

## The Use of Carnival Features for the Promotion of a New African Image in the Novels of Ouologuem, Kourouma and Labou Tansi

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### ABSTRACT

*In this article, after defining the concepts of the Negro myth and the carnival, I show what these three novels have in common: giving the impression that the negative image given to Black Africa by Europe was justified while at the same time giving a fresh interpretation of many of the prejudices against the black man since slave trade. The article shows that the creation of African imaginary territories and the dual language characteristic of the carnival are intended to promote a new African image. In order to arrive at the interpretation given here, I used the postcolonial theory as described by Edward Said Culture and imperialism and the deconstructive criticism as defined by Atkins Douglas in Reading deconstruction and deconstructive reading.*

**Key words:** Negro Myth, Carnival, carnivalesque, deconstruction, dual language

### INTRODUCTION

According to Fanoud-Siefer L. (1968: 18), the Negro – myth refers to the negative image given to the Black Africans by French novelists such as Pierre Loti, Joseph Conrad.... This image is a consequence of slave trade and the colonial ideology. The black African was described by historians, ethnographers, travelers and scientists as ugly, lazy, morally bankrupt, backward cannibals, stupid and generally inferior to the white man. In brief sub – human. After studying European languages (French for this article), many black intellectuals of different academic disciplines tried to counteract this negative publicity by using different strategies. The most prominent ones are the great African historian Cheikh Anta Diop, the renowned black story teller Amadou Hampaté Ba and the essay writer Frantz Fanon. It is in this context, that the three postcolonial novelists (Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma and Sony Labou Tansi) tried to use fiction to add their voices to the noble cause of promoting a new African image.

### Problem statement

A reader interested in the development of African societies cannot fail to note that the three novels contain symbols of a marriage between the Africans and the Europeans and that the language used is a bit special and deserve a technical interpretation. One such novel was written by the Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem and is entitled *Devoir de violence* and translated in English as *Bound to Violence*. It was published in 1969. The other writer is the Ivorian story teller Ahmadou Kourouma. The novel sampled here is entitled *Monne, outrages et defis* (2000). The last one was published by The Congolese novelist and playwright Sony Labou Tansi. It is entitled *L'Etat honteux* (The Shameless State). The titles were carefully selected because the novels are highly political and ideological and require a serious interpretation for their meanings to be beneficial for the African continent. This is why the problem identified is to study what the marriages referred to in the above novels mean and what the linguistic codes used stand for in terms of cooperation between Africa and Europe. We also wanted to study the narrative strategies selected to convey this new message.

### METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative approach in order to arrive at our interpretation. We first read a PhD dissertation written by Fanoudh Leon Siefer in which he researched on a set of stereotypes on Black Africa as they appear in French literature from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the eve of the Second World War. Afterwards, we did a content analysis of *Devoir de violence* (Ouologuem), *Monne Outrages et Défis* (Kourouma) and *L'Etat honteux* (Labou Tansi). We first read the three books separately looking for the counter reactions to the stereotypes of the Negro myth. Thereafter, we looked for commonalities between the three novels.

We looked for the most occurring themes while taking into account the fact that the three novels were written by postcolonial writers who had to react against the stereotypes of the negro-myth as described in the introduction. We also looked for the most recurrent features of the carnival and tried to interpret them using the postcolonial theory and the principles of deconstructive reading. According to Atkins Douglas, to deconstruct does not mean necessarily to destroy but to dismantle pieces of a system in order to understand it. When a postcolonial work of art is read, one should be cautious to avoid condemning wholesale whatever was written on formerly colonized territories. Neither should he imagine that the postcolonial writer is always right when he talks about his

country. According to the Orientalist scholar Edward Said, in colonial literature, the truth always lies always in-between. Writers like Jacques Derrida, founder of the deconstruction theory, does not hesitate however to condemn the written text when it is necessary. He is quoted by Jacques Zima (1994:40) as having said that writing is sometimes immoral, especially when it relies on quotations of previous writers without any critical thinking.

### Research Question

- i. What is a carnival?
- ii. What are the carnival features that the three postcolonial writers use and how?
- iii. What negative image is deconstructed by the three writers?
- iv. Which new African image is being promoted?

## MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Definition of the carnival and the carnivalesque narrative strategy

According to Annie Winchanck in an article which she published in a book co-authored by Daniel Lezou and Pierre Nda (2000:30), the carnival is a ceremony with roots in European Middle Ages. During the carnival, cultural norms were overthrown, hierarchy was not recognized and the whole period was characterized by laughter and merry making. This was done as a strategy to fight anxiety in periods of uncertainty as explained by Gilbert Durand in his book entitled *Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*. It is said that when these cultural features were used, the action represented would usually be the opposite of daily life. In a real carnival, people would wear masks; slaves would have fun with their masters and interchange roles making it possible for masters to act as slaves, and for the slaves to say whatever was on their mind. According to Anny Winchanck (2003:92), the expression carnivalesque which is coined from the word carnival is a transfer of carnival features to literature. She says the pioneer of this narrative strategy is Micheal Bakhtine.

The Carnavalesque strategy is characterized by the use of humor, obscene language and magnified descriptions of people's shortcomings in order to stimulate changes in society.

This usually goes hand in hand with use of imagery and a coded mode of expression. The images and the codes must therefore be deciphered in order to arrive at the new African image which is sought by Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma and Sony Labou Tansi.

### Use of magnifying descriptions

Unlike other African novelists, in order to counteract the negative image of a backward Africa characterized by incompetent leaders with a lot of sexual scandals, the three authors did not opt for an attitude of denial. On the contrary, they first give an impression of admitting this stereotype only to come up with a comparison with dark aspects of the European history.

In *Devoir de violence* (Ouologuem) for example, on the first 100 pages, the monarchy led by Chief Saif of the imaginary Nakem Empire, has carnival features. The different ancestors of Saif looked physically like monsters. They were sexual pervers, committed incest, exchanged sexual partners and had sex with animals. This deliberately negative description is intended to show that if good leaders had been the majority in Africa's history, slavery and colonialism would not have taken place.

After this carnivalesque description of leadership in Africa, Ouologuem picks a son of slaves, Raymond Kassoumi, takes him to Europe to study and makes him an observer of the return of Europe to backwardness during the Second World War. Raymond Kassoumi excellently finishes his degree in Architecture, marries Suzanne, a French woman and returns to Nakem with her to build his country.

The new African image promoted here by Yambo Ouologuem is therefore the one of a sincere partnership of Africa and Europe to develop the continent. The new partnership would be based on the lessons taught by world history based on the practical understanding that nobody including Europe is immune to the return to backwardness. Raymond Kassoumi observed Europe, learnt a lesson and returned home with it. There are other interracial couples in the novel meaning Blacks and Whites will have to learn to live with each other in harmony.

*Monne, outrages et défis* (Kourouma) follows the same pattern. It is a story of King Djigui of the imaginary kingdom of Soba. Djigui was the ruling monarch when the first colonialists arrived in Africa. He helplessly witnesses the overthrow of his authority by the French colonialists. He therefore talks about human sacrifice as a normal feature of monarchies in Africa. Whenever he wanted a big favor from the gods, blood had to be shed in abundance, including human blood. So here too, there is a deliberate decision of prior acceptance of the stereotype of backwardness only to come up with a fresh interpretation of the stereotype.

This is what King Djigui of Soba did when he had a dream that a powerful conqueror (the colonialists) was coming to take away his authority. He made sacrifices. When he reasons in this manner, he is giving an animist anthropological explanation to human sacrifice. This animist aspect had not been well understood by the first

Europeans to arrive in Africa but is well documented by Rene Gerard in his books. This is why even today, despite decades of evangelization and legal provisions to fight this deadly practice, there are still culprits languishing in African prisons. The new African image being promoted here is that there must be change of mindsets by Africans themselves if Africa is to fit in the new world order. Djigui could not understand that you could do away for example with slavery: *From birth to death, each one had his rank and place, his occupation and everybody was contented. There was little jealousy.*

To illustrate this, king Djigui thanks Diabate, the messenger of Emperor Samory by giving him horses, three virgin girls and three other women. In less than a week, Diabaté became a husband of six wives! Having recognized this aspect of his culture, Kourouma reinterprets the cliché of savagery by showing new forms of human sacrifice during the colonial period. In an abrupt carnival like change, forced labor appears as a form of white cannibalism and human sacrifice.

*Because no single black African taken by whites had ever returned home, many African ended up believing that the slaves had been sacrificed and consumed. It was explained that it was due to human sacrifice that the whites had offered to their gods and the vital energy of the Blacks which had given the Whites the witchcraft of their technological know-how.*

In this way, Kourouma, just like it is done in carnivals, manages to fight back, to return to the Whites the stereotype of cannibalism and human sacrifice. This is what we call dual language to refer to the act of giving an impression of accepting a given point of view while disputing it at the same time by allotting to it a new interpretation.

Even the issue of black sexuality which was a subject of so much mockery in colonial literature is not spared. Djigui talks of one of the French commanders who fell in love with a beautiful African girl from Soba and ended up divorcing his wife because she could no longer satisfy him sexually:

*Djigui remembered the great period of the fat white man who had one day, on a building site, in lieu of the usual glass of beer, asked for a black girl and tried her. The experience thrilled and transformed him to the extent that he could no longer be satisfied by his white wife who became colder than a snake.*

We can see here that Kourouma has chosen humor as a way of destroying one of the most annoying stereotypes of the Negro myth because it was based on white hypocrisy. He shows that the white men inwardly eyed black women while outwardly criticizing their so called ugly looks. The new African image being promoted here is that an African man or woman is an emotionally and psychologically healthy person, comfortable with his or her sexuality. In this way, the African is portrayed as someone capable of overcoming the worst forms of depression through laughter and humor. He must therefore be proud of his identity. He must know his strength but also his weaknesses. If he survived the trauma of slave trade, he will survive other forms of oppression and prejudice. Djigui exposes through humor what he calls new forms of white cannibalism: forced labor, participation of Africans in the First and Second world wars without any tangible reward.

In *L'Etat honteux*, Labou Tansi picks another feature of the carnival. That is vulgar language and the use of symbols and a coded language. The main character Martilimi Lopez is an African dictator, so bad that even the name of his imaginary country is not given. It is first named the Shameless state. Martilimi Lopez has several mistresses some local and others foreign. He talks about his sexual urges without any restraint. At the end of the novel, there is massive resignation of all his ministers and 12 of his mistresses and their children. This spectacular resignation against a dictator implies that Africa has a capacity to fight bad policies. It is also important to note that this bad leader is always flanked by a European advisor, Mr. Vauban. He is always received in western capitals and the Holy Father even makes a state visit to his country. He makes dirty every leader he shakes the hands with. The metaphors of muddy hands, bad smells and human excreta keep appearing in this novel in a hallucinating way (1990: 36):

*He (Martilimi) walks, full of mud, in front of delegations and their chairmen. Everybody claps. He shakes the hands of her Majesty of the Flemish people... and soils her with his historic manure. He shakes his hands with her majesty the Princess of Denmark and leaves on her royal garments a bit of his historic mud. Our people smile a bit when they see how the elite of this world is soiled by the smell of his hernia*

The new African image being promoted here is that Europe must stop the support it gives to African dictators especially those known for wasteful spending while their citizens live in abject poverty. If it continues the support, it will have lost the moral authority to criticize African leaders. With Sony Labou Tansi, we reach the climax of the carnival representation of leaders in Africa. The new image which he wants to promote is quality leadership and good relationships with Europe.

### Parody of ethnographers

The early ethnographers such as Claude Levy-Bruhl, author of *La mentalité primitive* are known have greatly contributed to the spread of many stereotypes of the negro-myth. This is the reason why Ouologuem picks one famous German ethnographer, Leo Frobenius and belittles him just like it would be done in a carnival. First of all he deforms his name. He calls him Fritz Shrobenius. His ideas about Black Africans are presented as confused because he wanted to see symbols everywhere in Africa even in the tree where elders sat chatting:

*He (shrobenius) displayed friendship to Africa and his windy knowledge with the confidence of a university student who completed his studies after supplementary exams (1969:140)*

Shrobenius is just a representative of other European experts on Africa. Yambo Ouologuem does not have any respect for them because he feels they were all agents of the colonial ideology. This is what we read in *Devoir de Violence* (1969: 153):

*For three years, men and what kind of men, women, adventurers, students, politicians, travelers, spies, pseudo scientists, they said but in reality watchdogs working to promote the name of Shrobenius around the idea of the so called Negro symbolism, flooded Nakem Empire*

Ouologuem is advocating for scientific humility and honesty. Many speculative ideas were put forward in books and later published as scientific knowledge whereas they were not. And this, according to him, has done a lot of harm to Black Africans. Ouologuem wanted Africanism promoted by Africans themselves not outsiders. He thought they were likely to understand better their communities than outsiders.

### Promotion of Africa through the use of humor

Besides parody, a carnival is also characterized by a display of lack of seriousness in speech. This situation makes it possible to laugh off many things including colonial exploitation. The example of African soldiers who fought alongside the French army during the Second World War is typical in this regard. Many promises had been made to them but very few were fulfilled. This is how the narrator of *Monne, outrages et defis*, paraphrases their disappointment.

*You will eat the best food, you will get the best pay. You will take away food from other indigenous people, their animals and their wives. It will not be a sin. Allah forgives people who are armed and are in power (1990:61)*

However many former Black soldiers were never paid. Others received meaningless medals. Kourouma uses irony to comment on this deception as follows: "The French people confirmed their reputation of good whites. To our compatriots who were maimed by the Germans, generous France gave the following: the red cap, the belt and the badge on which was pinned the medal" (1990: 83-84)

The new African image which Kourouma wants to promote is the one where Africans get a fair deal for its products and services. According to Eugene Guernier, the use of humor is one of the most constant features of human imagination in order to fight anxiety.

### Playing with words in *L'Etat honteux*

A carnival is also characterized by a lot of creativity in the use of language. In *L'Etat honteux*, Labou Tansi hits at African leaders whose undiplomatic behavior brings Africa into disrepute. He distorts their names or uses funny periphrases to give a hint on their identities. Mobutu becomes Toutanso, Micombero becomes Muhete \* a deformation of the Kirundi word Muhutu in reference to one of the tribes in Burundi whose members were butchered under his rule. Some words such as Father are so misused, played with to the extent that they lose their meaning. The word father reminds the reader of how it was used to name the first African presidents after independence. However, these leaders became dictators and according to Sony Labou Tansi they no longer deserved to be called Fathers of the Nation. Labou Tansi talks about the beautiful teeth of the father of the Nation, the great laughter, the heart of the father of the Nation. The word is so repeated that it is emptied of its meaning. It is now the no sense which becomes a carrier of meaning. The presidents became monsters ready to devour their citizens. The image promoted here by Sony Labou Tansi through this carnivalesque description is that leaders should strive to deserve the respect from their populations by behaving well and respecting human life. Martilimi Lopez had transformed the death penalty into the *male penalty* because of his habit of castrating political prisoners.

### CONCLUSION

In this study, the carnival features which were found in the three novels are the use of symbols, humor and play with the French language. We have shown that the aim of using these strategies is to restore African dignity, promote good diplomatic relations with the West. This means using the knowledge so far accumulated in order to develop Africa, not wasting its resources. It also means looking for fair partnerships on a win-win basis. This requires a new type of leadership for the different countries. The 3 postcolonial writers think Africa needs to rethink its destiny, its relationships with the outside world. The use of the carnivalesque strategy is intended to support the African renaissance both politically and economically. Yambo Ouologuem, Ahmadou Kourouma and Sony Labou Tansi creatively used what was said by Europe about Africans to create a new image for Africa

by Africans. They understood well that intertextuality (relation between text A and text B) is the basis of literary creation.

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