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YEAR BOOK

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The annual publication of the Association for the Study of Caribbean and African Literature in French

The ASCALF YEARBOOK

The *ASCALF Yearbook* is an annual publication intended to provide a permanent record of research work presented at the Association's annual conference and day workshops. It publishes substantial articles which represent important contributions to the knowledge of this specialised field of study and as such is complementary to the twice-yearly *ASCALF Bulletin*, which publishes shorter, more topical articles, book reviews and conference reports.

Articles for inclusion in the Yearbook are reviewed in the first instance by the ASCALF committee, which constitutes the Editorial Board of the Yearbook, and may also be submitted to independent referees. Although we welcome articles from non-members and non-participants in the association's activities, priority will be given to the publication of papers presented in the context of our regular meetings. Articles should be submitted in two copies, formatted according to the norms of the Modern Humanities Research Association style handbook, and accompanied by a disc in a format readable on a PC in Word for Windows 6.

The opinions expressed in articles published in the Yearbook are their authors' responsibility, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor or the association.

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ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF CARIBBEAN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE IN FRENCH

The ASCALF logo is based on a Téké mask from the Upper Sanga region (République populaire du Congo).

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- invitations to informal workshops on aspects of African and Caribbean literature held at various venues throughout the year.

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Editorial

The majority of the seven papers reproduced here were presented at an ASCALF study day hosted by the Department of French at the University of Warwick in April 1997. Entitled 'Text and History', this study day was concerned generally with examining the ways in which the question of 'history' impacts upon and is represented within, written and visual texts from the francophone Caribbean, Africa and the Indian Ocean. Often situating these texts within their wider social, cultural and political context, papers presented at the study day also interrogated the notion of history itself, and explored ways in which colonial history is and may be (re)written through fiction in an era which, however problematically, can be defined as 'postcolonial'. It is hoped that the papers reproduced here will provide a continuation of debates begun at the study day, as well as provoking further and future discussion.

The critical approaches and subject matter chosen by this volume's contributors are various as well as related. In the first article, Peter Hawkins explores the way in which the Indian Ocean writer Daniel Vaxelaire has, in recent years, moved away from his early preoccupation with 'grand narrative' historical novels towards a more subtle preoccupation with historical hybridity or *métissage*. Turning to the Caribbean, Bridget Jones examines the continuing Antillean preoccupation with the figure of King Béhanzin, exiled from Dahomey to Martinique in the late nineteenth century, and subsequently the subject of variously mythologised oral, written and filmic texts. Maeve McCusker, too, focuses on the Caribbean, as she explores the way in which Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, like the stories around Béhanzin, weaves together fact and fiction, oral and written, Creole and French, to produce what for her is a 'postmodern' historiography. In the final article on the Caribbean, meanwhile, Dominique le Rumeur provides a detailed study of the importance of bible as a point of reference for a variety of Antillean writers, past and present. For le Rumeur, the bible (as well as other holy texts) has proved a vital source for writers seeking to reinscribe and reinvent lost origin stories and occluded histories.

It is with David Murphy's contribution that the focus of this volume shifts to Africa as, in the first of three articles on Sembène, he explores the function of the *griot* in *Véhi-Ciosane*. Examining Sembène's own role as modern-day *griot*, Murphy also points towards the potential problems to be found in representing the *griot* as a guardian of history whose presence is used to 'authenticate' a fictional text. Shona Potts, meanwhile, presents a rereading of Sembène's *Le Dernier de l'Empire* which challenges its status as either straightforward satirical novel or simple *roman à clef*. Instead, she reveals an

interplay of factual and fictional discourses which enables the emergence of marginal versions of African history. A further, and alternative, view of Sembène's work is to be found in the final contribution here - a contribution which, far from providing a point of conclusion, very appropriately 'widens the debate'. Here, Andy Stafford takes the work of Sembène as a starting point in order to examine and extend Paul Gilroy's (anglocentric) notion of the 'Black Atlantic' both to questions on African history and literature, and also to Caribbean history, Guatemalan theatre and Fanon's activities in Algeria.

The thematic content of this third issue of the ASCALF Yearbook, like that of the second, is the result of a deliberate policy of producing coherent collections of papers, and it is hoped that this will continue in future years. It is generally felt that this is more useful to potential readers, be they teachers, researchers or students; it is also a more viable publishing proposition in a situation where the Association cannot count on any regular subsidy. This issue has been produced with the financial support of the University of Warwick, which ASCALF gratefully acknowledges here. In addition, the Editor and the Association would like to express their thanks and appreciation to Jackie Thompson, whose newly-designed cover features on this issue of the *ASCALF Yearbook*.

Although the financial future of the Yearbook remains at the present time uncertain, the aim of the Yearbook will continue to be to ensure the wider diffusion of the research work of our members and collaborators, and it is anticipated that subsequent issues will continue to reflect the themes of our regular conferences and study days. As such, articles and proposals for papers should in the first instance be directed to those events and their organisers. Short articles, as well as conference reports, book reviews, calls for papers and announcements of more topical or general interest to our members can be submitted to the editor of the *ASCALF Bulletin*, Dr Mary Gallagher at the Department of French, University College, Dublin.

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History and Hybridity in the Indian Ocean (with reference to the novels of Daniel Vaxelaire)

by Peter HAWKINS

Introduction

Who is Daniel Vaxelaire? A journalist who settled in Reunion some twenty years ago, and was employed in the late seventies and early eighties as the principal editor of a seven-volume history of the island, marketed by subscription only, called *Le Mémorial de la Réunion*. This monumental work led him to conduct extensive research in the island's archives, and the material he found there was so rich that it encouraged him to use it as the basis for a series of historical novels, situated at various well-documented points in the development of Reunion and its region, but using fictional characters and plots which illustrate the social relations of the period depicted. Reunion was initially an uninhabited terrain, and was first settled by a small group of French mutineers who were despatched there in 1647 as a punishment by the governor of Fort Dauphin (today Taolagnaro) in southern Madagascar, a trading post of the French East India Company. The exiled mutineers prospered, and the company decided in 1665 to colonise the island, which had been named Bourbon after the then current dynasty of French kings. These first settlers brought with them Malagasy women companions, and the story of one of these is imagined in the character of Anne in Vaxelaire's latest novel, *Bleu nuit*. Thus the island's first population was largely of mixed-race descent. In subsequent years the island became a slave-owning plantation economy, first growing coffee, cotton and spices, and subsequently sugar-cane, like its sister island Mauritius, later named Ile de France, and still referred to as 'l'île soeur' despite their divergent histories. Mauritius was ceded to the British after 1815 and has been independent, although strongly francophone, since 1968. Slavery was abolished in Reunion in 1848, which led to a massive importation of indentured labour from southern India and elsewhere, and the island became a French overseas department in 1946, along with Martinique, Guadeloupe and French Guiana.

Vaxelaire's cycle of historical novels

Certain crucial moments in the development of the multi-racial population of Reunion and its surrounding islands - Mauritius, Rodrigues, and Madagascar - have been chronicled by Vaxelaire since 1982 in the form of historical fictions. The first of these, *Chasseur de noirs* (1982) is the story of an 18th Century hunter of maroons, slaves who escaped into the inaccessible mountains of central Reunion to form renegade communities there. The second, *L'Affranchi* (1984) recounts the story of a bright young slave freed in the years prior to the abolition of slavery, who becomes a successful entrepreneur. The third, *Les Mutins de la Liberté*, originally published in 1986 and recently re-issued, romances the improbable but apparently authentic story of two pirates, a French adventurer and an Italian priest, who each married Comorian princesses and went on to found the short-lived utopian republic of Libertalia at the northern tip of Madagascar, at what is now known as Diego Suarez or Antsiranana. The origin of this latter story is an 18th Century English text, Johnson's *History of the Pyrates*. The fourth, *Chasseur d'Epices* (1990) is a romanced biography of the botanist Pierre Poivre and the story of the traders whose commercial competition for control of the lucrative spice route led to the initial colonisation of the island of Mauritius. The fifth and sixth, *Grand-Port* (1992) and *Cap Malheureux* (1993) tell the story of the Napoleonic wars between the British and French for control of the islands in the early 19th century. The latest, and probably the last novel of the series, *Bleu nuit ou les sept vies du Moine*, is different from the previous six, in that it abandons the conventional linear narratives and larger-than-life characters of its predecessors, to adopt a fragmented collage of stories from the whole range of the region's history, from the earliest Portuguese navigators to the present-day, high-tech, media-conscious world of Reunionese journalism; and it adopts an ironically transcendental narrator in the form of the ghost of the Italian priest Carraccioli, hero of the earlier novel *Les Mutins de la Liberté*.

Although all the novels allude to the multi-racial origins of the inhabitants of the region, I shall concentrate two of them, *Les Mutins de la Liberté* and *Bleu nuit* for reasons which will become apparent in due course. In these two novels the notion of hybridity - I use it in both the literal and the figurative sense, in the way that Homi Bhabha has theorised it in *The Location of Culture*,¹ as the equivalent of the French *métissage* - is extended to refer not just to the characters and the subject-matter of the novels, but also to their form and their ideological inscription as forms of historical writing. At the point where the ambition of the series to suggest a kind of 'grand narrative' of the Indian Ocean region becomes apparent, these two novels veer off in

the direction of marginality, fantasy, fragmentation, in a way which undermines the relative conventionality of the earlier texts. In particular, *Bleu nuit* becomes a kind of supplement - in the Derridean sense - which questions the foundations of the earlier forms of historical novel.

Les Mutins de la Liberté

The element of hybridity first appears in the narrative of *Les Mutins de la Liberté* about half-way through the novel², when the frigate *Victoire* has broken its allegiance to the French crown, and arraigns a slave ship off the coast of West Africa, with the intention not of continuing to trade in its captives, but of making them future citizens of a multi-racial Republic which the *Victoire's* captain and crew intend to found. Later in the text some members of the crew are freely chosen as partners by former slave women, and finally the libertarian fleet settles for a while in the Islamic sultanate of Anjouan, an island of the Comorian archipelago, with the predictable effect of a rapid increase in the number of mixed-race couples amongst its members. This miscegenation subsequently becomes the norm in the egalitarian and democratic community that these utopian pirates set up in the north of Madagascar, with the name Libertalia.

Behind the literal illustration of the theme of hybridity in this improbable yarn lies the question of its own origins. The preface indicates that the essential elements of the plot are drawn from some twenty pages of the apparently authentic *History of the Pyrates* published by one Captain Johnson, but recent scholarship has suggested that this might possibly be a pseudonym for Daniel Defoe.³ The author, whether Johnson or Defoe, indicates as a possible source the apocryphal memoirs of Olivier Misson⁴, the French adventurer who was one of the founders of Libertalia, who survived its downfall at the hands of Malagasy warriors. The narrative is thus an ambiguous hybrid of dubious truth and obvious fictionality, in such a way that the precise dosage is not at all clear. The fiction in its turn is inflected by a strong ideological current, that of the desire for a secular, egalitarian, multi-racial society to which contemporary republican France and its island-department of Reunion both aspire, but with currently differing degrees of success.

Without going into detail it is clear from this that *Les Mutins de la Liberté* illustrates a different blend of fictionality and history from the other five novels of a more realist kind. Instead, it looks forward to the explicitly

radical experimentation of *Bleu nuit ou Les sept vies du Moine*, and shares some of its utopian themes as well as the character of Angelo Carraccioli.

Bleu nuit ou Les sept vies du Moine

This novel abandons the linear narrative from the outset. The only narrative coherence offered to the reader is a tenuous and ironic one: the contemporary heroine Florence, a primary-school teacher and part-time journalist, disenchanted with the jaded celebrations of the millennium, decides to call up the spirits with a wee-gee board borrowed from her *voyante*. The spirit she encounters immediately is none other than the ghost of Carraccioli, the former monk turned utopian pirate of the earlier novel, who claims to have been reincarnated in seven different guises throughout the history of Reunion, and proceeds to recount his various former lives in fragmentary fashion, including his own, that of the utopian monk hero of *Les Mutins de la Liberté*. With the help of a media technician, Florence manages to engineer a more efficient radio contact with the midnight blue limbo inhabited by the ghost, by means of a sort of cosmic personal stereo. Quite apart from the 'seven lives of the monk', a further narrative thread in parallel to the contemporary love-life of Florence is provided by 'La femme de l'autre côté du canal' - presumably from a more modest, creole background than the heroine - who visits an exploitative sorcerer to try to regain the affections of her husband. This too is mediated through the semi-omniscience of the ghost-narrator, if not that of his likely alter-ego, the author.

What results from this fragmented, mock-serious structure is a play of irony in the relations between the narrator and the reader in terms of the latter's expectations and willingness to suspend disbelief. One of the factors which the text appeals to is obviously a religious dimension: it is as if the author has deliberately mingled elements of several religions present in the island - catholic, buddhist, animist, but not apparently hindu or muslim - as well as semi-religious practices such as divination and sorcery. He also suggests through the character of Carraccioli and the prospect of his future reincarnation the ideal of a multi-cultural, multi-racial society which might prosper in the future in Reunion. The historical vignettes of the 'seven lives' are as well-documented as in Vaxelaire's previous novels, but here they clearly serve to illustrate emblematically the various elements which went to make up the racially mixed Reunionese society of today: a stowaway on a Portuguese trading ship of the 16th Century; the Malagasy companion of one of the first settlers on the island, as mentioned earlier; a maroon; and a creole slave-hunter; a freed slave woman who marries a wealthy Indian

businessman in the late 19th Century; and a volunteer soldier in the 14-18 war. Add to that the presumably metropolitan French heroine Florence, and you have a fairly comprehensive representation of the various constituent elements of the racial mix of the island's population. Some elements are nevertheless missing from the tableau: the sizeable Chinese population who arrived in the late 19th century, and the Islamic traders from Gujerat in northern India and present-day Pakistan. The range is broad enough, even so, to account for the complex intermingling of races and cultures which go to make up the island's identity, and to provide a credible image of its history and origins.

This quasi-epic intention is undermined, however, by the ironic status of the narrative, and the author's playing with the limits of credibility of his readers. It is as if he is questioning in a humorous way the hunger of the Reunionese for a coherent account of their origins and destiny, a theme which is so recurrent in the cultural expression of the island as to have become almost a cliché. At the same time the playful questioning addresses itself to the desire for the 'grand narrative' which is part of the motivation for historical research of the sort exemplified by the author's own work on *Le Mémorial de la Réunion*, and rooted in the construction of a French national identity. Reunionese history is a marginal, fragmented part of the 'mainstream' history of the French nation which decisively determined the former at most of the crucial points in its evolution: colonisation, the 'code noir' of Colbert, the Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the relatively late abolition of slavery, the imposition of republican institutions, the two world wars and finally departmental status within the French nation.⁵ Reunionese history is a parasitic 'supplement' to that of mainland France, but one which serves to question the status and the coherence of France's own historical self-image. All too often it gives the lie to its pretensions by revealing the gaps between the French national rhetoric and the situation 'on the ground' in a far-flung island colony.

Conclusion

In the light of what the author has declared will probably be the last in the series, Daniel Vaxelaire's seven historical novels appear with hindsight to constitute an attempt to provide a fictional 'grand narrative' of the origins of the complex social structures of the Indian Ocean islands. The series is already conceived as a 'supplement' to what amounts to an official history of Reunion - *Le Mémorial de la Réunion* - and while the majority of its

elements represent a fairly traditional socio-realist account of the fortunes of the island peoples, the two volumes *Les Mutins de la Liberté* and *Bleu nuit* take on a more mythical dimension which highlights this function in the earlier tomes. *Bleu nuit* in particular can be seen as a kind of post-modern version of the historical novel, in which the position of the narrator is problematised and the status of the historical accounts questioned in the light of a mock-transcendental perspective. The whole undertaking seems to highlight the ambiguous, hybrid status of the islands and their populations, which gives the lie to the convenient national narratives which underpin the French state, and as such can be seen to contribute to a post-colonial re-appraisal of the French rôle in the region.

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 Daniel VAXELAIRE (1993), *Cap Malheureux*, Paris, Phébus, ISBN 2-85940-76-4.
 Daniel VAXELAIRE (1996), *Bleu nuit ou Les sept vies du Moine*, Paris, Flammarion, Collection Gulliver, ISBN 2-08-067338-6.

Notes

- ¹ See BHABHA (1994) pp. 111-112 and elsewhere in the same volume.
- ² VAXELAIRE (1986/1995), pp. 218-237.
- ³ See Daniel DEFOE, (1972) *A General History of the Pyrates*, ed. Manuel SCHONHORN.
- ⁴ DEFOE (1972), p.383.
- ⁵ These are conveniently outlined and dramatised in a volume intended for educational use: *Vingt-et-un jours d'histoire* (1992).

Telling the Story of King Béhanzin

by Bridget JONES

'Je crois qu'il rôde encore dans nos inconscients.'
- Glissant

The last king of Abomey, Béhanzin (or Gbehanzin), was exiled to Martinique by the French in 1894. He stayed only a few years and was moved on to Algeria, where he died in 1906. This brief and apparently undramatic episode in French colonial annals aroused ambiguous feelings in the local population. Persistent references to and stories about Béhanzin testify to the interest aroused by his status and mysterious image. They can be studied to illuminate the interaction of different kinds of narrative response, both oral and scribal.

The intention here is to sketch in the historical versions of Béhanzin's story and look at a few Caribbean texts, two novels and a film, which deal very differently with the royal presence in Martinique. In particular these versions suggest a gendered response, and reflect recent shifts in attitude in dealing with the African heritage of the black Caribbean population. The tall figure of the 'roi des Nègres', enigmatic behind his sunglasses, beaded cap and long pipe, attended by his wives, still stalks his way through local memory, present in fragments of language and lore.

The resilience of the folk myth is variously elaborated in the literary and filmic versions, but it is obvious enough that at one psychic level Béhanzin acquires the tragic aura of the prisoner in exile, the fallen hero, a victim of French repression. Like Toussaint (whose tragic death in an icy Jura prison fascinates many Caribbean writers, notably Glissant) he is confined in a distant alien space, like Dreyfus held within heavy stone walls (initially Fort Tartenson) on a small tropical island. However for the black population he figures very directly a repressed 'Afrique intérieure', prolonging the legacy of African blood brought forcibly to the Americas by the slave trade, a problematic inheritance for the majority of the people of the Caribbean. As a visibly patriarchal figure, still suggesting authority and power, attended always by at least three wives, he incarnates a phantasmic black Father, symmetrical to the White Master as abusive false father who predominates in traditional lore, for example the Ti-Jean cycle of folktales reflecting the matrifocal slave family.

Histories

In historical accounts, Dahomey, now Benin, presents a complex of traits bound to fascinate the observer, and it would be easy to cite the often divergent views of the European travellers who represented this unfamiliar society to their readers.¹ Ahidjéré Béhanzin (born 1844), as the last supreme ruler, concentrates and sums up an image of black power.

He was the warrior leader of a large disciplined fighting force, which the European powers hesitated to engage in battle, and French forces under Colonel Dodds only overcame after a lengthy campaign. Some of his regiments, as also the palace guard, were the famous female troops, labelled 'amazones' and led by women officers. When outgunned, Béhanzin bought German arms and trained his troops in their use.

His monarchy was as absolute and his kingdom as centralised as that of Louis XIV. He used many of the same strategies of systematic taxation and intelligence gathering, with strict hierarchies of control, some of which involved high-ranking women. Béhanzin's letters, even if they were altered or 'improved' by his devious translator, Xavier Béraud, speak in tones of unselfconscious equality to France, summed up by his suggestion, when exasperated by the parliamentarians' constant shifts of colonial policy, that Napoleon or the Bourbons should be restored to give coherence and continuity.²

It was thus an African king who had enjoyed supreme power in his kingdom and claimed semi-divine status for his dynasty who came to a small island colony in which slavery had only been abolished forty-six years earlier. Small wonder he perturbed the still dominant assumptions of white domination over black subservience.

Though he was a prisoner, humiliatingly stripped of all meaningful power, the French respected Béhanzin's status and cultural difference in a manner which made an indelible impression: his polygamy was given official recognition. The number of wives in his entourage varies according to different accounts - three or four or five, but they are integral to the folk image. This was a colony where monogamous Christian marriage was presented as the ideal, and most institutions stigmatised the *de facto* consensual unions of the majority and deplored the sexual rapacity of the rich and white. No doubt resentful women and restive men were likely to respond to the emblematic tableau of the king walking out from his well-furnished suburban villa at Bellevue: clad in robes and ornate slippers, one wife

preceding him, another shading him under a giant parasol, a third fanning him with her 'chasse-mouches'.³

However, if the king represented black power and its privileges, strong leadership, heroic resistance to the colonial invader, his regime in Dahomey could not figure unproblematically as a lost African paradise. Slave-trading was a major source of its revenues, even if much of the dirty work was done through intermediaries in the vassal states around the coastal forts: Porto Novo, Cotonou, Ouidah.⁴ Selling prisoners of war or unsuccessful rivals was accepted practice, persisting long after the New World trade was outlawed, for example in the form of 'forced labour' shipped to the Cameroons to work on German plantations. The presence of Dahomey in the Caribbean is unmistakably attested in some of the names of the vaudou pantheon such as Legba and Agoué, in a term like 'boknon' for soothsayer.

The 'Slave Coast' traded extensively in human flesh, but the sacrifice of slaves was also an important element in ritual custom. Witnesses speak of the slaughter to honour ancestors and give due splendour to royal funeral rites. Visitors keen to justify intervention or conquest may well have exaggerated, or failed to grasp the nuances of the ceremonials organised for them, but there is no glossing over the skulls 'thatching' the palace walls, or the image of the royal throne, a high wooden stool mounted on the four skulls of slain enemy chiefs.⁵ The stereotype of the bloodthirsty African 'savage', often propagated in justification of Christian missionary activity, receives a reinforcement in these images, which Catholic clergy working in Martinique may well have exploited.

Pride in claiming kinship with a royal line, centuries-old resentments of the 'brothers' who sold their fellows into bondage, a shocked rejection and will to distance oneself from pagan rites and human sacrifice, a titillating glimpse of polygamy, the complex of stimuli are in place to provoke fabulation, both at the popular level of tales, sayings and false memories, and as inspiration for fiction and film.

Stories

Edouard Glissant explores in most depth the potential meanings of this African presence. One of the brief harsh poems in the opening sequence of the collection *Boises* (1979) evokes 'le roi recommencé' - 'Ni un ô vent ne le connut' - a significant captive withheld from any meaningful contact with the population.⁶ However it is particularly in the novel, *La Case du commandeur* (1981) that Glissant weaves into his story not only a quest for information about Béhanzin's stay and what it might mean, but a touching fantasy,

resembling a Creole tale, of the welcome waiting in the lost African homeland. In a miniature version of the whole project of the book, an absence, a gap in the collective consciousness of the past, nevertheless comes to be transmitted and creatively shaped through the text.

As critics have observed,⁷ this novel is intricately crafted and strongly musical in its structure, resonating with surviving fragments of language and lore. In particular the enigmatic name 'Odonon' echoes throughout,⁸ its form sometimes modified, its meanings multiple: a people, two brothers, betrayer and betrayed, but inescapably an African vestige. Béhanzin might seem to offer a more specific and historically located link with Africa, 'le dernier déporté de la Traite' (p.38) but Glissant uses the reference to comment on the wilful suppressions which render even a relatively recent event irretrievable, above all for an uneducated countryman like Pythagore Celat.

In an episode sited early in the text, Pythagore gives voice to his frustrated passion for access to the meaning of the past, demanding to know about 'Congo' and 'Guinée' (the names survive for sections of the plantation), sharing his rum-sodden visions of great African rivers and giving a traditional narrative shape, the Return of the Prodigal child, the homecoming feast, to his tale:

Je vois le roi de tous les Nègres il est assis sur quatre têtes coupées (...) Je vois la femme Un du Roi des Nègres puis la femme Deux et ainsi de suite jusqu'à la femme Trois-cent-soixante-six (...) Le roi des Nègres me dit Pythagore que voulez-vous je réponds Roi des Nègres peux-tu me rapporter ce que tu connais à propos de la Guinée du Congo Le roi répond Pythagore ami c'est ici le royaume du Congo de Guinée réunis alors je dis Roi Pythagore est donc au bout de sa route La femme Soixante-onze me dit oui oui entrez et mangez. (p.27)

His listeners ponder but offer no elucidation, just as the French schoolbooks of his daughter Mycéa deform still further the enquiry with their mysterious gaps and stereotypes. Then in a continuation of the quest, Pythagore overhears on the *yac*, the ferry plying to the capital, a discussion on Béhanzin and resolves to find out more. Here Glissant expresses more forcibly and directly how social divisions in Martinique act to obscure and belittle the African roots of the majority. The conversation rehearses the image of the exotically clad, polygamous and sanguinary ruler: 'C'est l'ennemi mon cher' (p.36). Pythagore then tenaciously seeks information from government offices, obstinately demanding to 'éclairer la part de nuit qui bougeait en lui' (p.39). Predictably he meets with rebuttals and scorn from the minor civil servants, whose image of Africans is of subject people,

fodder for a possible promotion to Dakar or Cotonou. Glissant thus sustains a clear polarisation between the rural heirs of slavery puzzling to grasp a sense of origins, and the assimilated lower middle-class nonchalantly absorbing French attitudes along with the maps of Brittany and Alsace.

This episode occurs early, signalling the elusive quality of knowledge of the past, and yet the passion to retrieve and comprehend it which inhabits a humble black cane-cutter. The novel proceeds by a double movement: penetrating further into the past of Mycéa and her forbears, and then pursuing the alienating and tragic consequences into the present. Mycéa's present 'madness', the deaths of her sons are thus impregnated with the sense of fragmentation, absence and downright cruelty which emerges from a probing of the past. The mysterious significance of the talismanic 'Odon', the recurrent references to a void: 'trou du passé', 'trou de mémoire', concretised on the estate as a punishment hole, dark site of cruel death and of love, are more salient in the narrative. However, the treatment of the figure of Béhanzin - absence of reliable knowledge and understanding, failed communication, yet invention of a consoling and elaborated text to remake the emotional connection with Africa - offers a guide to reading the novel which follows.⁹ It is indicative of the complex narrative achievement of *La Case du commandeur*.

This novel draws more extensively on a creolised French than is typical of Glissant's fiction, and inserts many fragments of local language and lore. One of the unexplained 'given' items is an enigmatic saying: 'La balance de Béhanzin qu'on aurait mis à Bezaudin',¹⁰ referring to a remote village not far from the rural area where Glissant lived as a child. There is a persistent folk notion that Béhanzin's time in Martinique was symmetrical around the turn of the century (1894 to his death in 1906, or 1897 to 1903), allowing him to be associated with the volcanic eruption in 1902 when in fact he had left by 1901. As will be evident in relation both to Maryse Condé's novel and the Deslauriers film, fanciful inventions and false memories are more typical reactions to Béhanzin than the painful absence of knowledge stressed by Glissant.

Maryse Condé's novel *Le Dernier des rois mages*¹¹ demonstrates the storytelling fluency of this prolific author. She has manifestly yielded to the popular fascination with Béhanzin's presence, walking near his villa, gathering oral history, finding a witness claiming to have been to school in Saint-Pierre with his son, and constructing her novel around the persistent story that he (or a member of his family) fathered a child in Martinique.¹² This myth seems very revealing of a desire to appropriate the regal African

and counter the absence of local impact, the definitive departure to Blida, by the existence of a fictitious descendant. Condé bases her story on a putative dynasty of male heirs of the king, Djéré the son, Justin a grandson, and especially a great-grandson, Spéro, through whose consciousness much of the story is told. With sly humour she explores an image of the Caribbean male, consoling himself for inadequacies with delusions of grandeur, too often reinforced by the complicity of the womenfolk around him. Her demystifications recall Césaire's bracing rebuke: 'Non, nous n'avons jamais été amazones du roi de Dahomey, ni princes de Ghana...'

With Condé one often feels that a complex narrative strategy is chosen because this author would otherwise spontaneously tell tales in the popular mode of an unfolding chronology: 'Un matin d'octobre... Un après-midi qu'il se trouvait là...' (pp.82-3), yielding to a taste for sagas of the Caribbean and the diaspora, to her zestful interest in other lives. Here a set of notebooks composed by Djéré, the son abandoned when Béhanzin left Martinique, diversify the tone, recounting legends of the Fon people and the mythical origins of the dynasty in a forest coupling of leopard and human princess. In addition the author juggles with the time frame of her narrative, gradually developing a portrait of the three generations of Caribbean families who nurtured the abandoned 'princes', which is interwoven with the portrait of Spéro's life in the black American middle-class milieu of his wife Debbie. This decentring of the Béhanzin dynasty creates a strong ironic interplay: caught up in Debbie's uncritical passion for all things African, Black history, Black religion, for Spéro 'leur fantasme était pareil à sa vérité' (p.32). The theme of exile is expanded if not deepened by the wealth of material, to express not only a New World yearning for a lost Africa but a complex commentary on exile from fulfilment and happiness. The detailed portrait of Spéro's marriage resembles a sermon (from Relate?) on loving your man and accepting him as he is, accompanied by a candid look at the fascist tendencies of political correctness.

Rich, engrossing, over-generous in telling of all the incidental lives and settings the author enjoys, this work is evidence of Condé spinning stories for the pleasure of a large readership. She reconstitutes an episode of Caribbean history in the margins of a mildly didactic fiction, a tolerant woman's perspective on the male need for status and respect. Djéré's Notebooks do not get into print despite Debbie's best efforts, a constant erosion threatens the retrieval of the past (Agnès and her rambling unreliable oral history, Djéré's papers lost in the 1928 hurricane) but as Priska Degras stresses, authors such as Condé are increasingly exploring through fiction the

dense fabric of past experience, aiding in the complex process of retrieval of a Caribbean time past.¹³

Most recently, the film-maker Guy Deslauriers directed *L'Exil du roi Béhanzin*, an ambitious attempt at a historical romance, combining a fictitious love-story with a fable of 'créolité'. The scenario, composed with some strain by Patrick Chamoiseau: 'j'en ai écrit dix-sept versions',¹⁴ seeks not so much to retrieve and repossess the African otherness of Béhanzin as to show his conversion to the values of multicultural 'créolité'. Indeed Jean Bernabé hails the work as 'le premier film du mouvement littéraire et artistique de la créolité',¹⁵ indicating a new reading of the king's presence in terms not of his isolation or rejection by an assimilated population, but as testimony to the melding diversity of the developing creole culture.

Somewhat simplistically, in a work designed for a mass audience, values are ascribed to Béhanzin's African heritage which are challenged by the new world-view developed by the creole society of Martinique. Béhanzin assumes solidarity from his jailor by virtue of his dark skin, manifestly an allusion to the doctrines of Negritude, but is countered by an affirmation of individual identity and worth:

Gardien: Mais je ne suis pas africain!

Roi: Vous êtes quoi alors?

Gardien: Je suis Justin Gloria et ça me suffit. (...) J'ai peut-être du sang africain mais je ne suis pas africain.

Martinique is heir to the revolutionary Rights of Man, Schoelcher has contributed to the emancipation of the slaves, no longer chattels but citizens. A particularly clear contrast is made between the four spouses of the king, docile and obedient, graceful, but essentially seen as a passive group or spurned love object as against the independent vitality of the local laundress, Régina, with whom he falls in love. References to slave-trading and to ritual sacrifice reinforce the characterisation of Dahomey as a realm turned toward the past, where individual human life is expendable. The Martinican journalist who campaigns for the king's release can also be seen in terms of modern democratic pressure groups like the press, challenging the autocratic power of the governor.

Rooted in ancestral values, the king expresses concern that there is no privileged repository of the Caribbean past: 'Qui est le gardien de votre mémoire?' he asks, told of the forgotten massacred Caribs, and that same erosion of past Caribbean knowledge which so preoccupies Glissant.

However, once his son Ouanilo can write fluently, the king dictates his story. As in the case of the 'Cahiers' featured by Condé, the *griot's* memory is giving way to written record. Even African millet is contrasted unfavourably with creole cuisine, and as the film ends the king kneels at a Catholic wayside shrine to remember Régina. Africa, reduced to a caricatural mad maroon, fades into a final explicit moralising: '...Il faut s'enrichir de la diversité préservée du monde. / Le monde n'est plus à conquérir. Il est à habiter'.

Historians and the informed public are less than confident of the value of this propagandist view of Béhanzin's 'conversion', which entails a reduced image of a sophisticated ruler, his campaigns and his court. Very little effort is made to explore the complexity of colonial power: governors fit neatly into a comic book stereotyping of *Bon/Mauvais Blanc*, Béhanzin's defeat is reported by an opponent far removed from the bloodthirsty *métis*, Colonel Dodds, of historical record.¹⁶

In cinematic terms, the film too often disappoints, though it should be remembered that this is a first feature length production for both director and scenarist, delayed and hampered by problems of financing. As Béhanzin, Delroy Lindo has great dignity and presence, but dubbing his voice by radical *cinéaste* Med Hondo necessarily makes his impact more ponderous, particularly as the director's television experience favours sustained exchanges in close-up. Robert Liensol as jailor is impressively able to suggest both initial scorn and growing sympathy for the 'roi-macaque', 'roi des Zoulous' he guards. The sketches of *fin de siècle* Martinican life: laundresses at the riverside, *ti-ponch* in an *ajoupa*, lack the period flavour which was a strong point of *La rue Cases-Nègres*.¹⁷ The climactic scenes amid the burning ashes of Saint-Pierre, Gotterdammerung of old Africa and death of love, are perhaps mainly redeemed by the beautiful lament sung by Joscelyne Béroard at the close.

The film was shown extensively at cultural centres in the Antilles (it was part funded by many official organisations), but the response both of critics and public, in France and the Caribbean, has been tepid. Few will feel comfortable at another example of Martinique represented by a charming *doudou* (France Zobda) in the arms of the visiting warrior, even if for once he is black. Although attempts are made to suggest her feisty teeth-kissing independence, active exercise of power is reserved for the French and marginally for the journalist (Jacky Alpha).

For the outsider, the film disappoints due to its simplifications and lack of cinematic verve, but for a local public it is perhaps too one-dimensional a reading of an episode which still arouses a deep ambivalence. Memories of the king and his family are still transmitted, his pride is proverbial. Not only the distance enforced by French guards separated Béhanzin from those he lived among, he is an iconic image isolated by his strangeness but also by the troubling challenge he presents to many Martinicans in their relation to African origins and to their past.¹⁸

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Notes

¹ See the references given by J.Lombard, 'The Kingdom of Dahomey', *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, D.Forde & P.M.Kaberry, eds. Oxford U.P., 1967, pp.91-2. A brief and positive account in Adu Boahen et al. *Topics in West African History*, Longman, 1986, 2nd edition, p.85 ff.

² David Ross, 'The autonomous Kingdom of Dahomey 1818-1894', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, U. of London 1967, p.315.

³ Royal prerogatives further specified in Lombard, p.84.

⁴ Cf. Bruce Chatwin's novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, filmed by Werner Herzog as *Cobra Verde*.

⁵ Melville Herkovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom*, Evanston: North Western U.P., 1967, 2 vols, based on research in 1931, contains many photos and details of Béhanzin's belated funeral rites. A photograph of Guézo's throne (d.1858) appears in V.Thompson & R.Adloff, *French West Africa*, New York, Greenwood, 1969.

⁶ Originally published in the revue *Acoma*, then as a Gallimard 'Poésie' volume with 2 other collections, 1983.

⁷ Note Beverley Ormerod, 'Discourse and Dispossession: Glissant's Image of contemporary Martinique', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 27 / 4, Dec.1981, pp.1-12, and references given in J.Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, Cambridge U.P., 1995, especially Chapter 5.

⁸ See Priska Degras, 'Name of the Fathers, History of the Name: Odonno as Memory', *World Literature Today*, 63 / 4, Autumn 1989, pp.613-19.

⁹ A further 'reader's guide' can be discerned in the 'histoire éclatée' of Anatolie, who recounts different fragments of the same story to each of his women, a story going back to his grandmother. Even some fragments of African language have survived the crossing (p.123).

¹⁰ Bézaudin (in the hilly hinterland of Sainte-Marie, north of Morne des Esses where Carib handicrafts are made), appears to be a byword for remoteness, a community where traditional ways persist. See Jean-Max Bernabé, Philippe Bourgade, Jean Terrine, *Où a-t-on pris que la nuit tombe*, Case Pilote, Editions L'Autre Mer, 1997. Both Béhanzin and Bézaudin variously appear with or without an accent.

¹¹ *Mercure de France*, 1992. Translated by Richard Philcox as *The Last of the African Kings*, University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

¹² Condé, in conversation with Françoise Pfaff, remarks on the presence of the king in 'l'imaginaire martiniquais' and the persistence of invented memories (*Entretiens*, Paris: Karthala, 1993, p.135 ff.). An informant of mine in her seventies (November 1996) also singled out the strong association of the villa in Bellevue with the king's presence and strolls nearby, cited fellow pupils of the son Ouanilo at the Lycée de Saint-Pierre, and especially her great-grandmother's claim to have seen the king walk out ceremonially with his wives and entourage. Born in 1856, she could well have been an eye-witness, although she did not leave Le François and the king made few visits (cf. abortive outing to Saint-Pierre). The same informant added that the subject of the king's exile was never mentioned by her teachers.

¹³ See 'Maryse Condé: l'écriture de l'Histoire', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 33 / 2, Summer 1993, pp.73-81.

¹⁴ 'Un Goncourt sur la Croisette: Patrick Chamoiseau a écrit le scénario de "Behanzin", une rencontre historique entre Africains et Antillais', *Le Monde*, 18.5.93, p.17.

¹⁵ 'L'exil de Béhanzin ou la négritude revisitée', *Antilla*, No. 625, 24.3.95, pp.28-31.

¹⁶ See critical comments of Salifou Koala, 'Entre négritude et créolité: l'exil de Béhanzin à la Martinique', *Espace caribbe*, No.2, 1995, pp.43-8. An exhibition of historical documents including photographs took place in February-March 1995. The title 'Béhanzin: L'exil d'un roi, 1894-1906' still liable to prolong the revealing misapprehension which associates him with the volcanic eruption.

¹⁷ Deslauriers worked as Palcy's assistant on this film, set in the 1930's and very well-received by local audiences.

¹⁸ Note remarks on the sometimes traumatic impact of research into family history in Annick Cojean, 'Histoire d'Honoré, esclave devenu citoyen', *Le Monde*, 23.4.98, p.12.

Telling Stories/Creating History: Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*

by Maeve MC CUSKER

It is axiomatic in Caribbean literary criticism that the linear, chronological and teleological processes of historiography are peculiarly Western conventions. Hegel's dismissal of Africa as an ahistorical void¹ due to its lack of a *written* History, by implication excludes the Caribbean more brutally. The obliteration of the native island populations, coupled with the cultural and linguistic dispossession of the Middle Passage, has created an even more difficult access to history than that of most postcolonial states. Faced with the desire to reclaim history in order to create a sense of communal identity, writers such as Edouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, and in the anglophone context Derek Walcott, have conceded the 'unrecoverableness' of the past. Given that their history is untraceable or unrecognisably distorted among the written records of the white coloniser, they have chosen rather to concentrate on the recreation of a collective memory. If the development of the realist novel has been seen to parallel that of objective and unitary historical discourse, then the baroque, magic realist and oralised narratives of the Caribbean constitute a means of deconstructing the exclusionary and restrictive models previously available. Equally, as I hope to argue in this paper, a novel such as Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*² can be considered to exemplify many of the principles of postmodernism in, for example, its questioning of any monolithic 'truth' or stable narrative perspective, its ludic disregard for narrative linearity and in its self-referential undermining of canonical History.

The ongoing debate surrounding the relationship between the supposedly Western discourse of postmodernism and that of postcolonialism is beyond the scope of this paper³. However, in their common concern with marginality, ambiguity, parody and intertextuality, it is clear that both theories intersect in significant aspects. It could even be argued that the discourse of postmodernism is, in fact, more pertinent to the French Caribbean than that of an over-readily applied postcolonial paradigm, into which the departmentalised and assimilated Martinique fits uneasily. Not only has Glissant's influential application of the distinction between the *racine* and the *rhizome* to the Caribbean reality been drawn from the postmodern theorists Deleuze and Guattari⁴, but also the specific discourse of *Créolité* emphasises such values as multiplicity and openness, denigrating universalism and the notion of pure origin. As Raphaël Confiant has stated,

Le terme «Créole» est donc éminemment moderne [...] et même post-moderne dans le sens où il signale l'émergence d'une nouvelle identité qu'on pourrait appeler «multiple» ou «mosaïque»...

Chamoiseau's Goncourt-winning novel *Texaco* is a work which spans one hundred and fifty years of Martinican history, and in which *les histoires* - the individual and often conflicting memories of the multitude of characters in the novel - intersect with and supplant the dominant *Histoire*. Through a close reading of the novel, I wish to consider the extent to which it can be read as a postmodern text, or to use the term preferred by Linda Hutcheon, as 'historiographic metafiction', a genre she defines as '[t]hose well known and popular novels which are both intensively self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages'⁶. In their theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs, 'these novels become the grounds for rethinking and reworking the past'⁷. *Texaco* does not deny that the past existed; it is, on the contrary, highly informative about the Martinican past and exact in its references to recorded historical events. However, throughout the novel the very possibility of our ever having absolute access to the 'truth' of that past is problematised.

In his theoretical and fictional writing, as well as in his interviews⁸, Patrick Chamoiseau displays an enduring obsession with the history of Martinique⁹. He adopts the distinction explored by Glissant in *Le Discours antillais*¹⁰ between *l'Histoire* and *l(es) histoire(s)*, a distinction which he reiterates like a mantra. *Texaco*'s closing section begins with an epigraph from this work: 'Parce que le temps historique fut stabilisé dans le néant, l'écrivain doit contribuer à rétablir sa chronologie tourmentée [...]', an extract which also appears in a footnote in *Eloge de la créolité*¹¹. Such signalled paratextual references are reinforced by the diegetic reflections of the characters in *Texaco*. Esternome, father of the heroine Marie Sophie, declares:

Oh Sophie ma doudoune, tu dis «l'Histoire» mais ça ne veut rien dire, il y a tellement de vies et tellement de destins, tellement de tracées pour faire notre seul chemin. Toi tu dis l'Histoire, moi je dis *les histoires*. Celle que tu crois tige-maîtresse de notre manioc n'est qu'une tige parmi d'autres... (p. 102).

Similarly, she recalls her ageing father:

recréant le pays au gré de sa mémoire et de ce qu'il savait (ou imaginait) des histoires que nous eûmes dessous l'Histoire des gouverneurs, des impératrices, des békés, et finalement des mulâtres (p. 136).¹²

His daughter absorbs and transmits the philosophy of her father, in much the same way as Chamoiseau has done with his literary forefather, declaring early in her narration that she will not 'refaire l'Histoire' but will describe instead 'dessous l'Histoire, les histoires dont aucun livre ne parle' (p. 45). Their parallel enterprise is underpinned by the comments of their respective audiences. Marie Sophie observes that her father 'n'avait jamais raconté son histoire de façon linéaire' (p. 221), just as the town planner, to whom the story of Texaco was first narrated, refers to 'le chaos de ses pauvres histoires' (p. 184), and Oiseau de Cham, the fictionalised narrator, observes at the end of the novel that 'L'Informatrice ne racontait rien de manière linéaire' (p. 425).

Linear and objective History is undermined both at the level of content and at the level of formal structure. The reader is positioned at a series of removes from the events recounted. Access to the 'true story' – which is of course, as *Texaco* shows, the ultimate fiction – is thus continually postponed through the 'Chinese box' narrators, who in Derridean fashion not only *defer*, but provide differing versions of, the 'truth'. *Texaco* is neither an omniscient third person account, nor a straightforward and unified first person narrative. Instead, Patrick Chamoiseau authors the narrative of his fictional alter-ego, 'Oiseau de Cham' / *le marqueur de paroles*, who has recorded and edited the oral testimony of Marie Sophie Laborieux (a testimony already given to the town planner and responsible for the salvation of Texaco), who had in her turn transcribed and translated (from Créole to French) her father's memoirs in the *cahiers* which continually interrupt the linearity of the text. In spite of her exhortation at the outset of the novel ('mais ne perdons pas le fil, et reprenons l'affaire maille par maille, avec si possible une maille avant l'autre'), and her expressed wish to avoid '*détours*', Marie Sophie continually loses the thread of her own story. Her chaotic and disjointed narration begins in 1985 with her meeting with the *marqueur de paroles*, and then reverts to 1823, as her paternal grandfather's story provides the chronological starting point for her epic story. Events surge quickly forward and then fall back into obscurity at her whim or according to the meanders of both her own and her father's recollections. The thread of her narration is interrupted not only by extracts from her *cahiers* and those of the town planner, but also with extended digressions, such as the 'Nouteka des mornes', the 'Paroles du vieux nègre de la Doum' and the 'Songeries d'Idoménée en petit aperçu'. The footnotes which pepper the text do not perform their usual explanatory function, but act

rather as a supplement to a story that seems to overflow its own boundaries (see pp. 33 and 128, for example).

As the elderly teller of the story of her ageing parents ('J'étais fille de vieillards'), Marie Sophie is a privileged source of orally transmitted memory, which she in turn has reluctantly inscribed in French in her notebooks¹³. She declares at the outset that her 'intelligence de la mémoire collective n'est que ma propre mémoire', and towards the end of the novel states that while her memory 'ne fut plus tellement bonne pour se rappeler hier', she has deliberately cultivated and perfected her long-term memory (p. 406). And yet the authority of Marie Sophie's account is questioned and undermined. Although christened 'L'Informatrice' – someone who possesses and transmits knowledge – by 'Oiseau de Cham', her memory is often defective. In the first section of the novel, 'Résurrection', she provides him with three meandering versions of the Christ's arrival, only to conclude, 'Et si c'est pas comme ça, ça n'a pas d'importance'. At the end of the novel, the *marqueur de paroles* states that '[il] lui arrivait, bien qu'elle me le cachât, d'avoir des trous de mémoire, et de se répéter, ou de se contredire' (p. 423). While the 'Informatrice' is the sole source of the *histoires* of Texaco, neither the *marqueur de paroles* nor the reader can take her entirely at her word, but are reminded instead of the provisionality and constructedness of her version of the past.

Inherent in the postmodern project is 'the challenging of certainty, the asking of questions, the revealing of fiction-making where we might once have accepted the existence of some absolute "truth"'¹⁴. The polysemic word *histoire* is, of course, particularly fertile, denoting not only history, but also a fictional story and even a lie or a fib ('raconter des histoires' means to pull someone's leg, for example). This ambiguity is exploited throughout a novel which weaves seamlessly together fact and fiction, the real and the fantastic. If Marie Sophie tends to lose the thread of her own story, her father is even further removed from Cartesian rationality, choosing to 'spin yarns' rather than to respect the monolithic and exclusionary ideal of 'truth':

Dans ce que je te dis là, il y a le presque-vrai, et le parfois-vrai, et le vrai à moitié. Dire une vie c'est ça, natter tout ça comme on tresse les courbes du bois-côtelettes pour lever une case. Et le vrai-vrai naît de cette tresse. Et puis, Sophie, *il ne faut pas avoir peur de mentir* (p. 139, my italics).

With characteristic matter-of-factness, Marie Sophie tends to shed doubt on the veracity of her father's version of events. At one point she speculates that he has 'un peu reconstruit ses souvenirs' (p. 65), and later illustrates how the multiple versions of his 'heroic' defence of Ninon from the *békés* varied according to his stage of drunkenness (p. 115). She entitles his fantastical

explanations for the disappearance of Ninotte 'Première baboule' and 'Deuxième baboule'. No fixed guarantee of meaning is possible, but multiple alternatives are offered. Thus, conventional notions of a unified, monolithic and objective truth are disregarded in favour of a more fluid and imaginative evocation of the past. As Man Ninotte observes in *Chemin-d'Ecole*, 'On ne ment que quand on raconte mal'¹⁵.

And yet *Texaco* exploits the conventions of historiography, claiming for itself a veracity that it simultaneously refutes by appealing to a reality outside of the textual boundaries. Both narrators seek to legitimize their own authority. Marie Sophie advises 'Oiseau de Cham' - and by implication her wider audience - to consult a newspaper for further details of one of the many attacks on *Texaco*: 'tu peux lire ça dans le journal *Justice*, celui des communistes, à une date de novembre 1950. Cherche ça et lis, tu vas voir' (p. 336). The *Marqueur de paroles* informs us that he was eventually permitted to bring along his tape recorder to 'compens[er] les trous de ma mémoire' (p. 423), bolstering and yet simultaneously casting doubt on his own reliability. In a ludic and teasing conclusion, he describes his painstaking repair and numbering of the notebooks, which he tells us are now stored in the Bibliothèque Schoelcher in Fort-de-France (and which have, in reality, been sought in vain by dozens of visitors to the library). On the closing page of the text, the *authorial* voice - rather than the by now familiar narratorial voice of 'Oiseau de Cham' / *le marqueur de paroles* - intrudes, naming and thanking the real inhabitants of *Texaco* (among them Serge Letchimy, 'dont les travaux d'urbanisme et la pensée ont nourri ces histoires'). Such a device might even be compared with the 19th century realism of a Balzac, for example, in its invocation of a documentary realism to reinforce the authenticity of the novel and to suggest its status as a chronicle of society. In recognisably postmodern fashion, the narrative uses and abuses, installs and then destabilises convention, self-consciously pointing to its own inherent paradoxes and provisionality.

Caribbean history is defined as much by its gaps and fissures as by its certainties. The blanks inscribed in the 'Repères chronologiques' at the birthdates of Esternome, Idoménee and Marie Sophie, for example, are a poignant absence from the official chronological record. They demonstrate the indifference towards slave life on the part of the white master, but insinuate also, perhaps, a quickly-lost conception of African time by those slaves, soon suppressed by the rhythm of the plantation. At other points, such gaps are established by the victims of the plantation system and deliberately accentuated, emphasising the traumatic nature of Caribbean history and the difficulties inherent in confronting it. Both Idoménee and Esternome refuse to

answer the young Marie Sophie's persistent questions about slavery. Esternome explicitly refuses to describe the *béké*-owner of the plantation into which he was born, claiming to know neither his name nor his history (Marie Sophie comments: 'sans doute par crainte qu'il ne se mette à hanter sa vieillesse', p. 58). Similarly, when he mentions the dungeon into which maroon slaves were thrown, Esternome entreats:

Permetts-moi de ne pas te décrire le cachot car tu comprends, Marie Sophie, disait mon Papa, il ne faut pas illustrer ces choses-là, afin de laisser à ceux qui les ont construites la charge totale de leur existence (p. 46).

Even to verbalise the existence of such horrors is to assume that language can convey their awfulness, and to afford them some degree of legitimacy. On one level, such refusals constitute another erasure of the black experience from the history which Marie Sophie is trying to claim. More significant, however, is that fact that Esternome *chooses* not to evoke such horrors, and thus assumes an authority over 'his story' which official versions of History would deny him. The long catalogue of black victimisation at the hands of white has already been established. If aspects of the slave past have been neglected or actively repressed by official histories of Martinique, Esternome here proposes his own counter-operation of selection and exclusion, concentrating on the vagaries of his love life, or on the importance of his encounter with the Mentô, rather than on the official chronology. The eruption of Mount Pelée - which in any case, as Esternome points out, has been well-documented by the existing records - is another event which defies the words available to describe it:

Là, mon Esternome ne voulait rien décrire. Il déposait le même silence qu'il cultivait sa vie durant sur les antans d'esclavage. Il voulait peut-être oublier ce qu'il avait vu en entrant dans l'En-ville. Il dut y réussir car même lorsqu'il le voulut, il ne put murmurer que des choses éparées, sans grand sens, mais aussi terribles qu'une bonne description (*Texaco*, p. 168, my italics).

The discrepancy between authorised and official histories in the Caribbean has instilled a scepticism of the truth-value and representativity of written records of the past. Esternome's evasion evokes more faithfully and more poignantly the unspeakable horror of the catastrophe than, for example, an account of the extent of the damage, the number of lives lost, or any of the other conventional representational modes of historiography could do. Through the eloquence of silence, essential absences are thus transformed into powerful presences. While History seeks to fill in the blanks of the past and to eradicate uncertainty and doubt, Esternome claims a quite different relationship to the

past, declaring, '[I] ne faut pas répondre à toutes les questions' (p. 64). It is a sentiment endorsed by Chamoiseau's fictional alter-ego, who, although keen to record the death of Esternome as described by his daughter, simultaneously hopes that Marie Sophie continues to refuse him permission, as, 'il faut lutter contre l'écriture: elle transforme en indécence, les indicibles de la parole' (p. 222).

As we have seen, the reclaiming of the *histoires* which underlie *l'Histoire* participates in postmodernism's questioning of the 'grands récits' which have posited a progressive and linear version of history. And yet on opening *Texaco* the reader is presented with what appears to be exactly such a linear chronicle of dates and 'important' events. The 'Repères chronologiques de nos élans pour conquérir la ville', begin with the arrival of the Caribs, the Arawaks and the Galibis on the island and conclude with the death of the heroine. The 'significant' dates of internal Martinican history (such as the eruption of Mount Pelée and the election of Aimé Césaire as mayor of Fort-de-France) are interspersed with what Glissant calls the 'absurde catalogue de l'histoire officielle'¹⁶, such as the arrival of Columbus and the details of the French war effort. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the *histoire* of Marie Sophie's family and of the establishment of *Texaco* are gradually interwoven into the chronicle, eventually displacing the 'master narrative' completely. Distinguished typographically by the use of italics - conferring an oral, disruptive and urgent impression as they infiltrate the familiar fixed points of official History - these interventions inscribe multiplicity at the heart of the narrative frame, and suggest that, for example, the installation of the petrol company on the future site of *Texaco* (1938) is of equal validity to the event which succeeds it: 'La France déclare la guerre à l'Allemagne'. Of particular interest are the categories into which the chronology is divided. Reminiscent of the broad periodisations of prehistory (Ice Age, Bronze Age etc.), time is divided cyclically according to the building materials used on the island: 'Temps de carbet et d'ajoupas', 'Temps de paille', 'Temps de bois-caisse', 'Temps de fibrociment' and 'Temps béton' (the absence of the preposition conferring a note of finality on the title of this ultimate section). Chamoiseau thus reclaims 'official time' in order to fashion the past according to a relevant model for Martinican society. By installing the conventions of historical representation, Chamoiseau contests them from within by proposing a non-hierarchical and inclusive model which accounts for both *la grande histoire* and *la petite histoire*.

One of the defining characteristics of historiographic metafiction is its focus on the 'the ex-centrics, the marginalised, the peripheral figures of fictional

history'¹⁷, in contrast with the microcosm of society and the essential stock types of humanity supposedly represented in the realist novel. Already in an earlier novel, Chamoiseau had declared his intention to focus on 'l'histoire des anonymes'¹⁸, and *Texaco* continues his exploration of the 'petites gens' of society. *Texaco* is situated outside the centre, in a peripheral and precarious zone, just as its inhabitants are the vulnerable Martinican underclass. The powerful *békés*, the upwardly mobile mulatto class, and even the maroon slave celebrated by Glissant as the only authentic Antillean hero, figure rarely in Chamoiseau's work. *Texaco* is the story of those deemed too insignificant to warrant attention in traditional historical analyses.

The foregrounding of such marginal characters is accompanied by the marginalisation of 'central' historical events and figures. The love story of Ninon and Esternome, for example, dominates the first third of the novel, displacing the momentous events which, somewhere in the background of the narrative, are paving the way for liberation. Historically significant occurrences are pushed aside, recounted second or third hand in indirect speech and only vaguely understood ('je ne sais pas ce que tu cries «Révolution»', p. 118; 'Il ne sut rien du débarquement du vieux roi Behanzin [...] il ne sut rien de cette révolte du sud', p. 165). Esternome's detachment from, and disinterest in, the important events of the past is a source of continual frustration to his daughter. When Schoelcher's proposals concerning the abolition of slavery are first mentioned to him, he can only think of Ninon. Marie Sophie comments acerbically:

C'est pourquoi j'ai toujours pensé qu'amour est maladie. Vivre une péroïde comme ça en ne songeant qu'au matériel d'une nègresclave relève pour moi d'une ruine cervicale due aux rhums trop sucés près des violons grinçants (p. 101).

While discussions about the forthcoming emancipation of slaves engulf Fort-de-France, 'lui mon fou d'Esternome, mon ababa de charpentier' spends his time fighting a rival for Ninon's affections, and while people celebrate the changing of Fort Royal's name to Fort-de-France, 'mon dingo débeillé traversait des ravines pour discuter de ses avantages sur un chabin tok-tok auprès d'une négresse illuminée . . . ' (p. 103). The turbulent post-emancipation era is defined by the details of Esternome's physical relationship with Ninon; we are told that 'ils restaient comme ça, hors du monde, gardant sur l'Histoire en passage l'oeil des boeufs en savane' (p. 124). This distancing or de-centring of the canonical events of *l'Histoire* is sustained throughout the account of the world wars. The First World War is described vaguely as 'une la-guerre':

A cette affaire d'Allemands, mon Esternome ne comprit jamais rien. Depuis Saint Pierre, il était comme décroché du monde. Ejecté de l'Histoire, il vivait ses histoires sans décoder les événements ainsi qu'il l'avait fait dans son temps de jeunesse (p. 209).

The Second World War is later introduced as 'rumeurs d'une guerre qui semblait rechercher un isalop nommé Hitler' (p. 237). As Hutcheon has argued, 'even the historical personages take on a different, particularized and ex-centric status'. The most significant aspect of Césaire's political rally is the fact that Marie Sophie and Esternome are so remote from it, arriving late, able to hear only through the loudspeakers, and unable to see (p. 276). Esternome concludes 'C'est un mulâtre'. De Gaulle's avidly anticipated arrival in Martinique is similarly characterised by disappointment (having prepared an elaborate feast for 'Papa de Gaulle' Marie Sophie is unable to approach him) and misunderstanding (as to whether the President of France marvelled at the extent to which the islanders were 'français' or 'foncés'). Again, she has to settle for the words transmitted from afar by the loudspeakers, and though she follows him on his walkabout through Fort-de-France, 'à chaque fois, il était ailleurs'. Like her father, in fact by implication like her fellow islanders, she is excluded from the so-called momentous historical events of Martinique, relegated to the margins both literally and metaphorically. Paradoxically, a novel like *Texaco* manages to question this centre/margin dichotomy, and if not to reverse it, at least to suggest an alternative perspective.

It does seem, then, that Jean François Lyotard's well-known formulation of the postmodern attitude as one of incredulity towards the 'grands récits'¹⁹, those 'wholesale, overarching, grandiose theories of explanation which absorb smaller, lower-order narratives'²⁰ describes the treatment of history in *Texaco*, and in fact conforms to the distinction made between *l'Histoire* and *les histoires*. The explicit problematisation of the notion of history, as we have seen, coupled with the complicated and fragmentary temporal structure of the novel and the multiple versions with which the reader is presented, challenge the certainty and authority with which realistic historical representation is imbued. Chamoiseau does not propose a 'counter history' representing the colonised's version of the events surrounding the colonial experience, a kind of riposte to the prevailing History. Such a strategy would serve only to confirm the unifying and monolithic tendencies of conventional historiography. Nor does he deny the existence of History, which does indeed impinge on the lives of his protagonists (Marie Sophie's eagerly awaited emigration to France is prevented by the war, for example). However, *Texaco* preserves its protean fluidity, working to multiply and disperse meanings rather than to fix or delimit

them, and refusing to allow oral forms of history to be eclipsed by written ones.

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Notes

¹ See Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*, Paris: Seuil, 1981, p. 132.

² Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992. All subsequent references will be to this edition of the text.

³ It is however worth noting that two of the principal texts considered in Hutcheon's study are authored by non-metropolitans: Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, and that the work of Toni Morrison is another frequent reference point. For a sharply-focussed analysis of the divergences and convergences between theorists of postcolonialism and postmodernism, see Obed Nkuzimana, 'Les stratégies postcoloniales et le roman francophone: débat théorique et prospective critique' in *Présence francophone* 50, 1997, pp. 7-26. A useful discussion of the issue from an anglophone perspective is Tim Parnell's 'Salman Rushdie: from colonial politics to postmodern poetics' in *Writing India, 1757-1900*, Ed. B. Moore-Gilbert. Manchester University Press, 1996, pp. 236-261.

⁴ See Edouard Glissant's *Poétique de la relation*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 23. In his discussion of the *racine* and the *rhizome* Glissant invokes Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Editions de minuit, 1980.

⁵ Raphaël Confiant, *Aimé Césaire: une traversée paradoxale du siècle*. Paris: Stock, 1994, p. 266.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988, p. 5.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See, for example, *Antilla* 557, October 1993, pp 25-31, 'Contre la mémoire et l'Histoire'; and the *Cahiers de l'Université de Perpignan*, (Société et littératures antillaises aujourd'hui: Actes de la rencontre de novembre 1994), p. 45. When I interviewed Chamoiseau in January 1998, it was a theme to which he continually returned.

⁹ Indeed, it is an obsession which has led Richard Burton to criticise both Chamoiseau and Confiant for 'l'optique essentiellement "nostalgique" ou mieux "rétrospective" ' of the Créolité movement, which he claims has neglected the reality of contemporary Martinican life. Richard Burton, *Le roman marron*, Paris: Karthala, 1997, p. 259.

¹⁰ Glissant, *Le discours antillais*. See in particular 'Histoire, histoires', pp. 129-161. It is perhaps worth noting that the words *histoire/Histoire* had been juxtaposed and debated before Glissant, notably by Valéry. See, for example, Michel Jarety, 'Valéry: l'Histoire, écriture d'une fiction'. *Poétique* 49, février 1982, pp. 71-82. Anticipating the conclusions reached generations later in the Caribbean, Valéry also comments that 'Histoire et Philosophie seront plus ou moins remplacées par l'étude des valeurs de la parole', p. 73 (italics in original).

¹¹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant. *Eloge de la créolité*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989, p. 63. Chamoiseau's *Chronique des sept misères* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986) also opens with an epigraph from *Le Discours antillais*: 'Les histoires lézardent l'Histoire...'

¹² *Texaco*, p. 136. This reflection is practically identical to an observation made by Glissant in *Le Discours antillais*, p. 139: '[L]'histoire officielle] de la Martinique a été conçue à partir de la liste des découvreurs et des gouverneurs de ce pays, sans compter les souveraines... '.

¹³ See *Texaco*, pp. 352-4, for an oft-quoted passage in which Marie Sophie compares the translation and the transcription of Créole into French to death itself.

¹⁴ Hutcheon, *Ibid*, p. 48.

¹⁵ Patrick Chamoiseau, *Chemin-d'Ecole*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 139.

¹⁶ Glissant, *Ibid*, p. 157.

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *Ibid*, p. 114.

¹⁸ *Chronique des sept misères*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Paris: Editions de minuit, 1979, p. 7.

²⁰ Johnnie Gratton, 'Postmodern French fiction: theory and practice' in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel*, Ed. Tim Unwin, C.U.P, pp 242-260, p. 246.

Writing a History of Resistance: Sembene's Conception of the 'Griot' in *Véhi-Ciosane*

by David MURPHY

The modern African writer is often compared to the traditional *griot*, the purpose of such a comparison usually being to link the contemporary African writer to a traditional form of African storytelling. As a result, the writer's work is given the stamp of that most problematic of concepts, 'authenticity'. For example, the well known Nigerian critic, Chinweizu, uses the image of the *griot* to posit an 'authentic' form of African storytelling in his anthology of African literatures, *Voices from twentieth-century Africa: griots and towncriers*, in which he declares that the *griot* acts as 'traditional Africa's academy of the humanities'.¹ This paper will investigate the use made of the figure of the *griot* by the Senegalese writer and filmmaker, Ousmane Sembene, in his story, *Véhi-Ciosane* (1966). Effectively, it will be argued that, in Sembene's story, the question of which memory and which history the *griot* preserves is far more problematic than Chinweizu's vision allows.

Before turning to *Véhi-Ciosane*, it would be useful to look at an oft-cited quotation from the 'avertissement de l'auteur' at the beginning of Sembene's 1963 novel, *L'Harmattan*, in which he sets out his vision of the role of the African writer, explicitly linking the modern novelist with the traditional storyteller:

Je ne fais pas la théorie du roman africain. Je me souviens pourtant que jadis, dans cette Afrique qui passe pour classique, le griot était non seulement l'élément dynamique de sa tribu, clan, village, mais aussi le témoin patent de chaque événement. C'est lui qui enregistrait, déposait devant tous, sous l'arbre du palabre, les faits et gestes de chacun. La conception de mon travail découle de cet enseignement: rester au plus près du réel et du peuple.²

In this passage, Sembene links the standard concerns of the realist writer with the traditional social function of the *griot*. This conception of the artist as someone who holds a mirror up to his society is not presented as something new to Africa but rather as the continuation of a long tradition which has been maintained by the *griot* (or *gewel*, as the *griot* is alternatively known). Effectively, Sembene is here seeking to link his own radical, Marxist ideas to elements of the African past. In invoking this past, he ironically distances himself from the sentimental view of African history and its *classical* pre-

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colonial era. Sembene's identification is with the *griot* who he claims to have been the chief dynamic element in the traditional African village. In fact, in *Véhi-Ciosane*, Sembene presents the *griot* as the upholder of truth and justice in the face of moral and political corruption. But just how valid are these assertions about the role of the *griot* in African society?

A completely different picture of the *griot* is to be found in Ousmane Socé's *Karim* where *griots* are presented as being not quite as high-minded as Sembene would have us believe.³ Far from being the bearers of the truth, they are portrayed as hypocrites who simply sing the praises of the highest bidder. A similar image is to be found in Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* where Ramatoulaye's *griote* is shown to be constantly on the outlook for money-spinning opportunities.⁴ Even in Sembene's work, there exists equally negative images of the *griot*. In his film, *Borom Sarret*, a lowly cart driver is persuaded to part with his hard-earned money by a passing *griot* who sings the praises of the cart driver's family line in front of an admiring crowd.

As is often the case with such polarised views, a more balanced picture can be said to lie somewhere between these two poles of high-minded artist and low-minded hypocrite. The *griot* has played a role in many African societies (although not all, as is often believed) but I would here like to examine his/her position within Wolof society as that is the society which Sembene principally deals with in his work. Historically, Wolof society was made up of a complex structure of castes and orders.⁵ Those of the high caste are called the *géér* while those of the lower caste are called the *ñeeño*, and it is to this latter caste that the *griot* belongs. One's name and one's trade are all the signs necessary for one to be recognised as being of high or low caste. Although many of the structures of Wolof society have undergone profound changes, particularly in the period since independence, this notion of a higher and a lower caste still persists, with all its inherent social prejudices (it remains socially unacceptable for people of different caste to marry each other).⁶ In fact, the current Senegalese Prime Minister, Habib Thiam, is a *ñeeño*, and the malicious story in Senegal goes that the Senegalese public accept a *casté* as the second-highest official in the land simply because they see the Prime Minister as the President's *boy*.

Therefore, being born into a family of *ñeeño*, one is inheriting a whole series of social conventions and restrictions. This is particularly true for the *griot* who has always occupied an ambiguous position within Wolof society. Charged with the important task of preserving the myths and values of that society by means of the oral tradition, the *griot* is nonetheless looked down

upon as a flatterer and a courtesan: 'les griots sont enfermés dans leur caste, inférieure à celle des autres *ñeeño*, à cause de leur fonction méprisée.'⁷

In many ways, the *griot* resembles the Renaissance artist, forced to seek patronage from a wealthy noble in order to pursue his work. In the modern period, many griots have attempted to find success in the musical field by writing songs about the most powerful Senegalese marabouts in the hope of gaining some financial recompense from the objects of their praise.⁸ However, this dependence of the *griot* on the purse-strings of the wealthy and powerful should not be taken as proof positive that they are simply lackeys to their paymasters. The critic, Mbye Boubacar Cham, has brilliantly described the symbiotic relationship between the *griot* and his 'master':

The 'gewel' or 'griot' is something of a paradox in Wolof society. He is stigmatized socially because of his profession (the code of noble conduct despises loudness), yet it is this same profession that accords him one of the most important and, indeed, influential positions within Wolof political as well as social circles of power, prestige and wealth. He is socially stigmatized precisely because of his vocation, yet it is this same profession that grants him access to and influence over supposedly social and political superiors who, because of their need to maintain and live up to certain fundamental ideals of their caste or class code of conduct, must, of necessity, retain the services of a *gewel*. The latter's control over the word and over historical and social knowledge places him in a relationship of mutual dependency with social superiors. He needs their patronage as much as they need his services as artist, communicator, teacher and diplomat. Hence the *gewel*'s own sense of high status, which counters the other socially-defined low caste.⁹

Essentially, the *griot* appears to have been used as a safety-valve for Wolof society. As a professional manipulator of language, he/she was permitted to say things which 'respectable' people could not. The oral tradition is still well-respected in Senegal, and the stories, songs and proverbs which constitute the *griot*'s repertoire are seen to be of direct relevance to people's everyday lives (although the influence of television and cinema, combined with the breaking up of rural society, is beginning to take its toll). It is this sense of the *griot* as guardian of a set of moral values which Sembene taps into in *Véhi-Ciosane* and it is to this story which I will now turn.¹⁰

The central figure of the story is the *griot* Déthyè Law (and, in a lesser role, his wife Gnagna Guissé). In the European literary tradition, the position of a writer or artist as the central character of a work of fiction has long been used to form a reflection on the very art of writing itself, and I believe that this is precisely what Sembene is inviting us to do in his story. Sembene writes about a storyteller, a man whose role is to maintain the African oral tradition, and,

consequently, the values of a whole society. The story is made up in a large part by a series of *palabres* between the men of the village. These debates are more like chess games, or rather, games of *yothe* (the game played by two of the more independently minded members of the group), as the men speak in a roundabout fashion of the important issues facing their village, chiefly the case of incest between Guibril Guedj Diob and his daughter, Khar. It is Déthyè Law who manages to tease out the truth behind these word-games, to create meaning from the minefield of insinuation and suggestion which make up the *palabres*. As Déthyè Law himself puts it at one point: 'je sais la signification des paroles.'¹¹

Writing at the beginning of a new era for Africa, Sembene invests the traditional *griot* with exactly the sense of justice and integrity which he places at the heart of his own fiction. In this way, Sembene is, in effect, defining himself as a *griot* for contemporary Africa. Santhiu-Niaye, the village where the events of the story take place, is a small, isolated village which is on its last legs, as its people drift away towards the cities. As one era closes and a new one begins, Sembene declares that society needs its storytellers to remind it of its values, and to give expression to the sense of confusion which people feel in such a period of rapid change.

In fact, the urban world presented to us in *Le Mandat*, the story which accompanies *Véhi-Ciosane*, can be seen as an illustration of what happens when a traditional, village-based society is in the process of being transformed into a modern, urban society. As the bonds which had previously joined the community together are slowly broken down, the sole value which remains is money. People no longer trust one another, and language becomes synonymous with deceit and lies. However, unlike *Véhi-Ciosane*, there is no *griot* to create meaning out of this confusion. Indeed, the only *griot* we come across in the story is an impostor, as the 'trickster' figure, Gorgui Maïssa proclaims at great length on the proud lineage of a young man whose name he has simply overheard while waiting behind him in a queue. From the noble bearer of the truth in *Véhi-Ciosane*, the *griot* and his art have become just another means of fooling people into parting with their money. In *Le Mandat*, Sembene presents a society with no-one to uphold its values or tell its story, except, of course, that in telling this story, Sembene is fulfilling the role of the *griot*. A new society gives birth to a new type of storyteller.

The narrative style of both *Véhi-Ciosane* and *Le Mandat* is very much in keeping with the style of the short stories in *Voltaïque* (1962). In place of the grand narratives of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) and *L'Harmattan* (1963) there is a far more ironic and elusive narratorial voice which hints at things

rather than stating them straight out. In many ways, this narrative voice imitates the voice of the *griot* in its use of proverbs, and its direct addresses to the reader, recreating a bond between the storyteller and his audience. This style is clearly seen, even in the longish introductory section of the story. The reader is presented with what seems to be a proverb, which is used later on in the main body of the text (p.29):

Il naît parfois dans les plus simples familles, des plus humbles communautés, un enfant qui, en grandissant, élève son nom, le nom de son père, de sa mère, de toute sa famille, de sa communauté, de sa tribu; plus encore par ses travaux, il ennoblit l'HOMME.
Plus fréquemment vient au monde, dans les communautés de castes dites supérieures, de passé glorieux, un enfant qui, par sa conduite, ternit tout l'héritage de son passé, blesse l'honnête HOMME de passage, éclabousse même la dignité de l'individu diambur-diambur [i.e. a member of the noble order of Wolof society, not necessarily a *géér*]. (VC, p.13)

This passage constitutes something of a resume of the events of the story; the lowly *griot* who stands up for the truth, and the respected nobleman who commits incest with his daughter. The reader is presented with the moral of the story before it has even begun, a ploy which is in keeping with oral tradition.

The most important section of the introduction is the final one where Sembene addresses the reader directly. He presents the story as a true one which people wanted to be kept quiet. Once again, as with many of the stories in *Voltaïque*, we are presented with a story based around the notion of silence.¹² Sembene uses a tale of incest, perhaps the most vilified crime in all societies (especially when it concerns father and daughter), to look at the breakdown of the traditional African way of life. In the face of the arguments of Negritude and their sentimental glorification of all things African, Sembene invites Africans to make their judgements independently of questions of colour: 'Quand cesserons-nous de recevoir, d'approuver nos conduites, non en fonction de Notre Moi d'Homme, mais de la couleur des autres' (VC, p.15). Sembene sets up his tale as an investigation into the morality of his age, examining the dark corners of his society which the discourse of Negritude wishes to be overlooked, and presenting himself as the narrator of a tale which would otherwise not be told. He rejects the facade of racial and national unity and chooses instead to concentrate on the social conflicts ignored by the discourses of Negritude and nationalism. In the characters of Khar and the child born of her incestuous relationship with her father, Sembene sees hope for a better future, because telling their story is the first step on the road to rectifying the ills in African society which have brought about their problems.

In Sembene's words: 'c'est des tares d'un vieux monde, condamné, que naîtra ce monde nouveau tant attendu, tant rêvé' (VC, p.17). In the process of creating a new society, the act of storytelling, giving voice to hidden conflicts within that society, is shown to be of primary importance.

The notion of silence is put across in the very location of the story. The village is situated in the *niaye*, a barren, sandy region which runs northwards from Dakar to Saint-Louis. A strip of land between the coast and the interior, the *niaye* forms a world apart: it is, in a sense, a no-man's land, an atopia, unfit for human habitation. The village of Santhiu-Niaye is shown to be slowly dying, bled of its young people and retreating further and further into an entrenched fatalism. The villages live in the same environment, but are separated from one another in so many ways: 'Les cycles des saisons suivaient leurs cours. La singulière nature du niaye soudait et divisait les gens' (VC, p.25). It is these previously unvoiced differences which will come to the surface in the course of the story.

The *griot*, Déthyè Law, provides the main voice of resistance throughout the story and the scene of his defiant stand against the corruption of those in authority is the village square, where the men meet for their *palabres*. Effectively, what takes place at these meetings is a power struggle to see who will take control of Santhiu-Niaye, after the disgrace and subsequent murder of Guibril Guedj Diob. These debates act as a contest for authority in the village. Other events outside the *palabre* play a vital role in the quest for power by Medoune Diob, Guibril's brother, but the *palabre* is the site where one gains control over the language of the villagers. Control of language becomes a vital element in the control of power: to hold power, Medoune must silence the dissenting voices and prove himself to be the representative of the *true* values of African tradition.

In the key debate over the punishment which should be meted out to Guibril Guedj Diob, Medoune Diob carries out the same policy of dissimulation which characterises all the other, smaller rows which take place during the *palabres*. Medoune Diob wants his brother to be executed so that he can inherit his position as village chief, but he cannot declare this out straight, so he is forced to seek legitimacy for this punishment in the *adda*, or traditions of the village. However, Déthyè Law sees right through Medoune Diob's arguments. Refusing to be dismissed as a *casté*, Déthyè Law launches into a defence of his role as *griot*, and criticises the lack of true nobility in those who proclaim themselves to be *guelwaar* (i.e. noblemen) in these modern times:

Je demande pardon à l'assemblée. Je sais ma place dans notre communauté. Une chose est pourtant vraie. Lorsqu'il s'agit de dire la vérité, il n'y a pas de nawlé [i.e. classes]. On connaît le nombre de gens de ma caste assassinés pour le triomphe de la vérité. Vrai que Guibril Guedj Diob mérite la mort. C'était la règle de nos pères, nos grands-parents, lorsque l'essence de la noblesse n'était pas exhibition, mais conduite quotidienne. Pour des faits et des actes moindres que celui qui fait l'objet du palabre d'aujourd'hui, on a encore en mémoire les noms de ceux qui ont mis fin à leur vie. C'étaient des guélewar, ceux dont mon père et son père chantaient les louanges, non pour plaire, mais plutôt pour écrire, imprimer en nous le sens du devoir et de la dignité de l'homme. Aujourd'hui, cette conduite n'est plus. Mais la vérité, elle, elle est de tous les temps et le sera même après nous. (VC, p.69)

Guibril Guedj Diob lacks nobility in not taking his own life over his actions, but Medoune Diob is no better in seeking his brother's life so that he can claim his title. Déthyè Law, whose role it is to decipher the meaning of words, recognises that Medoune Diob's cloaking himself in the respectability of tradition and his noble birth is just a ploy in his quest for power, and he refuses to go along with it:

Notre manque de discernement de la vérité ne provient pas de nos esprits, plutôt du trop grand honneur qu'on accorde à la naissance, à la fortune et aussi—parfois—au manque de courage de s'extérioriser. Entre l'homme et Yallah, j'opte pour Yallah. Entre Yallah et la Vérité, je suis pour la vérité. Medoune Diob a autre chose derrière la tête. (VC, p.73)

The truth is argued to be the ultimate value for the *griot*, above both God and Man.

Despite losing the debate, Medoune Diob has Guibril Guedj Diob secretly killed by his son, Tanor. It seems, at first, that this *coup de village* has worked but, more importantly, he is to lose out in his fight for authority in the *palabre* of the village-square. Déthyè Law claims that he is leaving the village for good which finally stings the independently-minded villagers into action and they exclude Medoune Diob from their group. Outside of the *palabre*, where village opinion is formed, Medoune Diob's power simply evaporates. Now that the secular, liberal forces have taken control, there is some hope for the village. Perhaps the road which is to be built across the *niaye* will finally stem the flow of villagers from Santhiu-Niaye (as with the railway line in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, the road is that which will physically and metaphorically link the village to the rest of the nation: Santhiu-Niaye can no longer exist in isolation). Déthyè Law's vision of honesty, truth and equality has won the day.

The story ends in something of a fable-like style. The narrator asks the reader not to ask any question of the villagers if ever they go to Santhiu-Niaye. There

is a sense that the telling of this story is a sort of exorcism, and that the pain of past events should now be forgotten. Sembene has told this tale and it is now up to the characters to create something new: 'Cette histoire n'eut pas d'autre fin: c'était une page dans leur vie. Une nouvelle commence, qui dépend d'eux' (VC, p.109). In the final images of the story, we see Khar and her baby begin their trek towards the city. The child's name, Véhi-Ciosane Ngoné War Thiamdum (which is explained for us in the French translation of the story's title as 'Blanche-Genèse') is highly resonant. It could be seen to refer to the whiteness/blankness of the *niaye*. Equally, it could be taken to mean that she is a child born of the 'white', colonial era. Whichever it is (perhaps both), a new beginning is what is suggested. Through the articulation of the ills of his society, Sembene seeks to make public that which was previously silent in order to begin the process of constructing a discourse of resistance which may eventually lead to change. Cast in the role of the modern-day *griot*, he presents himself as the defender of the values of his people. Rejecting what he considers to be the self-serving platitudes of the discourses of Negritude and nationalism, Sembene sets his own Marxist agenda and declares that he will write the history of those who are marginalised and oppressed within his society.

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Notes

¹ Chinweizu, *Voices from twentieth-century Africa: griots and towncriers*, London: Faber, 1988, p.xxxiv. Anthère Nzbatsinda makes similar claims about the role of the *griot*, and, more generally, the artist, in Sembene's work in an article entitled, 'La figure de l'artiste dans le récit d'Ousmane Sembène', *Etudes Françaises*, 31, 1 (été 1995), 51-60. Since I delivered this paper in April 1997, another article by Nzbatsinda has appeared which focuses solely on the figure of the *griot* in Sembene's work: 'Le Griot dans le récit d'Ousmane Sembène: entre la rupture et la continuité d'une représentation de la parole africaine', *The French Review*, 70, 6 (May 1997), 865-72. As in the work of Chinweizu, the *griot* is simply described as the guardian of tradition with no discussion of the questions of the *griot*'s low social caste, his/her financial dependency on the nobility, etc.

² Ousmane Sembene, *L'Harmattan*, 1963; Paris: Présence Africaine, 1980, p.9.

³ Ousmane Socé Diop, *Karim*, Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1948.

⁴ Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre*, Paris: Présence Africaine, 1981.

⁵ For a comprehensive study of the structures within Wolof society, see Abdoulaye-Bara Diop's *La Société wolof: tradition et changement, les systèmes d'inégalité et de domination*, Paris: Karthala, 1981.

⁶ Similar problems of caste are to be found in other West African societies. Christopher L. Miller discusses the complex status of the *griot* within Mande society in his *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp.79-87.

⁷ Abdoulaye-Bara Diop, *La Société wolof*, p.59.

⁸ The Senegalese historian, Mamadou Diouf, describes how the current president of Senegal, Abdou Diouf, has made use of *griots* during official ceremonies and also on television in order to present his political authority as deriving from, and being sanctioned by, the values of 'traditional' Africa. In return for this political favour, the Comité National des Griots pour le soutien à l'Action du Président Abdou Diouf, CONAGRISPRAD, was founded in 1983. See Mamadou Diouf, 'Représentations historiques et légitimités politiques au Sénégal (1960-1987)', *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* [Paris], 34 (1989), 19, 22.

⁹ Mbye Boubacar Cham, 'Ousmane Sembene and the Aesthetics of African Oral Traditions', *Africana Journal*, 13, 1-4 (1982), 25.

¹⁰ This conception of the *griot*'s role in society is nicely summed up in Bernard Dadié's 'Le rôle de la légende dans la culture populaire des Noirs d'Afrique', *Présence africaine*, 14-15 (juin-sept. 1957), 165: 'L'Afrique Noire, faute d'écriture, a en effet cristallisé sa sagesse dans sa littérature orale. Et chaque conteur, chaînon ininterrompu d'un long passé, essaime chaque soir la sagesse des Anciens. Il la confie à ceux qui veulent en profiter et au vent qui l'emportera par le monde, car la sagesse n'est pas un bien que l'on conserve pour soi seul. Et c'est se survivre que de dispenser sa sagesse.' However, despite Dadié's impassioned praise of the African *conteur*, it should be noted that the social status of the *griot* is once again ignored.

¹¹ Ousmane Sembene, *Le Mandat* précédé de *Véhi-Ciosane*, Paris: Présence africaine, 1966, p.69. Hereafter referred to simply as VC.

¹² The problematisation of the notion of storytelling in *Voltaïque* is examined in my article, 'The "architecture secrète" of *Voltaïque*', in *Black Accents: Writing in French from Africa, Mauritius and the Caribbean*, ed. by J. P. Little & Roger Little, London: Grant & Cutler, 1997, pp.157-69.

'Speaking up': Alternative Historical Discourses in Ousmane Sembène's *Le dernier de l'Empire*

by Shona POTTS

*Le dernier de l'Empire*¹ is the chronicle of six days of constitutional crisis in a fictional African government which has been precipitated by the sudden, inexplicable disappearance of the country's pro-French president, Léon Mignane. The novel examines the personal rivalries which are unleashed by the sudden loss of a unifying figurehead and the resulting power vacuum which brings to light the corruption, abuse of power and continued reliance upon European aid which have dogged African governments since independence.² Only at the end of the novel do we learn the reason for Mignane's disappearance - a *coup d'état* initiated by the president himself which backfires when the military turns against him, imprisoning him and assuming power before exiling Mignane to France.

In an interview with Sada Niang,³ Ousmane Sembène acknowledges explicitly that the novel was inspired by the unprecedented voluntary retiral in 1981 of Léopold Senghor, president of Senegal since independence, who unexpectedly stood down in favour of his prime minister of the previous decade, Abdou Diouf.⁴ *Le dernier de l'Empire* is thus identified by Peter Hawkins as 'a thinly disguised piece of satirical political fiction, a *roman-à-clef* in which most of the main characters are recognizable...'.⁵ For Hawkins, the character of Léon Mignane represents no less than Senghor himself and Daouda, the novel's young technocrat prime minister-cum-interim president is clearly a portrait of Abdou Diouf. In the first section of this study, I will examine the way in which Sembène problematises the nature of historical writing, foregrounding the complex relationship between authorship, authority and power. I will then demonstrate that *Le dernier de l'Empire* is a narrative which traces the search for legitimation: historical, discursive and political.

Problematising history: questions of authority and legitimacy

Despite the obvious close correlation between historical reality and fictional narrative, I would argue that dismissal of *Le dernier de l'Empire* as a straightforward political satire fails to do justice to the complexities of Ousmane Sembène's writing. What interests me in *Le dernier de l'Empire* is the way in which the gap in the narrative created by the 'disappearance' of Léon Mignane allows interplay between the discourses of historical fact and narrative fiction, opening up a space for the proliferation of alternative voices

and discourses to the existing monologic, unifying discourse of authority and power. The issue of legitimacy is central at this period of re-evaluation of African history in which the discourse of glorious independence has been demystified after some two decades of socio-economic problems and, in much of Africa, political instability. For Ousmane Sembène, it seems, the rise of a second generation of African leaders requires the construction of a new national narrative which will replace the idealised version of African history which was central to the independence struggle. In its place, an authentic collective memory needs to be established. It is around the recuperation of a collective memory suppressed in the colonial and neo-colonial eras that the issues of authority, authorship and legitimacy circulate, foregrounding the relationship between individual and national history and problematising the monolithic identity of the nation state, highlighting 'the crisis of authority experienced by the nation as a whole'.⁶ Ousmane Sembène is particularly concerned with the manipulative nature of the rhetoric employed by the ruling authorities in postcolonial Africa. While a commitment to truth, openness and justice is claimed to underpin state discourse, that rhetoric is revealed to be self-serving, acting to reinforce the ideology of the state and suppress the dissemination of potentially subversive discourses. As Terry Eagleton explains:

Discourses, sign systems and signifying practices of all kinds, from film and television to fiction and the languages of natural science, produce effects, shape forms of consciousness and unconsciousness which are closely related to the maintenance or transformation of our existing systems of power.... Indeed, 'ideology' can be taken to indicate no more than this connection - the link or nexus between discourses and power.⁷

Power therefore lies with the discourse-controlling authority and what interests me here is the way in which authors such as Ousmane Sembène lay bare the strategies of power and call into question the legitimacy of meaning in language.

A close reading of the relationship between authority and authorship in *Le dernier de l'Empire* allows us to unpack the association of rhetoric and power in the novel. According to Fiona Robertson: '[f]rame narratives and other formal paratexts... are exercises of authorial control and tests of competing narratorial and historiographical authorities'.⁸ In *Le dernier de l'Empire*'s 'Avertissement de l'auteur' Ousmane Sembène challenges belief in authorial authority, disrupting the compact between author and reader and denying the possibility of as much as a trace of historical reference in the 'fictional' narrative which follows.

Ce présent ouvrage ne veut être pris pour autre chose qu'un travail d'imagination./.... Je ne pardonnerai (jamais) à une lectrice, un lecteur, toute comparaison, toute allusion, même furtive entre 'ces personnages inventés' et nos vaillants concitoyens, dévoués à notre avenir jusqu'à leur mort (d'une manière ou d'une autre). Et n'hésiterai pas à recourir à nos lois (qui sont justes, équitables) (DE:6).

The hyperbolic tone of denial of the *avertissement* is clearly ironic, asserting the novel's roots in the reality which it claims to deny. The bracketed interjections in particular foreground the incongruity of Sembène's exaggerated statements, encouraging the reader to conclude that the author means quite the opposite of all that he asserts. Even before the reader has reached the main body of the text, Sembène has called into question the nature of the 'historical' novel and his own status as a source of authority for the text he has written.

Authorship and narrative voice continue to be problematised throughout the novel. Although ostensibly a narrative which deals with six days in the life of a fictionalised government, signalled by the use of explicit temporal markers: ('Vendredi 8h 42' (DE:29); 'Samedi/midi trente huit' (DE:219)) and told by an unidentified, omniscient narrator, there is fluctuation between past and present and the stability of the narrative voice is undermined as Sembène calls into question the narration of history and its relationship with fiction. By means of a series of flashbacks and remembrances, Sembène's novel traces the (fictionalised) history of the socio-political situation in Senegal from the election of Pascal Wellé, in 1914 (a satire of Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy to the French National Assembly), the disillusionment of the first world war, independence, the rule of Léon Mignane (Léopold Senghor) and the coming to power of the second generation of African leaders. Historical fact and narrative fiction are tightly woven together as the novel ironically reflects on actual events. But just who is responsible for the narration of this historical background? The interjections continue, taking on a pedantic quality with unnecessary repetition (for example we are told on both pages 23 and 59 that General Wade is Mignane's defence minister) and explanations necessary for a non-African audience. Very occasionally, the narrative is personalised, but still with no revelation of the author's identity despite the use of the first-person pronoun:

Ma tante, la langue la plus venimeuse et la plus exercée de la contrée, déclarait.... (DE:105).
Soit qu'elle eût peur de ce qu'elle avait à dire (ce dont je doute), soit pour ne pas contredire son homme.... (DE:241, my italics).

At the novel's conclusion, the question of authorship is raised once again and the distinction between fiction and historical fact is again collapsed as *Le dernier de l'Empire* is revealed to be the name of the autobiography which the fictional character of elder statesman Cheikh Tidiane Sall plans to write in his retirement. Who, then, is the author of the narrative we have just read? To whom does the title of the narrative refer? Just who is 'the last of the Empire': Cheikh Tidiane Sall; Léon Mignane, the obsessive francophile; Sembène...?

As Cheikh Tidiane Sall and his wife gather together information to be included in the autobiography, history is demonstrated to be not only the written documentation of facts and figures but an accumulation of a variety of texts: photographs, old newspaper articles, souvenirs, memories from which a selection of material must be made. As we learn in the novel: 'La vie d'un homme est faite d'emménagement de choses futiles' (DE:335). This process of sifting and selecting is essential to the writing of any narrative. According to Robert Holton: 'acts of narrative necessarily exclude as well as include information; only by virtue of exclusion can the included be organised into any comprehensive order'.⁹ The organisation of material in order for narration (historical or fictional) to take place requires the elimination of elements of the narrative we wish to relate. The all-encompassing nature of history is perforce illusory. Each author attempts to convince us that theirs is the definitive, authoritative version. In Sembène's novel, as in every narrative, each voice seeks legitimisation. In the absence of Léon Mignane and the freedom granted by his own retirement from government, Cheikh Tidiane Sall re-interprets and reappropriates the events of his life, becoming aware for the first time that although he himself began the movement for recognition of indigenous rights which was to lead ultimately to independence, Léon Mignane 'lui ravira la direction des opérations dont il était l'initiateur' (DE:54).

Le survol de sa vie en ce vendredi matin lui dévoila les faiblesses de son caractère... Il ressentait de cruelles et profondes morsures à ces souvenirs. Une houle souterraine de limons amers charriait en lui des regrets... / De 1914 à ce jour, il n'avait été qu'un tronc flottant, servant à aider les autres à traverser la barre (DE:55).

Léon Mignane's absence allows alternative discourses to be heard as the version of history promoted by the central authorities is challenged. Again, according to Robert Holton:

The trace of the excluded, then, may remain within the borders of the narrative although in a transformed or misrecognized form which

enables the narration itself to proceed.... Narrative accounts of the past... can be interrogated like palimpsests for traces of the competing (but excluded) narratives which remain at some level embedded.¹⁰

One narrative which is significant in its explicit absence from the novel, yet underlying presence throughout the text, is that of the chauffeur who dies when Léon Mignane disappears. The chauffeur's narrative has no legitimacy in its own right but is appropriated by the new discourses of authority which rise up in Mignane's absence. Home Affairs minister, Corréa, is responsible for finding "comment dévier, orienter les esprits, en les accrochant à un fait secondaire", manipulating the information contained in the official press release in order to detract attention from Mignane's absence from the public scene (DE:149). In this way, Corréa fabricates an authenticating narrative which seeks to focus public attention on the issues of law and order: 'J'ai été inspiré cette nuit. Tout est réglé.... Le chauffeur a été attaqué par des voyous. Le médecin légiste a délivré un certificat' (DE:149-150). Corréa's narrative is thus granted textual legitimization in the form of a medical certificate. The chauffeur's funeral serves the government as an ideological weapon. Siin, the chauffeur, is denied any individual identity and is marginalised in death as in life as his individual narrative is appropriated by the government's *service de psychologie* and incorporated into the official discourse of the nation state.

Les funérailles du chauffeur Siin dépassèrent en ampleur tout ce que le service psychologique avait prévu..../ Anonyme de son vivant, illustre dans la mort, le conducteur Siin était devenu martyr, victime des temps modernes. /On accusait, condamnait, la jeunesse oisive, parasitaire, débauchée, perversie, sans morale. /.... Dans la soirée de ce samedi, une table ronde, réunira un commissaire de police, un représentant de la Gendarmerie, un juriste, un sociologue, une avocate, deux Imans, pour débattre de la recrudescence du banditisme..../ L'agression dont avait été victime Siin servirait de base aux débats.... (DE:224-226).

The media is the new voice of legitimization and authority in urban Africa, providing a link between the public at large and the government authorities. In Sembène's narrative, during the absence of Léon Mignane, journalism is a discourse whose influence cannot be ignored. Cabinet ministers hold regular press conferences in a vain attempt to allay public fears aroused by the president's non-appearance. While the government's press conferences are an attempt by the government to regulate public knowledge of events, the dissemination of that information by the press cannot be entirely controlled by the authorities. One journalist seeks to use his position to convince others that they can determine the outcome of the political crisis: 'Toi et moi connaissons

le pouvoir des mots. Nous savons ce qu'un papier de fond, favorable ou défavorable, peut susciter chez nos dirigeants ou notre classe politique. Tu n'es pas n'importe qui. Tu es un nom. Une surface. Des lecteurs. Tu es un leader d'opinion' (DE:274).

The poor and otherwise marginalised in African society have no voice of their own in the novel, being spoken for by members of the privileged class, highlighting their exclusion from the exclusively urban, male, elite-dominated world of African politics. Cheikh Tidiane Sall, a member of the ruling elite, is portrayed as speaking on behalf of the peasant population, investing their narrative with legitimacy. When the suggestion is made that President Mignane should be presented with a private jet as part of the celebrations marking his seventieth birthday, Sall points out the disparity between the ordinary people in the countryside and the bourgeois leadership: 'Comment le peuple va-t-il payer cette somme? Avec des coques d'arachides ou avec des tourteaux? Vous semblez oublier la sécheresse' (DE:57). In signalling the absence of certain voices from the narrative, Sembène undermines the monologic authority of the ruling regime, highlighting the need to re-negotiate the artificial and arbitrary boundaries which divide society and grant those currently confined to the margins an authoritative voice which will legitimise their central position in the collective memory of African history.

It should be acknowledged, however that this collective memory contains the dishonourable as well as the glorious and the previously silenced margins. According to Anna Ridehalgh: 'The repression of collective memory is clearly a crucial part of the business of colonization and decolonization: both are traumatic processes, involving shame and humiliation as well as deeds of glory'.¹¹ In *Le dernier de l'Empire*, Sembène points out the complicity of Africans themselves with the colonial system, a factor which he claims it is important to recognise if a future for Africa free of European influence is to be envisaged. In an interview with Anna Ridehalgh and Magèye Kassé, Sembène states clearly that:

Les Sénégalais ont été les meilleurs auxiliaires de l'esclavage et du système colonial.... Parce que la société wolof elle-même ne sécrétait plus de valeurs.... [D]ans *Le Dernier de l'empire*, je parle de la guerre de 14-18, mais c'est dans l'ensemble de l'Afrique que le problème se pose. Il est bon, je pense, de connaître ce passé pour mieux élaborer notre avenir.¹²

In the novel, the family of Mam Lat Soukabé, Daouda's most bitter political opponent, have held positions of authority throughout the pre-colonial and colonial eras and his own position is legitimated by reference to a glorious past

in which his ancestors proudly gave their lives in defence of their fellow countrymen. However, it is revealed that Mam Lat Soukabé's father bowed to the authority of colonial rule and was complicitous with its conduct, highlighting the mythical nature of the past which is celebrated. Brought up on narratives of the honour of his ancestors, Mam Lat Soukabé invokes their authority, however, this authority proves to be illusory.

Héritier d'un nom prestigieux que l'histoire locale, de génération en génération, avait enrichi, réadapté, nom auquel il s'identifiait. Les griots, chroniqueurs, citaient plus de trente-sept de ses ancêtres morts, l'arme à la main, pour la défense des siens.... / Mam Lat Soukabé fut élevé, bercé dès son enfance par les actions héroïques de ses ascendants. Il rêvait d'être le continuateur de cette lignée de héros disparus.... Son père, ... chef de canton, qui dirigeait en second commandement des villages sous l'oeil vigilant de l'administrateur colonial, savait se montrer soumis (DE:100-101).

While Mam Lat Soukabé uses the narratives he has absorbed in order to legitimate his individual political authority, Djia Umrel Ba, wife of Cheikh Tidiane Sall, highlights the necessity of reference to a glorious past in the establishment of national identity, an essential element of the discourse of nationalism.

Ces noms glorieux du passé cimentent aujourd'hui notre unité.
Cet attachement à la légende confère une identité à cette gloire...
qui rejaillit sur le clan, la tribu. Les griots sont là pour tailler dans
le tissu social, les gestes et faits nourrissant la fierté et la gloire.
Un peuple a besoin de ces labels, ces estampilles (DE:244).

Throughout the novel, political legitimacy and discursive legitimacy act to reinforce each other. While Mam Lat Soukabé's opposition to the rise to power of prime minister Daouda is legitimised by a discourse of traditional caste differentiation, the underlying motives are clearly those of political ambition. Accusing Daouda of being *un casté*: 'Tu es un homme de basse extraction. Inférieur à un esclave. Et tu n'y peux rien...' (DE:136), Mam Lat Soukabé aims to neutralise any opposition to his own assumption of the presidency. Mam Lat Soukabé represents a 'male-dominated, highly structured and myth-ridden social organization'.¹³ The caste system, according to Sembène, is a legacy of 'une société à règles' which has retained the discourse of tradition in order to empower the dominant class.¹⁴ In *Le dernier de l'Empire*, Daouda challenges the traditional hierarchization of African society, highlighting its arbitrary nature.

Throughout the novel, Ousmane Sembène challenges the unifying discourse of history which is essential to the maintenance of a centralised authoritarian regime and, in doing so, ultimately undermines the monolithic identity of the nation-state itself. Discussing another novel which deals with the subject of dictatorship, this time in South America, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch*, critic Jean Franco demonstrates that 'the nation and the dictator are clearly shown to be producers of and produced by a particular discursive formation' and goes on to claim that 'as soon as the nation is described as discourse, it simply becomes a provisional framework, a fiction that will disappear once the dictator is shown to be mortal'.¹⁵ Likewise, in *Le dernier de l'Empire*, Léon Mignane is the product of the discourses about him. Following the military takeover which occurs towards the novel's conclusion, Daouda finds himself under arrest with Mignane. For the first time, the Prime Minister sees Mignane as a human being without the external gloss of authority. The president is described as weak old man, dishevelled and disturbed by his recent experiences at the hands of the military: 'Léon Mignane avait vieilli, sans son massage quotidien, sa peau s'était distendue, relâchée. Les sillons autour de sa bouche accroissaient la chute de sa lèvre inférieure. Son costume trois pièces frippé, sans leurs plis de distinction, les bas de son pantalon tirebouchonnaient' (DE:365). The crisis of authority precipitated by Mignane's disappearance has called into question the legitimacy of his role as president and the monolithic identity of the nation-state which he embodies, opening a breach which will be filled by the military in the restoration of authority and the suppression of the alternative discourses to which Sembène has granted a voice.

In *Le dernier de l'Empire*, Ousmane Sembène calls into question the relationship between historical fact and narrative fiction in order to foreground the issues of authority and legitimacy which preoccupy Africa at this time of crisis in political and historical legitimacy. Sembène examines the relationship between individual and national history, allowing marginal voices to be heard and demonstrating the need for a re-definition of a 'legitimate' history of Africa which will replace the glorified version of the African past which characterised the independence period. In the intricate weaving together of the novel as fiction and its ironic reflection on actual events, Ousmane Sembène's *Le dernier de l'Empire* rejects the construct of linear historical progress, revealing instead a fragmentary narrative in which factual certainty and discursive authority are denied and in which alternative historical discourses challenge the certainties of official history. Writing about the establishment of a common collective memory amongst the disparate populations of Africa's cities, Alessandro Triulzi identifies a 'post-colonial memory' as:

a contestatory memory, or better memories, based on aggregation/exclusion that have characterised the African political scene particularly in the cities.... [T]he birth of new histories and the creation of new memories are, furthermore, seen as fundamentally 'heretic', being rooted in individual and group identities that no longer recognise themselves in the Great Tale of the unified Nation-State.¹⁶

It is precisely this postcolonial memory which is at work in *Le dernier de l'Empire*.

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¹ Ousmane Sembène, *Le dernier de l'Empire*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1981. Hereafter cited in the body of the text as *DE*.

² Ngugi, wa Thiong'o comments that, following the granting of political independence: 'By the end of the sixties... a native neo-colonial elite was now flying the flags and... ensuring, by every military and political trick possible, the stability necessary for the continued Western control of the economy while loudly proclaiming their non-alignment in international matters'. In *Moving the Centre: the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, London: James Currey, 1993, p.48.

³ Sada Niang, 'An interview with Ousmane Sembène by Sada Niang: Toronto 1992' in Samba Gadjigo, Ralph Faulkingham, Thomas Cassiere and Reinhard Sander (eds), *Ousmane Sembène: Dialogues with Critics and Writers*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, p.107.

⁴ For full discussion of these events, see Christian Coulon and Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, 'Senegal' in Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, John Dunn and Richard Rathbone (eds), *Contemporary West African States*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp.145-164.

⁵ Peter Hawkins, 'Marxist Intertext, Islamic Reinscription? Some Common Themes in the Novels of Sembène Ousmane and Aminata Sow Fall' in Laïla Ibnfassi and Nicki Hitchcott (eds), *African Francophone Writing: a critical introduction*, Oxford: Berg, 1996, p.166.

⁶ Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic and the Authorities of Fiction*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, p.189.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992 [1983], p.210.

⁸ Fiona Robertson, op.cit., p.118.

⁹ Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994 [1975], p.9.

¹⁰ Robert Holton, op.cit., p.10.

¹¹ Anna Ridehalgh, 'Boubacar Boris Diop: Deconstructing the Nation' in *Essays in French Literature*, nos.32-33, November 1995/1996, p.150.

¹² Maguèye Kassé and Anna Ridehalgh, op.cit., p.189-190.

¹³ Anna Ridehalgh (1995/1996) op.cit., p.150.

¹⁴ Maguèye Kassé and Anna Ridehalgh, op.cit., p.196.

¹⁵ Jean Franco, 'The Nation as Imagined Community' in H. Aram Verseer (ed.), *The New Historicism*, London: Routledge, 1989, p.206.

¹⁶ Alessandro Triulzi, 'African Cities, Historical Memory and Street Buzz' in *The post-colonial question: common skies, divided horizons* London: Routledge, 1996, pp.78-91.

Histoire sainte : les intertextes dans l'expression franco-caribéenne

par Marie-Dominique LE RUMEUR

Est-ce l'influence du prix Goncourt décerné en 1992 au martiniquais Patrick Chamoiseau pour son roman *Texaco* dont l'histoire antillaise s'enchevêtre aux repères chronologiques du Nouveau Testament (de l'Annonciation à la Résurrection) que la *Bible* devient littérairement le point de mire de ces écrivains?

Les ouvrages postérieurs tels *La colonie du nouveau monde* (Maryse Condé.1993), *L'exil selon Julia* (Gisèle Pineau, 1996), *Les récoltes de la folie* (Josephat Large. 1996), *La Vierge du Grand Retour* (Raphaël Confiant.1996), *La Charte des crépuscules* (Gérard Etienne.1995) pourraient conduire à penser qu'une nouvelle mode littéro-religieuse vient de surgir. En effet, Confiant appuie totalement son dernier roman sur l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament, les Epîtres, les Sermons, l'Apocalypse pour exposer une curieuse histoire insulaire. A première vue, une filiation entre Chamoiseau et Confiant tous deux auteurs de *Eloge de la créolité* est certaine mais les exemples de *Reine Soleil Levée* de Gérard Etienne, *Les armes miraculeuses* de Césaire et l'écriture messianique de Jacques Roumain et de Jacques Stephen Alexis, ainsi que de nombreux ouvrages antérieurs à 1992 réfutent cette supposition. L'écriture sainte en proposant l'histoire du monde de sa genèse à la fin des temps a servi inlassablement de source d'inspiration. Juifs, chrétiens, athées et agnostiques y ont puisé images, symboles, personnages, trames historiques et romanesques, emprunts stylistiques. Ainsi l'expression prophétique, le Paraclet, la Parousie, l'Apocalypse, la Rédemption, les signes de malédiction ou de bonheur promis, deviennent pour beaucoup une référence où alternent selon les romans, le collage, l'adaptation, la réappropriation, l'existence d'une intertextualité d'orientation transgressive ou parodique.

J'ai toujours rêvé de savoir lire, reprit-elle pour être capable de prendre la vieille Bible qui est sous mon oreiller et de trouver les réponses à toutes les questions entre ses pages. A ton avis, que nous dirait de faire cette vieille Bible en ce moment, dans cette situation précise. (Danticat.1995.29)

A la *Bible*, objet sacré gardé comme un trésor s'amalgame dans cette citation, le livre comme référence textuelle aux questions existentielles. Hélas, la Tante Atie dans *Le cri de l'oiseau rouge* de Edwige Danticat est

une analphabète qui se plaint de ne pouvoir accéder à ce savoir tant culturel qu'historique.

Parangon de la connaissance, le livre saint s'assimilait à la notion de christianisme valorisée par l'élite coloniale comme 'facteur et preuve de "civilisation"' (Hoffman.1992.249). Ceci jusqu'en 1915, car la parution de *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* (1928) de Price-Mars, de mère catholique et dont le père protestant lui appris justement à lire dans la Bible marque 'un nouveau mode de penser, de sentir et de vivre aux Antilles' (Berrou.Pompilus.1977. 721). En analysant dans son chapitre VI, le sentiment religieux des masses haïtiennes, ce théoricien tente de revaloriser le savoir du peuple, de réhabiliter les valeurs autochtones entre autre, le vodou. Sa critique du 'bovarisme collectif' des siens, s'intègre certainement aux cris de révolte des auteurs de *Légitime Défense*, qui en 1932 donnèrent naissance à une nouvelle littérature. Littérature basée à l'origine sur une polémique revendicative, sur le rejet global des valeurs chrétiennes donc de l'histoire de l'occident. Citons cet extrait fort significatif:

Parmi les immondes conventions bourgeoises, nous abominons très particulièrement l'hypocrisie humanitaire, cette émanation puante de la pourriture chrétienne. Nous haïssons la pitié. Nous nous foutons des sentiments (cit. Kesteloot.1977.25).

De sorte que la Négritude dans ses pamphlets anticolonialistes jonglera entre l'éducation reçue de cette civilisation chrétienne, les influences littéraires occidentales pour offrir une contre-discours religieux basé paradoxalement sur cet héritage culturel.

Tel est le cas de Césaire, ce lecteur biblique consciencieux, qui se sert de la tradition catholique pour défendre ses positions politiques, idéologiques. De nombreux critiques ont mis en relief dans leurs études les intertextes religieux de sa poétique. Régis Antoine par exemple étudie les rafales de vers disposés à la manière des prières de Péguy et un collage de l'Ancien Testament dans *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Antoine.1992.219). J.C.Bajeux souligne la fonction prophétique de *Les armes miraculeuses*, de l'homme porte-parole d'une communauté, investi d'un pouvoir verbal en lutte contre les séquelles historiques de la colonisation et dont 'le combat d'Israël avec l'ange, de Jonas avec ses voix, d'Amos, d'Osée, de Jérémie se répète avec ses refus et ses acceptations et marque l'acte par lequel il est investi et accepte la vocation prophétique' (Bajeux.1983.180). Mais vocation prophétique noiriste car si les symboles, les images, les références bibliques pululent sous la plume du poète, ils se transforment en ironie

iconoclaste : 'Ne vous gênez pas, déclare le rebelle dans Et les chiens se taisaient, je m'accuse d'avoir ri de Noé mon père nu mon père ivre' (Césaire,1970.143). Cette confession voisine de la transgression, l'auteur la brandit comme une arme de combat afin de dénoncer cette malédiction qui plane historiquement sur le noir depuis le temps de Cham. Cham fils maudit par son père Noé, qui sera pour ses frères 'un escalve d'esclaves' (Genèse.9.18), Cham donc ancêtre d'une nation d'asservis. De sorte que le Dieu des Blancs se mue en Dieu des colonisateurs et le binôme maître-esclave dérive sur celui de colonisateur-colonisé contre lesquels le Noir doit lutter. *Les damnés de la terre* de Frantz Fanon résume bien ces conceptions raciales et idéologiques qui s'enracinent dans le passé.

Mais par contre, et là, réside une certaine ambiguïté, quand l'histoire biblique se prête aux revendications des leaders antillais, elle sert alors de point d'appui référentiel. Prenons à titre d'exemple *la Genèse et l'Exode*.

Maryse Condé laisse supposer que la traite des noirs ne fut pas exclusivement l'affaire des colonisateurs; certes, les razzias sur le sol africain existèrent mais la romancière inculpe aussi les hommes de sa race d'avoir vendu leurs frères pour de la pacotille de la même manière que les frères de Joseph troquèrent ce dernier 'pour vingt pièces d'argent' (Genèse.37.28). Dans Ségou, il est clair que les Blancs n'avaient pas besoin de se battre pour se procurer des esclaves puisqu' *on leur en apportait jusqu'à la côte*' (Condé.1984.275).

Bien explicite, les pronoms personnels *on*, *leur*, *en*, démontrent que les Blancs ne sont pas totalement les seuls usuriers dans ces anciens ravitaillements d'esclaves. Cette approche de Maryse Condé, va à l'encontre des thèses liées à l'histoire coloniale, elle marque sans doute le déclin de certaines certitudes prônées jusqu'alors, et ouvre les portes à une révision des données de l'Histoire.

D'autre part, l'enfer de l'esclavage des fils d'Abraham vivant sous la férule des pharaons et leur désir d'y échapper devient une réflexion constante pour les intellectuels ayant choisi ou subi une situation d'exil ou de diaspora. Tel est le cas des dictatures, celle de Duvalier surtout, ou des situations économiques précaires qui poussent un bon nombre à quitter leur pays. Situation traumatisante pour beaucoup similaire à l'exode de la sortie d'Egypte, que le haïtien Gérard Etienne dans *La Charte des crépuscules* rappelle fréquemment: 'aujourd'hui le vent du fleuve raconte une épopée semblable à la sortie d'Egypte (Etienne.1993.9) *et nous renvoyait le message de l'Oncle Moïse*' (Etienne.1993.131). Sous le vocable d'Oncle,

Etienne qui a choisi de fuir, assume donc sur la terre d'accueil, sa parenté biblique avec celui qui délivra le peuple juif.

Dans une toute autre optique *L'exil selon Julia* de Gisèle Pineau reprend dans le chapitre intitulé 'les cinq plaies du retour aux pays natal' plusieurs des sévices subis par les égyptiens. Des dix châtements infligés par Moïse, elle n'en retient que cinq pour les calquer à l'espace antillais. Son texte assez cocasse comprend deux types de graphie, la première en italique est une citation biblique à laquelle se rajoute un deuxième texte biblico-autochtone semé de verve humoristique. Sous sa plume, l'inventaire des plaies s'entrechoque, puis la faune devient typiquement insulaire, nous passons des mouches venimeuses du texte original aux ravets, cancrelats de la villa guadeloupéenne; les grenouilles, se transforment en zandolis, serpents et mabouyas du potager de la cuisine. Voyons la deuxième plaie présentée par Gisèle Pineau mais troisième dans le texte de l'Exode biblique :

Elle deviendra une poussière qui couvrira tout le pays d'Egypte; et elle produira, dans tout le pays d'Egypte, sur les hommes et sur les animaux, des ulcères formés par une éruption de pustules ...

Les moustiques et les maringouins... Les moustiques ne cessent de m'assaillir. Dans l'euphorie du retour, je ne vois pas qu'ils font de mes jambes une collection : Taches et Bobos.... La peau de mes jambes s'étend comme un pays percé par les bombardements. Une guerre qui ne finit pas et s'enlise. (Pineau.1996.272-273)

Dans ce corps blessé, métaphore d'un pays percé par les bombardements, la victime n'est plus, comme chez Gérard Etienne identifiée au peuple juif, mais bien aux souffrances infligées par ce même peuple juif sur ceux qui l'asservissent. Ce changement d'optique dans cette 'pseudo-guerre' marque sans doute une relativisation des données de l'histoire. Les couples oppresseurs/oppresseés et victimes/bourreaux fluctuent certainement selon les points de vue.

L'articulation du sacré et du profane qu'offre le parallélisme entre le peuple noir et le destin des juifs trouve son apogée dans ce que Bernard Mouralis a dénommé 'la littérature des mouvements messianiques' (Mouralis.1984.312). La prégnance des modèles bibliques débouche sur une sorte de mystique politique qui s'articule autour des thèmes de la dérédiction, du rôle prophétique, de la passion du Christ, du héros rédempteur etc... Curieusement Césaire, Glissant, Roumain, Alexis de tendance marxiste puisent dans cette écriture les véhicules de leurs

messages. Ainsi le titre de *Gouverneurs de la rosée* de Roumain pourrait s'assimiler à ceux de Jésus des îles, le Christ d'ébène, la résurrection du morne, selon l'exercice rapporté par Christiane Conturie dans son étude critique de l'oeuvre (Conturie.1980.94). Car Manuel le personnage central représente non seulement tous les symboles christiques mais il les manipule; sa signification multiple englobe 'l'Homme-Nouveau, le Sauveur, un Daniel dans la fosse aux lions et un Joseph vendu par ses frères' (Dorsainville.1981.86). De telle manière que Roger Dorsainville dans son analyse de l'ouvrage utilise à son tour un métalangage liturgique qui s'appuie sur les expressions de célébration, rite, sens religieux de la vie, rite sacramentel, messe célébrée, haut sacrifice, ofertoire, etc...

De plus chez Jacques Roumain, les mythes religieux s'accordent au rythme poétique biblique. Ainsi les paroles qu'Anaïse adresse dans le roman à son promis rappellent le dynamisme stylistique du *Cantiques des Cantiques*. Si l'on sait que dès le premier poème de Salomon, l'Épouse revendique sa race - 'Je suis noire mais belle, fille de Jérusalem... ne prenez pas garde à mon teint basané, c'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé' (Cantique1.6) - on comprend l'attrance de Roumain pour ce texte historique quoique dans *Gouverneurs de la rosée* les réminiscences au texte sacré se teintent de couleurs indigénistes.

Jacques Roumain cité précédemment est présenté par Alexis dans *Compère Général Soleil* sous les traits du prisonnier politique Pierre Roumel. Les similitudes entre fiction romanesque et réalité historique sont évidentes, 'les mots de lumière, de soleil' (Alexis.1955.50), adressés à Hilarion seront les détonateurs de son engagement politique et de la 'rédemption' de ce dernier. Mais c'est surtout dans *Les arbres musiciens* malgré la dédicace du livre aux prêtres catholiques haïtiens, que la griffe du marxiste se manifeste et où le romancier s'interroge par l'intermédiaire du père Osmin sur les énigmes existentielles et la présence du mal. Diogène Osmin, prêtre soumis à la volonté de l'Eglise pour défendre la campagne antisuperstitieuse menée dans les années 40 contre le vodou, s'interroge sur le sens de son sacerdoce. Pour cela le narrateur s'appuie sur le premier verset du chapitre 31 du *Livre de Job* et volontairement, il choisit les extraits marquant les aspects négatifs d'une telle vocation tels le célibat, l'absence de paternité, l'obéissance aveugle aux supérieurs et la soumission. Dans cette dialectique spirituelle d'une conscience effarouchée, la stratégie narrative de l'auteur présente tout d'abord une référence biblique pour immédiatement la commenter à sa manière, exercice fort différent, comprenons-le, de l'exégèse offerte par St Thomas d'Aquin dans son travail sur Job. Ainsi au verset :

J'avais fait un pacte avec mes yeux. Et je n'aurais pas arrêté mes regards sur une vierge! (Job.31.1)

L'ordinand vit toutes les filles d'or noir qui fleurissent la terre natale /.../ En une seule minute il mesura l'injustice contre nature du veuvage éternel qui serait le sien, il mesura le poids de son membre viril à jamais enchaîné. Aïe ! Comment était ce paradis promis aux Justes. (Alexis.1957.59)

De sorte que l'apologie de Job se métamorphose sous la plume de l'auteur en réquisitoire contre l'inquisition bretonne dans sa campagne antisuperstitieuse puisque obéissant 'comme un cadavre', Diogène se mue en 'renégat, profanateur, iconoclaste' (Alexis.1957.61). Prédicateur biblique Alexis se sert paradoxalement du texte sacré pour démontrer l'absurdité d'une telle attitude. En contrastant deux histoires, celle de l'Eglise et celle de son peuple, son but est de démystifier toutes les religions qu'elles soient catholique, protestante ou autres. Elizabeth Mudimbe-Boyi remarque que chez cet écrivain les réflexions, d'abord ironiques, deviennent progressivement des contestations passionnées pour finalement rejeter l'idée même de Dieu (Mudimbe-Boyi.1992.113). Par contre certains passages lyriques tel l'ode à la faune et la flore exotique s'amalgament à la prière, à un chant d'inspiration biblique. L'hymne à la joie de l'exaltation de la nature reprend à plusieurs reprises la symphonie aromatique et visuelle du *Cantique des cantiques* et les salves de louange du *Livre de Daniel*.

Les générations post-négritudiniennes manipulent *La Bible* dans une optique fort différente de celle de leurs aînés. Les revendications socio-politiques fruits de l'aliénation colonialiste bifurquent actuellement vers des contestations d'orientation plus linguistiques. Dans le faisceau des histoires de *Texaco* de Patrick Chamoiseau, le récit se place à la fois sous le signe parodique de Messie, figure central du Nouveau Testament, assise structurale du roman et sous celui de la chronique des différentes étapes de l'en-ville. Selon Jean Bessière 'le mythe du Messie, appliqué à un urbaniste, figure l'incongruité du récit' (Bessière.1995.282). De fait, son arrivée dans un espace périphérique, s'avère un signe de contradiction car les différentes lectures des personnages varient de 'Fléau'; 'd'ange destructeur'; puis 'le Fléau perdit de sa menace et nous nous mîmes à l'appeler Christ, sans trop y réfléchir, et à espérer qu'il revienne nous porter la Bonne Nouvelle dont ne ne savions rien' (Chamoiseau.1992.27; 36; 416).

Dans l'organisation symbolique du roman s'accumulent lettres, sermons, épîtres pour offrir un pastiche biblique aux intentions ludiques et désacralisantes. La parole sacrée incarnée non plus par le Christ mais par le Marqueur de Paroles remémore les phases de l'Anonciation de 'Et le verbe

s'est fait Chair et il a habité parmi nous', métaphore subtile d'un écrivain qui s'impose la tâche de repêcher l'oralité et de réorganiser la 'foisonnante parole de l'Informatrice /.../ pour nous conquérir nous-mêmes dans l'inédit créole' (Chamoiseau.1992.426-427). De sorte que la parole du vieux nègre de la Doum se mue en Paraclet. Ainsi en remplaçant la figure historique du Christ par un architecte et la présence du Saint Esprit par le Marqueur de paroles, l'auteur bouscule les données de l'histoire sainte et, à la réalité historique, il entremêle des personnages de fiction qui réinventent l'Histoire. Cette substitution subversive renverse non seulement les principes établis mais tente de plus de les violer. Les incises des textes où figurent d'une part les notes de l'urbaniste au Marqueur de Paroles, et d'autre part, les extraits des Cahiers de Marie-Sophie Laborieux, minutieusement inventoriés avec leurs numéros, leurs pages et leurs dates, ces archives supposées de la Bibliothèque Schoelcher ne sont qu'un matériel fictif destiné à démythifier l'Histoire mais aussi à s'en servir comme levier polémique. De plus en inventant de fausses sources bibliographiques Chamoiseau offre par là plus de crédibilité à sa fiction. Revanche sans doute à une Histoire souvent manipulée par les Blancs; transgression historique et religieuse qui va de pair avec un 'marronnage esthétique', à un chamboulement des procédés stylistiques et lexicaux. Curtius précise que l'écriture de Chamoiseau s'avère comme une pratique d'anthropophagie et de subversion de la langue française qui donne naissance à un langage ni français ni créole mais 'fréole', une sorte de 'schizo-linguistique' (Curtius.1995.295), où toutes les normes et les règles sont perturbées. Chamoiseau le reconnaît lui-même lorsqu'il écrit:

Mêlant ces deux langues, rêvant de toutes les langues, la ville créole parle en secret un langage neuf et ne craint plus Babel... La ville créole restituée à l'urbaniste qui voudrait l'oublier les souches d'une identité neuve : multilingue, multiraciale, multi-historique, ouverte, sensible à la diversité du monde. Tout a changé' (Chamoiseau.1992.242-243).

Tout à changé et tout change dans cette symbiose où la langue se compare à l'architecture urbanistique, l'architecte au Christ et le Christ à l'Histoire pour déboucher sur une nouvelle Babel ou vision babélienne du monde, signe post-moderniste dont le concept de chaos souligne les options. Chaos, paradigme du désordre que les auteurs de la créolité revendiquent avec force, comme le témoigne les paroles de Chamoiseau tirées d'un entretien au *Journal Viva*: 'on a toujours considéré le chaos comme une chose qu'il fallait réduire. Mais sans chaos, comment comprendre le monde d'aujourd'hui. Lorsque nous parlons de la créolité, nous voulons parler de cet état là, où l'on se trouve dans un lieu chaotique' (Cité par Chivallon.1996.106).

Dans la chronique de *Texaco*, l'arrivée du Messie s'accompagne de celle de la Madone, une statue qui 'débarqua du ciel en latécoère' (Chamoiseau.1992.371) et plonge en 1948 la population martiniquaise dans une apocalypse mariale. Néolise Daidaine se jette à corps perdu dans les périples miraculeux de cette Vierge mais l'exagération stylistique du narrateur tourne ce fait véridique en dérision. *La Vierge du Grand Retour* de Raphaël Confiant, titre qui suggère la Vierge des derniers temps des visions de Saint Jean, ce roman donc reprend cet épisode comme axe de son roman et exploite l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament pour étayer son histoire transgressive. De même que chez Gisèle Pineau nous avons relevé deux textes identiques d'adaptation d'apocalypse-créoliste), cette dernière compare les versets où 'le soleil devint noir comme un sac de crin, la lune devint comme du sang et les étoiles du ciel tombèrent sur la terre' (Pineau.1996.286) au cyclone Dorothy tandis que Raphaël Confiant, lui, rapporte ce même extrait à l'explosion en plein ciel de l'hydravion porteur de la Vierge (Confiant.1996.394). Cependant Confiant ruse plus alègrement avec l'histoire sacrée; ainsi dans son chapitre sur *L'Ecclésiaste*, le premier texte en italique, prétendument original, se mue en un faux-authentique puisque le narrateur y insère ses dires, un plagiat en quelque sorte retouché ludiquement du genre : 'Vanité des vanités dit Mathieu Salem; vanités des vanités, tout est vanité. Quel profit trouve le nègre à toute la peine qu'il prend sous le soleil?' (Confiant.1996.110)

Le jeu phonétique entre le Matusalem de l'Ancien Testament et le nègre identifié Mathieu Salem, personnage fictif, débouche sur une deuxième rédaction qui englobe l'essentiel du discours narratif et là, le texte religieux s'éclate et sert d'exutoire aux diatribes caustiques. Ainsi dans l'article sur la Vierge de Boulogne, dont les origines historiques datent de l'an 638, règne du roi Dagobert, l'ironie sarcastique contre les Blancs oppresseurs et leur siècles d'Histoire s'épanouit sous sa plume lorsqu'il écrit: 'Faisons un accueil somptueux à celle qui a béni la France, sa fille aînée, car notre Martinique est, elle, la fille aînée, parmi toutes les colonies de la France sur les cinq continents' (Confiant.1996.109).

Raphaël Confiant associe l'histoire religieuse de la France, dénommée depuis Clovis, fille aînée de l'Eglise, à l'empire colonialiste métropolitain qui maintient toujours sous son joug ces territoires annexés même si la Martinique figure comme une enfant privilégiée et fille aînée des colonies.

Ainsi dans l'histoire de la littérature antillaise, les revendications sociales, raciales, politiques, linguistiques, s'unissent comme un écho pour refuser et

réfuter une Histoire imposée par les autres. L'exemple du suicide d'un personnage peu commun, dans *La Vierge du Grand Retour*, appelé le Dictionneur, l'as du Littré, à l'affût des définitions parfaites telles 'Acquiescence', 'Magnanitude' (les connotations sont provoquées), ce suicide donc, symbolise la destruction volontaire d'une langue, de l'histoire d'une langue où ne figurent 'ni bougresse, ni capon, ni baliverneur, ni cannir, ni bancroche'... ni les néologismes, ni les créolismes. D'ailleurs le narrateur sous l'injonction du personnage de Cham lève les ambiguïtés lorsqu'il déclare: 'Fabrique un dictionnaire qui soit pour nous autres. Celui-là c'est la chose des Blancs qui ont damné notre race' (Confiant.1996.367).

Le Cham cité précédemment s'avère être le créateur d'une secte originale, 'd'un système poligamique instauré depuis l'époque biblique, tant en Terre Sainte que chez nos ancêtres d'Afrique-Guinée' (Confiant.1996.239). Personnage calqué de la réalité, ses dogmes hérétiques reproduits dans les annexes du *Discours antillais* permettent à Edouard Glissant de présenter, dans son chapitre conceptuel sur le délire verbal en Martinique, la thèse suivante, que le mélange français-créole née d'une déportation des avatars de l'Histoire a la couleur de 'nos errements' (Glissant.1981.485).

Errements en grande partie conséquence de l'Histoire car la parole devient le reflet d'une Histoire subie, souvent aliénante dont l'origine inscrite dans la Genèse biblique (la récurrence du mythe chamique taraudant l'écriture antillaise le prouve), bifurque sur le continent africain, pour s'imposer à la date fatidique du commerce négrier comme une nouvelle genèse pour le peuple antillais. Cette obsession des origines, qui démarre pour beaucoup d'écrivains à la déportation, n'est pas toujours satisfaisante d'où chez certains la volonté de recourir, tel est le cas de Maryse Condé et bien d'autres, aux sagas familiales où à l'écriture que l'on peut dénommer 'généalogique' qui propose la vie de plusieurs générations pour fixer des histoires réelles ou fictives dans l'Histoire et tenter de récupérer ces données historiques bouleversées.

La récupération d'un passé historique s'avère une tâche des plus difficiles; ancrés dans un refus de l'Histoire des autres, nous entendons par là l'Histoire des français dont les rappels de la célèbre phrase 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' ont levé un tolet de polémiques et revendications et d'autre part celle des Amérindiens quasi inexistante, les Antillais face de plus à la rupture historique du continent de leurs ancêtres africains, se trouvent devant à un vide, une carence qui les pousse sans doute à recourir à

l'Histoire Universelle que représente l'Histoire biblique et à s'en servir pour essayer de se doter d'une nouvelle identité.

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'The Black Atlantic': History, modernity and conflict in Sembène Ousmane's 'Le Voltaïque'

by Andy STAFFORD

Lorsque la mémoire va ramasser du bois
mort, elle rapporte le fagot qui lui plaît.
African proverb

The analysis is the science and the
demonstration the art which is history.
C L R James, preface to *The Black Jacobins*

Fortunately, we are not always faced by the difficulty of choice of reading about either African or Caribbean writing. It was with this unfortunate dilemma in mind that I want to investigate a theory of Anglophone African and Caribbean writing to see how we may extend it to the Francophone situation. Nobody who is interested in African and/or Caribbean writing in French will be surprised by, nor doubtful of, the centrality of the connection between the West Indies and Africa, be it Aimé Césaire's *Cahier*, or his working with Birago Diop and Léopold Senghor on *L'Étudiant noir*, not to mention Frantz Fanon, a Martiniquais living and working in North Africa.

In his recent *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* the Black British sociologist Paul Gilroy has seen this transatlantic connection as central not only to Black experience but to modernity in general.¹ Analysing Black American writers and thinkers, Gilroy shows convincingly that the memory of slavery and racial oppression are integral to modern experience. At the same time, as well as showing the victims of the slave trade as the 'first modernists', Gilroy wishes nonetheless to avoid the simplicity of Black Nationhood, to undermine the belief that this memory requires a separate African-American political and cultural organisation. On the contrary, argues Gilroy, the movement of millions from Africa to the Americas has meant that the Atlantic links not only diasporic culture but also Europe, the Enlightenment tradition and radical modernity.

Thus, Black nationalist attempts to see, for example, Richard Wright's writing in France towards the end of his life as somehow inferior to his earlier writing in the United States, are convincingly undermined by Gilroy. Similarly, Du Bois's theories on race are shown to have been deeply influenced by his European experience a generation earlier. Thus, Gilroy sets out the dangers of isolating Black experience from wider theoretical and historical developments, and sets this modernist character within travel, dialogue and cultural hybridity.

Refreshingly, Gilroy's account sees the radical Enlightenment tradition as not superseded, or rendered obsolete, in the manner that talk of a *post*-modernity would have us believe. Rather than articulating the rather spurious belief that Modernism only ever put forward rather unproblematic 'Grand narratives', the Black Atlantic shows the double - that is, contradictory and dialectical - consciousness of Du Boisian theory as a central experience of modern life. The difficulties of identity experienced by all in this so-called 'post-modern' era, he shows convincingly, were first evidenced in Black experiences of modernity. Indeed, and as we will see in the short story Sembène Ousmane to which I shall apply Gilroy's theory, surely one imperative of modernism was precisely to underline the crisis in the link between history and literature, not its simple transcription in a mimetically unproblematic realism. The view of history as a mere discourse is perhaps simply a more sceptical version of the dilemma.

It is via the notion of a double consciousness of history, and Gilroy's placing of Atlantic culture at the heart of modernity, that I wish to analyse an example in Francophone writing, the final story in Sembène Ousmane's first collection of short stories *Voltaïque*. With the eponymous title, 'Le Voltaïque' holds a central place in this set of stories published immediately after Senegalese independence in 1962.²

The story initiates immediately a problematic of history. Beginning with references to the colonial and imperial situation - the Algerian War, the ex-Belgian Congo, Mali and the UN's latest decision - Sembène's dramatic and powerful story quickly, and with glorious ellipsis, moves away from this situation to report the question asked by Saër, a question which, says the narrator, was (in contrast to the discussion about colonial break-up) the 'parole' the most 'passionné' heard for a long time and which raised great controversy in the gathered group: 'Pourquoi avons-nous des balafres?'. Thus

begins Saër's narration of how facial scarring - 'balafres' - came to have social and cultural currency in West Africa.

Before we look at this story in detail, it is worth considering the place of the short story within modernity. As Guy Ossito Midiohouan has pointed out in his circumspect consideration of the 'nouvelle africaine' in the first ASCALF Yearbook, the relationship between the short story and modernity is already a problematic one.³ Showing how since Edgar Allan Poe, the first European to theorise the short story, little has been concluded, Midiohouan underlines the confusion in which the nature of the short story is held in Africa too. Indeed, it is futile, he suggests, to try to explain the African short story either by comparison or contrast with European definitions. In his view, it is the 'commodité' of how to get the message across which informs the choice of a 'texte narratif court'. Also, he notes, the oral tradition plays a great part in the African short story. To what extent do these two characterisations apply to Sembène's 'Le Voltaïque'?

The narration used is a complex one. Russian-doll-like, the story contains no less than three narratives - the first narrator (Sembène for simplicity's sake), then Saër's story to the gathered assembly, and finally that of the protagonist of Saër's story, Amoo, to the villagers telling of his experiences at the hands of slave-traders. Though locked within a story (Saër's) which itself is within a story (Sembène's) Amoo's is the most important in 'Le Voltaïque'.

Amoo describes how, having been part of Momutu's band of outlawed Africans, he has escaped with Iomé his nine-year old daughter and returned to his village to warn of an impending visit from slave-traders. He managed to save his daughter from being transported to the Americas with the aid of Momutu's gang just as the ship was about to set sail with its merchandise. However, it was not simply the White slave traders he had had to evade, but also Momutu himself. For Momutu's treachery was such that, having 'liberated' Africans from White slave ships, he simply resold them to the next 'customer' to be enticed into a deal. So faced now with the prospect of both a White and Black threat, Amoo, who had killed his own wife to prevent her falling into slavery, now has to decide how to save his young daughter from a similar fate.

The vast majority of this story is told by Saër: his aim is to provide a explanation of the pressing problem of why scars on the face have become

part of African cultural and tribal practice, whilst not in evidence the other side of the Atlantic. Thus, Sembène uses the 'commodité' of the oral story told by Saër to put across a crucial point about cultural practices. However, the story is not simply one which is relevant to the past but also to the present. The reference to the contemporary colonial situation in Sembène's brief introduction to Saër's story only serves to encapsulate the whole story within a contemporary Senegalese context. By describing the treachery of Momutu, Sembène is obliquely commenting on the neo-colonial situation of post-independence Senegal. This double consciousness of history, (neo-)colonial present and slave past, is augmented by the manner in which the two histories are placed here in 'dialogue'.

But it would be unwise to see the story as a mere allegory of the Senegalese situation in immediate post-independence. The strength of Sembène's story, in my view, is its ability to balance between allegory and 'histoire profonde'. The dilemma and brutality of Amoo's choice is matched by the depth of exploitative and almost genocidal levels that the slave trade represented. The mercantile and economic references in the story only serve to underline Gilroy's view that the birth of Capitalism, dependent on racial subjugation and subsequent trade, and on elements of Black co-optation, pushed Black experience to the forefront of modernity. The critique of mercantile and ideological control in modernity, the 'counter-cultural' as Gilroy calls it, is evident in at least two ways in Sembène's story.

The first, and the most obvious perhaps, is in the figure of Momutu. 'Le Voltaïque' goes a long way, it seems, in satisfying Gilroy's desire for an undermining of the Black nationalist view of shared black interests. Momutu's treachery and inhumanity towards his fellow African appears worse than that of the Whites, who are barely present in the story. Momutu by contrast - here is perhaps the strength in the 'commodité' of the short story, suggested by Midiohouan - is described in detail, from counting his money to his cynical duplicity towards Amoo. Sembène piles up the scorn by repeatedly giving the ship's name, *L'Africain*: the ship which takes people to slavery and humiliation, with the connivance of Africans such as Momutu, is given the name of Africa - and we know from *Le Docker noir* that the 'négrier' has a significance far beyond its immediate historical status.

The second critique of modernity, and the most striking, is the oblique references to the Nazi Holocaust in 'Le Voltaïque'. Just as Gilroy's theory of

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Atlantic modernity sees the Holocaust as of germane and equal importance to slavery, so Sembène's short story describes, via Saër, Amoo's belief that the slave trade existed so that Whites could make shoes out of their victims' skin. It is difficult *not* to see the two appearances of Amoo's idea as an oblique reference to the Holocaust's production-line attempts to convert Jewish bodies into commodities.

By looking at the rhythms and leitmotifs of black music, particularly in the various forms of jazz, Gilroy considers that 'dialogue' across the Atlantic is a crucial element of modernity. Though Saër's story stresses that no evidence of 'balafres' exists across the Atlantic in the Caribbean - thereby proving, in his view, the effectiveness of the practice in saving Africans from slavery - Sembène's short story receives its 'reply' in a quite stunning fashion from across the Atlantic. Radical playwright Armand Gatti's first play, the one-act *Le Quetzal*, written, performed and published at almost the exactly the same time as Sembène's *Voltaïque* collection, begins with almost exactly the same situation in Guatemala.

Gatti prefaces his first published play with an explanation of how, fighting in the maquis in Guatemala against the US-backed rebels, he had met Felipe, a young Maya Indian resisting colonial oppression. Gatti recounts the story told to him by the young Felipe. Noting how Felipe saw no difference between the battle against the right-wing insurgents now in 1954/5 and the attempts to repel the 'Conquistadores' centuries before, Gatti tells us Felipe's story of his Maya Indian ancestor's systematic killings of their children to prevent their falling into the slave service of the Conquistadores.⁴ Gatti then dedicates the play to the young Maya, killed only moments after telling this story to him.

Both Gatti's and Sembène's story illustrates what Gilroy calls the 'the principle of negativity'. Gilroy shows, in relation to Frederick Douglass's writing, how Black modernity stood in opposition to the formal logic and rational calculation characteristic of modern Western thinking and expressed in the Hegelian slave's preference for bondage rather than death.⁵ Against Hegel's theory of interdependency, both 'Le Voltaïque' and the preface to *Le Quetzal*, in their own way of course, illustrate Gilroy's view of a crucial element in Black Atlantic modernity. For Gilroy the denial of the legitimacy of slavery is a form of agency, which rejects Hegel's intersubjectivity of slave/master as a precondition of modernity. So, in marking Iomé not only does Amoo ruin her beauty, but her scream reveals his own whereabouts to the

advancing Momutu, and results in his own sacrifice. And as Gilroy goes on to show with the preference for death in song in Black culture - 'routinely practised as a form of vernacular cultural history' - this moral and political gesture of Amoo's is joined to the memories of slavery and described in Saër's story as a form of vernacular history.

Within this vernacular, there emerges what Gilroy calls a 'new discursive economy' which is characterised by the 'refusal to subordinate the particularity of the slave experience to the totalising power of universal reason'. Hence Amoo's otherwise brutal scarring of his daughter's face, and its subsequent adoption in West African culture, founds a new economy of signs. Just as the veil became a sign of revolt for Frantz Fanon during the Algerian War - rather than indicative of women's oppression - so the 'balafres', rather than a sign of barbarism and cruelty, come to represent resistance in Sembène's story. However, it is the vernacular cultural history which retains us most here.

Importantly for Gilroy, the persistence of tradition in Black writing and culture suggests that modernity has not been surpassed. Rather than seeing repetition and variation of tradition as a Bataille and Barthesian 'stereotype' indicative of a post-modernist 'aplatissement' in cultural forms, Gilroy identifies these as crucial components of memory, central to Black modern experience and cultural forms. In story-telling terms this is significant. What is 'Le Voltaïque' other than a 'griot' performance of a long-lost story, transcribed in such a way as to imply a permanence which has a continually self-questioning character? The fact that Sembène's story is told in a problematic fashion - it is told only as a *possible* and hypothetical explanation of 'balafres' - and moreover ends abruptly with a call from Sembène (not Saër) to the readers to give their opinion on Saër's 'theory', implies that Sembène is highly self-conscious of the story's narrative status. His transposing of a collective, oral account before a gathered presence (as if given by a Griot), to a modern literary narrative, is commemorative not only of its profound historical significance for cultural practices but also of its story-telling genesis. This linking of narration with 'oralité', History with story, appears to be part of what Gilroy calls the 'slave sublime': the permanence of and variation on a founding historical theme in Black Atlantic culture.

We should not be surprised then if this oral tradition has now successfully found its written version, across the Atlantic, in the Caribbean short story. The

crisis that is perhaps visible in the European short story is not reflected across the Atlantic. *Écrire 'la Parole de Nuit'*, a recent collection of short stories, displays how the Francophone Caribbean short story can work in theory and practice, able to transcend the opposition between *oralité* and *écriture* as illustrated by its powerful and persuasive theoretical section.⁶ Similarly, the Caribbean short story in English, according to the late E. Markham writing the preface to a recent Penguin collection, is thriving.⁷ Nor must we overlook Raphaël Confiant's trilogy of excellent short stories in the hugely popular 'Mille et une nuits' series, which varies and repeats a theme and a story which makes all three difficult to distinguish from one another: as if one 'oral' story told on three different occasions.⁸ This vitality suggests that Black Atlantic modernity is leading to a renaissance of the short story in a way which gives the traditional role of the griot and story-teller a new function. The multiplicity of voice equated with the short story of 'oralité', admirably instigated by Sembène's 'Le Voltaïque', is just one case in point.

Deemed as *post*-modern, in their use of irony, indeterminacy and multiplicity of voice, many of these stories suggest that it seems a little early to deem modernity to have been surpassed. As Édouard Glissant has pointed out, modernity is probably only our growing awareness of each new era, suggesting that a *post*-modernity is but a problematic of modernity itself - or an inability still to characterise accurately our 'modern' era.⁹ Indeed, the return of nationalism, fascism, ethnic conflict, a new world disorder, what Glissant calls in a positive fashion (rather problematically) a 'chaos-monde', suggests that 'post'-modernity is rather premature.

Nevertheless, the affirmation of radical history and modernity in Gilroy's thought raises important questions about the nature of Black Atlantic culture. Does Gilroy's 'anti-anti-essentialism' mean that multiple voice is lost between essence and non-identity, and where does hybridity sit here? Does André Schwarz-Bart's powerful *La Mulâtresse-solitude* fall outside of Black Atlantic modernity, since it is the story of a mixed-race slave but written by a white European? Or does it go a long way in proving Gilroy's own insistence on the similarity between the Holocaust and 'la traite', between Jewish and Black experience as fundamental to modern culture? To repeat (and mildly alter) the final words of Sembène's 'Le Voltaïque': 'lecteurs/trices, qu'en pensez-vous?'.

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