to Ottoman invaders, after a chaotic period of Mamluk rule.<sup>2</sup> The story is told through several modes of narration, which include government spy reports, a European traveller's account, as well as stream-of-consciousness narration from the point of view of students and sheikhs at al-Azhar, a major religious university. Here, al-Ghitani's choices regarding genre, writing style and narrative strategies are interwoven with the novel's focus on surveillance and tyranny, in order to produce a text that resists authoritarianism in the author's own time. Close analysis reveals that themes of authoritarianism and surveillance highlight the interplay between present and past in this allegorical novel and the way in which language is invested with a power far beyond that of an autocrat.

The novel *al-Zaynī Barakāt* opens with the scene of a Cairo in uproar after the Ottoman invasion in 1517, narrated by a Venetian traveller named Visconti Gianti. The narration then switches back to events some ten years earlier, when a character named al-Zaynī Barakāt Ibn Mūsā was appointed in a most powerful post. Although he first declines the position, giving the impression of disinterest in power, he is eventually made *muhtasib* of Cairo; that is, the commercial overseer, in charge of regulating prices, preventing corruption, and more generally safeguarding public morals. In a city that was then a centre for merchants, Ibn Mūsā wields enormous power. He proceeds by using the police chief, Zakariyā Ibn Rādī, and his agents to monitor and inform on the population. Zakariyā recruits students

2 The Mamluks were slave-soldiers that were originally brought to the Middle East from the Balkans, and who eventually rose to power in the fourteenth century.



and sheikhs at al-Azhar to inform on their colleagues and uses his army of spies to control Cairenes.

As the narrative proceeds, it becomes clear that Ibn Mūsā is more concerned with internal power struggles and with maintaining his popularity, than with the very real threat of foreign invasion. He establishes a system of public announcements for the benefit of the population, in which he regularly proclaims his commitment to the public good and the preservation of morals. However, the rivalries between different Mamluks become difficult to control, and threaten the stability of the regime. As state power disintegrates, the Ottomans invade, sacking the city and terrorizing the people, who had so far been kept in the dark about the foreign threat. By the close of the novel, the regime falls. However, al-Zaynī Barakāt simply transitions to working under Ottoman rule.

Considered a seminal example of Arabic novels in the post-Mahfouz generation, *al-Zaynī Barakāt* has been addressed by many critics, and I will give here a brief overview of the most important scholarly works analysing the novel. In a 1981 article,<sup>3</sup> Céza Kassem Draz has focused on the uses of irony in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, arguing that al-Ghitani uses pastiche and parody to create estrangement. In *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (1995), Roger Allen includes it in a chapter he devotes to the analysis of twelve influential and, at that time, relatively recent novels.<sup>4</sup> Allen describes *al-Zaynī Barakāt* as 'a work of fiction that uses historical documents' (196) and also highlights al-Ghitani's use of strategies of pastiche and irony. By contrast, Fakhri Salih, in his 1997 article in *Sutur*, chooses to zoom in on the allegorical function of the novel, and argues for *al-Zaynī Barakāt* as a radical departure from pre-existing Arabic works, due to its use of the historical novel as allegory for the present or recent past.<sup>5</sup> In his book *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary*

3 Ceza Kassem Draz, 'In quest of new narrative forms: Irony in the works of four Egyptian writers', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 12 (1981): 137–59, 144.

4 Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982), 195–208.

5 Fakhri Salih, 'Al-Riwāya al-'Arabiya wa Ashkāl al-Sard al-Turāthiyya', *Sutūr* 2 (1997): 76–8.

*Modernism in the Levant* (2001), Stefan G. Meyer builds on his predecessor's analyses, highlighting both the allegorical dimension as well as the novel's use of irony.<sup>6</sup>

All these works have focused on *al-Zaynī Barakāt's* relationship to historical events and texts, underlining its functions as pastiche and commentary on both the historical past and the author's contemporary reality. While these themes are important and do hold a place in my own analysis of the novel, I am also interested in the text's techniques and narrative strategies as they relate to the novel's themes of surveillance and tyranny. Indeed, in contrast to the aforementioned examples, Samia Mehrez's analysis focuses on the internal logic of the text, rather than simply drawing links with either an historical moment or a corpus of pre-modern texts. In a chapter dedicated to the novel in her *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction* (1994), Mehrez, like Kassem Draz, draws on Gérard Genette theory of intertextuality to highlight the potential for allegory in the novel.<sup>7</sup> However, her analysis excavates al-Ghitani's narrative strategies from within a multi-layered text, and is one I find most productive and will be drawing on to inform my own reading of the novel.

The novel is structured into six 'Pavilions', or sections, each divided into short chapters, which are told from the point of view of one of six characters. The characters we follow include the title character, who was the markets inspector of Cairo and a powerful historical figure. Thus, we are told the story of the last decade of Mamluk rule in Cairo before Ottoman rule, which was marked by political repression and widespread government spying, and throughout the novel, we are shown how systems of *baṣṣāṣīn* (literally 'lookers'), or spies, with al-Zaynī Barakāt Ibn Mūsā at their centre, control the lives and minds of Cairenes.

The eponymous character, al-Zaynī Barakāt, is progressively revealed to be a secretive, manipulative tyrant, using a carefully curated public image to consolidate his own power, undermining even his closest advisors. The parallel between al-Zaynī and Nasser, at least as the latter is perceived after

6 Stefan G. Meyer, *The Experimental Arabic Novel: Postcolonial Literary Modernism in the Levant* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 55–9.

7 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 96–118.

the 1967 defeat, are key to a contextualized reading of the novel. Mehrez points out:

Several critics have not failed to note the affinities that exist between the character of al-Zaynī and that of Nasser. Both figures seem to elicit the same controversial questions: are they good or are they evil? Are they working for the people or simply manipulating them? Are they villains or are they heroes?<sup>8</sup>

But more than simply portraying him as a symbolic titular character, through the representation of al-Zaynī the novel draws a parallel with a painful moment of Egyptian history. The humiliating defeat of Egyptian forces in 1967 was only made worse by the systemic state propaganda which tried to conceal the truth from the Egyptian public for as long as it could. When the news reached the populace, it was a gigantic blow, which fostered disillusionment with Nasser. Even though the Egyptian leader's popularity kept him at the head of the state (after he stepped down and massive demonstrations demanded his return), 1967 was a turning point in the Egyptian psyche, and especially in arts and literature.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the themes of propaganda, of lies and concealment were directly relevant to the writer's present, and *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, published shortly after Nasser's death, has been read as a damning indictment of his regime.

The novel revolves around a system of surveillance. The first hint of the spy network is found near the beginning of the novel, shortly after Ibn Mūsā's appointment as overseer, when we are told the story of a slave girl whom he rescues from an abusive master. Visconti Gianti describes how some people felt about the incident:

But another group felt that he had intruded on the most private matters of people's lives; and that no one at all could feel safe in his home or about his family, especially after a rumour indicated that the girl had never appealed to al-Zaynī at all; that he had found out about the matter through dubious methods which enable him to acquire information about the minutest details that occur within homes. (25)<sup>10</sup>

8 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 101–2.

9 Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 59.

10 While my analysis at large is based on the original Arabic text, I quote from the beautiful and faithful English translation by Farouk Abdel Wahab.

In an earlier chapter, whose events occur ten years later, Cairo is compared to 'a terrified woman fearing rape late at night' (9). The fall of the city is represented as sexual violence, and as tantamount to the emasculation of its male citizens. Beth Baron argues that '[o]nce the nation was envisioned as a family, the concept of family honor could easily be appropriated as the basis for national honor.'<sup>11</sup> The latter 'worked as a concept because at more or less the same time as the notion of national honor emerged, the nation was imagined as a woman.'<sup>12</sup> The slave girl's sexual abuse thus foreshadowed the fall of Cairo.

Apart from the spies' intimate acquaintance with their subjects, the theme of knowledge emerges as a reflection on the role of the intellectual, through Sa'īd, the Azhar student, and his sheikhs and fellow students. Despite being presented as simple-minded and naïve, Sa'īd goes out of his way to spend more time with the sheikhs, from whom he has excessive respect; in his honesty and desire to keep the moral high ground, he is the opposite of 'Amr, who works as a spy for Zakariyā, the police chief. Ibn Mūsā and Zakariyā are also defined by their knowledge, but it is excessive, Faustian knowledge, obtained through dangerous and cruel means. They possess precisely the kind of knowledge which enables them to break Sa'īd's spirit. It might be pointed out here that Sa'īd is from Upper Egypt, an historically poor and under-developed region, and therefore belongs to the poor working class. His growing suspicions towards al-Zaynī Barakāt result in his getting detained and tortured, and seeing the girl that he loves marry someone else (as Ibn Mūsā has arranged). By the end of the novel, he is roaming the streets, driven to madness. The political betrayal and national catastrophe are therefore paralleled by a personal crisis.

Zakariyā himself, the police chief and chief spy, is eventually made to think that al-Zaynī Barakāt has been spying on him as well, using a personal spy network, thus doubling the levels of surveillance and creating a structure of concentric circles around the leader. However, that impression is revealed to be an illusion, carefully planted by Ibn Mūsā, in order

11 Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

12 Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 7.

to maintain his control over his subordinate. The illusion of surveillance therefore acts as a real threat, breaking down the barrier between reality and fiction, in the internal narrative of the novel. In this instance, too, al-Ghitani is taking the opportunity to comment on his contemporary reality: Nasser's spies were rumoured to be everywhere, and yet at the same time many were convinced the regime planted those rumours in order to keep the population in check. By giving credence to the latter narrative, al-Ghitani evokes a form of literary resistance.

The very idea of resistance literature has been widely contested. Indeed, in *Resisting Novels*, Lennard J. Davis argues that the novel form is inherently conservative, because it emulates life without being life itself.<sup>13</sup> Opposing the novel to political resistance, Davis classes it as a form of psychoanalytic resistance, a 'defensive reluctance or the blockage of change'.<sup>14</sup> Even what he calls the 'overtly political novel' cannot, according to him, change the world, only its representation.<sup>15</sup> However, in *Resistance Literature*, Barbara Harlow argues that the novel does participate in reality: 'the resistance writer, like the guerrilla of the armed liberation struggle, is actively engaged in an urgent historical confrontation'.<sup>16</sup> Never strictly separated from life, the novel becomes 'an indictment'.<sup>17</sup> Harlow ties this to 'the resistance writer's demand for a politicization of interpretation'.<sup>18</sup> As we will see below, the role of allegory in *al-Zaynī Barakāt* is essential to its political project. However, language itself is also a powerful force that builds up and tears down tyranny. In his study of Latin American dictator novels, *The Voice of the Masters*, Roberto González Echevarría shows how language becomes a manifestation of power, identifying the author with the dictator.<sup>19</sup> Echevarría argues that in post-Boom novels, language is also the means by which authority

13 Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

14 Davis, *Resisting Novels*, 12.

15 Davis, *Resisting Novels*, 225–7.

16 Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 100.

17 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 98.

18 Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, 77.

19 Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

is demystified: 'what the new literature is doing is dismantling Literature itself, not replacing a relation of power with another within an unchanging concept of literature.'<sup>20</sup> I will show how both dynamics operate in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, language being a key to both authority and resistance.

The history of Arabic literature has long been a history of orality. Indeed, poetry, considered the preeminent genre and appearing much earlier than prose, was passed down orally, with the exception of the very best *qasīdas* [odes], which were written down and reportedly hung on the Holy Ka'ba, a sacred site of Islam, in use since Pagan times. In reference to that honour, those poems were called *al-Mu'allaqāt* [the hung ones]. Thus, while orality was the principal medium of transmission of literature, writing conferred an honour upon the work being physically preserved for future memory. After the rise of Islam, and with the death of its Prophet, an oral tradition of *ḥadīth* was born, passing down the prophet's words with a complex system of attributions (*isnād*). In *Arabic historical thought in the classical period*, Tarif Khalidi chronicles the emergence of *adab* (literature) out of this tradition, brought about by the bureaucratic system of the Abbasid caliphate:

But perhaps the most important political impulse to the systematic development of interest in the sciences of the Arabic language came from the Arabization of the administration, undertaken by the caliph 'Abd al-Malik and carried through by his successors. This policy resulted in a gradual and far-reaching transformation of the bureaucratic structure, the creation of new routines of government and the rise of new classes of bureaucrats and a new secretarial 'style'. The new bureaucrats were soon to become skilled professionals who were trained to express the finest shades of mood and meaning in the letters and directives of their masters and frequently passed on their jobs and skills to their descendants. As court procedure came to be imitated in provincial capitals, a corps of state secretaries with a highly developed art began to occupy a distinct and influential position throughout the empire and to be associated in the popular mind with a particular style of literature, to which we shall return below.<sup>21</sup>

20 Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters*, 85.

21 Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic historical thought in the classical period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 84–5.

*Adab*, which is often translated as literature but corresponds more to Belles-Lettres, therefore rose from the spread of literacy and from the need for textual models in prose. *Al-Zaynī Barakāt*, emulating the language of sixteenth-century historiography, inserts itself into the lineage of early modern *adab*, emphasizing the power of language. Ibn Mūsā's spy network collects oral stories, and we see them transformed into written reports that can condemn a person to jail and torture. Thus the word, spoken and written, is invested with a power. In its oral form, the word serves as a source of information for the state's spies; written, however, it becomes a weapon to use against Ibn Mūsā's adversaries.

Throughout the novel, as readers, we have access to certain documents that are used to tell aspects of the story. A major role is accorded to historiography, as the novel contains several pseudo-translations of imaginary writings: most of them are excerpts from the travelogue of Visconti Gianti, a fictional representation of the European travellers of the time. As well, in the Fifth Pavilion, we see a summary of papers from a report on a conference between Chief Spies from various places, which one of the protagonists participates in. This report is followed by appendices of which we see only the cover pages – translations of papers presented by other Chief Spies. What role do these pseudo-historical documents and their pseudo-translations play in the narrative? In fact, the multiplicity of points of view is essential to this work's novelistic – and anti-novelistic – project: the implosion of the unit, confusion, and alienation of the reader all function as a commentary on the difficulty of making sense of history, both ancient and modern. To quote Mehrez, the novel includes 'a very elaborate form of pastiche, wherein al-Ghitani imitates several kinds of documents. He draws on a repertoire of medieval conventional forms.'<sup>22</sup>

Such a hybrid pseudo-documentary identity is in fact central to *al-Zaynī Barakāt*. The insertion of imaginary historical documents lends the novel what can be termed an imagined intertextuality, which complements the strong intertextual links it entertains with a historiographical text from the period – Ibn Iyās's *Badā'i' al-Zuhūr fī Waqā'i' al-Duhūr*

22 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 109.

[*The Wonders of Blossoms in the Events of the Ages*], which the novel borrows from heavily. Mehrez comments that '[t]he relationship between *al-Zaynī Barakāt* and Ibn Iyās's medieval chronicle can best be defined in Gerard Genette's term 'hypertextuality'. This relation of hypertextuality is therefore used to reattach al-Ghitani's novel to a canon of classical Arabic prose, and inscribe it within the Arab literary tradition.<sup>23</sup>

In her chapter, Mehrez goes on to expand on the themes of parody and pastiche, relying on Genette's work on hypertextuality to show how al-Ghitani uses those strategies to efface the speaking subject:

Hypertextuality operates on two levels: *parody*, which is the *transformation* of the elements of the hypotext, and *pastiche*, which Genette identifies with *imitation* of the hypotext. In *al-Zaynī*, parody is identifiable on the level of style, where some of the most prominent stylistic characteristics of medieval Islamic historiography are reused to create the 'fictional world' of the novel. Here I am referring especially to the use of narrated discourse and the passive voice.<sup>24</sup>

Mehrez therefore points out that '[t]here is no responsible 'I' at which a finger can be pointed.' While she does argue that 'the absence of the 'I' is a way in which the historical text can reflect a collective consciousness', one cannot help but wonder if al-Ghitani's use of these devices be a kind of 'disguise' that absolves the writer from his political responsibility.<sup>25</sup>

In analysing the fictional documents that al-Ghitani presents us with in *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, Mehrez divides them into 'authority-people documents' and 'authority-authority documents'.<sup>26</sup> These two categories correspond roughly to oral and written documents, which we will return to shortly. The former are accessible to the characters of the novel at large, but the latter are only seen by some of them (usually Zakariyā or al-Zaynī himself), and the reader; some of them are not even available to us, as with the case of the reports of which we see only the title. This device gives us as readers direct access to the poles of authority in the text. Therefore, the

23 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 102.

24 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 103.

25 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 99.

26 Mehrez, *Egyptian Writers Between History and Fiction*, 110.



reader not only witnesses the spying, but becomes a spy her- or himself. In complicity with the writer, our informant, we mirror, albeit in a fragmented and incomplete fashion, the voyeurism which, as a theme, pervades the novel. In an increasingly televised world, we can all think of ourselves as being watched and watchers: we are all *baṣṣāṣṣīn* as well as the people they spy on. However, by witnessing events and texts that are inaccessible to 'normal' characters, we are made complicit with Zakariyā and, especially, with al-Zaynī Barakāt. Their authority is thus subverted, making the written word a weapon of resistance against oppression.

In addition, the inserted texts sometimes operate against authority. For instance, one of the texts for 'the meeting of the world's police chiefs in Cairo', authored by the police Chief, Zakariyā, details various forms of torture that he uses on suspects. Such a detailed description reveals the subject of physical violence to the reader. al-Ghitani himself has commented on the role of pain: 'the pain felt by a soldier in the Hellenic, Pharaonic, Babylonian, Assyrian or Mamluk era in war, is the same pain that a human being can feel now, and this is what I call the unicity of human experience.'<sup>27</sup> Therefore, pain gives us access to other peoples' struggle and a way into solidarity and resistance.

Indeed, the historical novel generates an intersection of two or more times: as Faisal Darraj explains in his chapter titled 'Gamal al-Ghitani and the aesthetics of the novelistic experiment', the time of the events and the time of the writing of the novel are brought together.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, as we read the text and participate in the creation of meaning, the time of our reading is superposed to those two:

The historicity of reading produces the historicity of the text that is read. For the text that is sought by a reader from a different time encounters questions that its writer never conceived of, and it divides itself between silence and speech. However, divided between silence and speech, it finds new life because life is found in renewed imperfection, and not in imagined perfection.<sup>29</sup>

27 'Roundtable discussion: al-Riwāya w-al-Tārīkh', *Fusūl* 17.1 (1998): 405–34.

28 Darraj, *Naḍhariyyat al-Riwāya w-al-Riwāya al-ʿArabiyya*, 231.

29 Darraj, *Naḍhariyyat al-Riwāya w-al-Riwāya al-ʿArabiyya*. Beirut: Arabic Cultural Center, 1999, 231.

There is thus a parallel drawn between several historical moments by the very process of writing and reading a historical novel, and that parallel emphasizes the temporal gap between writer, subject matter and reader. Darraj says of al-Ghitani that he 'took from history a document with limited temporality and a single meaning and transformed it through the novel' (Darraj 232). Therefore, al-Ghitani's text is not only a transparent allegory for Egypt in the 1960s, and the fall of Mamluk Cairo a medieval counterpart for the 1967 defeat, but at every moment of reading it creates its own allegory to reflect the reader's contemporary reality.

This novel straddles historical, documentary, allegorical and fictional genres. It also operates an internal 'cultural translation': the sixteenth century is used as an allegory for the twentieth. However, it is also pitted against it; in a world of polymaths and fluid identities, our modern categories do not apply; the novel itself is an anachronism. *al-Zaynī Barakāt* may thus be read as a formal contestation of the most authoritative genre of modern literature. In her analysis of parody in the novel, Kassem Draz explains:

Parody as a particular type of transtextuality aims at imitating a text, it is a device which emphasizes the 'literarité' of literature since its main aim is to destroy the mimetic illusion and does not aim at imitating nature but at imitating literature; by doing this it destroys the realist illusion and comes as a reaction to the realist concept of art.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the superposition of medieval and modern Cairo puts in question the mimetic role of the novel. Coming on the heels of Mahfouz's realist chronicles, al-Ghitani's novelistic experiment is a bold re-imagination of what 'fiction' can be, when drawn from historical chronicles, and superposed so transparently to a present reality.

As Cairo falls prey to the Ottomans, only one of the Mamluks, Sultan Tumanbay, resists. However, history tells us that Tumanbay will be defeated, captured and executed. *al-Zaynī Barakāt*, on the other hand, persists in his administrative duties after the defeat, showing that corruption is more powerful than heroism. Through the examples of Sa'īd the student and

30 Kassem Draz, 'In quest of new narrative forms', 140.

Sultan Tumanbay, the novel presents us with a narrative of failed resistance, whether against the invaders or against the corrupt and oppressive state. However, in its narrative strategies, it uses the medieval historiographical form to veil the 'I' while simultaneously implicating reader and writer deeply into the political transgressions. It implodes the authority of the narrator and of the tyrannical characters by making readers into spies, and juxtaposes the medieval defeat with the author's and reader's contemporary realities, creating an infinite allegory that functions as a constant indictment of tyranny. *al-Zaynī Barakāt* therefore exchanges literal resistance with literary dissidence, and simultaneously revises the meanings of author and authoritarian. While resistance fails in the narrative, al-Ghitani's novel itself becomes a form of resistance. By using it to challenge state authority, official historiography, and even the unity of the novelistic genre, the author creates a space of freedom from authoritarianism.

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KERRY VINCENT

## 8 The One Who Does His Majesty's Bidding: Censorship and the Banality of Power in siSwati Crime Fiction and Drama

While many writers across the continent have discussed the figure of the African dictator in their fiction and drama, in Swaziland literature the potentate's presence is made most notable by his absence. SiSwati writing generally appears to sidestep potentially controversial topics. Instead it seems content with presenting variations on the same parochial themes, as Clara Tsabedze claims,<sup>1</sup> laying it open to the kind of criticism Mazisi Kunene levelled at black South African writing in an article published in 1968. Kunene labelled this writing 'situational literature' continuing to say, 'it deals with factual situations, without drawing any significant conclusions; ... the writers lend themselves to the requirements of the school audience and purge their works of any paragraph, word or phrase, that might be deemed subversive by missionary and government standards.'<sup>2</sup> Kunene's judgement was meant to be an indictment of bantu education under the apartheid regime, and certainly a good deal of siSwati fiction goes beyond this kind of desultory scribbling, but factors like self-censorship and school audience that influenced early writings by Swazi authors have persisted as forces that have helped shape Swaziland literature.

Like many other African nations, Swaziland struggled to achieve self-representation by reforming a colonial education curriculum and introducing literature written by local authors. Because of its colonial history and attendant influence by missionaries from South Africa, formal use of its

1 Unpublished seminar paper.

2 Cited in Albert S. Gerard, *Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic* (Berkeley: University of California, 1971), 266.

mother tongue, siSwati, was stifled by English and isiZulu, both of which were the languages of official record up until independence in 1968. When siSwati was finally introduced into the curriculum after 1968, education authorities introduced a series of workshops in an attempt to nurture budding siSwati authors. What followed soon after was a literary output tailored for the education market, a trend that has continued up to the present. However, much of the literary production has been influenced by an autocratic state that uses a traditionalist ideology to suppress freedom of expression. Many of these elements converge in the publishing history of Eric Sibanda's siSwati detective story, 'Sagila Semnikati' (The Owner's Knobkerrie). The story's original setting – the royal grounds where the *Ncwala* ceremony takes place – was quietly removed in the second edition of the anthology in which it originally appeared.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the ritual site reappears in a radio play adaptation of Sibanda's story written by Swazi actor and playwright, Sibusiso Mamba.<sup>4</sup>

Often dubbed Africa's last absolute monarchy, Swaziland is less known for its written literature than for its annual public rituals, its oral performances which draw large crowds of tourists and journalists. Every year in a ritual of its own the global media descend on Swaziland during the time of the *Umhlanga*, and then again for the *Ncwala*.<sup>5</sup> For outsiders, while the former promises a display of thousands of bare-breasted maidens, one of whom might be chosen to become King Mswati's next bride (at the moment, he has fourteen wives, according to some sources<sup>6</sup>), the latter – the *Ncwala*, or ritual of kingship – offers the supernatural and secretive aura of primeval ceremony. For insiders, while the *Umhlanga* reinforces

3 Wandile Mathonsi alerted me to alterations to the original story while conducting research as part of the team working on an annotated bibliography of Swazi literature. He also translated both the original and revised stories. Without his alert eye and valuable assistance, this piece would not have been written. Telamilile P. Mkhathshwa also helped with some of the translation.

4 Mamba, Sibusiso, *Sagila*, 2006. I wish to thank Sibusiso Mamba for providing me with a copy of the manuscript.

5 While often spelled 'Incwala', I follow Andrew Apter's rendering of the word, which is based on Hilda Kuper's distinction between its noun-prefix usage. See Apter, p. 50.

6 See, for instance Socrates Mbamalu's article in *allAfrica*.

the allegiance of the king's subjects and ensures the king's patrimony, the *Ncwala* fortifies his position as ruler and shapes the consciousness of the nation. Or at least that is the official narrative, a stance that increasingly has led to a great deal of largely muted discontent. The pomp and ceremony of Mswati III's appearances and the excess represented by his fleet of luxury cars, his private aeroplane, and his bevy of wives, each with her own palatial residence, in a country with the grim distinction of having the highest HIV/AIDS infection in the world,<sup>7</sup> along with a devastating poverty level, constitute grotesque and obscene displays that mirror Achille Mbembe's notion of 'the banality of power'.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, the *Ncwala* is a manifestation of Mbembe's assertion that 'the postcolony is a particularly revealing (and rather dramatic) stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline'.<sup>9</sup> Alan Booth notes that Mswati II (who ruled from approximately 1825 to 1865) gave the *Ncwala* 'unprecedented emphasis as an annual ritual reaffirmation of the symbiosis between himself and the nation ...'.<sup>10</sup> Following the example of his father and their royal predecessors, Mswati III has continued the celebration as a means of consolidating power and gaining the approbation of the general population. Its ancient origins as a first fruits celebration linked to the astrological movement of the sun and the moon, its highly ritualistic design, concluding with the elemental conjuring of fire and water, its dramatic display, indeed, even the vocabulary used to describe its components – water priests; pilgrimage; warriors; sacred enclosure, for example – these combined elements produce an extremely powerful drama of kingship. This is most cogently exemplified by Hilda Kuper's observation, 'When there is no king, there is no *Incwala*',<sup>11</sup>

7 An article published by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation provides the following statistics: 'South Africa has the highest number of people living with HIV in the world (7.0 million). Swaziland has the highest prevalence in the world (28.8%).'

8 Achille Mbembe 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa* 62/1 (1992), 3–37.

9 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.

10 Alan R. Booth, *Historical Dictionary of Swaziland* (Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press, 2000), 210.

11 Hilda Kuper, *An African Aristocracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 197.

which so economically gathers together two strands of the ritual: power and performance. In effect, the king *is* the *Ncwala*, so any rendering of the ceremony into fiction, either positively or negatively, becomes an implicit representation of the monarch.

While the *Ncwala* is a religious ceremony, it is also a ritual of kingship and an affirmation of national identity. Kuper notes that its function is ‘to protect the King, symbol of the nation, against rivals from within, and enemies from without.’<sup>12</sup> This dramaturgy of power is intimately linked to the ruling elite’s manipulation of tradition and ideology of traditionalism, which ostensibly rests on adapting useful practices from the present to a bedrock of traditional values.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the name of tradition, following the general election in 1972, Sobhuza II had repealed a Westminster-style constitution imposed upon the country by Britain in 1963 that limited his influence, and announced that he would rule by decree. He outlawed political parties, regulated the number of people who could hold meetings, and introduced an order-in-council that would allow the detention of anyone for up to sixty days, measures that were only revised prior to the October 1993 election. By 1978 Sobhuza had established a reconstituted *tinkhundla* system (ostensibly modelled after ancient Swazi traditional councils) that in effect bypassed parliamentary democracy. Hilda Kuper writes that under this system ‘individual rights ... were subordinated to the interests of an autocratic aristocracy.’<sup>14</sup> A year after King Mswati III’s accession to the throne in 1986, during a speech to mark his nineteenth birthday, he reaffirmed his father’s vision: ‘I have the unshakeable belief in tradition, and still wish that the entire African continent would follow their traditional norms and choose only what suits them from western traditions.’<sup>15</sup>

12 Hilda Kuper, *Sobhuza II: Ngwenyama and King of Swaziland* (New York: Africana Publishing, 1978), 340–1.

13 Hugh Macmillan, ‘Swaziland: Decolonization and the Triumph of “Tradition”’ *Journal of Modern African Studies* 23/4 (1985), 643–66.

14 Booth, *Dictionary*, 318.

15 Msibi, Nhlanhla, *The Delayed Revolution: Swaziland in the Twenty-First Century* (Kindle Edition, 2014).



But while such an impressive performance worked during his father's reign, its effectiveness has become more questionable. Mswati's invention of a system of monarchical democracy, which he claimed in 2013 came to him during a thunder storm, or his revelation at the 39th SADC assembly meeting in June 2016 that he believes in 'democracy as an idea but not as an ideal because things that are ideal to you may not be ideal to other people' (*Mail and Guardian* np), would be merely a laughable part of the grotesque and obscene that Mbembe identifies as being intrinsic elements of the banality of power, if it were not for the very real instances of ongoing human rights abuses.<sup>16</sup> In short, the practice of defiant African alterity that the *Ncwala* represented under King Sobhuza has in many ways been reduced to an event or function alongside other traditionalist practices

16 Buhle Dube and Alfred Magagula's caustic remarks are worth quoting at length: Swaziland is in a fairly unique position as it has more than one document which claims to be the supreme law of the land: the King's Proclamation to the Nation No 12 of 1973 (the '1973 Decree') and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland Act No 1 of 2005 (the '2005 Constitution'). The 1973 Decree is still in effect; a decree can only be repealed by decree, and there has been no decree repealing the 1973 Decree. The 2005 Constitution vests most powers in His Majesty. For example, he appoints the Cabinet, the judges and the Civil Service Commission. He can veto any law and is not properly bound by the laws of the realm .... However, this is nothing compared to the 1973 Decree. That document places 'all executive, judicial and legislative functions' in the King. In other words, the 1973 Decree allows the King to rule by decree. It was this power His Majesty used on 6 February 2006 when he declared that the 2005 Constitution ... would come into force on 8 February 2006. The King's ... Proclamation No 1 of 2006 demonstrated that the 1973 Decree was still fully operational. As things stand in the state of Swaziland in 2011, there can be little doubt that the 1973 Decree is the supreme law of the land. Two recent examples of how the law operates with impunity were the imprisonment of Thulani Maseko, a human rights activist and lawyer and Bheki Makhubu, editor of *The Nation*, for 470 days (they were finally released in June 2015), and the February 2016 attack on University of Swaziland students by security police, who drove an armoured vehicle into the crowd, injuring one student so badly that her spinal cord was broken.

that foreign journalists in particular draw upon to present the nation to the world as a kind of royal African theme park or cultural village.<sup>17</sup>

As such, the annual ritual reflects and reinforces the more mundane, banal operations of government, whose exploitation of traditional structures also includes modes of censorship. The tight restriction placed on the news media and voices of dissent extends beyond the control of state television, radio, and print media to the world of book publishers. Macmillan Publishers holds a monopoly on the production of educational materials following an agreement with the government first struck in 1979 and renewed for a further ten years in 1988.<sup>18</sup> In turn, local writers and editors hired by Macmillan practise a form of self-censorship, as they expunge from their own work as well as that of others any material that might be considered subversive by the state. This is evident in the various iterations of Eric Sibanda's 'Sagila Semnikati'. Originally set during the *Ncwala* ceremony, Sibanda's story was subsequently recast, the *Ncwala* written out of it and replaced with a traditional wedding ceremony as educational authorities, publisher, writers, and editors performed a version of Mbembe's 'mutual zombification'<sup>19</sup> in their unwitting attempts to make literal the original siSwati title, which metaphorically refers to 'the one who does his majesty's bidding'.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently in 2006, another Swazi writer and actor, Sibusiso Mamba, adapted Sibanda's original story as an English radio drama that was broadcast on BBC radio, reinserting the *Ncwala* as the setting and

- 17 Comaroff & Comaroff refer to an article in the *Cape Times* on Swaziland to reinforce their comparison of KwaZulu-Natal to a culture park (fn 25, 156). As a ceremony, the *Ncwala* has featured in the writings of foreign visitors and journalists since the nineteenth century, when it was often viewed as either proof of an autochthonous cultural heritage or as a display of savage brutality. During the twentieth century, the print media has tended to sensationalize it as a means of critiquing royal power.
- 18 Late in 2000 the government proceeded to introduce the development of school textbooks for the secondary level as well. Mavuso, Makana, 'The Book Chain in Swaziland' in Roger Stringer, ed., *The Book Chain in Anglophone Africa* (Oxford: INASP, 2002), 83–6 (85).
- 19 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.
- 20 Lucy Dlamini offered 'The One Who Does His Majesty's Bidding' as another possible translation. The manuscript translations are not paginated.

shortening the title to 'Sagila'. With Mamba's English rendering, the detective story's capacity to represent and propose change to social systems and their structures reaches a global audience.

Sibanda's story, 'Sagila Semnikati', is a whodunit murder mystery set during the nation's most sacred rite of kingship. The mutilated body of the wealthy and respected farmer, Fabagiye Mamba, is discovered on the eve of the *Ncwala*. More unsettling is the realization that his death was a medicine murder, and that various parts of his body ('his tongue, his nipple, his right eye, and his beard')<sup>21</sup> have been cut away and taken along with the titular sagila, or club, which was his proud possession. As the story progresses, the setting of the royal residence and the *Ncwala* ritual seem to fade into the background. The detectives question a number of suspects, but when each is proven to be innocent, the investigation circles back to the site of the murder at the Ludzidzini royal compound where the *Ncwala* was held.

Like the conventional murder mystery, character is secondary to plot. Sibanda's story depersonalizes the police officers, usually called 'senior detectives', instead allowing the story's narrative thrust to remain firmly on the investigation. When the detectives are given a voice, they generally discuss the direction that they should or should not have taken. This lack of a central character who analyses events and makes pronouncements creates an oddly distanced, objective effect. The suspects who are put forward are conventional types that appear often in Swazi literature. There is the farmer who had been engaged in a land dispute with the victim, the victim's favourite but junior wife, who may also have stolen his money, and the stranger who had been seen carrying a club. These suspects, however, are each dismissed in short order. The story's potentially troubling critique of state power begins when the detectives review the case one year later, as one of them speculates, 'Maybe the killer is one of those living in the royal residence, or somebody related to them.'<sup>22</sup> His partner concurs, 'We made

21 Original text: 'Akusekho lulwimi, libele, liso langesekudla, kantsi nentjwebe ihin-indziwe' (138).

22 Original text: 'Awucabangi yini kutsi lowambulala kungaba ngumuntfu wakhona lapho esidzidzini, noma-ke lohlobene nemuntfu wakhona?' (141).

the mistake of looking far from the scene of the crime.<sup>23</sup> This, it turns out, is precisely the case. Following a further investigation, two senior warriors who resided at the royal residence during the *Ncwala* are finally arrested and charged with murder and fraud.

Even though the club itself is actually discovered at the home of one of the warriors, not on the grounds where the *Ncwala* had been performed, it would appear that Eric Sibanda made the mistake of *not* setting the scene of the crime far enough from the royal residence, of *not* being satisfied with placing the killer amongst the all too common farmers, or wives, or strangers found everywhere in the nation. In preparation for a revised edition of the anthology, *Khulumani Sive* in which 'Sagila Semnikati' had appeared, Macmillan Swaziland asked Sibanda to make changes to his story. In particular, the editors wanted him to situate the murder in a different location and context from that of the royal residence and the *Ncwala*. Sibanda refused, arguing (perhaps disingenuously) that the *Ncwala* was peripheral to the story, that it was a story about medicine murder. It is Eric Sibanda's belief that following his refusal to revise his story, Macmillan approached another Swazi writer who then made extensive changes, including most importantly the removal of the *Ncwala* as setting and its replacement as the more innocuous *umtsimba*, or traditional wedding scene. However, a lecturer from a local Teachers College who is one of Macmillan's regular writers and editors, disputes Sibanda's claim, insisting that *she* was hired by Macmillan to edit the story. She argues that the original version, with its implicit link between the *Ncwala* and ritual murder, was unSwazi, which in local terms is an extremely powerful accusation to level against someone.<sup>24</sup> As Mirta Virella writes in an article on censorship in Argentinian cultural production,

the regulations and decrees that testify to the control of culture are semantically interwoven and engender prescriptive practices that are organized through contagion

23 Original text: 'Tsine sesuke safuna khashane sashiya ekhaya' (141).

24 Sibanda discussed the issue with me in his office at the University of Swaziland. I had an opportunity to talk to the actual editor (who shall remain anonymous) outside the UNISWA library in July 2014.

and inclusion. Accordingly, a discourse takes shape in which each isolated prohibition is absorbed and understood as a general prohibition.<sup>25</sup>

With her accusation of being 'unSwazi,' the editor firmly situates the discourse of censorship in the arena of nationalist sentiment. And as if to prove how much she is willing to sacrifice, her name does not appear among the list of authors or editors in the book. Instead, Macmillan retained Sibanda's name, as if to suggest that he had revised the story himself.

When the 2001 edition of the anthology was published, the whole of Swaziland was gripped by reports of the capture of a serial killer named David Simelane, who is believed to have killed forty five women between 1999 and 2001. Further, during the course of ongoing interrogations, Simelane claimed that he did not act alone, that he had been hired by a prominent local businessman and two members of parliament to collect body parts to be sold as *muti*. Perhaps this case (still unresolved by 2004 when the second edition of the anthology was published) may have influenced Macmillan's decision to revise Sibanda's story. The ongoing discovery of mutilated female bodies was reported to a population bewildered and terrified by the ravages of HIV/AIDS and some were using *muti*, or traditional medicine, in an attempt to combat the disease. When Simelane started his killing spree in 1999, Swaziland was being confronted with another crisis. In a carefully researched article on the mass-murderer, Shaun Raviv writes,

By one account, nearly 50,000 people had died of AIDS at that point, nearly one out of every twenty Swazis, most of them in the prime of their lives. [Alan] Whiteside told me that there was a cemetery at the bottom of the hill by his school, and it served as an indicator of the epidemic for him. 'Every time I went past,' he said, 'it just grew, the red mounds of earth scarring the veld.'<sup>26</sup>

This was also the year that King Mswati called the nation together to fight HIV/AIDS, even as he chose yet another wife following the *Umhlanga* ceremony that year. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics describes the king's

25 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 4.

26 Shaun Raviv, 'The Killers of Swaziland', *The Big Roundtable* <<https://thebigroundtable.com>> accessed 8 August 2017.

empty rhetoric which in effect created the conditions for ‘*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*’.<sup>27</sup> Sibanda’s short story had captured a small part of this world, and the implications of a medicine murder occurring during the kingdom’s most sacred ritual meant Macmillan felt its own close association with government at least partially threatened.

The second version of the story attempts to stay true to the situational irony of the original by locating Fabagiye’s death during a private wedding, a celebration of a fresh beginning. However, the new site and altered ceremony depreciate the significance of the crime as it appears in the original story and empty the act of ritual murder of its potentially subversive value. Early in the original story Sibanda writes,

A lot of people were shocked and amazed by Fabagiye’s death. A man to die when he had attended the incwala ceremony! And then rot away for days without being found! What had happened to his neighbours who were also there? Fabagiye left on Saturday in readiness for the incwala which was to be danced the following Tuesday.<sup>28</sup>

The edited rendering retains the exclamatory sentences, but modifies the occasion:

A lot of people were shocked and amazed by Fabagiye’s death. A man to die when he had attended a traditional wedding! His cousin’s wedding, too! Fabagiye left home on Tuesday in order to help his cousins with the wedding preparations at Masini, across the Mkhondvo River. The wedding was on that Saturday.<sup>29</sup>

27 Achille Mbembe, ‘Necropolitics’, trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15/1 (2003), 11–40 (40).

28 Original text: ‘Kubamangalise kufanele bantfu kufa kwaFabagiye. Ukhona nje umuntfu longafa aye eNcwaleni? Adzimate umuntfu acishe abolele emalawini pho angabonwa ngumuntfu? Kani lawa lamanye emajaha emmango labekaye eNcwaleni abekadze akuphi? Fabagiye usuka lapha kunguMgcibelo, iNcwala itawugidvwa ngaLesibili lolandzelako’ (138).

29 Original text: ‘Kubamangalise kufanele bantfu kufa kwa Fabagiye. Ukhona nje umuntfu longafa aye emtsimbeni? Emtsimbeni wemzala wakhe nekwent! Fababiye usuka lapha kakhe ngalweSibili utsi uyawusita emalungiselelweni emtsimba wemzala

Sibanda continues on as if to underscore the setting of the murder, whereas the editor of the second version dutifully decontaminates the site. The original edition reads:

His family was then shocked to receive a message that Fabagiye had died at the traditional capital. But he had been in good health when he left! The deceased had been discovered in his hut at Ludzidzini by children who were playing hide and seek. A child who had hidden in Fabagiye's open hut had come out screaming his lungs out, one would swear he had chanced upon the deadly mamba snake.<sup>30</sup>

The revised edition reads:

His family was then shocked to receive a message that Fabagiye had passed on. His wives had been to the wedding and come back on Sunday, leaving him in good spirits and health. The deceased had been discovered by herd boys four days after the *umhlambiso* rite which concludes a traditional wedding. The boys were looking for lost goats in a forest. One of them had searched inside a donga and soon emerged screaming his lungs out, one would swear he had chanced upon the deadly mamba snake.<sup>31</sup>

All of this occurs on the first page of the story, with one final insistence. Sibanda's 'Since this tragedy had occurred at a royal residence, it therefore had to be investigated by senior, experienced detectives. The motives of

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wakhe le eMasini ngesheya kweMkhondvo. Umtsimba wemzala wakhe utawuba mgeMgcibelo' (139).

30 Original text: 'batunywe ngumbiko wekutsi sekumenele Fabagiye kaNgwane. Njani manje umuntfu ahambe aphila lapha? Umufi utfolwa bantfwana elawini lakhe eLudzidzini ngelilanga lelilandzela lelo lekushisa umgogodla. Bantfwana bebadlala bacoshana, lomunye abone umnyango ungakavalwa kahle kulenye indlu agijime ayowungena khona, atsi ubhacela labangani bakhe. Akuphelanga namizuzu mingakhi angenile, umntfwana aphume acacamba. Wawungafunga utsi uhlangene nemamba lukhonkhotsi' (138).

31 Original text: 'batunywe ngumbiko wekutsi sekumenele Fabagiye. Njani manje umuntfu ahambe aphila lapha? Futsi nabo bamshiye aphila nasebabuya ngeliSontfo. Umufi utfolwa bafana bekwelusa ngelilanga lesine emva kwemhlambiso. Bafana bahamba vafuna timbuti lapha emahlatsini eceleni kwemfula. Munye wabo watsi asekgangene lapha esihosheni abukabuke khona ngobe lokwetimbuti kuyatitsandza tihosha. Akuphelanga mizuzu mingakhi, ashobe umfana esihosheni, wevakala acacamba. Wawungafunga utsi uhlangene nemamba lukhonkhotsi' (139-40).

the killers had to be known', is reduced to, 'Since this was a serious crime, it therefore had to be investigated by senior, experienced detectives. The ruthless killer had to be found at all costs', in the revised version.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, the mysterious editor did not see fit to remove the abhorrent criminal act of medicine murder. Except for the victim, Fabagiya Mamba, all the suspects are commoners, including the murderer himself apparently, who has no known links to royalty. But, like in the original story, the precise motive for the killing and dismemberment is not revealed; the emphasis instead is placed on the sagila. Even this object, however, is neutralized in the revised version. Whereas in Sibanda's story the club would be associated with the Swazi regiments whose loyalty to the king is in part represented by these traditional knobkerries or war clubs, in the revised version it seems merely to be one of the accoutrements for full traditional regalia. The revised version does describe Fabagiye as 'a senior warrior initiated under the Inyatsi regiment',<sup>33</sup> one of the nation-wide formations whose principle objective is to protect kingship,<sup>34</sup> but it obfuscates the cultural value of the sagila during an exchange between the detectives and a herd boy who is the son of Bhodlijingi, one of the murders:

'What does your father know about such things since he is always with his regiment?'

'Then you really do not know him. Nobody can compete with him in this area. The club that he is carrying these days is awe-inspiring.'

'A club? Where does your father get one from since he no longer herds cattle?'<sup>35</sup>

32 Original texts: 'Njengoba lendzaba yenteke emtini webuKhosi, kufanele iphatfwe bofokisi labavutsiwe. Kufanele kutsi jakutfungatswa luhala kutfolakale kutsi ngabe lowo lombulele bekafunani' and 'Njengobe lendzaba yimbi kakhulu kufanele iphatfwe bofokisi labavutsiwe. Nakanjani lolobulele umntfwana Mamba ngesibulawela lesingaka kufuneka atfolakale' (140).

33 Original text: 'Libutfo lakhe bekuyiNyatsi yaMswati' (140).

34 Following a period of training and upon graduating into a regiment, inductees utter the declaration, *tsine sigane iNkhosi* (we are married to the King) (Kumalo 88).

35 Original text:

"Suka lapha wena, abekubonaphi uyihlo kugawula tindvuku loku uhlala lena emabutweni nje. Kgutiphi ke letindvuku telikhetselo lotsi uyihlo unato?"

'Kuhleke kwemfana.



While the detective's interrogation places the herd boy on the defensive, causing him to reveal his father's secret, the dual associations of the staff with the utilitarian work of cattle herding and the ceremonial display of the king's warrior also distracts from Eric Sibanda's emphasis on the sagila's symbolic resonance. Macmillan or the National Curriculum Centre possibly felt that the story would initiate useful discussions amongst students (the target audience) over a practice that was still current in Swazi society, as the grisly Simelane case proves. Just as the sagila would simply operate as evidence, with no link to the *Ncwala*, the prescriptive practices of the state would remain outside of classroom discussions.

But while Sibanda's story was appropriated and recast to perhaps satisfy a guarded monarchist sentiment, in March 2006 'Sagila Semnikati' reappeared as 'Sagila', a drama adapted and performed on BBC radio by Sibusiso Mamba. And in this emergence onto an international platform Sibanda's original use of the *Ncwala* as setting is revitalized, its understated presence transformed during the revelatory final moments into a vexed denunciation of the constrictions placed upon the individual in the name of tradition. Whereas the economy of Sibanda's six-page narrative favours plot at the expense of character, Sibusiso Mamba's version manages to align character development with the complications of a detective drama. The disclosure in the final minutes, in which we discover that the farmer's son, Mafa, has plotted to have a traditional healer murder his father, with a reward of some of the murdered man's body parts, acts as a shocking culmination to the dark currents of superstition, jealousy, infidelity, wife-beating, and polygamy that gather and circulate during the course of the play. Siphon, the detective, asks, 'Why Mafa? Why during the Incwala?'

MAFA:           You see Detective ... I hate this country. I hate all the traditions and fears and superstitions of this country ... they are the reason my mother died. Because she refused to accept them! I knew that I had to make it look like a ritual killing. Scare the whole nation! Deflect any possible suspicion from myself.

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“Wo-hho-hho! Nembala awumati babe wena. Uyatati tindvuku latiphatsako kutsi tinjani? Yona lena lanayo nje kulamalanga yelikhetselo lucobo” (146).

Earlier in the play, Mamba has his character, Mafa, use voice-over to provide information on the significance of the ceremony to a foreign audience:

Incwala ... the most sacred ceremony on the calendar of the Swazi Kingdom ... thousands of young men and thousands of traditional warriors gather round the King, the most potent medicine men in the country also gather ... and the purpose? To fortify the king and the Swazi nation ... for the year to come.

Even more radically, perhaps, Mamba also has a character describe the king himself as being ‘dark as a storm-cloud’ upon hearing of the murder. The character Nkunzayi, a senator who presumably has links with the royal house, continues: “They killed your father on the day of Incwala, committed a ritual murder right on the premises of the Royal residence. It is an insult to the King and the whole nation!”<sup>36</sup> Hilda Kuper notes in her analysis of the ritual during King Sobhuza’s reign that, ‘the *Incwala* unites the people under the king, and at present there is a fairly general appreciation of its nationalizing value. “We see we are all Swazi; we are joined against outside foes.” ... The people must be united in friendship and cooperation; bloodshed at the *Incwala* is a terrible thing’. Writing for a global audience, Mamba appropriates this central narrative of the nation and translates this ‘play of kingship’ into a radio drama to expose the grip traditionalist ideology and patriarchal structures have on Swazi society.<sup>37</sup> This development of Eric Sibanda’s relatively unobtrusive use of the *Ncwala* perhaps foregrounds its unsettling potential, the troubling implications of which were recognized by the education authorities, and subsequently occluded in the revised version.

A more public debate around censorship began in 2009 following a report that an account of the country’s largest opposition party, the People’s United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO) would be introduced into the 2010–11 secondary school history curriculum.<sup>38</sup> However, Vusi Sibisi

36 All quotations Eric Sibanda, ‘Sagila Semnikati’ in Zodwa Motsa, ed., *Khulumani Sive* (Manzini: Macmillan Boleswa, 2004), 139–48, revised edition, 45; 3; 8; 8.

37 Kuper, *Aristocracy*, 224; 225.

38 Mduduzi Magagula, ‘PUDEMO in New School Syllabus’, *Times of Swaziland* <[www.times.co.sz/index.php?news=11071](http://www.times.co.sz/index.php?news=11071)> accessed 16 August 2017.

published a scathing article in the *Swazi Times* the following year on the government's decision to exclude any references to PUDEMO, a party that was banned practically at its inception and whose president, Mario Masuku, has been jailed on numerous occasions. Sibisi reported that Pat Muir, the Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Education and Training, claimed that the party's inclusion in the textbook 'was an oversight on their part' ostensibly because the organization did not have any material on its evolution and history that could be used by teachers and students. The underlying rationale was that this caused confusion to both pupils and teachers.<sup>39</sup> More recently, the text which caused the controversy, *Focus on Swaziland*, has apparently been grudgingly accepted after its initial rejection two years earlier. A 2014 article by Mduduzi Magagula notes that a government official 'says the book is now usable because it documented things that happened before the party was proscribed'.<sup>40</sup> The text documents the formation of PUDEMO in 1983 at the University of Swaziland during the turbulent interregnum following the death of Sobhuza II in which the Queen Regent, Dzeliwe, was deposed by a faction within the royal house.<sup>41</sup>

With such close regulation of educational material, it is perhaps not so surprising, then, that the kingdom's most important ritual, the *Ncwala*, is almost wholly absent in siSwati fiction, poetry, and drama. Zodwa Motsa recognizes its potential for literature in her call for Swazi writers to model their drama after its performative displays; for her, the ritual reinforces Swazi identity and is an imaginable vehicle for an original local expression separate from Western dramatic patterns.<sup>42</sup> Like Motsa, in a separate arti-

39 Vusi Sibisi, 'New syllabus geared to brainwash Swazi child', *Swazi Times* <<http://www.Swazilive.com>> accessed 16 August 2017.

40 Mduduzi Magagula, 'PUDEMO AND THE ROYAL FAMILY' *Times of Swaziland* <<http://www.times.co.sz/news/96695-pudemo-and-the-royal-family.html>> accessed 16 August 2017.

41 There is some uncertainty over whether the material has in fact been included in the syllabus to date. The text in question, *Focus on Swaziland*, does not appear in any Google search. It was, however, published by Macmillan.

42 Zodwa Motsa, 'The Missing Link in siSwati Modern Drama', in Lokangaka Losambe and Devi Sarinjeive, eds, *Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial Drama and Theatre in Africa* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2001), 32-47.

cle Patrick Ebewo (unaware of Mamba's play) wonders why Swazi writers have not incorporated elements of the ceremony into their drama, but he is more interested in the subversive potential of transforming 'the Incwala ritual performance into a revolutionary theatre with the primary purpose of empowering disadvantaged Swazi citizens in the struggle to liberate themselves from the oppressive forces of cultural conventions'.<sup>43</sup> Mamba's version of 'Sagila Semnikati' does answer Ebewo's call for writers to lay claim to and adapt elements of the ceremony as a means to expose the *commandement's* manipulation of tradition. In this, he also goes some way towards Motsa's recognition of the *Ncwala's* potential for self-representation by local writers that is free from the shackles of Western literary influences.

Ironically, however, his translation of the ritual must rely on a European platform from which to be heard. Within Swaziland itself, discussion on the workings of this 'play of kingship' is forbidden. Describing a seminar on traditional religion and culture organized by former Lecturer Joshua Mzizi at the University of Swaziland, Simangaliso Kumalo writes,

when people raised questions around the issue of *Incwala* they were warned not to discuss this because he had not sought permission from the royal elders (*labadzala*). The warning came through the then Minister of Justice who also happened to be a chief himself. The question that may be asked is why the mystery surrounding the monarchy and some of the sacred ceremonies? The answer to that question is so that it can remain mysterious. It is this mysteriousness and superstition that has sustained the continuity of the kingship.<sup>44</sup>

Mbembe argues that in the postcolony 'the *commandement* is constantly engaged in projecting an image both of itself and the world – a fantasy that it presents to its subjects as a truth that is beyond dispute .... The *commandement* itself aspires to be a cosmogony'.<sup>45</sup> The mystification of a ritual that is the embodiment of kingship is institutionalized as the despot's

43 Patrick Ebewo, 'Swazi Incwala: The Performative and radical Poetics in a Ritual Practice', *South African Theatre Journal* 25/2 (2011), 89–100, (90).

44 Simangaliso Kumalo *Religion and Politics in Swaziland: The Contributions of Dr. J. B. Mzizi* (South Africa: Sun Press, 2013), 43–4.

45 Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes', 8.

inviolability filters down to its national university as repressed freedom of expression. More broadly, the secrecy enveloping aspects of the *Ncwala* insinuates itself into educational, literary, and media spaces. In August 2014 Minister of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT), Dumisani Ndlangamandla, announced that 'state media existed primarily to serve the interests of the state'.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile in June 2015, a report tabled at the Swaziland Parliament revealed that censorship at (state-controlled) Swazi Television was so tight that every month the Swaziland government issued directives to the station about what events it should cover.<sup>47</sup> And as recently as January 2018 an Independent Online (IOL) article written by Mel Frykber reported that Zweli Martin Dlamini, the editor of *Swaziland Shopping*, an independent newspaper based in Swaziland, was forced to flee the country after receiving death threats from the manager of Swazi Mobile, a telecommunications company that the king and other high-ranking officials own shares in. Dlamini's paper was closed down by the government following the publication of his article, which exposed how Swazi Mobile had dislodged its rival, the parastatal company, SPTC.<sup>48</sup>

The control of public spaces is duplicated in the censorious practices of a publishing house that employs an anonymous writer to alter a story appearing in an anthology that is included in the high school curriculum without providing acknowledgement of the changes. This elision of the site of kingly ritual mirrors the absence of the *Ncwala* in Swaziland's literary landscape more generally. Certainly, the continued rendering of this drama of kingship by Swazi writers could further test the limits of saying the unsayable in Swaziland, transforming the event into a ritual of rebellion

46 'Swaziland: No Chance of Open Broadcasts', *allAfrica* <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201708020680.html>> accessed 16 August 2017.

47 Rooney, Richard, 'NO CHANCE OF OPEN BROADCASTS', *Swazi Media Commentary* <<http://www.swazimedia.blogspot.com>> accessed 8 August 2017.

48 Frykberg, Mel. 'Swazi editor flees over story on King Mswati's "shady dealings"', *IOL Africa*, 12 January 2018. <<https://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/swazi-editor-flees-over-story-on-king-mswatis-shady-dealings-12702920>> accessed 13 January 2018.

against autocratic rule and questioning the claim that one absolute, singular narrative constitutes a nation.<sup>49</sup>

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49 The *Ncwala* was identified by South African anthropologist Max Gluckman as belonging to ancient practices that he labelled 'rituals of rebellion.' During these displays tensions are openly expressed, but rebellion is performed as a means of channeling potential hostilities and ultimately reinforcing loyalties towards the king, thus denying the possibility of social change to traditional structures.

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9 'My characters, my plots, are under my pen':  
 Authority as dictatorship in King-Aribisala's *The  
 Hangman's Game*

African dictator fiction places the body centre stage, spotlighting the despot as the manifestation of gross power. The dictator performs his authority through a body frequently imagined as expanding, corpulent, oversexed and, paradoxically, impotent. His is an economy of excess. This trope of the hyper-masculine dictator's body, undergirded with the apparent contradiction of virility and impotence, is deployed time and again in the genre. Writers portray the dictator as an object of fear, with the raw power over life and death written into the vast terrain of his body; and yet, satirists insistently return to the inherent comedy of that same body. The dictator's body sets him apart from lesser beings; however, it is the focus on the body that gives the genre its egalitarian impulse, for the body represents the shared experience of mortality, and thus exposes his vulnerability. The dictator rules not only through fear but also through propaganda, channelling a national script through official broadcasts, pamphleteering and the press. The national narrative sustains his power while at the same time mythologizing it.

The majority of African dictator fiction follows a real or imagined dictator in his political intrigues: prominent examples include Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demi* (1979), Ousmane Sembène's *Le dernier de L'Empire* (1981), Henri Lopès's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006; originally published in Gikũyũ as *Murogi wa Kagogo*, 2004). This chapter will discuss Karen King-Aribisala's *The Hangman's Game* (2007), a novel that, against the grain of the genre, fashions the dictator figure out of a

woman's body. This postmodern novel explores the theme of dictatorship largely through analogy, reimagining a dictator's relationship with his citizens as that between an author and her creations. Through this lens, King-Aribisala highlights the deep structural implications of authoritarian power, and the narrative product of the law as restraining the characters as imagined citizens.

It is now common to describe governance in terms of bodily metaphor: we speak of the 'head' of the country, the 'long arm' of the law, and of the citizenry as the 'body politic'. The dictator is the 'head' and he is also the first and most prominent body: constantly under surveillance, being broadcast, having his image stamped upon posters, newspapers and currency. It is through his body that the African 'Big Man' demonstrates his aesthetics of excess. Achille Mbembe explains:

To exercise authority is, [...] for the male ruler, to demonstrate publicly a certain delight in eating and drinking well, and, [...] in Labou Tansi's words, to pass most of his time in 'pumping grease and rust into the backsides of young girls.' The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The body, however, simultaneously provides the point of affinity with the despot's citizens: he exists not only as the 'head' of state, but also as one of the masses. It is this vulnerability that he seeks to cloak in endless parades of authoritarian power: it is a matter of urgency that he should project the appearance of solid immortality, denying any implications that he, like previous heads of state, may be toppled from command. Mbembe concludes that 'one should not underestimate the violence that can be set in motion to protect the vocabulary used to denote or speak of the *commandement*, and to safeguard the official fictions that underwrite the apparatus of domination'.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of the African dictator (who rose to power, in some cases, on a wave of revolutionary hope – only to prove a source of disillusionment in

1 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 110.

2 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 111.

the postcolonial state)<sup>3</sup> took root in the cultural and administrative legacy of colonialism. In his introduction to *Unmasking the African Dictator*, Gĩchingiri Ndigĩrĩgĩ observes:

In centralized states the traditional rulers were shunted aside to make way for colonial governors who had enormous powers without corresponding accountability to the governed. The colonial state thus created the foundation for the centralized despotism of the colonial era.<sup>4</sup>

This ‘centralized despotism’ was shored up by the support of Western powers during the Cold War,<sup>5</sup> and has resulted in ‘undermining the post-colonial compromise, emasculating the traditional instruments of state power, and bringing about a profound modification of social structures and cultural imaginations.’<sup>6</sup> Under dictatorship, the ‘privatization of public violence’ is distilled into the sanctified body of the ruler, and his edicts comprise the ‘official fictions’ of the national script.<sup>7</sup>

The despot frequently renders himself through body language and in state-authorized texts as the ‘father figure’ of the nation, conflating the sphere of national politics with domestic space. In casting himself as the national father, the dictator adopts the ‘natural’ authority of the male head of the house,<sup>8</sup> solidifying a narrative of kinship even while perpetu-

3 In examples such as Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe, Guinean Sékou Touré, Libyan Colonel Gaddafi and Malawian Hastings Banda. Such leaders’ reputations often remain in dispute within and outside their country as violence is frequently perpetrated against ethnic minorities. Positive features of their government and opposition to foreign imperialism also renders criticism to their reigns contentious; criticism may be further complicated after western powers’ retractions of support after the cessation of Cold War hostilities.

4 Gĩchingiri Ndigĩrĩgĩ, *Unmasking the African Dictator: Essays on Postcolonial African Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), xix.

5 Ndigĩrĩgĩ, *Unmasking the African Dictator*, xxi.

6 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 57.

7 Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 66.

8 Michael Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

ating violence against political opponents or ethnic others on a vast scale. 'The process by which a national identity is consolidated and maintained,' Mary Poovey advises, 'is [...] one of differentiation and displacement – the differentiation of the national us from the aliens within and without, and the displacement of other interests from consciousness.'<sup>9</sup> The dictator controls the state of exception and may declare who is to be excommunicated from the national family. The sovereign's body and speech are coterminous with the political space of the nation, gaining authority by association with the more local authority of the patriarchal family unit.

It is precisely this association of the paternal dictator's body with the nation that renders it an attractive target for writers. The body has long been harnessed for national allegory in African fiction,<sup>10</sup> and almost universally this national body has been gendered as male. While '[t]he female body form, [...] that most fetishized and silent of body symbols, figures prominently in early nationalist/postcolonial representations,'<sup>11</sup> it has most often been equated with fertility and general expressions of nature, home, ethnicity, tradition and, more recently in the burgeoning field of postcolonial ecocriticism, environment. Women's bodies have been seen as the communal ground on which the masculine structures of governance may rest, whereas the authority invested in the male body has lent itself as a symbol for state-based political criticism. This position has been revised in recent decades with writers' invitations to read national symbolism in women's bodies, such as in Nuruddin Farah's *Maps* (1986), and increasingly by women writers, as in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Yvonne Vera's *The Stone Virgins* (2002), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

9 Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830–1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 55–6.

10 Here I do not mean to second Fredric Jameson's now-infamous statement that: 'All third-world texts are necessarily [...] national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel' (Jameson 69). However, even refuting this claim, it is my view that the history of the use of national allegory in relation to the body in African literatures remains a subject demanding further study.

11 Elleke Boehmer, 'Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 26/3 (1993), 268–77 (273).

*Purple Hibiscus* (2003). In her compelling study of African women writers' representations of nation, Susan Andrade argues that 'earlier female writers' representations of national politics become most sharply visible through allegorical readings of familial structures and institutions' but that, 'over time, female writers have changed their writing style and now represent the national imaginary more directly'.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, it has remained the case that the majority of African dictator fiction discussed by critics has been generated by male writers. This chapter will address an unusual contribution to the genre written by a woman. The novel aligns representations of dictatorship with structures of authority, and humorously revises the dictator's problematic body in fiction.

### *The Hangman's Game*

The theme of postcolonial dictatorship is foregrounded in Guyanese–Nigerian writer Karen King-Aribisala's novel *The Hangman's Game*, regional winner of the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Uppermost in this novel is the constant struggle for 'control', as emphasized in the titular 'hangman's game'. 'This is how the game is played,' (35) the unnamed narrator explains to her opponent, a young woman:

'Listen carefully. Each blank represents a letter in the alphabet and the letters together make a word.'  
'What word?'  
'I'm the one who knows the word.'  
In spite of my pain, I somehow feel strong.  
'I think I've heard of this game, Madam, but ...'  
'It's my game!' I shriek, noting her pouting lips which are curved ever so prettily. (35–6)

'The hangman's game' refers to the children's game of the same title, in which the opponent is required to guess a word from a sequence of dashes on the paper, each incorrect guess resulting in a detail added to the body of

12 Susan Z. Andrade, 'Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels', *Research in African Literatures* 42/2 (2011), 91–101 (92).

a stick-figure hanged man. The game is lost when the hanged man's portrait is complete and the spectacle of a public death is etched out in miniature. 'The public execution,' Foucault contends, 'has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted': an act which 'did not re-establish justice' but 'reactivated power'.<sup>13</sup> The narrator's chosen solution to the game – that she plays against her live-in nurse, whom she jealously suspects of trying to seduce her husband – is, appropriately, 'control'. The narrator threatens to sack the girl if she does not take part in, and win, the hangman's game, activating political struggle along the lines of labour, social class, and gender.

The hanged man represents powerlessness at the hands of the sovereign whose authority is performed through the "political economy" of the body.<sup>14</sup> Images of hanging proliferate throughout the novel, most notably in the death of the narrator's friend: a writer modelled on Ogoni political activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa was arraigned before a special military tribunal and executed by hanging under Abacha's military dictatorship in 1995 (his death contributing to economic sanctions against Nigeria and its suspension from the Commonwealth). The reference to Saro-Wiwa's death paints a backdrop of authoritarian oppression and resistance in the novel, and spotlights the very real dangers for writers who criticize authoritarian governments.

In the novel, Butcher Boy is the authoritarian leader of a junta that has wrested control of Nigeria and become its president. He embodies overt themes of dictatorship. Just as the hanged writer is modelled on Saro-Wiwa, Butcher Boy is designed to resemble former Nigerian president General Sani Abacha (in power 1993–98). Butcher Boy's reign is marked by terror and lavish excess; he self-mythologizes to the populace that: 'Salvation, the nation's freedom, came from him and him alone' (19). Much of the novel follows the coups and counter-coups planned to topple him from power. Ultimately, however, the president dies under salacious circumstances – reminiscent of the rumours surrounding Abacha's death – in a bed full of

13 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1977), 48–9.

14 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 25.

prostitutes on the night of a grand party. An effigy of the dead dictator is then paraded and burned through the streets as the citizens exult in the abjection of the former sovereign's sacred body.

The body of the sovereign is suspended in balance with that of the prisoner, the balance created by the authority of the law. Foucault explains the eighteenth-century reasoning that any crime, in addition to 'its immediate victim,' 'attacks the sovereign: it attacks him personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign; it attacks him physically, since the force of the law is the force of the prince.'<sup>15</sup> This is compounded exponentially in cases of regicide which, in some respect, is doomed always to fail. Ernst Kantorowicz explores the 'dual' body of the medieval king in political theology in *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), for 'the king is immortal because legally he can never die': he is a 'superhuman' immortal who, at the very moment of his death, lives on through the title's transfer to his heir.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary terms, the corrupt structures of governance may live on even after the dictator's death, as the mantle of authority passes to another.

While foregrounding the theme of dictatorship in the novel, Butcher Boy forms merely one stream of its political commentary. The novel also features a covert dictator figure, but one who is key to King-Aribisala's critique of authoritarian power structures: and that is the narrator herself. In addition to the frame narrative recounting her own life, the narrator also intersperses text from a novel she is, diegetically, writing: *Three Blind Mice*. This novel-within-a-novel forms a piece of historical fiction set in Guyana (the birthplace both of the narrator and of King-Aribisala herself) during the lead-up to the Demerara slave rebellion of 1823. King-Aribisala underscores the connection between the slave revolt and 1990s Nigerian politics in order to foreground homologies around oppression and agency. Each of the characters in *Three Blind Mice* forms a counterpart to someone in the narrator's life: she sees herself in 'Mary ... my poor Mary mine' (157) who is 'rattling away in her half-demented nursery-rhyme, fairy-tale style [...] longing to gain control of her life and her husband' (8), while her husband

15 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 47.

16 Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 4–5.

is likewise reflected in Mary's husband, John, and the nurse echoed in their beautiful servant Rosita. The narrator's deliberate mirroring of people in her novel reveals her desire for control: unhappy with her degree of influence in 'real life', she places the people around her into a fictional universe in which she is God. This is complicated by King-Aribisala's constant frame-breaking allusions to the fact that *The Hangman's Game*, like the *Three Blind Mice* text it contains like a nesting doll, is fiction; this neat barrier between fictive and real is in turn disturbed by the many pointed similarities between the narrator's life story and King-Aribisala's own history. She reiterates her obsession with control throughout the narrative:

'I must learn to be in control' (33);  
 'As God is my witness, I was going to be in control' (13);  
 'They will not take me out of control of myself' (13);  
 'I must not be blind as to what will happen if I do not control them' (14);  
 'I even had Auntie Lou kill the Governor by remote control' (176);  
 'I'm eye-focused conscious and eye-blind unconscious, out of control and in control all at the same time' (69);

and so forth. However, in a strange twist, her mania for control is held in counterpoint with her paranoia that her characters in the fictional world of *Three Blind Mice* are trying to kill her:

All of them – Mary, Rosita, John, the Governor, Quamina and Auntie Lou and Captain McTurkeyen – wanted me dead, and would have gotten away with it if I hadn't been able to control their words, their thoughts and actions. Had I not done so I would have been dead, hanged by the neck in their hangman's game. (8)

The narrative is peppered with accusations against the characters, Iago-like muttered asides and vows for punishment. The narrator is a bully, both over her subjects in the novel and to her household staff; her erratic demands are born of feelings of helplessness both in her personal relationships and in the unstable political climate. She writes sullenly of her husband: 'I need control. He has the control' (51). Throughout the novel she displaces her own feelings of subjection and powerlessness by bullying others. Her obsession with control manifests in fantasies of dominance over those



around her, usually by choking or hanging – notably, a form of corporal punishment that inhibits speech. Just as a dictator’s performances of power mask a deep-rooted fear of assassination, so the narrator’s own fear of ‘a hanging death’ (7) is reproduced throughout the novel. She takes the greatest pleasure in planning pain for Rosita, the fictional counterpart of her child’s nurse and object of her jealousy. She decides: ‘I will hang her first’ (35), preparing to choke her in ‘a slow death with that rope of long black hair before she goes too far’ (13). Her victimization of Rosita/the nurse, apparently the least empowered in both narrative levels, commences with mind games before advancing to an affront on the body.

It is not only the dictator’s body that holds political significance, but also that of the citizen. The citizen’s body is ground zero for human rights and political expression. ‘The body,’ as Robyn Longhurst insists, ‘is as “political” as the nation-state.’<sup>17</sup> It is against the body that crimes to torture or silence are exercised. In West Africa in recent decades, voters have been intimidated and attacked if suspected of voting for the ‘wrong’ party; in Sierra Leone in the 1990s voters’ hands were notoriously amputated by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Amputations, rape and other forms of torture have been used by militia as weapons against the citizen. ‘[T]he body itself,’ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton remind us,

has been and remains a zone of management, containment, regulation, conformity, and resistance as well as of contact tout court. Under a variety of social, economic, and political constraints it has exhibited a remarkable flexibility and resilience as both a category and as the matériel of history, even while it has also been the site of suffering, the subject of humanitarian intervention and military invasion, and the object of violence and trauma.<sup>18</sup>

17 Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 134.

18 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, ‘Postscript: Bodies, Genders, Empires: Reimagining World Histories,’ in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 405–23 (407).

It is the narrator's encroachments upon the nurse's body that fan the flames of her rebellion. Threatened by her young employee's beauty, the narrator has her fictional counterpart in *Three Blind Mice* shorn of her hair. Mary, the narrator's equivalent, forces Rosita (her slave) to remove her clothes. Mary is a white English foreigner to Guyana, whereas the narrator, her counterpart, is a black immigrant from Guyana to Nigeria. When Rosita asks if she has incurred her displeasure, Mary responds, 'Your body is your offence' (111). In a pointed power play,

Mary moved closer to Rosita, still holding the scissors. Then with quiet deliberation she pointed them at Rosita's neck. The girl screamed as the beaks of silver touched her skin, then the blades were opened and were grinding and snipping through the girl's tresses. (111)

Although a stated motivation for the narrator writing her novel is to reflect on the horrors of slavery, in this scene she appears to take pleasure from describing Rosita's symbolic castration. She describes the 'grinding' act with almost sexual pleasure, as though co-opting the imagined sexual mastery of her husband. The success of this fictional show of authority gives her the confidence to have the same degradation inflicted in real life, wheeling with the nurse's fiancé: 'It's essential to my life, to my emotional well-being ... actually it's spiritual ... You are more or less married to her. Tell her she's got lice ... anything' (118). After exacting his promise, she returns to the nurse and takes 'a long look at her head, which I have no doubt whatsoever will soon be quite shaved. I almost begin to like her' (118). The narrator imagines the head shorn of hair and physically marked as a prisoner: she has transformed the nurse's body into her own territory. After the nurse's hair has been hacked off, the narrator sits in front of her and brushes her own hair 'till it gleams', musing with satisfaction on 'its blackness, its silky sheen' (126).

However, the narrator has lulled herself into a false sense of security in her relationship with those around her, mistaking agents in her life for those in her book. The narrator repeatedly refers to characters by the wrong names: that is, confusing characters at different narrative levels. The nurse responds to her provocation not with compliance, but by threatening the narrator with scissors – suggestively, also a weapon that could destroy the

narrator's unfinished novel, which the nurse has discovered and started reading. 'Did you really think,' the nurse asks in rage, 'I am one of the characters in your book, Madam? Did you really believe that you can continue to terrorize me? You piece of shit'"(127). Shocked, the narrator is:

so frightened I cannot speak. I cannot even pretend courage when I see the malice in her eyes.

'It isn't a game when the shoe is placed on the other foot is it, Madam?'

'Shoe?' I repeat stupidly. (127)

The narrator is rendered mute by the nurse's act of terrorism, reduced to 'stupidly' repeating one whom she regards as her own creature, having confused her with her fictional counterpart. The nurse concludes the ordeal by spitting: "Madam, I am not a character in your book" (129). She denies the narrator's authority over her, claiming her status as a real rather than imagined citizen. This insubordination reminds the narrator that she is not outside society but in it. Like the dictator, she has perpetuated the myth of sovereign exception, in which 'the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law'.<sup>19</sup> The dictator pretends to be immortal but is made vulnerable by his body. In the same way the narrator has imagined herself as being outside of the narrative, and is therefore staggered when the nurse makes clear that she is not exempt from the physics contained in that narrative frame, over which she enjoys less control than she had imagined. This episode fans the narrator's ever escalating paranoia.

Despite her preoccupation with control, the novel showcases the narrator gradually losing the plot. Her loss of control is signalled first in the release of information. Descriptions and events shift from appearing first in the frame narrative and then in *Three Blind Mice*, to appearing *first* in the actions and mouths of her characters and then as an echo in her own life. For example, at the funeral of the hanged writer, the narrator observes 'the coffin, roughly hacked and put together with bright round tops of nails on

19 Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (*Homo Sacer: Il Potere Sovrano E La Nuda Vita*), trans. Heller-Roazen, Daniel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

the planks' (16). Later, in the *Three Blind Mice* narrative, she consciously harvests that description for John's coffin, writing that it was 'a rectangular wooden box of planks hurriedly hammered together with bright nails. The tops of the nails are round silver disks which shine in the darkness' (22). She also puts her own words into the mouths of the characters, such as the first words of the novel, 'They wanted me dead' (7), being reproduced as the first words of *Three Blind Mice* in Mary's speech: 'They wanted my John hanged. They wanted to see him dead' (21). As the narrative progresses the temporal causality becomes broken, with control of the timeline originating in the 'embedded narrative' rather than with the narrator.<sup>20</sup> Instead of writing the script of the characters, it appears as though the imagined citizens are controlling her. Mélanie Joseph-Vilain points out that 'the polysemous verb "plot" is explicitly used: "Only God knows what they are plotting for me" (41) – as if she was being written by her novel instead of writing it.'<sup>21</sup> Further, rather than a clean schism between the *Three Blind Mice* narrative and the frame narrative, the novel-within-a-novel starts to bleed into her own narration as well as she extends the embedded narrative's events within her own story frame. The narrator starts to fetishize the act of writing itself as a means of controlling her own universe, increasingly viewing the text of *Three Blind Mice* as a semi-autonomous parallel world to which she is in thrall. Fearing a political coup at an event she is to attend, she scrawls hurriedly: 'IF I HAVE WRITTEN ANYTHING ABOUT THE GOVERNOR BEING MURDERED AT DINNER, I HEREBY EXPUNGE IT' (131) on her way out of the house.

The narrator also appears increasingly ignorant of what her characters are 'up to' (101), interrupting her own narration to question:

What's John up to in my novel? The runaway slave has been caught by McTurkeyen. Mary and Gruegel and Parsons are making their way back to Georgetown and from there they'll go to their respective plantations. But what has John been doing with himself? (101)

20 Monika Fludernik, *Towards a Natural Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

21 Mélanie Joseph-Vilain, "'The Hangman's Game': Karen King-Aribisala's "Diary of Creation"". *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 31.1 (2008), 80–92 (85).

By airing the narrator's obsessions and fears alongside the career of Butcher Boy, King-Aribisala invites us to read her narrator as a dictatorial figure, drawing confidently on the structural analogy between authorship and authoritarianism. The author-narrator is functionally a dictator in this postmodern narrative, writing a script to which she expects her characters to conform. Narrative takes the place of the law, and the rebelling citizens who diverge from her script may expect to be punished by hanging – the capital punishment of which the narrator is so fond. Foucault observes that 'by breaking the law' – that is, by contradicting the sovereign's will – 'the offender has touched the very person of the prince.'<sup>22</sup> The narrator's urge to violence against those who she views as transgressing the 'law' of her narrative constitutes 'the reply of the sovereign to those who attacked his will, his law, or his person.'<sup>23</sup> Authorship in this context is cast as ontological violence against imagined citizens. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's formulation of 'imagined communities', the concept of 'imagined citizens' must have implications for citizens living under dictatorial regimes. The term implies that such citizens are not 'real' in the sense of being flesh and blood: they are the subjects of an authority that imagines them to be disposable, whose lives may be written or overwritten (or expunged) with a magisterial decree or an amendment to the law. These citizens are merely characters in the national narrative, and remain imagined because the dictator, who writes the script that runs their lives, is unlikely to meet his 'subjects' in the flesh: theirs is always a compromised freedom.<sup>24</sup> In this narrative, characters fill the function of imagined citizens while the narrator is determined to exert her authority at all costs: 'The plot was mine but my characters were intent on out-plotting me. As God is my witness,

22 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 49.

23 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 137–8.

24 Obviously the difference between ontological violence against fictional characters and the very real violence levelled against political dissidents today is total. By suggesting that King-Aribisala has mobilized a political agenda through this structural allegory using 'imagined citizens', I have no desire to diminish the real effects of politically motivated violence as some kind of 'imagined suffering'.

I was going to be in control whether they liked it or not – or kill them off’ (King-Aribisala 13). Her rambling, repetitive prose returns obsessively to the problem of mastery and the divine right of her rulership. Just as the sovereign’s body is coterminous with the nation-state, so too is it overlaid with the narrative product of the law that both creates the space and conditions of statehood and sustains it with fictions (harmless or otherwise). The sovereign’s ‘embodied equivalence with the country extends beyond the semantic to the rhetorical register as well.’<sup>25</sup> ‘The address to nation as narration,’ Homi Bhabha writes, ‘stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in what Derrida describes as the “irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic”.’<sup>26</sup>

In *The Hangman’s Game*, the text itself is imagined as a body that bleeds, leaks and becomes increasingly deformed in its narrative coherence. The text is both held up as powerful and sacred, while at the same time articulating deep ambivalence about the authority with which it is invested – interrogating authority while also perpetuating it. The implications of this conceptual movement are suggested in, but never quite confronted by, the actual sacred text in the novel, the Bible. The conclusion of the novel leaves ‘control’ in the hands of God. Operating as a literal *deus ex machina*, the narrator’s reliance upon religious salvation reads as allegorical postmodern comedy until the author’s statements in interview are taken into account. In interview with Ronnie Uzoigwe, King-Aribisala has declared her own perception of Nigerian politics as constituting a ‘spiritual problem’ to be reconciled through ‘[p]rayer and just giving the control back to God, to handle it’, suggesting a passivity that tends to undermine the struggle for postcolonial power articulated in the novel.<sup>27</sup> The text raises the spectre of

25 Robert L. Colson, ‘Diagnosing Dictatorship: Illness, Medicine, and the Critique of Sovereignty in *Wizard of the Crow*’, in Gichingiri Ndirigiri, ed., *Unmasking the African Dictator: Essays on Postcolonial African Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 167–81 (168).

26 Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Introduction: Narrating the Nation’, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1–7 (4).

27 Karen King-Aribisala, ‘Conversation with Karen Ann King-Aribisala’, by Ronnie Uzoigwe, *Nigerians in America*. Nigerians in America, 2003. Web. 4 March 2014.

this extra rung of authority, but never fully mobilizes the allegory – across the extra leap between character, narrator, dictator, *deity* – suggested by the plentiful Christian religious allusions in the text.

Ultimately, the narrator proves impotent as a dictator, unable to control the characters who are her subjects (in both senses of the word). The characters as unwilling citizens resist her authority by erupting through the borders of the postmodernist frame narrative and behaving in unexpected ways, acting outside of the total jurisdiction she had sought to claim over their lives. We can read the characters' refusal to be contained alongside the rioting in the streets following Butcher Boy's death. Their success over the failed dictator may be read as a politically activated 'saturation of content in form',<sup>28</sup> because the collective impulse has wrested control and agency from the singular sovereign, contributing to the recent drive towards what Bill Ashcroft has described as 'the emerging genre of post-colonial utopianism'.<sup>29</sup>

The elision of boundaries is also facilitated by the conscious similarities between the narrator and King-Aribisala, reflecting the postmodernist affection for destabilizing reality. Both are female writers originally from Guyana having settled in Nigeria after marrying a Nigerian citizen.<sup>30</sup>

28 Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 124.

29 Ashcroft contends that the genre is 'nearly always at least an implicit critique of state oppression of one kind or another' despite its different forms. He goes on to conclude that 'for most contemporary utopian theory Utopia is no longer a place but the spirit of hope itself.' Bill Ashcroft, 'Post-Colonial Utopianism: The Utility of Hope', in Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio, eds, *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres* (New York: Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2013), 27–43 (28–9).

30 King-Aribisala has written in a recent article that she felt claimed by Nigeria after her collection of short stories was published:

'I was now a bona fide African representing Africa, even though I was Guyanese; an individual had represented a group, a continent, and this particular irony was not lost on me. I was moved by the Nigerian reception of this collection of stories – some stories caustic in their appraisal of Nigeria, bitter, some not. In a sense, through my writings I had "come home." I had become in a way "wedded," "married" to Africa in a more profound manner than ever before, even more so than my actual marriage to

Furthermore, King-Aribisala has stated in interview of the texts she has written that ‘all of them are like my children’ and that she writes in order to ‘get some control over my existence and of the things that happen around me.’<sup>31</sup> As Joseph-Vilain has described it:

The relationship between reality and fiction in *The Hangman’s Game* is all the more complex as the ‘real’ Nigeria is itself fictional, while the ‘fictional’ facts in *Three Blind Mice* are based on historical events, which means that the novel does not stage the resurgence of fiction into reality, but the resurgence of fiction into (realistic, historically-based) fiction.<sup>32</sup>

Throughout, the narrator refers to herself not only as the ‘author’ of the characters but also as their ‘mother’:

Indeed, in a way, the seven are all my children, deviant as they are. I must be firm. I must make them do what I want. I must not be blind as to what will happen if I do not control them. (13–14)

Her self-positioning as the mother of the characters who are, in every sense, her subjects provides an interesting twist on the dictator-as-patriarch trope. She assumes a local analogy of authority. King-Aribisala replaces the paternal dictator with the (increasingly unstable) mother’s body, providing the unusual analogy of the pregnant narrator as dictator.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the novel there is a strong triangulation between the unborn child, the unfinished novel, and the dream of a democratic Nigeria imagined as a foetus to be born: ‘Their stories I birthed with my own words’ (13). The pregnant body exceeds its bounds, is generative, and promises future hope and citizenship; the woman’s body becomes the fertile ground of the nation.

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Femi.’ Karen King-Aribisala ‘What is Africa to Me Now?: The Sweet, The Bitter ...’ *Research in African Literatures* 46/4 (2015), 15–25 (17).

31 King-Aribisala, ‘Conversation’.

32 Joseph-Vilain, ‘The Hangman’s Game’, 86.

33 King-Aribisala’s novel was interestingly published closely after Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s English translation of *Murogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*), also featuring a pregnant dictator – albeit a male one, whose performances of masculine power are destabilized by his increasingly feminine body.



However, the pregnant body is also placed in a history of representation that conceives of women as objects. Longhurst explains that while men 'are often understood to have secure (autonomous) bodily boundaries – bodies that are "in control"', women by contrast 'are often understood to be in possession of insecure (leaking, seeping) bodily boundaries [...] not to be trusted in the public spheres of Rational Man.'<sup>34</sup> This is compounded in the case of pregnant bodies, which

can be seen to occupy a borderline state that disturbs identity, system and order by not respecting borders, positions and rules. [...] It is a body that is considered dangerous and to be feared. It is also considered to be a body that needs to be *controlled*.<sup>35</sup>

It is precisely these 'leaking, seeping' boundaries – between levels of narration, between the text and the connected bodies of mother and unborn child, between narrative and the law, between King-Aribisala and her narrator, and so on – that have been deployed in this narrative. Pregnancy, which highlights and exaggerates the physical differences between men and women, at times serves as a catalyst to renew discourses around man as a rational creature and woman as flesh.<sup>36</sup> King-Aribisala exploits these associations through her pregnant narrator's utter loss of control. Her madness and hospitalisation are marked as being triggered by her pregnancy, and her increasingly erratic behaviour is blamed on the conveniently pseudoscientific understanding that her 'pregnancy hormones are skidaddling all over the place' (68–9). Such a construction relies on age-old renditions of the female body as having control over the weak female mind.<sup>37</sup> King-

34 Longhurst, *Bodies*, 2.

35 Longhurst, *Bodies*, 6 (my emphasis).

36 In popular culture a pregnant woman's tiredness is commonly interpreted as 'baby brain' (eerily similar to bygone medical linkages between 'hysteria' and 'wandering womb'), while bodily impulses and cravings are seen to suggest that women's minds are controlled by the demands of their bodies.

37 Men have been traditionally aligned with the mind and the imperial, whereas women, as has been endlessly shown, have been equated with the bodily sphere and colonized space. Huggan and Tiffin explain that:

'Indeed, it is now commonplace to suggest that women and colonized subjects have been identified with the body and the animalistic, while the "natural" supremacy

Aribisala has replaced the paranoia of the dictator, who sees a coup around every corner, with the paranoid woman who believes fictional characters are out to kill her and that a member of her household staff is trying to 'steal' her husband. Despite her clear attempt to reframe women as possessing a subversive agency through the characters of Mary, Rosita, Aunt Lou and the Deaconness, King-Aribisala's project is marred by her reliance on a gendered madness that positions the female mind as in thrall to its extravagant, border-destabilizing body. In so doing she tacitly authorizes representations of authority that see men as in control of the power they wield, but women as merely cracked vessels into which power is poured.

Despite these concerns, the use of the narrator as a formal dictator represents an fascinating inversion for dictator fiction. Where most novels in the genre address dictatorship thematically, King-Aribisala's novel also activates a merger between content and form. However, recent criticism leans away from the academy's privileging of 'what we might call pomo-postcolonialist reading ("pomo" as in "postmodernist")'.<sup>38</sup> Neil Lazarus states his 'conviction that we ought, today, to begin to redress a long-standing imbalance in postcolonial studies by focusing anew on realist writing', while Eli Park Sorensen similarly rankles under what he views 'as a "tacit", allegorizing leap, and by which I refer to the uncritical *assumption* that a set

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of men – and, by extension, male colonisers – is evidenced by their apparent transcendence of the body.' Graham Huggan, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2009), 158.

- 38 Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25. Strong arguments against the general privileging of the 'pomo-postcolonialist' texts include that it is to the detriment of the real political work of realist and social realist texts, that it creates and sustains a parasitic market based on one style of writing, that it misreads any aesthetic moves towards hybridity as political, that it is blindly critical of the national, and that it feeds a fetish for 'the postcolonial exotic' (Huggan). There are also sensitivities around reading the post-modern postcolonial text as political *tout court*. 'The anxieties about authenticity and resistance that surround the postcolonial text,' Bahri explains, 'arise from an awareness of its commodity value in the global information loop where Western control of the technologies of representation is still seen as dominant.' Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 160.

of politically subversive concepts corresponds to formal disruption, meta-fictional strategies and labyrinths of narrative structures.<sup>39</sup> While Deepika Bahri similarly argues against the reactive labelling of postmodernist strategies as political, she nonetheless argues for ‘a reanimation of the aesthetic dimension as a crucial category in the assessment of the social content of postcolonial literature’, suggesting that we may construe ‘the aesthetic as political and moral without surrendering it to a transparent and reductive purpose.’<sup>40</sup> While I agree with those arguing for a renewed critical interest in the social and literary project of realism, in this case I argue that the subversive aesthetics in King-Aribisala’s novel are politically motivated, flagged by her consistent interrogation of dictatorship and economies of power. King-Aribisala’s novel is an example of ‘the postcolonial text that imagines justice through aesthetic modes more fictional than functional.’<sup>41</sup>

*The Hangman’s Game* allies the postmodernist focus on destabilizing narrative with postcolonialism’s rejection of authoritarian power. In this highly self-referential work, King-Aribisala highlights the structural analogy between authorship and authoritarianism by linking the nation, the narrative, and the body. King-Aribisala ascribes hope to the future of Nigeria even while criticizing the devastating effects of authoritarian control. Ndígíriḡí has identified work that is ‘devoted specifically to the interrogation of the ways women writers have fictionalized dictatorships [as] a gap that future scholarship should attempt to fill.’<sup>42</sup> King-Aribisala’s fictionalizing of dictatorship through the formal relationship between an author and her imagined characters renders this a text worthy of study. Despite its troubling reliance upon irrational womanhood, the charting of political space across the pregnant narrator’s expanding body and the focus on nationhood as a script through which characters burst forth in a regenerative claiming of agency secures *The Hangman’s Game* as a provocative addition to the corpus.

39 Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, 82; Sorensen, 10.

40 Bahri, 6; 4.

41 Bahri, *Native Intelligence*, 99.

42 Ndígíriḡí, *Unmasking*, xxii–xxiii.

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PART IV

Forms of Resistance





10 Figuring the Dictator in the Horn of Africa:  
Nuruddin Farah's Dictatorship Trilogy and  
Ahmed Omar Askar's Short Stories

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Francis Fukuyama's 1990s declaration of the culmination of universal socio-political evolution in the precepts and institutions of western liberal democracy, seems premature. Although parliamentary democracy is the normative default political system, even in cultures without an established liberal individualist tradition, recent trends towards the right and increased authoritarianism and surveillance, especially in established western democracies, suggest the model of a continuum of political domination and control rather than an evolution towards individual freedom within a purely regulatory, transparent liberal democracy. Forms of authoritarian power within the normalized landscape of the modern nation-state today occur in all of the 'three worlds'. It occurs more than symbolically in the first nation of the first world when presidential candidate Donald Trump unironically states on a national television series: 'This is a dictatorship and I'm the dictator.' It occurs in the second world of Turkey with Recep Erdoğan's far-reaching clampdown on an attempted coup and the elimination of all political opposition. And authoritarian control is the hallmark of numerous third world dictators who seem organically to develop out of the social and political conditions of many postcolonial nation-states. Dictatorship, resistance to dictatorship and the outcome of destabilization of dictatorships are transnational concerns that have transnational impacts, as the failed revolutions of the Arab Spring and Syria attest. Dismissing cultural engagements with dictatorship to the shelves of the twentieth-century archive seems precipitate, and understanding dictatorship today remains as urgent as it has been in the past.

Nuruddin Farah's 'Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship' trilogy, which includes the novels *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1980), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983), is probably the most extensive and sustained single-authored exploration of the politics of dictatorship in an African literary context. The trilogy was written with its author in exile from his native Somalia, an exile that has continued from 1976 till this day. (Fearing that he had fallen foul of the Somali political regime after the publication of his novel *A Naked Needle*, Farah did not return home after his studies in London.) While the scholarship of the African 'dictatorship novel' is not as developed as the study of this sub-genre of Latin-American novels, including, most notably, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* and Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*, the number of African writers who have fictionalized the origins, effects and decline of dictatorships is striking. The list includes the troika of African literary 'fathers', Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Kongi's Harvest* and *The Wizard of the Crow*, respectively. But the list of African dictator fictions is much longer and includes many other works.<sup>1</sup> A complete overview of literary works that address dictatorship in the African context suggests the dominance of the genre of the novel, with a few exceptions, for example, Soyinka's drama, *Kongi's Harvest*, mentioned above. There are also numerous fictional engagements of the totalitarianism of the apartheid state, where social control was located in a structure and an ideology without a single figurehead leader. The dictator novel may, furthermore, be very productively read in conjunction with the African war novel; in particular, the many child-soldier narratives that have emerged in recent years. Very often in these novels, the dictatorship itself or resistance to dictatorship creates the spiral of violence into which child-soldiers are enlisted; and, ironically, the paramilitary leaders of the platoons of child-soldiers become mini-dictators of 'nations' on the move.

1 Some recent African dictatorship fictions include Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Wild Beasts to Vote*, Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*, Moses Isegawa's *Snakepit*, Yasmina Khadra's (nom de plume) *The Dictator's Last Night*, Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Henri Lopès's *The Laughing Cry: An African Cock and Bull Story*, and the novels of Hisham Matar.

Farah's dictatorship trilogy that provides an archaeology of the power of autocrat, Mohamed Siad Barre, remains to date, however, the most extended detailed meditation on African dictatorship by a writer of fiction. Farah's oeuvre, beginning in 1970 with the novel *From a Crooked Rib*, narrativizes the history of Somalia from the colonial period to contemporary times where Somalia today, as failed state, makes the headlines for piracy and terrorism. In terms of the bigger picture of Somalia, the dictatorship trilogy is one part of a larger oeuvre that completes a Somali historical timeline. The dictatorship trilogy is flanked by *A Naked Needle* (1976), set in the period where Siad Barre has just come into power. Here, in incidental allusions, Farah, without a crystal ball in which Siad Barre's future authoritarianism is foreshadowed, appears to endorse the socialist coup that claimed it would bring stability and prosperity to Somalia, whose experiment in postcolonial democracy hitherto was anarchic in the extreme. The dictatorship trilogy is followed by the 'Blood in the Sun' trilogy, where Siad Barre assumes a background role, hanging onto a precipitously waning power which in *Secrets*, the final novel of the second trilogy, gives way to the power of the warlords.

In its representation of the figure of the dictator, Farah's trilogy will be compared with a collection of short stories titled *Sharks and Soldiers*, little known in Anglo-American literary circuits but widely read and easily available in Somaliland, by medical doctor, Ahmed Omar Askar. Askar sought asylum in Finland after the destruction of his home in Hargeisa in Somaliland in the north of the country in Siad Barre's aerial bombardment of the city in 1988. Like Farah, Askar's stories attempt to encompass a wide historical sweep but which, in this case, covers only the period of Siad Barre's accession to power, till his destruction of Hargeisa, a major city in northern Somalia, and seat of the greatest resistance to the dictatorship based in the south. These two representations of political oppression, both written by Somali intellectuals who were driven out of their country by the megalomaniac supremacy and cruelty of a military dictator, represent the dictator in intriguingly different ways.

General Mohamed Siad Barre came into power in a military coup in the early hours of the morning of 21 October 1969, declaring a 'socialist revolution' in Somalia. Within a few hours of consolidation of his power, he

arrested the prime minister and his cabinet, and other significant political figures. His takeover was, in the first instance, facilitated by the assassination six days earlier of president Abdirashid Ali Shermarke in an apparently unrelated clan-linked revenge attack.<sup>2</sup> The coup was more generally encouraged by the chaotic and tension-ridden state of parliamentary democracy in the preceding nine years since independence and by the failing state of the economy.<sup>3</sup> The Westphalian nation-state model and British-style parliamentary democracy were alien to indigenous forms of social and political organization, that in many ways were more fundamentally democratic and anti-hierarchical than colonial models. In the days and weeks after the coup, Barre declared himself head of the newly constituted Supreme Revolutionary Council, suspended the supreme court, barred all political activity and presented a charter outlining the forms that social and economic engineering would take under his regime.<sup>4</sup> Challenging the complex clan-based structure of Somali society, the new regime excoriated 'tribalism' as contradictory to the principles of nationalism and scientific socialism. Recognizing the importance of literacy in an internationally connected and modernizing Somalia, the 'socialist' regime introduced a script and orthography for Somali, which hitherto had been a wholly oral language. It also drove a literacy campaign which saw young people from the towns and cities deployed to nomadic pastoralist communities in the countryside to teach reading and writing. The new regime also declared itself the champion of women's rights under the Somali Women's Democratic Organization, under the leadership of Barre's wife. Putatively socialist, the regime nevertheless needed to find support for its policies in politically slanted interpretations of Islam, the deeply culturally ingrained faith of 99 per cent of Somalis. Unwilling to provide scriptural endorsement of Barre's dictats and policies, ten sheikhs were summarily executed in January 1975, shocking Somalia into final acknowledgement of the authoritarian nature

2 Mary Harper, *Getting Somalia Wrong: Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 54.

3 Ahmed I. Samatar, *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 70–7.

4 Samatar, *Socialist Somalia*, 83–7.

of their polity. Whatever its declared ideals, Barre's socialist revolution degenerated into a cruel and unpredictable personal leadership that ruled by fear, manipulated clan loyalties and promoted his own clan and the clans of his immediate family members.

Barre's dictatorship lasted more than twenty years in which time Somalia experienced drought and famine, war with Ethiopia in the Ogaden and the bombing in 1988 of Hargeisa by South African mercenaries so devastating that Hargeisa came to be known as the Dresden of Africa, recalling the indiscriminate bombing by allied forces of Dresden in Germany in the Second World War. While Siad Barre exerted tight control over the city of Mogadishu, he ruled largely by coercion and could not manufacture the consent one associates with European totalitarian states. He was, for the most part, kept in power by Cold War rivalries in Africa, that saw him armed and supported first by the Soviets and then by the US. The collapse of his regime and his eventual flight in 1991 were owing partially to internal resistance, but also to the waning power and collapse of the Soviet Union, also in 1991. The end of Cold War antagonisms saw a dwindling of American support in Siad Barre's final years on the pretext of a breaking of ties because of his regime's human rights violations. In these respects, Siad Barre's dictatorship has followed the pattern of most modern dictatorships marked by the collusion of the imagined community of nation with the cult of individual leadership, an ideology that provides justification for otherwise unconscionable acts of terror and violence, and an insatiable acquisitiveness that allows the accumulation of personal wealth amidst personal tyranny. Both Farah and Askar, the two writers of dictatorship studied here, draw on the major trends and events of Siad Barre's leadership described above, but approach the figure of the dictator himself in rather different ways. Farah's dictatorship novels have been studied by many scholars as individual works, as a trilogy and as part of general overviews of Farah's development across his career. Of the analyses of the dictatorship novels, surprisingly, very few focus specifically on the question of dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> What none of the commentators on dictatorship in Farah's novels do, however, is focus

5 Articles that specifically focus on Farah's critique of the Somali dictatorship include, among others, the work of Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine, Annie Gagiano,

on the figure of the dictator that lies at the centre of each of the novels and of the trilogy. Max Lerner in the classic volume, *Dictatorship in the Modern World*, proposes that the 'most important symbol and emotionally the most evocative figure' in an authoritarian state 'is the leader himself'.<sup>6</sup> Lerner has in mind Fascist and Nazi cults of leadership, but his powerful portrait is apt also for the postcolonial dictator, as this figure emerges in Farah's dictatorship trilogy:

The dictator, like the movie star, has been excessively romanticized. A glamour-starved populace, ... create the myth of a superman who focuses all of the energies of his time and dares put an end to inaction. By enlarging his stature they succeed in compensating for their own dwarfed and stunted stature in an industrial age. ... He sways tens of thousands by his daemonic oratory; he moves about in a continuous hysterical parade; wherever he goes heels are clicked, hands raise to salute, hoarse and eager throats do him homage. In due course this begins to tell on him, for he is generally a person capable of persuading and hypnotizing not only others but even himself. If, to start with, he was only a man who wanted to be dictator, he ends by becoming a combination of Caesar and Messiah. And naturally so, for he comes at the end of a long romantic sequence. All the centuries of romanticism, by emphasizing genius and leadership and a Promethean defiance of fate, have contributed to his construction. He stands there, mystic, adventurer, orator, fanatic; the man of action who moves by his words, the man of words who incites to action; the hero of our time, which had begun to fear that it had lost its capacity for hero worship.<sup>7</sup>

The society that produces Lerner's dictator is early twentieth-century, modernized, industrialized Europe; but if one substitutes postcolonial for industrial, the picture that emerges is of Farah's dictator, especially in the Romantic and Promethean mirror the dictator holds up to the individuals of the elite who challenge his power in the three novels.

Paradoxically, Farah's dictator is both at the centre of the dictatorship trilogy, but is also striking for his total absence. In 'Why I Write', a well-known essay describing the author's origins and evolution as a writer

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Josef Gugler, Dubravka Juraga, Armando Pajalich, John Masterson, Felix Mnthali, Gichingiri Ndigirigi and Derek Wright, as well as my own research.

6 Max Lerner, 'The Pattern of Dictatorship', *Dictatorship in the Modern World*. Ed. Guy Stanton Ford (London: Minnesota University Press, 1935), 9.

7 Lerner, 'The Pattern of Dictatorship', 9–10.

in a society that was largely oral, Farah outlines the impact of Siad Barre's dictatorship on his literary creativity. In response to pressure from both camps – those for and against the 'socialist' revolution – Farah admits in his youthful naivete to have written works that were 'as apolitical as I could make them' (8). But, after trips to various other dictatorships like the Soviet Union, Hungary, Greece and Egypt, Farah recognized that the essence of dictatorship consisted in the dictator's construction of fictive truths. For this reason, he adopted as the driving force for his own fiction the theme 'Truth versus Untruth' (13). Given that postmodernism is the implicit paradigm for the greater number of Farah's novels, the 'Truth' that the novels uncover is the truth of nontruth. In some ways this insight is carried over to the representation of the dictator in the four books written from 1971 to 1980 about Siad Barre's Somalia – the dictator is represented through nonrepresentation. At no point in any of the novels that constitute the trilogy is the dictator presented in person as a character. There are no physical descriptions of the general, no intimations of his character, drives or ambitions, and the reader is never told about the dictator's origins and personal history. At no point is any of the action focalized through the dictator. The 'aesthetics of vulgarity' that Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* links with the African dictator, and the fetish objects and ritualization that are tropes in many of the other African dictator fictions, are not elements of Farah's representation.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the novels, the dictator is referred to only in the third person 'he', or by his military designation, the General, he is never named and certainly is not presented as a fleshed-out character. But the novels do, however, construct in detail the architecture of a postcolonial, largely nomadic-pastoral and agricultural country, unusually, as a totalitarian state with explicit parallels in Mussolini's Fascist Italy and Stalinist Russia, both of which were socially and economically quite different from Somalia. (Somalia has historical links with both Italy and Russia. The south of Somalia was an Italian colony and Somalia received Soviet support after its proclaimed socialist revolution.) Across the three novels, despite the fact that the leader is presented in absentia, his authority,

8 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 102–41.

certainly in the city of Mogadishu, is shown to be virtually absolute through very concrete methods of control described below.

In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, the first novel of the trilogy, the dominant analogy is of Somalia, or more correctly, Mogadishu as prison with the General as Grand Warder, supported by his personal police, the Green Guards: 'There are thirteen cells. This city is broken into thirteen cells, of which all but one is of manageable size. The Security deems it necessary to break this sandy city into these, have each house numbered, the residents counted – and everybody screwed! The General has the master-key to all cells, whether numbered or unnumbered. He is the Grand Warder, remember' (87). This novel also introduces the allusion of Dionysius's ear (136), that is referred to in the other novels also. Here the cave built, according to legend, by the Syracusan tyrant to hear the whispered conspiracies of his prisoners is compared with Siad Barre's manipulation of clan loyalties and the 'technology' of orality to spy on the populace with the efficacy of electronic surveillance, given the exceptional memories of people in largely oral cultures. In *Sardines*, the second novel of the trilogy, the image of the oral informer is given visceral impact through being transformed into the figure of the pederast, cruising the streets for potential innocent victims, whose persecution generates the fear that keeps the populace in thrall. As in the USSR under Stalin where all information was filtered and reconfigured into news that supported state policies and promoted its leader, the General is shown in *Sweet and Sour Milk* to be a wily spin doctor who takes the state-sponsored murder of Soyaan, a resistance figure, and transmutes it in newspaper reports into the death of a loyal party hero. Loyaan, the twin brother of Soyaan who investigates his death, is appalled to read an article in the Mogadiscio daily that reports his brother's dying words as, 'LABOUR IS HONOUR AND THERE IS NO GENERAL BUT OUR GENERAL' (99). In *Sardines*, the subsequent novel, when the heroine, Medina, exploits her position as editor of the city daily to edit the speeches of the General undermining his control of the media, she is summarily fired. The General also is presented as controlling through the fear inspired by the notorious pre-dawn raids in which critics of the regime were rounded up and detained or executed without trial, or were simply made to disappear. Thus, the importance and impact of control through various means in the



Somali socialist state are clearly shown in Farah's novels, even though the dictator himself is not shown.

Farah's representation of the forms of surveillance, control and summary punishment of the dictatorship carries sufficient specific detail for it to read as a relatively accurate account of Somalia under Barre's rule, and, through implicit and explicit links, this dictatorship is paralleled with other tyrannies, both in Africa and internationally. Thus, although the effects of authoritarian rule are explicitly described, Farah's depiction of dictatorship moves into a more abstract realm through using the Somali dictator as a symbol of all forms of authoritarianism, rather than presenting him as a wily opportunist who takes advantage of political and social weaknesses in his society to consolidate power and wealth. The abstraction of the historical dictator is presented mainly in the first two novels of the trilogy through the control and oppression of the male hero *as son* in *Sweet and Sour Milk*, and the female hero *as daughter* in *Sardines*. Patriarchy in the double sense of oppression by fathers of sons and oppression of women by men is implicitly condemned through the absent-presence of the ruthless dictator figure. The twins, Soyaan and Loyaan, are victims not only of the control and cruelty of the head of state, they are the victims also of their father who is a security officer for the state. The father, Keynaan, is presented as a conservative 'flat-earther' persuaded both of his own political and religious subservience, and, his subordination fuels his cruel power over his wives and children: 'My father grew up with the idea that the universe is flat; we, that it is round ... My father sees himself as a miniature creature in a flat world dominated by a God-figure high and huge ... Suddenly, however, he behaves as if he were the most powerful of men ... the Grand Patriarch ... in front of his children and his wives' (83). For Medina in *Sardines*, the dictator similarly embodies the patriarchal brutality of her slave-owning grandfather, who exploits what, in the novels, is the inherent oppression of tradition and religion, especially of women. The conflation of dictatorial political power with patriarchy is underlined by a quote from Wilhelm Reich that is used as epigraph to part two of *Sweet and Sour Milk*: 'In the figure of the father the authoritarian state has its representative in every family, so that the family becomes its most important instrument of power.' The historical figure of the dictator is abstracted also to encompass

a critique of the authority of religion, through its foundation in a single Godhead in the monotheisms. This critique emerges most strongly in the middle novel, *Sardines*, where the honorific titles frequently linked with leadership cults, and a significant feature of Siad Barre's historical inflation of self, are associated with the 99 beautiful names or qualities of the God of Islam. The critique of tyranny thus, through the highly abstract absent-presence of the dictator figure who represents all hierarchical systems, is a simultaneous critique of traditional and religious forms of authority construed only as relations of power.

The idea of the dictator's 'absent-presence' is captured also in *Sardines*, where, in the same way that the novel itself educates the reader about authoritarianism generally, the heroine Medina writes a Somali translation of the folk tale of the tortoise and the birds told by a mother to her daughter in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Medina writes the translation for her own daughter, Ubx, whom she has taken out of school to avoid exposure to the General's propaganda. The story about the selfishness and greed of tortoise who tricks the birds out of a feast in the sky is left vague and is repeatedly referred to only by the title given to it by Medina – 'He'. The tale is intended as an allegory of Siad Barre's deception and avarice, but the moral does not clearly emerge; instead it is overshadowed by the looming, abstract figure known only as 'He'. Lerner in the excerpt above alludes to the Romantic and Promethean sources that feed into the construction of the totalitarian dictator. *Sardines* quite explicitly presents Siad Barre in a similar way. *Sardines* pivots the challenge between Siad Barre and those who resist him on the knife-edge of the battle of 'opposites' who are mirror images of each other. Medina is the rebellious, Romantic-Promethean who believes herself to be the General's nemesis, inspiring her to make 'daredevil' decisions like altering the General's speeches. The image used to describe this *pas de deux* is the 'dance of death': 'The General's power and I are like two lizards engaged in a varanian dance of death; we are two duellists dancing a tarantella in which they challenge their own destiny. He is as aggressive towards me as I am towards him. He uses violent language and so do I. He calls me "a dilettante bourgeois", "a reactionary"; I call him "fascist" and "dictator"' (45). Even in this 'manifesto' by Medina, she specifies that she opposes not the General, who is not represented even in this individually

directed challenge, but the General's 'power'. The effect of the above forms of inflation of the representation of the dictator as a larger than life, but also abstract, character is to make the Somali dictator a philosophical principle of authoritarianism writ unaccountably large, rather than a fairly pusillanimous military man and politician who, through manipulation of local contexts and through foreign support that bolstered geopolitical interests at the time, was able violently to terrorize Somalis for about two decades.

Thus in the trilogy the figure of the dictator, through the detail of the forms of brutality and control of his regime, is sufficiently specific to be historically linked with the Somali dictator. However, the real dictator, in crucial ways, is absented in order to exist as a stand-in for all other forms of authoritarianism. Specific references to the General are even fewer in *Close Sesame*, the final novel of the trilogy, but the General's animus looms large and threatening. In the final novel of the trilogy, the focus falls on the possibility of a non-authoritarian patriarchy in the ageing apparently traditionally and religiously conformist hero, Deeriye. However, in the final analysis, Deeriye is shown not to be shaped by Somali cultural and religious precepts, but as I have argued elsewhere, is revealed to be constituted out of an individual, rather than collective, spirituality.<sup>9</sup> What remains thus is the idea of the oppressiveness of all sovereignty, including good authority, figured in the totalitarian absent-presence of the General. In this way, Farah's dictator comes in some ways to resemble the leader of the true totalitarian state, which for Hannah Arendt, is represented only by Nazism and Stalinism. Totalitarianism for Arendt is a destructive mass movement, with the leader as the absent-presence at its centre – like the eye of the storm. She uses the image of the onion for the totalitarian state, buffered by layers of self-justifying subterfuge, with the leader as the hollow in the centre. Totalitarianism, unlike dictatorship, 'means permanent revolution which does not exhaust its momentum in conquest of a particular state, but goes on attacking all institutional structures, and all

9 F. Fiona Moolla, *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey, 2014), 122–41.

territorial boundaries.<sup>10</sup> In some ways, perhaps, through exorbitation of the Somali general, Mohamed Siad Barre, into a figure that encompasses the world-dominating ambitions of a *Fuhrer* or a Stalin, and tyranny as a broadly philosophical concept, Farah may have created an abstraction that none of his heroes and heroines would be able to overcome, as indeed they do not. Neither the passive resistance of the elect group of ten in the first two novels, nor the violent individual resistance of Deeriye in the final novel of the trilogy appears to put a dent in the fictional dictator's armour.

By contrast, a very much more real and manageable, albeit disturbed and disturbing, dictator emerges in the narratives of Ahmed Omar Askar who lived in Somalia until his home was destroyed in the 1988 Hargeisa bombing. The author suggests in the foreword to *Sharks and Soldiers*, that this is a collection of 'fictionalized short stories', but the pieces in many ways are written as narrative nonfiction, coming close to the approach of auto/biography or the style of American New Journalism, where reportage is combined with the use of literary techniques. In the foreword, Askar states furthermore that he seeks through his 'few lines' only to preserve a memory of Somalia under tyranny for younger generations of Somalis who have been dispersed throughout the world: 'This book preserves a few lines for the younger generations, who seek answers for many questions concerning their situation during this period in which hundreds of thousands of Somalis live as refugees in foreign countries and millions suffer from hunger, diseases and war in their homeland' (Foreword). Thus, the ambition of the collection is modest. It does not seek to reveal ultimate truths, and the choice of English as international language over Somali by a political refugee in Finland is probably motivated by the likelihood that future generations of Somalis in the diaspora would be English – rather than Somali-speaking. Askar emphasizes, however, that his writing should not be considered as historical evidence, but that his 8 short stories represent a fictionalized account of major events from the proclamation of the

10 Margaret Canovan, 'The Leader and the Masses: Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Dictatorship', *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and Totalitarianism*. Ed. Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241–62, 248.

socialist revolution to the heavy-handed clampdown on the insurrection in Somaliland in the north. The titles of the 8 stories provide a timeline of key moments in the development of the Somali dictatorship: 'Paint the Revolution Bloody Red', 'The Devil is a Mullah', 'Feeding the Sharks', 'Laughter is a Crime', 'Operation Water Reservoir', 'The Isaak Extermination', 'Hand Over Your Money', and 'The Appeasement Committee'. The stories are not markedly literary in their techniques and are simply written, given that English is not the author's first language. However, the stories provide one of very few narrative glimpses, certainly available in English, into a dark but interesting period of Somali history; and what is especially fascinating is the quite dismissive representation of the dictator by a writer who himself lived subject to his rule and had his home and family life destroyed by Siad Barre's bombing of Hargeisa where he lived. Siad Barre is personally represented in 5 of the 8 stories, and where he is figured, the portrait is truncated and cartoonish, and quite calculatedly so. Although Askar is not an experienced creative writer with a literary background, there is nevertheless an artfulness in the use of juxtaposition of elements, irony, paradox and bathos in the representation of Siad Barre in the stories. For example, in the first story, 'Paint the Revolution Bloody Red', where Siad Barre liquidates members of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, beginning a consolidation of personal power, the narrative dramatically creates a climactic scene with a tense head of state testing the waters to see how far the Somali people will allow him to go:

President Mohamed Siad Barre was chain smoking in his office at Avezione, the national army's headquarters, which also served as the presidential palace. The military camp is not far from the Badka, the revolution's death site. ... Siad Barre started walking up and down his office as it was about the time at which the death squad was to carry out the death penalty of the SRC members. He can hear the firing in his office and he was waiting for this to happen at any minute. At last the sound of the firing reached him. He was seized by a wild sensation. Breathing rapidly and perspiring, he clutched the edge of his desk. When the firing stopped, he felt a deep pleasure through his whole body and relaxed his grasp. This was his first test of the Somalis, it was a success. They were all ready to offer their necks for hanging. ... It is a great day. (4)

Askar goes on to write that a light ‘*hagayo*’ rain begins to fall shortly after the execution, shedding tears that no one else ‘dared’ to shed. The narrative thus creates a critical ambiguity regarding whether the populace is justifiably fearful, or, alternatively, too cowardly openly to condemn Siad Barre’s actions. The representation of Siad Barre is similarly ambiguous, presenting an image of a ruthless dictator, which is simultaneously a comic-book sequence of a depraved little man deriving orgasmic pleasure from seeing how far he can go. The narrative thus presents a picture of a cruel but certainly not superhuman man, subtly implying the potential but historically failed agency of the Somali people to put him out of power early in his career. A very similar scene is constructed in the story ‘The Devil is a Mullah’ when the religious leaders who critiqued Siad Barre’s interpretations of the Qur’an are executed.

The stories also record Siad Barre’s paltry attempts at distiguishing himself through various means – honorific titles, narcissistic valorization in print, portraiture and popular music, plush office furnishings, cars and presidential ‘palaces.’ The second story, for example, presents Siad Barre staging himself as the father of the nation through very careful events management:

The Dervishs’ [sic] Park of Mogadishu lies in the low valley between the statue of Mohamed Abdulla Hassan and Hotel Bulsho. This is a favourite spot for Siad Barre to make his public speeches. While making a speech, he is usually standing at the highest point of the sand-hill near the statue, looking down at the crowds down in the valley. This gives him a real sense of power and greatness. (17)

In the final line of the extract, the narrative undercuts the attempts of the president to align himself with the leadership, charisma and oratory of Muhammad Abdille Hassan, ‘Sayyid’, often considered the father of Somali nationalism and the Somali Shakespeare for the unsurpassed power of his oral poetry. Even though Siad Barre positions himself in close proximity to the statue, he himself is the bathetic anti-climax of what the Sayyid represented.

On the one hand, the picture that emerges is of a fairly insecure man, not a postcolonial Somali Prometheus, or magnetic charismatic *Führer*. In fact, he is presented in the context of his family members, namely a drunken

son and a wife who solicits butter as a bribe from a visiting regional official, further reducing his stature. On the other hand, the picture emerges of a cruel, vindictive, heartless man. The collection in part takes its title from the rumours associated with Siad Barre that he threw his political opponents into the shark-infested waters of the Indian ocean off the Mogadishu beaches. In the story 'Feeding the Sharks' Siad Barre is presented as having built a shark aquarium where he studies shark predation in an attempt to hone strategies of political and actual attack. The dictator who emerges in these accounts is an altogether more manageable, albeit cruel figure, than the dictator of the trilogy – he is a leader who rules by wiliness and strength of arms, but who may be overcome. The figure of the dictator is balanced by the representation of individuals and groups who challenge his policies and who sometimes suffer setbacks but are not written out of the political picture, or at least, the spirit they represent is not.

The study of the representation of dictatorship in the trilogy and the collection of short stories provokes questions about genre. Does the form of the dictator genre determine its content? How does the content shape our understanding of the problem of dictatorship and the response to the problem? More specifically, does the novel as genre, with its channelling of individual character and the attendant ironies and contradictions of philosophical individualism, reflected in the anti-hero as mirror, produce a dictator figure so abstract and complex that he cannot be resisted? Does the compressed narrative form of the short story, often located within a short story sequence or short story cycle, predispose the genre to a more focused, specific representation, minimizing inflation of the dictator figure? Do the claims to factuality of narrative nonfiction impact forms of representation of the dictator? Finally, how might other genres, for example the oral forms alluded to in both the novels and the short stories, figure dictators? These questions demand a more rigorous analysis of the impact of forms both on modes of representation of the dictator figure and effects on the audience of these forms – an enquiry which is opened up in this volume.

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## II 'Under the Lion's Gaze': Female Sexualities under Dictatorship in Selected Fiction from Malawi

The intersections between the ideological-material legacies of Hastings Kamuzu Banda's dictatorial regime and representations of female sexuality in Malawian fiction are the focus of this chapter. Drawing from Dubravka Juraga, who points out that 'literary texts may offer an incisive perspective on the social and psychological dynamics of authoritarianism, addressing not only how dictators maintain power through outright surveillance mechanisms, but what living conditions are like for ordinary individuals under modern despotic regimes',<sup>1</sup> I am particularly interested in using literary narratives to examine how writers explore the congruencies and disjunctures amongst outright political dictatorship and the impact on bodies and behaviours of subjects, along with discourses such as gender and culture which are commonly mobilized in the service of national identity. I focus on two novels by Malawian writers, namely Tiyambe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) and James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* (1989 [2005]), texts which are both set in Banda's dictatorial regime. The chapter examines the writers' portrayal of female sexual agency, desires and pleasure and how they simultaneously challenge and reproduce received, normative 'truths' about female sexualities.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's critical insights from his seminal text, *History of Sexuality*, this chapter explores Zeleza and Ng'ombe's depiction of female sexualities in their novels as sites of resistance against patriarchal

1 Dubravka Juraga, 'Nuruddin Farah's Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship: Patriarchy, Gender, and Political Oppression in Somalia', in Derek Wright, ed., *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* (Trenton: Africa World Press Inc., 2002), 283–307 (283).

hegemony, which elude control even while there remain awkward moments in which the female characters continue to be interpellated by normative, even hegemonic discourses around sexualities. Foucault maintains that sexuality has ‘been taken charge of, tracked down, as it were, by a discourse that aims to allow ... no obscurity, no respite.’<sup>2</sup> He argues that discourse involves power because it is about knowledge and language and narratives are key vehicles for producing knowledge. Power is thus a multiplicity of force relations of which discourse and knowledge are key elements. As such, language is not merely an explicitly directed, repressive power, but productive of knowledge in more dispersed forms – in the case of the present chapter, of the nature of sexuality and ‘proper’ sexual conduct. Thus power paradoxically offers spaces for reverse, opposing discourses as will be illustrated in this analysis.

## Regimes of power and sexualities

In contemporary Malawi, the mention of the name of Kamuzu Banda, the first president of Malawi, commonly referred to as *ngwazi* and *mkango*,<sup>3</sup> invokes many ambivalent memories including those of murders, mysterious accidents, imprisonments and exiles of dissenters as well as peace and food security. To further comment on the ambivalence in the national memories of Banda, Reuben Chirambo explains that ‘the narratives of constructed monuments (both scripted and symbolic) recall and celebrate Banda as a nationalist hero, the father and founder of the Malawi nation, but his critics and victims suggest he was a vicious dictator.’<sup>4</sup> Banda’s Malawi, as

2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol.1* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 20.

3 Ngwazi was Banda’s official title, which means ‘the all wise one’, and *mkango* means ‘lion’ in Chichewa (the national language of Malawi).

4 Reuben Chirambo, “A Monument to a Tyrant” or Reconstructed Nationalist Memories of the Father and Founder of the Malawi Nation, Dr. H. K. Banda, *Africa Today* 56.4 (2010), 2–21 (3).

Tiyambe Zeleza describes the thirty-year regime (from 1994 to 1964), was 'a contraption of totalitarian power [...] a land of pervasive fear where words were constantly monitored ... a state of dull uniformity that criminalized difference, ambiguity, and creativity, an omniscient regime with a divine right to nationalize time'.<sup>5</sup> Through a pervasive system of control which employed various state machinery, Banda's one party state 'censored memories, stories, and words that contested and mocked its hegemonic authority, thus rewriting history, banishing and imprisoning numerous opponents, real and imaginary, who questioned the legitimacy of the regime'.<sup>6</sup> In post-colonial Malawi under Banda, state power exceeded its normal limits; the state was able to exert influence, direct and indirect, on both mundane and politically consequential matters. In such semi-permanent states of political 'excess', the postcolonial commandment (as Mbembe calls it), routinizes itself through 'daily rituals that ratify it'.<sup>7</sup> Such control by the regime was even extended to issues to do with sexualities which Banda sought to regulate and mould into his idea of propriety. For example, on one occasion in the early 1970s long before AIDS struck the nation, Banda devoted a three-hour speech to 'extolling traditional sexual and moral propriety as part of a perceived Malawian cultural heritage'.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, in 1973, Banda's regime, through the Decency in Dress Act, imposed strict dress codes for women whereby 'a new script, steeped in the moralistic, anti-sexual and body shame acts, was inscribed on the bodies of women and with it an elaborate system of control'.<sup>9</sup> The act made women's wearing of trousers, miniskirts, skirts with slits, showing cleavage a criminal offence as it was perceived inimical to the so called Malawian

5 Tiyambe P. Zeleza, 'Banishing Words and Stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi', *CODESRIA Bulletin* 1 (1996), 10–15 (10).

6 Zeleza, 'Banishing Words', 10.

7 Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa* 62/1 (1992), 3–37 (10).

8 Chimaraoke Izugbara and Jerry Okal, 'Performing Heterosexuality: Male Youth, Vulnerability and HIV in Malawi' in Andrea Cornwall et al., eds, *Men and Development: Politicizing Masculinities* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 21–32 (22).

9 Sylvia Tamale, ed., *African Sexualities: A Reader* (Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2011), 16.

cultural values. The regime claimed that these prohibited clothing items drew attention to a woman's thighs and buttocks, two areas considered particularly erogenous in Malawi. Banda was known for having very strict, conservative notions about sexuality and the impropriety of displaying or even discussing anything that might be construed as sexually suggestive. The state's control of bodies, conflated with the dictator's puritanical beliefs, made sexuality a taboo subject in Banda's Malawi. A censorship board was even constituted to monitor and regulate the literature, films, and music Malawians had access to. For example, Marvin Gaye's hit song 'Sexual Healing,' released in 1982, was banned from Malawian airwaves because of its title and lyrics which were perceived to be sexually explicit. Under the regime, even various sexual practices such as homo-erotic practices and oral sex were penalized and prohibited as they were categorized under 'unnatural sexual acts' and contrary to Malawian culture. Here, one notes how sexuality exists as a site for marking national belonging, thus reminding us of Foucault's argument that sexuality is a charged point of transfer for power. Banda's systematic control of bodies and sexualities was maintained and perpetuated through the indoctrination of the nation, exercised through the regime's four cornerstones, namely unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline.

Contrary to the regime's rhetoric that one of its main agendas was to empower women's lives, women bore the brunt of the regime's oppressive machinery. Traditionally the role of the Malawian woman has been that of subservience to the man and female sexuality is generally perceived as subordinate to that of men. Modes of regulating and controlling female sexualities are embodied through various forms including through cultural practices, religious and state institutions and their role in socializing women and men. Banda's regime took advantage of the already disempowered position of Malawian women to further exploit them and to further secure women's sexuality under men's control. Oppressive conditions under the regime perpetuated by the *Mbumba* culture in which every Malawian woman was forced to dance for Banda at every political event, exposed women to different forms of sexual exploitation carried out by politicians and the

youth militia who exercised power over local citizens.<sup>10</sup> Emily Mkamanga argues that women suffered in silence despite the *Nkhoswe-Mbumba* ideology which purported to exist for the provision and promotion of women. She argues that women were 'vulnerable [...] in [the] dictatorship which downgraded [their] status to second class citizens' and the regime 'left no woman untouched'.<sup>11</sup> Although Banda insisted on sexual propriety in terms of dressing and behaviour exemplified through the dancing women's donning of long *zitenjes*, the dance movements in interaction with the dress had a transformative effect on the message. The dance moves in the form of eroticized hip and thigh movements directed towards male politicians, notably Banda himself, presented a paradox. The message of female sexual propriety changed from one of modesty to one of explicit sensuality and sexuality but under the control of Banda, who always made sure that he had the optimum view of women's dancing bodies.<sup>12</sup> Such were the contradictions of Banda's regime.

## Literary production and authoritarianism

Thirty years of Banda's systematic control on the publication and circulation of literature, which was implicated in various state and cultural institutions, affected literary production in the country. Hester Ross argues that 'Malawian literature has been affected by the prevailing totalitarian power structures', and goes on to assert that this is even reflected in the

10 Women in Malawi were fondly referred to by Banda as *Mbumba za Kamuzu* which literally means women who were under the protection and moral care of Kamuzu Banda as their *nkhoswe*.

11 Emily Mkamanga, *Suffering in Silence: Malawi's 30-Year Dance with Dr Banda* (Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba, 2000), 6; 11.

12 Lisa Gilman, *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 66.

representation of male-female relations in Malawian literature.<sup>13</sup> Generally, Malawian literature has attracted minimal critical attention and even more so, the subject of gender in Malawian novels has been neglected by critics within Malawi and outside. Issues to do with gender and sexuality have not occupied much space in the literature produced by Malawians. In fact, these issues are often glossed over by critics and writers alike in favour of focusing on the harsh realities of Kamuzu Banda's autocratic regime and less on its effects on gendered and sexed subjectivities. This focus has 'arrested the discussion of sexuality', to borrow from Allison Donnell's observation about the dearth of studies on representations of sexualities in Caribbean literature.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the few studies on gender with a biased reference to women in Malawian fiction reflect that their representation in Malawian literary imaginaries is almost always framed within binary representations of the prostitute/mistress living at the margins of society versus the 'Madonna', or the ideal, long-enduring wife and mother.<sup>15</sup> Francis Moto adds to this observation by contending that he is yet to come across a story that treats a woman character as 'a whole person in her own right and not only as a tangential individual who cannot lead a free and independent life.'<sup>16</sup> However, in these representations, I notice a glaring absence of the complex and heterogeneous ways in which women embody their gendered experiences as well as the diverse and multifaceted inflections of their sexualities. Sexuality in relation to embodiment is important to this analysis for, as Ezekiel Kaigai argues, 'embodiment offers a nuanced optic through which to capture the way power hierarchies ... are exercised'. It is through bodies, for example, 'that ... narratives invite the reader to reflect on how

13 Hester Ross, "All Men Do is Love, Love ..." Context, Power and Women in Some Recent Malawian Writing', in Kings Phiri and Kenneth R. Ross, eds, *Democratization in Malawi: A Stock-taking* (Blantyre: CLAIM, 1998), 168–94 (169).

14 Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 2007), 182.

15 Jessie Sagawa, 'Archetype or Stereotype? Three Images of Women in the Malawian Novel', Paper presented at an International Conference on Malawian Literature, Blantyre, Malawi, 1996.

16 Francis Moto, *Trends in Malawian Literature* (Zomba: Chancellor College, 2001), 10.

certain forms of power and domination are gendered in particular ways and how stories present the gendered body as an unstable field of power contestation' (Kaigai 60).<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, representation of sexuality in Malawian fiction is often shrouded by a myriad of taboos, essentialisms, as well as political and cultural objections, as it is framed within cultural silences which regard talking publicly about issues of sexuality as taboo. As Joel Gwynne and Angela Poon observe,

sexuality is often perceived as shameful, for the dangers it potentially precipitates – rape, exploitation ... – often outweigh its pleasures. Essentialist arguments surrounding sexuality have historically cast the subject as taboo, and even within relationships where sex is sanctioned – namely heterosexual marital relationships – it is often a difficult subject to navigate and negotiate.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, this critical observation proves to be pertinent especially when interrogating how sexualities of Malawian citizens within a thirty-year contraption of totalitarian rule, have been represented in works of literature considering the restrictions that were placed on the literary production of issues concerning sexualities.

### Representing female sexualities in *Smouldering Charcoal* and *Sugarcane with Salt*

Zezeza's *Smouldering Charcoal* and Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with Salt* are both set in Banda's repressive Malawi. Since both texts were published when Banda was still in power, both writers go out of their way to disguise certain

17 Kimani Kaigai, 'Sexuality, Power and Transgression: Homophobia in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Memory of Departure*', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 1/1–2 (2014), 59–70 (60).

18 Joel Gwynne and Angela Poon, eds, *Sexuality and Contemporary Literature* (Amherst, MA: Cambria Press, 2012), xi.

locations and names to avoid political persecution. Writers who seemed to be critiquing Banda's totalitarianism were detained without trial, exiled and even killed.<sup>19</sup> However, the socio-political reality which they depict form part of the backdrop in the two novels and make it clear that the reference is Banda's Malawi; for example, the portraits of the head of state hanging on the walls, the perversion of youth militia who demand party membership from local citizens, and women forced to dance for the nameless leader. In her analysis of both novels, Hester Ross notes that 'there is even an irrational "big brother" force in the country which rules by fear'.<sup>20</sup> Zeleza, who was living outside the country, reveals that he wrote the novel in 1982 but to avoid the persecution of his family, he only published the novel in 1992 when Banda had begun to lose his grip on power. Banda is simply referred to as 'the leader' and he does not appear anywhere in person in the novel. However, reminiscent of an 'Orwellian Big brother, he has almost everybody in the country in his radar'. The leader is the sole administrator of the only political party in the country which deploys spies for the regime in different capacities. As Ogbeide remarks, 'the party has no boundaries ... through it the leader has his iron grip on the country through vigilant party women, fanatical youth leaguers, chairmen, ministers and other informers who work either as house helps, university lecturers'.<sup>21</sup> Reuben Chirambo describes these as 'untamed pests', a horde of fanatics or political loyalists who 'have chosen to serve the party either in position in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities'.<sup>22</sup>

*Smouldering Charcoal* focuses on two families from different social classes as they are trying to navigate through life under a dictatorship. Chola is a journalist who is influenced by Marxist thinking. He lives with his girlfriend Catherine who is a university student. On the other side

19 Writers imprisoned by Banda include Jack Mapanje and Felix Mnthali.

20 Ross, 'All Men Do', 181–82.

21 Victor O. Ogbeide, 'Raping the Dreams and Subverting the Aspirations: Post Independence Disillusionment in Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal*', *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)* 2/7 (2014), 76–83 (both quotations 78).

22 Chirambo, 'Untamed Pest', 9.



of the economic spectrum is Mchere, a baking factory worker, who lives with his wife Nambe and their five children. The two families are drawn together by a strike which subsequently has a profound effect on their relationships, identities and politics. *Sugarcane with Salt*, on the other hand, is about a young medical doctor called Khumbo Dala who comes back from his studies in England only to find his family and the country in a state of disintegration ranging from the divorce of his parents to widespread corruption in the country. Women in the two novels occupy very marginal positions in the society and their significance is mainly in relation to the major characters who are male. Nevertheless, I am interested in the various degrees of co-optation and coercion, containment and escape demonstrated by these female characters in the face of totalitarian power structures and patriarchal socio-cultural values and norms which mediate the agency of female sexualities. Further drawing on Foucault's ideas about sexuality and power as being diffusive, my analysis pays attention to how the self is, to a certain extent, a product of particular knowledge engendered by dominant discourses. I therefore reflect how the embodied self's relationships to societal modes of respectability, values and aesthetics 'continue to play roles in how people negotiate place and power, and inform how we traverse the terrain of sexualization', and that 'rather than being a mere tool, then, the body acts as both the site and language through which positioning is negotiated'.<sup>23</sup> My analysis focuses on three characters in *Smouldering Charcoal*, namely Catherine, a university student who is expelled because of her boyfriend Chola's political activities, Nambe, a poor wife to Mchere, a bakery worker who is later arrested because of his participation in a strike, and finally Lucy, Mchere's mistress, who is also a prostitute who works in a bar which Mchere frequents. In *Sugarcane with Salt*, I examine the character of Grace, a primary school teacher who has a short-term relationship with Khumbo Dala, the main protagonist of the novel. Although marginal, these characters variously exemplify the ways in which women resist and negotiate cultural and political constraints on

23 Pumla D. Gqola, 'Yindaba kaban' u'ba ndilahl' umlenze? Sexuality and Body Image', *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 19/63 (2005), 3-9 (3).

their bodies and sexualities at the same time as they conform to societal ideas of sexual propriety and respectability.

Catherine is one of the interesting characters who challenges societal expectations of how a respectable female is supposed to behave sexually. She is a university student and is described as a beautiful, intelligent woman who is in charge of her mind and body, one who realizes that her sexuality is hers to own and control. She distinguishes herself from other women who after graduation 'sink into the anonymity of marriage' by mapping out a plan for herself after marriage thus resisting the almost inevitable obscurity that accompanies female determination after marriage in the male hegemonic society she has been brought up in.<sup>24</sup> She refuses to shelve her ambitions while settling for marriage with the successful Chola. She asserts that when she gets married 'she would not be reduced to a carbon copy of Chola, a faceless wallflower', just like other married women.<sup>25</sup> Being a carbon copy of Chola and a faceless wallflower implies the loss of her own individuality and autonomy and being at the service of Chola's needs. This effacement of one's identity is embedded in patriarchal, cultural expectations of wifedom which enforce limitations on women and places them at the service of man of the house. To conform to such expectations also connotes being a 'good', 'respectable' wife, one who knows her place. Catherine refuses to limit her capabilities and ambitions by being Chola's subordinate and despite objections from her family and friends she chooses to be in a fulfilling sexual and love relationship with Chola often 'cuddl[ing] up to each other' with 'soft music playing in the background' while making passionate love.<sup>26</sup> Often times, she feels a pleasurable 'warmth and tenderness tingling in her body as an aftermath of sexual pleasure derived from her passionate lovemaking with Chola.'<sup>27</sup> The narrator says about their relationship:

They had been going together for two years now. They had been engaged and living together for the past six months despite the objection of her parents and some of her

24 Tiyambe Zeleza, *Smouldering Charcoal* (Essex: Heinemann, 1992), 55.

25 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

26 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

27 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 14.

friends ... They had agreed that there was an advantage in knowing each other before taking the final plunge in order to find out whether they were really compatible.<sup>28</sup>

Her rebellion against expectations from her parents and her friends illustrate her defiance against notions that equate female respectability with so-called sexual purity and which are moulded within cultural narratives that require heterosexual marriage to be the basis for living together as that is the normalized space for legitimate sex, 'divine and sacrosanct ... the most appropriate place to be in terms of conducting sexual activity and or the procreation of future generations.'<sup>29</sup> Her relationship with Chola, seen as a transgression of moral codes of female sexuality, therefore subjects her to different forms of ridicule and shaming from many people, including her own peers who label her a prostitute who is interested in getting money out of her 'sugar daddy'.<sup>30</sup> From these labels, one notes that the relationship, which is actually based on mutual respect and affection, is reduced to a transactional activity in which they see Catherine callously intending to exploit the older Chola and financially benefit from him before dumping him for younger suiters. The age gap between Chola and Catherine provokes this disapproval. Catherine is stereotypically framed as a *femme fatale* since primary ridicule and shaming is directed to her and not Chola, who is largely exempt from negative labels.

The expectations of wifhood discussed earlier and prescribed sexual propriety for women which Catherine rejects and refuses to conform to can best be understood through Foucault's argument that it is through discourse, paradoxically verbose and clear, that expectations, experiences, and events are constituted. According to Foucault, the discourse of sexuality has been instrumental to the development of the self and he points out that particular knowledge (in this case about women) produces and reinforces a certain truth about female sexuality and how this is subsequently

28 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 55.

29 Sara Mvududu and Patricia McFadden, *Re-conceptualising the Family in a Changing Southern Africa Environment, Women and Law in Southern Africa* (Harare: Research Trust, 2001), 63.

30 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 54.

internalized and manifested in various subjectivities such as wifeness and motherhood. Catherine resists the internalization of such subjectivities and maps her own path. Thus, Zeleza's depiction of Catherine's reactions against societal expectations of female sexualities not only illustrates the social construction of sexuality and how discourses generate subject positions, it also portrays 'how people embody, transgress or reconstruct such positions'.<sup>31</sup>

Zeleza further shows how Banda's male state agents and political party leaders use sexuality as a tool through which to exploit and punish women who did not subscribe to the laws of the regime or whose husbands or male relatives were suspected to be anti-Banda. The author's depiction exposes what Desiree Lewis calls 'a conflation of power and sexuality'. In repressive contexts such as the one depicted in the novel, 'far from being disassociated from any realm that we could call "instinctive", sexuality is constantly defined through and within violence and the assertion of power'.<sup>32</sup> As the narrator explains about those who did not possess a party membership card: 'Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card'.<sup>33</sup> Emily Mkamanga argues that even though public prudery was at its height during Banda's regime, it was however undermined by the MCP itself with its perverse sexual exploitation of women.<sup>34</sup> This aspect is portrayed through Catherine who is almost sexually assaulted by government agents. Her firm belief that a woman should not be used as an object of sexual pleasure for men, 'that what was at stake was the very essence of her being'<sup>35</sup> enables her to fight off attempted rape, first by the government official who promises to give her favours whenever she wants to visit Chola

31 Rachel Spronk, 'Sexuality and Subjectivity: Erotic Practices and the Question of Bodily Sensations', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 22/1 (2014), 3–21 (6).

32 Desiree Lewis, 'Rethinking Nationalism in Relation to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* and Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"', *Sexualities* 11/1–2 (2008), 104–9 (106).

33 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 18.

34 Mkamanga, 'Suffering in Silence', 22.

35 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 144.

in exchange for her body and who happens to be the same person who had arrested Chola for covering anti-Banda activities. Later, her professor, Dr Bakha, also attempts to lure her into having sexual relations with him thus taking advantage of her vulnerable situation when she is expelled from university because of her association with Chola. In both cases, she could have used her sexuality to secure these benefits since without Chola who provided most of the material benefits she would suffer financially as she had no other stable source of income. However, she refuses to be objectified by these men and asserts ownership of her sexuality by resisting and warding off the violent advances.

Similarly, Nambe refuses to be the object of political party men's perverse pleasures and strategically manipulates the same system that is used to sexually exploit women thus illustrating that African women 'know when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal landmines ... how to go around patriarchal landmines ... how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts'.<sup>36</sup> Nambe and her husband Mchere live in dire poverty and she resorts to brewing local beer to provide for her family. However, in order for the business to be allowed in the area, she had to obtain permission from party officials who also used their ability to grant permission as leverage to get sexual gratification from the local women:

When Nambe was approached by one of the party officials after she had started her business and was asked whether she had obtained the necessary permission, she replied affirmatively. Little did she know what was meant by permission. When the party official made himself clear, Nambe was utterly shaken. What a price! She could not allow it ... But she did not want to stop brewing *kachasu* either. Surely there had to be a way out. Yes, how about promising him that next time would do because at present she was not in the right condition? He bought her story. When he came back a few days later she took a gamble: well, how unfortunate he was, she said, he had come rather late, for none other than the Party chairman himself had been to see her and had told her to keep herself only for him. He could go and ask for the chairman's permission if he still wanted her.<sup>37</sup>

36 Obioma Nnaemeka, 'Nego-feminism: Theorising, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29/2 (2003), 357–86 (377–8).

37 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 73.

Because of selling *kachasu*, a home-brewed spirit, a trade that she engages in as a source of income for her impoverished family, Nambe is considered as being outside the bounds of female respectability. This is because women who brewed *kachasu* were labelled as 'aggressive and disobedient to their husbands and morally loose'.<sup>38</sup> A party official takes advantage of this stereotype and uses it to sexually exploit Nambe who is desperate to make ends meet. The official is aware of the power that he yields in the community and the fact that the women in Njala village cannot openly challenge his power and therefore will give in to his sexual advances. Refusing to be commodified as a sexual object, Nambe appropriates the same discourse which objectifies women's bodies and constructs female sexuality as free and open to male consumption to manipulate and resist the party official's sexual advances. To buy herself some time, she lies to the party official, saying that she is menstruating, as a tactic to ward off his sexual advances. Though temporary, the strategy works as it is a cultural taboo to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman who is on her monthly period since she is considered to be defiled in that moment. As a way of rejecting the official, hence defending her bodily integrity, she wittingly performs the role of sexually licentious *kachasu* when she tells him that she is already sleeping with the party chairman who is obviously much more powerful politically and socially than he is. She deliberately uses commodifying language which reflects the official's perception of female bodies to taunt him and make him aware of his inferiority when she tells him to go and ask permission from the chairman with whom she is supposedly having sexual relations. This strategy saves her from the official's advances.

Further exploitation of female bodies by powerful politicians in Banda's regime is portrayed through the character of Lucy, a prostitute at a bar in Njala. Lucy, a former beauty queen is coerced into a relationship with an older man, an MP for Njala who 'seduced her by promising to pay her school fees at one of the famous boarding schools for girls'.<sup>39</sup> The MP merely uses her for his own sexual gratification for he refuses responsibility and abandons her soon after she falls pregnant at seventeen. She becomes expendable

38 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 73.

39 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

for she is now tainted with the inescapably female-embodied, public visibility of pregnancy and framed as a damaged, typical representative of sexual promiscuity. Because of his powerful position and gender, the MP escapes repercussions of his despicable behaviour as well as the ostracism that Lucy faces because of the pregnancy. He ensures her silence by threatening her that if 'she continued spreading lies that he was responsible, she and her family would pay for it'.<sup>40</sup> Lucy resorts to sex work as a means of supporting herself, her child and her family. Despite her circumstances, Lucy refuses to be a victim and fights against exploitation from men who simply want to use her labour for free. For example, when Mchere, her regular client, begins to make a habit of not paying her after sex, she demands payment, and 'threatened that unless [he] gave her K2 right now she would never talk to [him] again'.<sup>41</sup> She asserts herself by threatening to withdraw her labour from Mchere who is becoming potentially exploitative. Furthermore, she refuses to be objectified by Mchere when he approaches her in her room at the back of the bar. She tells him, 'If it's sex you want I am not in the mood for it and I don't have the time'.<sup>42</sup> Exercising her agency, she disabuses the notion that because she is a prostitute she is open for sex at all times even if she doesn't want it. She takes charge of her body by controlling who has access to her body and when.

In *Sugarcane with Salt*, Ng'ombe clearly portrays patriarchal socio-cultural values that subordinate and commodify women's sexuality as working in concert with authoritarian power structures in the mediation of female sexuality. The country is facing devastation as it is 'sagging under the yoke of betrayal, moral failure, corruption, drug peddling, disillusionment and stock suffering'. Against this backdrop, Ng'ombe moves away from 'the thinly disguised socio-political context' to focus on women and how they fare at the hands of both the dictatorial regime and the patriarchal society.<sup>43</sup> Of interest to me is the treatment of Grace, a primary school teacher

40 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

41 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 63.

42 Zeleza, *Smouldering*, 104.

43 Nick Mdika Tembo, 'Politics and stylistics of female (re)presentation in James Ng'ombe's *Sugarcane with salt*', in Reuben Chirambo and Justus K. S. Makokha, eds,

who teaches with Pempho, Khumbo's former primary school classmate who happens to be the headmaster of the school now. In contrast to the traditional and backward town where she lives, Grace is presented as a modern, young, educated woman who does not seem to fit in the town. Khumbo is immediately drawn to her independence and her assertiveness which is further mediated in the way she carries her body sensually as well as the way she interacts with people of the opposite sex. However, the fact that she is a single woman makes her vulnerable to the sharp eyes and wagging tongues of the community who monitor her every move. This is done especially by her fellow women who assume that she is going to go after their men. Furthermore, her singlehood renders her sexuality subject to commodification by the headmaster who unashamedly brings all types of men to her house at night in order to hook her up with them. Grace reveals to Khumbo, who is taken to Grace's house by Pempho who conveniently leaves the two of them together:

'This is not the first time he has done this to me,' she replied. 'That's the price you have to pay for being single in a small town like this. Everyone makes passes at you.' [...]

'The visitors I have had from Pempho have always come at Pempho's instigation.' She hesitated before proceeding. 'It's as if he wants to see my breaking point.'<sup>44</sup>

There are a number of points to be noted in the way female sexuality is framed within this context. Firstly, the fact that Grace is single is an anomaly which stands against the norm, since patriarchy dictates that woman be attached to a man in order to gain validation. Female autonomy and self-determination exemplified by women who decide not to be male appendages therefore destabilize societal gender roles and expectations. Secondly, the fact that Pempho decides to use his position as Grace's work superior to turn her body and sexuality into a commodity through which his friends can achieve some gratification shows how little he respects her and how he reduces her body to a sexual object. Her resistance against being reduced

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*Reading Contemporary African Literature: Critical Perspectives* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 2013), 109–26 (both quotations 113).

44 James Ng'ombe, *Sugarcane with Salt* (Blantyre: Jhango Publishing Company, 2005), 47.



to a sex object is in turn viewed by Pempho and others as stubbornness which needs to be dealt with.

Interestingly, unbeknownst to Pempho and others, Grace does have a boyfriend called Dan Kapena who lives away in the city. However, even though Grace is faithful to him, staying indoors and refusing to interact with men about anything other than professional issues, her boyfriend is non-committal to her. The presence of Khumbo whom she is mutually attracted to offers her the chance to temporarily explore her sexuality by having a sexual affair with him, even though she is well aware of the transient nature of the affair since Khumbo is engaged to a white woman called Sue. Thus, transgressing the moral codes of female respectability, Grace exercises her agency to pursue sexual pleasure at the expense of her reputation. However, even though Grace exhibits some considerable level of independence, challenging patriarchal norms of respectable female sexuality, it is interesting to note that when she suspects that she is pregnant she becomes conscious of the shame that is associated with pregnancy out of wedlock and she grudgingly decides to get married, thus conforming to conventional expectations regarding respectable womanhood.

'I think I am going to have a baby,' she whispered evasively, and a tear or two landed on Khumbo's hand.

'Are you certain?' he gasped, helpless.

'I am hoping that Dan won't find out.' She whispered [...] 'I need a father for my baby,' she [...] cried openly. 'I'll just have to accept his proposal.'<sup>45</sup>

To rid herself of the shameful burden of having a child out of wedlock especially one whose father was already involved with someone else, she decides to pin the responsibility of fatherhood on Dan to save face. She clearly does not love Dan, as she only grudgingly accepts his proposal because the child is on the way. Ng'ombe's portrayal echoes Rachel Spronk's argument that though modern women express the desire to challenge conventional modes of femininities, 'they also internalize certain constructions of femininity that are at odds with change'. Spronk further notes that about

45 Ng'ombe, *Sugarcane*, 107.

modern women: '[T]heir experiences and their wishes relate to conventional discourses that discourage particular expressions of their sexuality, as well as with those more liberal discourses that encourage them to explore sexuality'.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Grace, as a product of her society, also embodies such ambiguous attitudes. She undermines conventions proscribed for female sexuality by following her sexual desires thereby being or representing the modern or liberal woman but at the same time she conforms to conventional notions of femininity by wanting a father for her child to avoid being stigmatized for having a child out of wedlock.

In conclusion, female bodies in Banda's autocratic regime were subjected to different kinds of sexual abuses and controls which aligned with patriarchal socio-cultural values to limit women's mobility and sexualities. However, these two texts depict the agency available to and exercised by women to negotiate against such restrictive discourses. At the same time, the two authors' representation of female sexual agency highlights the problematics of women's open expression of sexual desire and pleasure in a context where such freedom is perceived as transgressing the norms. I also observe that the representation of female sexual agency in the two texts is to a certain degree framed within paradoxical, normative expectations of gender and female sexuality.

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46 Spronk, 'Sexuality and Subjectivity', 17; 14.

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## 12 Mighty Mouth, Minor Literature: Siad Barre's Dictatorship in Italian Postcolonial Literature

Mohamed Siad Barre's autocratic rule over Somalia began with a *coup d'état*, including the murder of the former President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke on 15 October 1969, and lasted twenty-two years (1969–91), deeply marking Somali postcolonial history as a whole. In its latter years it also determined most of the political, social and economic conflicts leading to the outbreak of Somali civil war, which started with the demise of Barre's regime and is still ongoing. Siad Barre's political action, initially inspired by the secular principles of scientific socialism, was officially based on the motto, 'Socialism unites, tribalism divides,'<sup>1</sup> but his regime eventually turned out to be supported by a specific inter-clan faction called 'MOD', from the initials of the three clans composing both Barre's family and government (Mareehaan, Ogaden and Dulbahante). Although heavily questioned in some recent reconstructions of the conflict,<sup>2</sup> it can be argued that the hegemonic force held by, or just ideologically attributed to, the MOD produced that clan rivalry which fuelled the war after its outbreak.

Equally ambivalent and divisive was the position of Somalia on the geopolitical terrain, shifting from an alliance with the USSR to one with the US during the Ogaden War between Somalia and Ethiopia (1977–8). This change was mainly due to the decision of the USSR to back Ethiopia, which was governed, at the time of the conflict in Ogaden, by another autocratic leader siding with the Soviet bloc: Mengistu Haile Mariam.

- 1 Donatella Strangio, *The Reasons for Underdevelopment: The Case for Decolonisation in Somaliland* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2011), 33.
- 2 Lidwien Kapteijns, *Clan Cleansing in Somalia: The Ruinous Legacy of 1991* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 79.

During Barre's regime, these political ambiguities were always concealed, if not directly suffocated, by a strong internal programme of propaganda, censorship and repression. This is aptly symbolized by the ironic appropriation of Barre's childhood nickname, 'Afweyne' ('Mighty Mouth'), by his political opponents which points, in this case, at the strength of political propaganda. In this regard, Gabriele Proglorio has recently argued that 'Siad Barre's dictatorship was violent and murderous also because it made people feel alone, it muzzled sociality, it denied people the possibility for social and collective spaces to exist'.<sup>3</sup> In terms of literary criticism, this remark constitutes a noteworthy suggestion to consider the narratives and representations of Barre's dictatorship not only from a historical point of view, but also for their symbolic value. In other words, writing about Barre's dictatorship was, first of all, a reaction to the censorship imposed by the regime and a way to rebuild the sociality destroyed by its authoritarian power, by staging, and often deconstructing, the conflicts that the dictatorship had helped to create. Paradoxically, however, those public and collective spaces which had been erased by the repressive action of the regime have been mainly rebuilt in the fiction about dictatorship written by exiled Somali authors and authors of Somali descent in Europe and elsewhere, leading to different and sometimes ambivalent outcomes.

The importance of exile and migration in the literary reconstruction of an 'imaginary homeland', to borrow Salman Rushdie's famous title,<sup>4</sup> both during and after Barre's dictatorship, corresponds with the position of Didier Morin about Somali postcolonial and diasporic literature as a whole:

In a country where language has always been treated as a political good, literature, being the work of writers involved in the nation-building process, has become one of the markers of the political evolution of the nation and, for those able to decode it, the revealing symptom of its progressive entropy. In fact, this writing, which has been intended, since the beginning, as a form of civic engagement, has rapidly evolved into

- 3 Gabriele Proglorio, *Memorie oltre confine. La letteratura postcoloniale italiana in prospettiva storica* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011), 123: 'Il regime di Barre uccide perché rende soli, imbavagliando la socialità, negando gli spazi collettivi e sociali' (our translation).
- 4 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism (1981–1991)* (London: Granta, 1991).

a celebration of the regime, forcing free writers to exile, even before Barre's demise, in order to regain the authentic territories of the imaginary. [...] Exile affects 90% of the educated people and endangers the future of modern Somali literature, as well as the democratic evolution of the country.<sup>5</sup>

Morin's analysis is mainly based on the cultural policies of Barre's regime. Somali language gained official status, together with the adoption of the Latin alphabet, in the earlier years of Barre's rule (1971–2). This peculiar cultural investment was positively received by many authors composing oral poems or writing in Somali. Somali oral poetry focused on the celebration of Somali nationalism, or, more directly, of Barre's regime.<sup>6</sup> Also the few examples of novels written in Somali – such as *Aqoondaarro waa u nacab jayl* (*Ignorance is the Enemy of Love*, 1974) by Faarax J. M. Cawl, whose publication was financially supported by the Somali Ministry of Education – did not express any explicit political critique of the Somali government.<sup>7</sup>

These symptoms of a growing political and ideological complicity with the regime do not signify, however, the absence of strong political and cultural resistance in Somalia during Barre's regime; on the contrary, this has been well documented.<sup>8</sup> The opposition against Siad Barre's regime,

- 5 Didier Morin, *Littérature et politique en Somalie* (Talence: Centre d'Études d'Afrique Noire, 1997), 2: 'Dans un pays qui a toujours géré sa langue comme un bien politique, la production des écrivains, militants de la construction nationale, est devenue un indicateur parmi d'autres de l'évolution politique et, pour qui savait la décrypter, le révélateur de son entropie progressive. De fait, une écriture qui s'est voulue, dès le début, comme un exercice civique, s'est rapidement muée en un encensement de régime, obligeant, avant même la chute de ce dernier, les écrivains libres à s'exiler pour retrouver les vrais territoires de l'imaginaire. [...] L'exile touche 90% des personnes possédant un quelconque niveau d'instruction et compromet l'avenir de la littérature moderne somali, comme d'une évolution démocratique' (our translation).
- 6 Said S. Samatar, *Oral Poetry and Somali Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 7 F. Fiona Moolla, *Reading Nuruddin Farah: The Individual, the Novel and the Idea of Home* (Oxford: James Currey, 2014), 124–6.
- 8 Mohamed Hajji Ingiriis, *The Suicidal State in Somalia: The Rise and Fall of the Siad Barre Regime (1969–1991)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2016).

took many different forms, including the two paradigmatic examples of the Somali National Movement (SNM) and Somali women's resistance to dictatorship. Founded in London in 1981, the SNM relied on the participation of various Somali exiles, as well as of specific clan-based communities, such as the Isaaq (one of the social groups which suffered from the clan politics enacted by the MOD). While mostly ineffective in its attempt to overthrow Barre's regime, the SNM achieved one of its goals in the declaration of independence of the Republic of Somaliland on 18 May 1991.<sup>9</sup> The Somali civil war was a decisive step in this process, as Asteris Huliaras concludes, '[i]n sum, as happened in the case of medieval Europe [...], warfare had played a central and indeed essential role in the process of nation-formation in Somaliland'.<sup>10</sup>

As for women's resistance, its importance was often downplayed by the regime, which could rely, on the other hand, on various groups of women actively supporting it. This was the case of those women who collaborated with the only radio station in the Somali capital, Radio Mogadishu, in order to mobilize people in favor of Siad Barre after the unsuccessful *coup d'état* of 1978. There was, nonetheless, a strand of political and cultural opposition which was led by Somali women. Their opposition is illustrated by this oral poem recited by Hawa Jibril, who had also participated in the anti-colonial struggle against the Italian empire:

O Secretary General, you also declared that 'Women are a force the shortsighted cannot perceive.'

Is it fair to have only two women in our higher political offices? [...]

Do they not deserve higher positions and rewards?

Or were you too hasty, and are having second thoughts?

Are you not tormented by the injustice they suffer?<sup>11</sup>

9 Although it is *de facto* independent, the Republic of Somaliland has not been internationally recognized as an autonomous nation-state so far.

10 Asteris Huliaras, 'The Viability of Somaliland: Internal Constraints and Regional Geopolitics', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20/2 (2002), 157–82 (159).

11 Cited in Iman Abdulkadir Mohamed, 'Somali Women and the Socialist State', *Journal of Georgetown University – Qatar Middle Eastern Studies Student Association* 4 (2015) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5339/messa.2015.4>> accessed 30 September 2017.



These examples reveal the crossover between the movements of cultural and political resistance located in Somalia and those being carried out in the Somali diaspora. Indeed, some of the most vivid representations of Barre's dictatorship are to be found in the fiction produced beyond the national boundaries and written in the former colonial languages of English and Italian.<sup>12</sup>

Within this body of literature (which contests Morin's gloomy prophecy about the future of modern Somali literature above) Anglophone literature benefits from worldwide circulation while the literary texts in Italian are globally less known and less translated.<sup>13</sup> These call for specific critical attention.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a large group of authors of Somali origin writing in Italian, including Mohamed Aden Sheikh, Kaha Mohamed Aden, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, and Garane Garane.<sup>14</sup> This might be related to the growing presence of the Somali diaspora in Italy after the beginning of the Somali civil war, in 1991. This wave of migration was not extensive, but it has nonetheless contributed to the creation of a stable and active Somali community in Italy, strengthened by intergenerational bonds.<sup>15</sup> Somali refugees joined those Somalis who had relocated to Italy during the colonial era (1889–1950) and the subsequent UN Trusteeship over Somalia delegated to Italy until 1960.

The importance of intergenerational bonds is evident in the work of two writers: Mohamed Aden Sheikh and his daughter Kaha Mohamed Aden. Born in 1936, Mohamed Aden Sheikh was appointed as Minister in

12 British Somaliland was a British colony from 1884 to 1940, while the Italian colonial rule in Somalia and Somaliland, including the ten years of the UN Trusteeship after the Second World War (1950–60), lasted from 1889 to 1960.

13 Only two novels originally written in Italian have been translated into English: *Far from Mogadishu* (2013 [1994]) by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and *Little Mother* (2011 [2007]) by Ubax Cristina Ali Farah.

14 This group of authors, whose works are analyzed here, should be complemented by at least four other writers, Sirad Salad Hassan, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego and Antar Mohamed, whose literary production falls beyond the scope of this essay.

15 Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (New York: Cassell, 2000).

the first revolutionary governments, but he soon understood that he did not share the same ideas as General Barre. Due to his political opposition, he was arrested in 1975 and detained for more than ten years. In the early 1990s he eventually reached Italy, where he died in 2010. In his works, he offers a historical and political reconstruction of the dictatorship, without any fictional *détour*.<sup>16</sup> He repeatedly argues that Somali military forces had planned to seize power way before the coup, eventually seizing the opportunity of the power vacuum created by President Shermarke's murder. According to Mohamed Aden Sheikh, a major cause for this political instability was the administration of the Italian colonial protectorate (1950–60), which had encouraged clan divisions instead of trying to amalgamate the different social groups living in Somalia. Clan rivalry, which would later fuel civil war, is thus traced back beyond Barre's policies to the *divide et impera* motto defining Italian colonial rule.

In addition to this, in *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi*, Mohamed Aden Sheikh makes a particularly ambivalent comment on the impact of civil war on Somali women: he describes it as an exclusively 'male business'. While he argues that Somali women may contribute to national reconciliation in the future on the grounds of their non-involvement in the conflict, he also criticizes them for their ideological adhesion to the clannist claims fuelling civil war, which, he claims, led many of them to a sort of regression in terms of mentality. His ambivalent position is shown when he invokes Somali anticolonial heroines as a point of reference that is nowadays disregarded; at the same time, he does not even mention the oscillation between support and resistance of Somali women's groups under Siad Barre's rule.<sup>17</sup>

What Mohamed Aden Sheikh seems to give, therefore, is an incomplete report of Somali women's resistance before, during and after Siad

16 Mohamed Aden Sheikh wrote four books on Somali dictatorship. Arguably, he re-wrote almost the same book four times, changing it each time, either to add more details or to incorporate the contemporary situation of Somalia. The definitive version could be identified as *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2010).

17 All quotations from Aden Sheikh, *La Somalia*, 236–7 (our translation).

Barre's regime, confining them, at the same time, into the homogeneous and monolithic category of 'Somali women', which he leaves unquestioned. In her short story '1982 fuga da casa' (2010), his daughter Kaha Mohamed Aden gives a different representation of Barre's dictatorship. The short story is set in 1982, during Kaha's childhood, and it includes a fictional dialogue between Kaha and the marmoset belonging to her sister Idil. Kaha tells the marmoset a fable which has been told her by her father, Mohamed Aden Sheikh. The tale goes as follows:

the lion, king of all animals, gathers all his subjects, asking them to share the amount of meat he has in front of him. The hyena tries first, dividing meat in equal parts. Warned by the fox, the lion does not accept such a division. The fox tries after the hyena, but she does not divide it equally: the lion receives half of the meat; the other half is divided into two parts: one for the fox and the other for all the other animals.<sup>18</sup>

The fable refers to the political dynamics of an authoritarian regime, which does not accept sharing power in a democratic way. It also refers to those people who sustain such power, looking for personal gain. Kaha Mohamed Aden uses this specifically as an allegory of the Somali regime, as indicated by the year mentioned in the title, which marks the beginning of the final period of Barre's dictatorship, the most violent of all. Unlike her father, then, Kaha Mohamed Aden argues that it was the last period of Siad Barre's rule which determined the conflicts leading to the outbreak of Somali civil war.

The subsequent dialogue between Kaha and the marmoset adds other elements to the allegorical story. The marmoset tells Kaha that there is a different version of the tale, which her father had previously narrated to Idil. In this version, a marmoset, said to be the ancestor of the present one, defends the hyena from the king's anger, pointing out that its own suggestion would have strengthened the king's power, by the consent of all the other animals. As the lion eventually agrees with the marmoset, all the animals live happily ever after.<sup>19</sup>

18 Adapted from '1982 fuga da casa' in *Fra-intendimenti* ('Mis-Understandings') (Roma: Nottetempo, 2010).

19 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 106.

According to the marmoset, Idil reacts to this story by asking her father about herbivores and their role in the fable. Granting legitimacy to Idil's doubts, her father replies by emphasizing the importance of diversity and the fact that social equity, as represented in the fable by the portions of meat, is not the only goal to be achieved by political wisdom. While this might be considered an implicit justification of Barre's regime by Mohamed Aden Sheikh, the young Kaha seems primarily to be upset because her father had told his daughters two radically different versions of the tale; her immediate reaction is, 'My father manipulated the story, then.'<sup>20</sup> Recalling this episode twenty years later, however, she no longer points that out. She seems to agree, instead, with the marmoset's enigmatic conclusion, 'The ability to adapt stories is a substantial one, sometimes happily present in oral traditions.'<sup>21</sup> By underlining the mutability of narratives in oral traditions, she implicitly points at the mutability of political positions (including opportunism) held by Somali oral poets and storytellers under Barre's rule. In addition to this, the episode demonstrates the possibility for Kaha and Idil to contest such narratives, and thus refashion the cultural and political pillar of oral literature in Somali society from a gendered point of view.

Although merging with her personal experience, and emphasizing the role of the dictatorship in the exile of her family, the fable recounted by Kaha Mohamed Aden, in its two different versions, stands apart as an allegorical representation of dictatorship which is quite unique within the fictional texts written. In other texts in Italian by authors of Somali descent, the representation of Barre's regime serves either as an element of individual memory narrative or as plot-catalyst.

As for memory narratives, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel – who left Somalia in the 1970s, lived in Italy for more than three decades, and recently moved to the United Kingdom – gives a brief but impressive description of the life conditions under dictatorship in her short story 'Mukulaal' (2010). This is presented again through a generational shift, because it is Jama,

20 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 108, 'Quindi mio padre ha manipolato il racconto' (our translation).

21 Aden Mohamed, '1982', 108, 'Cambiare i racconti è una possibilità pesante, a volte piacevolmente presente nelle tradizioni orali' (our translation).

the protagonist's father, who recalls the enthusiasm for the 'revolution' animating Somalis in the earliest period of Barre's rule. Jama, in fact, grew up during the 'glorious period of the Regime'.<sup>22</sup> In those days, according to his memories, the town of Mogadishu experienced great expansion, and new hospitals and modern roads were built across the country. Jama attributed the economic empowerment of Somalia to the efficiency of the educational system and to the creation of a dynamic intellectual class as well as to its growth in terms of trade and agriculture. In this way he recalls the aforementioned enthusiasm of oral poets and writers for Barre's cultural policies. However, he soon understood that everything around him was a farce: 'Those who had economic resources left town; many others stayed, helplessly enduring every imposition.'<sup>23</sup> With these few lines, Fazel shows the propagandistic dimension of Barre's regime, based on an illusion of progress, and introduces the *leit-motif* of departure, which will be hugely amplified by civil war.

Fazel's fictionalization of the Somali dictatorship is not limited to memory narratives: Barre's rule is also presented as a plot-catalyst in her novel *Nuvole sull'Equatore* (*Clouds on the Equator*, 2010), and has a similar function in *Il latte è buono* (*Milk is Good*, 2005) by Garane Garane. Both novels, in fact, follow the lives of young adults whose lives radically change because of dictatorship.

In *Nuvole sull'Equatore*, a short passage describes how the *coup d'état* takes place. The police begin to arrest people, especially young people, because they wear jeans and other clothes which are considered to be too transgressive. However, nobody really complains, hoping that this is just a temporary measure. Young people, in particular, try to deal with police's 'moral zeal', making the best of a bad situation.<sup>24</sup> It is not insignificant that the young people went on strike and dressed defiantly, as it reveals the will to influence the future of the country, its development and possibilities of

22 Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, 'Mukulaal'. In D. Comberiat (ed.), *Roma d'Abissinia* (Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010), pp. 13–22 (14).

23 Fazel, 'Mukulaal', 15: 'Chi aveva i mezzi economici lasciava la città; molti rimanevano, indifesi, a subire ogni sopruso' (our translation).

24 Fazel, 'Mukulaal', 159 (our translation).

change. Very soon, the *coup d'état* shows its true face and a military regime is declared. The streets of Mogadishu are crowded with soldiers, who establish checkpoints everywhere. Fazel describes that moment: '[t]here were no victims and the situation in the country was quiet. The people had to stay home because at the declaration of the state of emergency, a curfew had come into force. All means of communication had been interrupted and the country was completely isolated from the rest of the world.'<sup>25</sup>

The reference to the curfew has an important function for the plot, as young people are forced to hold secret meetings: during one of them, Giulia, the protagonist of the novel, meets her first boyfriend. After the description of the *coup d'état*, the novel focuses in a more direct way on Giulia's life. The consequences of the *coup*, in fact, will be disastrous for Giulia and her family: Giulia will leave the country, reaching Italy, and she will never come back to Somalia; her parents will be obliged to move to Kenya. Once again, then, the emphasis on departure overwhelms any other political and cultural concern about the dictatorship.

*Il latte è buono* is the only novel written so far by Garane Garane, a professor in French and Italian Literature at the University of Virginia. He studied in Somalia, attending Italian schools, and then came to Europe, first to Italy and then to France, where he continued his studies and obtained a PhD. Although heavily based on Garane's personal experiences, his text includes fictional sections, reaching mythical, if not epic, tones while speaking about the ancient origins of Somalia as a nation. As for the representation of dictatorship, Garane, like Fazel, focuses his attention on its very beginning, and more precisely on the day of President Shermarke's murder:

25 Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Nuvole sull'equatore. Gli italiani dimenticati. Una storia* (Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010), 162: 'La popolazione doveva rimanere in casa, perché con la dichiarazione dello stato di emergenza era entrato in vigore il coprifuoco. Tutte le vie di comunicazione erano state interrotte e il paese era completamente isolato dal resto del mondo' (our translation).

‘Suddenly, a snatch, a mortal snatch hit Somali people. President Shermarke had been murdered.’<sup>26</sup>

Gashan, the young protagonist of the novel, gets the news while at school. He attends an Italian school, a place where, during the Italian Protectorate, as well as afterwards, the national élite was formed. Gashan is the son of Mogadishu’s mayor, whose political faction is opposed to President Shermarke’s. Shermarke’s daughter Mariam is also one of his classmates. As the murder takes place, Gashan tries to calm Mariam by inventing a story which draws a mythical parallel between Somali history and that of ancient Rome, which pupils used to study at the Italian school.

As Laura Lori argues, the rhetorical strategy used here by Gashan shows that during Italian colonialism, ‘cultural colonization went along with political colonization, influencing Somali future elites, as well as their political opponents.’<sup>27</sup> This cultural element, however, also allow the children – affected both by Barre’s dictatorial rule and its aftermath – to avoid involvement in Somali political matters, as if they were not concerned by it, because they belong to a new and different, Roman/Italian culture. In addition to this, the recurrence of the colonizer’s culture, although mediated by its rhetorical use, marks further ambivalence towards the public and collective spaces which Somali authors could rebuild from exile, as it reintroduces those elements of political and cultural colonization that Somali independence had tried to remove. This analysis leads to some preliminary conclusions on the representation of Barre’s dictatorship in Somali Italian Postcolonial literature. Although Barre is mentioned by all these authors, he is never presented as a fully-fledged character. There are no detailed descriptions of him. These authors never describe his physical

26 Garane Garane, *Il latte è buono* (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone, 2005), 48: ‘Di colpo, un colpo mortale colpì il popolo somalo. Il presidente Schermache [*sic*] fu ucciso’ (our translation).

27 Laura Lori, *Inchiostro d’Africa. La letteratura postcoloniale somala fra identità e diaspora* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2011), 91: ‘É indicativo come un fatto della realtà somala sia interpretato dai ragazzi attraverso la storia dell’impero romano: questo è un modo molto efficace per sottolineare come la colonizzazione culturale sia andata di pari passo con la colonizzazione politica’ (our translation).

appearance, his posture, his ways of moving or talking to Somalis during his speeches; there are no dialogues, even invented, involving the dictator. Apart from Kaha Mohamed Aden's short allegorical fable, there is no real plot or fictional storyline centered on him.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, his figure is at the origin of most of the plots, catalyzing many different events: Barre is repeatedly indicated as the main figure responsible for the crisis of Somali public space and of Somalia as a nation, leading to its dissolution with civil war, and the effects of his rule can be identified in the lives of thousands of people leaving the country.

This is utterly different from the celebration of the regime which can be found in Somali oral poetry and in Somali written literature of the time, but also from the treatment of Barre's dictatorship in Nuruddin Farah's oeuvre, which probably represents the longest and deepest engagement with the representation of Siad Barre's dictatorship.

Born in 1945 in Baidoa, Farah has been living in exile since 1976, a few years after his literary debut with *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), written in English, and the attempt to publish a second novel in Somali, which was later censored in Somalia. At least four of Farah's eleven novels written in English so far – from *A Naked Needle* (1976) to *Close Sesame* (1983) – are based on the 'quite direct relationship between the traditional patriarchal Somali family and the authoritarian regime in Somalia under the rule of Mohammad Siad Barre.'<sup>29</sup> Ranging from the authoritarian and murderous father Keynaan in *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979) to the figure of the anti-colonial fighter and resistant Deeriye in *Close Sesame* (1983), Farah both staged and deconstructed the linkage between Barre, as the self-declared 'Father of the Somali nation', and the relevance of fatherhood in Somali

28 An interesting case of fictional storyline centered on an African dictator is *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* by Maaza Mengiste. The novel is about the Ethiopian dictatorship under Mengistu Haile Mariam. Whilst the plot is based on historical events, the author imagines and describes the thoughts and feelings of the dictator, who thus becomes a character of the plot.

29 Dubravka Juraga, 'Nuruddin Farah's *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship: Patriarchy, Gender, and Political Oppression in Somalia*.' In D. Wright (ed.), *Emerging Perspectives on Nuruddin Farah* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), pp. 283–305 (285).



clans. Through a direct allegorical representation of his figure (Keynaan), as well as its reversal (Deeriye), Farah managed to fictionalize Barre's figure in a different way from what had been done so far in the Somali literature in Italian.

In addition to this, Somali literature in Italian, unlike Farah's fiction, can be helpfully understood via Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'minor literature'. This is of course an established trend within Italian Studies, especially when concerned with migrant and postcolonial literature, and the use of Deleuze and Guattari's category has already been criticized by several scholars in Postcolonial Studies, for its Orientalist consolidation of the 'major/Western' vs. 'minor/Other' dichotomy.<sup>30</sup> Vulgarizations and abuses in the application of this definition have also been underlined in the case of Italian postcolonial and migrant literature as a whole, as well as in its specific application to Somali literature in Italian.<sup>31</sup>

In the latter case, however, the definition of 'minor literature' bears some relevance, as Simone Brioni has convincingly argued by critically revising the three pillars of Deleuze and Guattari's analysis – the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of a major language, the extension of the political dimension over the individual one, and collective enunciation – in his recent monograph *The Somali Within* (2015). While Brioni's treatment of the de-territorialization and re-territorialization of the Italian language, through a careful analysis of the linguistic and translation strategies enacted in the texts written by authors of Somali origin, seems to be quite exhaustive, it is the political dimensions of this 'minor literature' which need to be closely explored in relation to the narrative representations of Barre's dictatorship.<sup>32</sup>

30 Paul Patton, (2006). 'The Event of Colonisation.' In I. Buchanan and A. Parr (eds). *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 108–24.

31 Chiara Mengozzi, *Narrazioni contese. Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2013); Simone Brioni, *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in 'Minor' Italian Literature* (Leeds: Legenda, 2015).

32 Simone Brioni, 'Language'. In Simone Brioni, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–59.

When Deleuze and Guattari argue about ‘minor literatures’ that ‘everything in them is political’, in fact they also state:

In major literatures, in contrast, the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background [...]. Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.<sup>33</sup>

The ‘whole other story’ vibrating within these texts can often be linked to the Somali civil war, as most of the texts have been written and published since the beginning of the 1990s, coinciding with that period of armed conflict. As mentioned, however, the disgregation of the Somali nation as a collective space goes back at least to the latter period of Barre’s dictatorship (if not to the period of the Italian colonial protectorate). Barre’s rule appears thus to be a constitutive part of this narrative, catalyzing important events in the life of individual characters.

As for the third element of ‘minor literature’,

[...] everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn’t abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. [...] The political domain has contaminated every statement (*énoncé*). But above all else, [...] literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation. It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism [...]<sup>34</sup>

Concerning Somali literature in Italian, this ‘collective enunciation’ appears to be only an ideal horizon, as the stylistic means which (according to Deleuze and Guattari) shows it at its best – free indirect discourse – is nearly absent in this body of literature. The impossibility of a collective enunciation ideologically rebounds on the ambivalences in the process of

33 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975]) 17.

34 Ibid.

reconstruction of that ‘collective space’ muzzled by Barre’s dictatorship, whose reconstitution in Somali diasporic literature in Italian constantly faces physical, cultural and political boundaries – leaving room, thus, for new fictional and critical elaborations in the future.

The critical perspective of ‘minor literature’ is rapidly expanding its field of application to Somali literature (in Somali, as well as in English and in Italian) as a whole, given the ongoing violence and political troubles in Somalia. The dynamics of de-territorialization and re-territorialization of language, together with the political implications of the fictional elaboration of Somali postcolonial literature, history and culture as seen from outside its boundaries, are now becoming three defining features for this literature which largely survives in the diaspora – continuing, thus, and expanding on the political and cultural production from exile which began during Barre’s rule.

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## RACE AND RESISTANCE ACROSS BORDERS

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