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## The Impact Of Christianity On The Trickster Figure In Anglophone African Literature During The Period Of Decolonisation

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**The impact of Christianity on the trickster figure in  
Anglophone African literature during the period of  
decolonisation**

THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE OPEN UNIVERSITY  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which the trickster figure of oral literature is represented in postcolonial Anglophone African written literature. While the function of the trickster in African oral culture has been much studied, the question of how the figure of the trickster has been inscribed in African novels and plays in English has been relatively neglected. The thesis addresses this lacuna in the existing scholarship by examining how trickster figures have been represented and narrated in six English-language texts from Britain's former colonies in West, East and South Africa: Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960, Nigeria); Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975, Ghana); Peter Nazareth's *The General Is Up* (1984, Uganda); Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Matigari* (1986, Kenya); Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000, South Africa), and André Brink's *Praying Mantis* (2005, South Africa). Identifying the 'source' trickster figures in the different African oral cultures for each selected text, the chapters provide carefully historicised close analyses of the literary texts, attending to the variety of social and narrative functions ascribed to trickster figures. One major element influencing how trickster figures from oral culture have been transmuted in African written texts has been Christianity. Missionary endeavours played a large role in the colonisation process and, by providing formal western education to prepare indigenous peoples to be subservient employees of the colonial machine, also enabled indigenous peoples to challenge colonial rule in its own terms. In several of the texts explored in this thesis, the trickster figure's role is complicated by encounters with Christianity. Identified as subversive and morally ambiguous, the trickster figure provides a lens through which the conflicts and challenges of postcolonial nations can be viewed. The thesis concludes that close attention to the many literary re-workings of trickster figures provides both the functioning of dynamic and adaptable literary trope, and a unique insight into the concerns and anxieties of post-independence African nations.

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## **Abbreviations**

<b>AIC</b>	African Initiated/Independent Churches
<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>BCP</b>	Basutoland Congress Party
<b>CCF</b>	Congress for Cultural Freedom
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>CMS</b>	Church Missionary Society
<b>CPP</b>	Convention People's Party
<b>IAS</b>	Institute for African Studies
<b>KLFA</b>	Kenya Land and Freedom Army
<b>LMS</b>	London Missionary Society
<b>NGK</b>	Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church)
<b>NTM</b>	National Theatre Movement
<b>PAC</b>	Pan African Congress
<b>PDA</b>	Preventative Detention Act
<b>TfD</b>	Theatre for Development
<b>WPK</b>	Worker's Party of Kenya

## Introduction

Trickster figures and their stories have appeared in oral literature in most cultures.<sup>1</sup> The enduring and ubiquitous presence of the trickster has prompted many to hypothesise a correspondingly universal function. In seeking to frame the trickster figure in sweeping aetiological and functional terms, studies of the figure have often ignored, or failed to give due consideration to, the cultures which continue to generate trickster narratives, and the contexts in which they are shaped. The focus of this study is postcolonial African literature written in English, but analysis of each literary manifestation of the trickster figure is rooted in an understanding of its particular prototype in oral literature. I offer some examples of the trickster as he appears in the oral literature of each relevant culture, without claiming definitive knowledge of the trickster's role within the culture itself. What I intend to consider instead is the adaptation of the trickster figure of oral literature in postcolonial written texts, and how such adaptations can be interpreted.

What are the defining characteristics of 'the trickster'? One influential answer is provided by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty who, in their introduction to *Mythological Trickster Figures* (1993), address the suitability of the term 'trickster figure', acknowledging that although the differences between trickster figures worldwide are perhaps immeasurable, there are nevertheless 'sufficient inherent similarities among these diverse figures and their functions' to justify the use of the term.<sup>2</sup> Hynes identifies six common trickster figure features: he posits the primary trait as 'the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster.'<sup>3</sup> Related to this are the subsequent five traits: '(2) deceiver/trick-

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<sup>1</sup> My language here is intentionally vague.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, 'Introducing the Fascinating and Perplexing Trickster Figure' in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty (London: University of Alabama Press, 1993) pp. 1-12 (p. 2).

<sup>3</sup> William J. Hynes, 'Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide' in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 33-45 (p. 34).

player, (3) shape-shifter, (4) situation-inventor, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur.’<sup>4</sup> Although recognising that this definition is broad, I too use the term to refer to figures which share some of these similar characteristics, while also arguing that the trickster’s function is diverse. Not least, this is because the trickster figures I examine have been translated from oral cultures to published text: an orally and locally disseminated composition appropriated and adapted for a mass-produced publication, to be consumed by a literate and potentially global audience.

Scholarship focused on oral prose literature often ignores some of the most illuminating aspects of oral literature. Ruth Finnegan identifies several aspects typically neglected, including ‘the art or originality of the individual composer, the nature of the audiences reached, the local assessment of the relative worth or seriousness of stories against other forms, or the position of the story-teller himself.’<sup>5</sup> In addition to these important factors, the student of written literature can rarely acquire knowledge of such aspects as, *inter alia*, tone of voice; explicit or implicit reference to another member of the narrator’s community, perhaps notorious at the time the narrative was constructed; unique content or emphasis added by the narrator to embellish a story recounted to him or her previously, for the particular occasion on which the narrative was recorded and transcribed.<sup>6</sup> I therefore acknowledge my position as the reader of circumscribed trickster narratives that have been constructed with a global audience in mind rather than a local one, but are nevertheless equally open to diverse interpretations. As with oral narratives, an understanding of context is the guiding principle for my discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Hynes, ‘Mapping’, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2012), pp. 308-309.

<sup>6</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, p. 313; 346.



### **Idealist approaches: Boas to Jung**

A comprehensive survey of contributions to the trickster debate is not possible here, and has been conducted thoroughly elsewhere by others.<sup>7</sup> However, an overview of early interpretations of the trickster figure – particularly those theories which were formulated shortly before the publication of the first text considered in this study – will illuminate the complexities and limitations of the anthropological discourse, and subsequently the adaptation of the trickster figure in written literature.

The early contributions of anthropologists focused on attempting to explain the origin or function of the trickster figure and its contradictory nature. In the late nineteenth century, the German-born American anthropologist of Native American culture and folklore, Franz Boas, posited that the transformer figure found in Native American mythology was comprised of two distinct entities: a culture hero and a trickster. Although both figures feature in aetiological narratives, the positive changes brought about by the culture hero are the consequences of his altruism, whereas the trickster's acts are incidentally beneficial, the result of 'purely egotistical' behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Boas posited a positive correlation between the civilisation of a society and the distinction between culture hero and trickster: as a society becomes less primitive, the morally ambiguous protagonist no longer corresponds with the new, ostensibly more civilised values of the society.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> William G. Doty and William J. Hynes, 'Historical Overview of Theoretical Issues: The Problem of the Trickster', in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 13-32. See also Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess": The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered', *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 11:3 (March, 1975), 147-186 (pp. 159-160).

<sup>8</sup> Franz Boas, 'Introduction', in *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia* by James Teit, "Memoirs of the American Folklore Society", Vol. VI (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1898), pp. 4-18 (p. 6).

<sup>9</sup> Boas, 'Introduction', p. 10.

Perhaps the most frequently cited study of the trickster figure is Paul Radin's *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (1956). Radin, a student of Boas, considers the trickster cycle of the Winnebago to be an amalgamation of a 'typical' trickster cycle – an embodiment of 'vague memories of an archaic and primordial past, where there as yet existed no clear-cut differentiation between the divine and non-divine' – and aetiological narratives connected originally with a hero or supernatural figure.<sup>10</sup> Thus the perceived dichotomies inherent within the Winnebago trickster are accounted for by the hypothesis that the figure was originally two entities, blurred together through centuries of relating and adapting the myths concerning them. Identifying numerous narratives in which the trickster commits sacrilege, Radin asserts that the participants' satire acts as a protest against the obligations of their social order: the rebel is not the narrator – at risk of repercussions – but the figure to which they ascribe the profane acts.<sup>11</sup> Radin concludes that trickster figures are found worldwide despite not being easily classified because they represent 'not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within every individual.'<sup>12</sup>

While Boas and Radin offered these initial interpretations of the figure, it is Carl Jung's contribution to Radin's book which has attracted more attention and debate. Jung's commentary contended that the Winnebago trickster cycle is the preservation of a 'collective shadow figure' in its 'pristine mythological form.'<sup>13</sup> The Jungian shadow comprises everything that is not present within the consciousness, namely the countertendencies in the unconscious: humankind's hidden traits and desires – puerile and inferior, instinctive,

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), pp. 167-168.

<sup>11</sup> Radin, *The Trickster*, pp. 152-154.

<sup>12</sup> Radin, *The Trickster*, p. 168.

<sup>13</sup> C. G. Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure', in *The Trickster*, pp. 193-211 (p. 202).

constructive and destructive.<sup>14</sup> The trickster cycle is representative of a time in which the society still existed in a state of ‘mental darkness’, a darkness only recognisable when the society has progressed beyond it, subjecting it to ‘mockery and contempt.’<sup>15</sup> According to Jung, societies continue to relate trickster tales because the narratives serve as ‘therapeutic anamnesis’, keeping the shadow figure conscious and – crucially – criticised, despite its allure.<sup>16</sup> For Jung, the trickster is the psyche’s reflection: ‘an epitome of all the inferior traits of character in individuals.’<sup>17</sup> Yet it is also a ‘forerunner of the saviour’, only hinted at but potentially there: the trickster’s enantiodromia.<sup>18</sup>

These early idealist approaches have been criticised for their evolutionary stance and accultural, reductive analyses. In her discussion of Native American trickster narratives, Anne Doueihi describes the way in which Western scholars approach trickster narratives within their own ideological framework, reducing them to one interpretation:

In this discourse, Western conceptions of the sacred and profane, of myth and literature, and of origin, evolution, and degeneration, are used to frame the trickster particularly, and Native American culture generally, so that Western civilization can see the primitivity or degeneracy of the Other – and so justify its own domination and its own discourse.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Jung comments that ‘we may expect that with the progressive development of consciousness the cruder aspects of the myth will gradually fall away, even if the danger of its rapid disappearance under the stress of white civilization did not exist.’<sup>20</sup> It is clear that Boas, Radin and Jung’s evolutionary interpretation of the trickster’s characteristics and function presupposes that the communities who generate the narratives are less civilised than

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<sup>14</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, pp. 202-203.

<sup>17</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, p. 209.

<sup>18</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, p. 203; 211.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Doueihi, ‘Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story in Trickster Narratives’, in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 193-201 (p. 195).

<sup>20</sup> Jung, ‘On the Psychology’, p. 205.

the societies within which the scholars write. Trickster figures are, however, found in every culture. Thus the only assertion which can be made with confidence about communities in which a popular trickster appears frequently, is that the people within that culture scrutinise humanity.

### **Tricksters contextualised: Evans-Pritchard and Street**

The consideration of context was advocated by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his study *The Zande Trickster* (1967). A collection of narratives regarding the trickster Ture are presented following an introduction to the culture of the Zande people of North Central Africa. Radin did, in fact, also disclose important contextual information required for a better understanding of the trickster cycle, but he and his peers drew broad conclusions about trickster figures worldwide from the few cycles which had been studied. By contrast, Evans-Pritchard declined to attempt an interpretation of the narratives he acquired, explaining that the tales are ‘best read simply as tales, without [his] trying to get between the reader and the read with elaborate structural and sociological interpretations.’<sup>21</sup> He draws attention to the artificiality of tales narrated to a transcriber: the consequence is ‘curtailed or garbled’ versions of the narrative, lacking essential aspects such as prosodic variation and audience participation.<sup>22</sup> Although Evans-Pritchard concedes that the trickster stories are ‘rich in material for the psychoanalyst’, he also asserts that the stories ‘might be a problem for him, since there is nothing buried’, adding that ‘all is on the surface and there are no repressed symbols to interpret.’<sup>23</sup> Rather, Evans-Pritchard suggests that the cause of Ture’s prevalence and popularity is simple:

It is as if we are looking into a distorting mirror, except that they are not distortions. We really are like that. What we see is the obverse of the

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<sup>21</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Zande Trickster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. v.

<sup>22</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Zande Trickster*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Zande Trickster*, p. 29.

appearance we like to present. The animals act and talk like persons because people are animals behind the masks social convention makes us wear.<sup>24</sup>

One further significant point is outlined by Evans-Pritchard in his introduction. Tales cannot be referred to as ‘variants’ because there is no authentic ‘original’ from which the variant stems. Instead, each narrator creates ‘a tale anew’: additions and omissions combine with style to make each narrative unique.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the absence of an *Ur* trickster narrative renders meaningless the quest to identify and interpret universal trickster characteristics.

Brian Street, however, offers an interpretation of Ture’s function in Evans-Pritchard’s collection of narratives, comparing Evans-Pritchard’s summation of the trickster’s nature to Radin’s, and suggesting a third possibility. Since creation ‘demands the destruction of what went before,’ the trickster prevents social stagnation by challenging boundaries, yet also prevents anarchy.<sup>26</sup> Street concurs with Radin, specifying that ‘by acting at the boundaries of order the trickster gives definition to that order.’<sup>27</sup> From this, Street concludes that in all societies the trickster functions as both revolutionary and saviour, echoing Jung’s enantiodromia concept: ‘creator and destroyer can be seen and understood in terms of the potential saviour in every rule-breaker.’<sup>28</sup>

### **Recent studies of the trickster in African written literature**

The approaches outlined above consider trickster figures as they appear in oral literature, predominantly in narratives shared by Native Americans. Although trickster figures in oral

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<sup>24</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Zande Trickster*, p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Zande Trickster*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Brian V. Street, ‘The Trickster Theme: Winnebago and Azande’, in *Zande Themes: Essays presented to Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard*, ed. by André Singer and Brian V. Street (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp. 82-104 (p. 97).

<sup>27</sup> Street, ‘Trickster Theme’, p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> Street, ‘Trickster Theme’, p. 103.

literature have received more attention, there have been a few noteworthy recent studies on the trickster in African written literature. Jesse Weaver Shipley's *Trickster Theatre* (2015) explores Akan trickster narratives as the origin of modern Ghanaian theatre. In her 2016 study of the fiction of four African writers, Nadia Naar Gada considers Ayi Kweh Armah and Rachid Mimouni as 'intellectual tricksters.'<sup>29</sup> Gada argues that, by using trickster narrative strategies in their novels, Armah and Mimouni 'appropriate the ambiguity in African oral tradition in order to resist domination and transgress boundaries.'<sup>30</sup> As trickster figures themselves, the authors make connections between 'the artistic and political worlds and construct a rich metaphorical framework in which two opposed groups of ideas struggle.'<sup>31</sup>

In his 1999 study of tricksters in West African literature, Thomas Jay Lynn explains that tricksters mediate past, present and future because their 'dispositions and behaviours are partly drawn from the realm of myth and cultural tradition, making them appropriate foils to destructive aspects of colonization and modernity', yet 'they also embody the desire for a new reality in which concepts of tradition and progress are reconciled.'<sup>32</sup> Lynn summarises the postcolonial trickster thus:

[He] is typically an agent of memory. He recovers dimensions of a given culture that were nearly extinguished by colonization or reshaped by colonial narratives of history. He is not, however, a relic of the past. Rather he plays a role in reclaiming and validating the cultural past while mediating a vision of the future. The counter narratives of history and cultural legitimacy that he forges in this process challenge the ideological norms of modern society and the authority that rests on them. Thus, the

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<sup>29</sup> Nadia Naar Gada, *Modern African Literature Revisited: A Study of Literary Affinities* (Saarbrücken: Noor Publishing, 2016), pp. 204-306.

<sup>30</sup> Gada, *Modern African Literature Revisited*, p. 318.

<sup>31</sup> Gada, *Modern African Literature Revisited*, p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Jay Lynn, 'Resistance and Revision: West African Literature and the Postcolonial Trickster' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Arkansas, August 1999), p. 11. See also Thomas J. Lynn, 'Politics, plunder, and postcolonial tricksters: Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 6:3 (2003), 183-196; Thomas J. Lynn, 'Tricksters Don't Walk the Dogma: Nkem Nwankwo's "Danda"', *College Literature*, 32:3 (Summer, 2005), 1-20; Thomas Jay Lynn, *Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Narration: Envisioning Language* (New York: Springer, 2017), pp. 41-76.

trickster becomes the postcolonial author's device for expanding vision in a changing cultural context.<sup>33</sup>

Lynn also explains that the postcolonial trickster is characterised by cultural hybridity, which enables him to generate 'discourses that challenge, and disclose alternatives to, the prevailing discourses of the metropolitan.'<sup>34</sup> Although Lynn focuses on the works of Chinua Achebe, Nkem Nwankwo and Ousmane Sembène, the patterns he identifies in the postcolonial trickster narratives are relevant to this study.

A wider geographical range of literature published over a forty-five-year period is explored within this study, and consequently no such concrete conclusion can be offered. The focus here, on the trickster figure in a selection of modern African literary texts, complements recent scholarship on postcolonial literatures of decolonization. Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001) explores *inter alia* the multiple identities lived by subjects in order to survive: the dominated people perform public support for rulers, creating an illusion of conviviality and obedience to power. Mbembe develops his analysis beyond binary categories such as resistance versus passivity, and hegemony versus counter-hegemony, considering how Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of obscenity and the grotesque function in the Cameroonian people's parodies of the dominant culture.<sup>35</sup> Mbembe considers the way in which cartoons and sketches, rather than a specific figure, are used to ridicule the postcolonial regime, with a focus on the context of production – historical and anthropological – and the cartoons' status as a commentary on power in the postcolony.<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Brown's *Utopian Generations* brings together postcolonial African literature and British modernism, considering texts that constitute a Badiouan 'event', such as Ngũgĩ's mid-

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', pp. 5-6.

<sup>35</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (London: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 80-81.

<sup>36</sup> Mbembe, *Postcolony*, pp. 109-110.

1970s ‘learning theatre.’<sup>37</sup> As a community project, Ngũgĩ’s work erased the distance between the workers and the product of their labour, thus constituting ‘utopian theatre.’<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Wenzel’s exploration of literary and historical texts concerning the 1850s Xhosa cattle killing, *Bulletproof* (2009), concludes that Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* (2000) offers a utopian promise in the form of a small village where, eventually, tradition and modernity harmoniously combine.<sup>39</sup> In *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Neil Lazarus sets out to reconstruct postcolonial studies by engaging with Fredric Jameson, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said in relation to the postcolonial present.<sup>40</sup> In one chapter, Lazarus follows Raymond Williams’ *The Politics of Modernism* by broadening the postcolonial literature corpus to consider what kind of ‘representational schemas’ might be found through the exploration of ‘neglected’ works.<sup>41</sup> Lazarus also identifies a pattern of representation in postcolonial literatures which suggests a ‘deep-seated affinity and community’, rather than incommensurable difference; many of the authors considered in this study contribute to Lazarus’ reconstruction of the corpus.<sup>42</sup> In *What Is a World?* (2016), Pheng Cheah reads postcolonial literature as world literature, arguing that it has the ability to redefine the world: he examines postcolonial novels which ‘propose revolutionary time and worldly ethics as alternative temporalities.’<sup>43</sup> Robert Spencer’s *Dictators, Dictatorship and the African Novel* (2021) explores the dictator novel as a literary tradition, examining the origins of postcolonial

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 55-57.

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Utopian Generations*, p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Wenzel, *Bulletproof: Afterlives of Anticolonial Prophecy in South Africa and Beyond* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Lazarus, *Postcolonial Unconscious*, pp. 18-19; 21-88. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>42</sup> Lazarus, *Postcolonial Unconscious*, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 330.



dictatorships and the alternative, democratic visions offered by writers such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.<sup>44</sup>

The comparative readings that constitute this work differ from the studies summarised above through a sustained consideration of the trickster figure in postcolonial African literary texts. Each chapter here considers the local, relevant trickster figure as he appears in oral literature; the specific historical and cultural context in which the literary manifestation of the trickster appears, and his relation to authorial intent. Of particular interest to this study is the author's capacity to represent the trickster as both rebel and saviour. This dual nature is alluded to in the recent studies outlined above, in which there is a recognition that the trickster/writer must rebel against and challenge oppressive social institutions in order to improve conditions.

### **The trickster and religion**

Functionalist interpretations of the trickster figure's role within society, although problematic, will be considered because they can serve as a lens through which the authors' use of the figure can be illuminated. That the trickster figure of oral literature is inextricable from religion and ritual is a contention expressed by many: Laura Makarius sees the trickster as a 'mythic projection of the magician who in reality or in people's desire accomplishes the taboo violation on behalf of his group', and is therefore the 'founder of his society's ritual and ceremonial life.'<sup>45</sup> Victor Turner classifies the trickster as a liminal entity. The liminal period is the second of a three-part process in *rites de passage*.<sup>46</sup> In the liminal phase, the neophytes, 'initiands' or liminal *personae* are 'betwixt or between the positions assigned by

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<sup>44</sup> Robert Spencer, *Dictators, Dictatorship and the African Novel: Fictions of the State Under Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Laura Makarius, 'The Myth of the Trickster: The Necessary Breaker of Taboos', in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 66-86 (p. 73).

<sup>46</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1969), p. 94.

law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.<sup>47</sup> Tricksters, behaving ‘as though there were no social or moral norms to guide them’, personify this phase of *rites de passage*.<sup>48</sup>

Alan Barnard seeks to resolve the disagreement concerning the /Xam trickster /Kaggen, initiated in response to W. H. I. Bleek’s conflation of the mantis trickster with the identically named /Xam divinity.<sup>49</sup> While some have disputed /Kaggen’s status as a deity, claiming that Bleek made an error in translation, Barnard clarifies that /Kaggen the trickster, and Mantis the /Xam God, are the same: his name can designate either trickster or God depending on the context.<sup>50</sup> The ambiguity of /Kaggen is such that he has also been conflated with the Devil.<sup>51</sup>

Exploring tricksters in the Pentateuch, Dean Andrew Nicholas cites Moses’ initially marginal status, deception and transformation as evidence for his trickster status.<sup>52</sup> Moses’ passage conforms to the tripartite pattern – separation, marginalization or liminal state followed by reaggregation – identified by Arnold van Gennep and extended by Turner.<sup>53</sup> Nicholas concludes that the function of the Pentateuchal tricksters, of which Jacob/Israel is the greatest, is to inspire ‘hope in the in-between time of desperate hopelessness.’<sup>54</sup> Figures from the New Testament have also been classified as tricksters: Mathias Guenther details the ways

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<sup>47</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 95.

<sup>48</sup> Victor W. Turner, "Myth and Symbol", *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. by David Sills (New York: Macmillan Co. and The Free Press, 1968), 10: p. 580.

<sup>49</sup> W. H. I. Bleek and L. C. Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (London: George Allen, 1911), pp. 1-37. The /Xam people are a group within the San, formerly and pejoratively referred to as ‘Bushmen’, although the term ‘San’ is also considered pejorative. ‘Khoisan’ is the term used to refer to the Khoekhoe and San groups collectively: the San survived by foraging, whereas the Khoekhoe kept livestock. The Khoekhoe was historically and pejoratively referred to as ‘Hottentots.’

<sup>50</sup> Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 84.

<sup>51</sup> Mathias G. Guenther, *Bushman Folktales: Oral Traditions of the Nharo of Botswana and the /Xam of the Cape* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1989), p. 144.

<sup>52</sup> Dean Andrew Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 63-71.

<sup>53</sup> Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, p. 36; 71; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffé (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960); Turner, *The Ritual Process*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>54</sup> Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, p. 100.

in which //Gãũwa is identified with both Satan and Jesus Christ, either erroneously by Western anthropologists or by indigenous peoples affected by Christian doctrine.<sup>55</sup> Hynes and Thomas J. Steele claim that Saint Peter is ‘highly impulsive, impetuous, unrefined, spontaneous, elemental, and exuberant’, ‘forever buffeted by rapid reversals in attitude and behaviour.’<sup>56</sup> The presence of tricksters ‘at the heart of virtually every religion and culture’ is rationalised thus: in myth and ritual they seem to be ‘officially sanctioned exception clauses by which belief systems regularly satirize themselves.’<sup>57</sup>

Here I provide just a few instances of how and why tricksters have been associated so frequently with religion and ritual. Although I do not concur with the theories outlined above, I recognise that trickster figures, by virtue of their moral ambiguity, conflict with socially accepted behaviour norms. Whether behaviour is regulated by religion, tradition, or any other agent, needs to be ascertained in relation to the individual society. That Christianity was a powerful tool of the colonisers is a view shared by many, but perhaps most succinctly expressed by Ngũgĩ in his address to the Fifth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa; discussing the cause of ‘difficult periods’ in Africa’s history, he comments:

Christianity, whose basic doctrine was love and equality between men, was an integral part of that social force – colonialism – which in Kenya was built on the inequality and hatred between men and the consequent subjugation of the black race by the white race.<sup>58</sup>

The contradiction Ngũgĩ identifies here is a recurring motif in the texts I examine, and there are parallels to be drawn with the ambiguity of the trickster figure. Professed Biblical

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<sup>55</sup> Mathias Guenther, *Trickster and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 116-125.

<sup>56</sup> William J. Hynes and Thomas J. Steele, S. J., ‘Saint Peter: Apostle Transfigured into Trickster’, in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 159-173 (p. 164).

<sup>57</sup> Hynes and Steele, ‘Saint Peter’, p. 160.

<sup>58</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972), p. 31.

authority enabled missionaries and colonisers to advocate love and equality, while in practice they delivered hatred and inequality. It also enabled them to subjugate almost every aspect of the colonised peoples' lives. To successfully maintain this ambivalence, missionaries and Christian colonisers engaged in and perpetuated a particular brand of hermeneutic preaching, in which scripture was interpreted in such a way as to benefit themselves.

Doty examines the ancient Greek mythological figure Hermes as a trickster, specifying that the most significant aspect of Hermes is his role as a messenger between the gods and humankind, and as an interpreter.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the term 'hermeneutics' is believed to be derived from Hermes's interpreter role, and it is clear that proselytising missionaries perform a similar role. In some ways, trickster narratives function in the same way as biblical narratives: usually didactic, they are also open to interpretation and can be adapted, manipulated, and modified in order to suit a unique context and agenda. This affinity is strengthened by Alan Dundes, who argues that biblical narratives are 'codified folklore', previously transmitted orally.<sup>60</sup> In order for Christianity to flourish, it was also deemed necessary for aspects of indigenous culture to be comprehensively denigrated and eradicated, and identifying the trickster with the Devil served this double purpose. Thus the trickster figure of oral literature did not always escape from the interaction between missionaries and indigenous people unscathed. For all its condemnation of indigenous culture, however, the Church and its representatives perhaps bore more similarity to the trickster figure than it would care to admit. Some postcolonial writers have exemplified this relationship in their work. Considering the exponential spread of Christianity in sub-Saharan, colonial Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth century – initially through missionaries and

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<sup>59</sup> William G. Doty, 'A Lifetime of Trouble-making: Hermes as Trickster', in *Mythical Trickster Figures*, ed. by Hynes and Doty, pp. 46-65 (p. 46).

<sup>60</sup> Alan Dundes, *Holy Writ as Oral Lit: The Bible as Folklore* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), p. 12.

perpetuated by indigenous converts – I intend to consider how Christianity has been assimilated within the trickster tradition, and adapted to novel or drama, in the postcolonial and neo-colonial context.

### **The Texts**

The texts explored here have some key commonalities: all were composed after independence had been secured, and thus decolonisation is a prominent theme in all. The publication dates range from 1960 to 2005. In chronological sequence, I discuss two plays and four novels from Anglophone Africa: two plays from West Africa, two novels from East Africa, and two novels from South Africa, in order to facilitate a broad comparison. I have chosen the six texts with only general criteria in mind. First, so that translation does not introduce complications for the monolingual reader, the texts must have been originally written in English, or – in the case of *Matigari* – translated into English by an authoritative, author-approved, source. Aside from portraying characters which could be justifiably labelled ‘tricksters’, at least one of the texts I consider potentially performs a trickster ‘function’ itself, without fulfilling the prerequisite of featuring an individual character with archetypal trickster characteristics. I also focused on those texts in which Christianity is prominent. Despite the substantial and complex interaction between traditional culture, including folklore, and Western culture and religion, as yet no trickster figure study addresses the impact this interaction has had on oral trickster narratives. I intend to consider the unique context surrounding each of the six texts and its influence on the trickster function. Each trickster – in print – has the potential to reach a broader and significantly more varied audience than its oral antecedent. Consequently, the two figures are barely comparable, though the progenitor will inform an understanding of its progeny.

The first of the texts I consider, Wole Soyinka's play *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960), was written and first produced in the year Nigeria gained independence. The play presents Jero, a scheming and manipulative Christian 'prophet', professing to communicate directly with God and relating to his followers messages which will ultimately benefit himself. Jero's antics identify him as a mischief-maker, and most critical responses have either explored Jero as a trickster without a specific antecedent in oral literature, or explored the satirical and comical elements of the play.<sup>61</sup> However, I read Jero as a modern, parodic manifestation of Esu (Eshu) the Yoruba trickster-god, adapted specifically for a key moment in Nigerian history: the advent of independence.<sup>62</sup> In part, this is a consequence of Esu's association with crossroads, but Soyinka has also commented that the character was inspired by the Aladura prophets he watched as a child – a religious movement influenced by Pentecostalism that had grown considerably by the time Soyinka wrote *Trials*.

The second chapter focusing on West African literature considers Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975), developed and produced from the early 1960s prior to its publication 1975. Ghana gained independence in 1957, and Sutherland's early work was carried out in the service of a cultural nationalist agenda. The 'Anansewa' of the title refers to the daughter of Ananse, the popular spider-trickster of West Africa. Of the six texts explored in this study, Sutherland's play is the most explicit literary adaptation of a traditional trickster narrative. Consequently, critical responses to the play have often focused on identifying similarities between Sutherland's character and the spider-trickster of

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<sup>61</sup> See for example: Samuel B. Olorunto, 'Modern Scheming Giants: Satire and The Trickster in Wole Soyinka's Drama', *Callaloo*, 35 (Spring, 1988), 297-308; Patricia Beatrice Mireku-Gyimah, 'Soyinka as Satirist: A Study of *The Trials of Brother Jero*', *International Journal of English and Literature*, 4:6 (August 2013), 269-282; Confidence Gbolo Sanka & Cecilia Addei, 'Comedy As A Way Of Correcting The Ills Of Society: A Critical Reading Of Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* And Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*', *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 2:9 (September 2013), 20-26.

<sup>62</sup> I use the more recent orthography for proper nouns with variant spellings, but the writer's spelling will be retained in direct quotations.

traditional folktales, and exploring the ways in which traditional story-telling performance features have been adapted for the stage.<sup>63</sup> Ananse has been identified by many critics, including Sutherland, as a figure through which society can be satirised and examined.<sup>64</sup> Some critical responses to *Marriage* maintain that Sutherland's Ananse performs this function well in a modern, postcolonial context, whereas other responses claim that there is little satirical or examinatory value in Sutherland's adaptation.<sup>65</sup> Although the adaptation of Ananse for the stage will be discussed – both the character himself and the story-telling performance – my primary focus in this chapter is exploring to what extent Sutherland's work was influenced, supported, and undermined by the context in which she was writing. Using Sutherland's interpretation of folklore Ananse as a starting point, I consider the ways in which Ananse became a contentious political figure in post-independence Ghana.

The first of the two chapters concerning East African literature considers Peter Nazareth's *The General Is Up* (1984), which explores the repercussions of the President-General's decision to expel Asian citizens from 'Damibia' – a fictional postcolonial African country.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See for example: John Hagan, 'Influence of Folktale on *The Marriage of Anansewa*: A Folkloric Approach', *Okike*, 27 (1988), 19-30; Annin Felicia and Abrefa Amma Adoma, 'Representations of Ghanaian Tradition in Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Fiawoo's *The Fifth Landing Stage*', *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 1:1 (Feb., 2012), 89-94.

<sup>64</sup> See Efua T. Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa AND Edufa* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p. 3. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text. Efua Sutherland, 'Venture into Theatre', *Okyeame*, 1:1 (1960), 47-48 (p. 48).

<sup>65</sup> See for example: Patrick Ebewo, 'Reflections on Dramatic Satire as Agent of Change', *English Studies in Africa*, 40:1 (1997), 31-41; Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1982), pp. 196-224; James Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin: Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 114-115, 127-142; David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre* (Oxford: James Currey, 1995), p. 114, 119; Femi Osofisan, 'Drama and the New Exotic: The Paradox of Form in Modern African Theatre', in *The Nostalgic Drum: Essays on Literature, Drama and Culture* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2001), pp. 43-53; Ola Rotimi, 'The Attainment of Discovery: Efua Sutherland and the Evolution of Modern African Drama', in *The Legacy of Efua Sutherland: Pan-African Cultural Activism*, ed. by Anne V. Adams and Esi Sutherland-Addy (Oxford: Ayeibia Clarke, 2007), pp. 18-23 (pp. 20-22).

<sup>66</sup> Chapters from *The General Is Up* were published in literary magazines as early as 1974. An early version of the novel was first published in Calcutta by Writers Workshop in 1984. It was subsequently revised and published by TSAR in 1991. In 1986, Nazareth told an interviewer that his new novel was not coming out soon, and that it was with the publishers. See Peter Nazareth, interviewed by Bernth Lindfors, *Africa Talks Back: Interviews with Anglophone African Writers*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors (Asmara: Africa World Press, 2002), July 1986, pp. 191-212 (p. 209). A further revised edition was published in 2013 by publisher Goa 1556, in Goa. See Nazareth's CV from 2015:

Nazareth's *General* resembles Uganda's former president Idi Amin, who overthrew Milton Obote – Uganda's prime minister and president since independence in 1962 – in a military coup in 1971. A Ugandan writer of Goan descent, Nazareth explores the consequences of the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in the 1970s. Rather than exploring the General as a trickster figure, I consider the potential trickster function of Nazareth's novel. In Nazareth's study of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar and Ishmael Reed's fiction, *In the Trickster Tradition* (1994), he explores the form of his chosen writers' works, asserting that the form of a novel can play tricks on the reader, shaking them out of 'dangerous fixed perceptions so that they will see and think.'<sup>67</sup> Nazareth's interest in the trickster function of fiction has prompted some critics to consider how his novels might also fulfil this function: indeed, this is something that Nazareth discusses and writes frequently of himself.<sup>68</sup> Of *The General* Nazareth says, 'the trick is in the conclusion and the epilogue.'<sup>69</sup> These sections call into question the reliability of the preceding narrative, and in the chapter I consider Nazareth's concept of the trickster novel as it relates to his own work, how Nazareth's 'trick' functions, and what precisely it achieves.

Ngũgĩ's *Matigari* (1987) narrates the return of the eponymous freedom fighter to his village in an unnamed neo-colonial country. Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963, and the fictional country in the novel is similar to post-independence Kenya. Matigari is characterised by an unwavering determination to rid his country of corrupt neo-colonial

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<https://english.uiowa.edu/sites/english.uiowa.edu/files/field/cv/Nazareth%20CV%202015%20website.pdf>  
[Accessed 16 April 2020].

<sup>67</sup> Peter Nazareth, *In the Trickster Tradition: The Novels of Andrew Salkey, Francis Ebejar and Ishmael Reed* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> J. R. McGuire, 'The Writer as Historical Translator: Peter Nazareth's 'The General is Up'', *The Toronto South Asian Review*, 6:1 (1987), 17-23; Olatubosun Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice in Two Novels of Peter Nazareth', *Asemka: A literary journal of the University of Cape Coast*, 7 (September 1992), 13-31; Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, pp. 191-212.

<sup>69</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 10.



practices, an honorable endeavour that does not correlate with the moral ambiguity of most traditional tricksters. In some ways, however, Matigari's behaviour reflects that of the popular Gikuyu trickster figure Hare, and an exploration of these similarities forms part of this chapter. In fact, the contradictory nature of trickster figures *can* be seen in Matigari's characterisation: he is both hero and villain, subversive and authoritative, a self-pronounced saviour of the people whom he views with contempt. Critical responses to Ngũgĩ's works are numerous, and although some have considered Matigari's moral ambiguity, none have considered the ways in which Matigari can be read as a trickster figure.<sup>70</sup>

Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) is the first of two chapters that consider literature from South Africa. Mda's novel offers a dual narrative of a nineteenth century and present day rural community, depicting the Xhosa Cattle-Killing movement and its repercussions. Khoekhoe characters are used by Mda to explore aspects of Khoekhoe cosmology, including belief in and attitudes towards the Khoekhoe forefather Heitsi Eibib. While some critics have identified Mda's presentation of the child Heitsi as a character that symbolises a potential saviour, a challenge to binary thinking, and the amalgamation of beliefs usually considered to be mutually exclusive, the reception of the novel to date has been dominated by discussion of the Cattle Killing, in the process neglecting the key role of the trickster figure.<sup>71</sup> I approach

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<sup>70</sup> See for example: Abdulrazak Gurnah, 'Matigari: A Tract of Resistance', *Research in African Literatures*, 22:4 (Winter, 1991), 169-172; Lewis Nkosi, 'Reading *Matigari*: The New Novel of Post-Independence', in *The World of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1995), pp. 197-205.

<sup>71</sup> See for example J. U. Jacobs, 'Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*: The Novel as *Umngqokolo*', *Kunapipi* 24:1/2 (2002), 224-236; David Bell, 'The Intimate Presence of Death in the Novels of Zakes Mda: Necrophilic Worlds and Traditional Belief', in *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational*, ed. by Anne Holden Rønning and Lene Johannessen (New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 93-106; Renée Schatteman, 'The Xhosa Cattle-Killing and Post-Apartheid South Africa: Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *African Studies*, 67:2 (August 2008), 275-291; Hilary P. Dannenburg, 'Culture and Nature in *The Heart of Redness*', in *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*, ed. by David Bell and J. U. Jacobs (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), pp. 169-190; Paulina Grzęda, 'Magical Realism: A Narrative of Celebration or Disillusionment? South African Literature in the Transition Period', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 44:1 (2013), 153-183.

Heitsi Eibib as a postcolonial prophet-trickster, one whose adaptation by Mda reveals his ideological inconsistencies.

André Brink's *Praying Mantis* (2005) reimagines the life of a historical figure, Cupido Kakkerlak – a Christian convert who worked as a missionary in the early nineteenth century. More explicitly than Mda, Brink identifies Cupido with Heitsi Eibib (referred to by Brink as Heitsi-Eibib), as well as the mantis insect that is at the heart of the trickster-deity debate outlined above. Brink's novel, however, has not yet been evaluated as a contribution to the trickster debate. Interestingly, one critic has stated explicitly that Cupido is no rogue or trickster, clearly failing to acknowledge the innumerable ways in which 'trickster' can be both a positive and revealing designation.<sup>72</sup> Again Heitsi-Eibib's function as a prophet-trickster will be considered, but Brink's contention that historical fiction can offer a new way of perceiving South Africa's history, as well as its present, is also essential for understanding the nature of Cupido as a trickster.

## Conclusion

Given the expansion of Christianity in Africa during the colonial and postcolonial eras, it is not surprising that the trickster rooted in oral tradition often appears in postcolonial literature as a holy man. Through his immoral behaviour, and his association – real or imagined – with divinity, the trickster can seem to be a union of the sacred and the profane. Broadly, the trickster figures considered in the following chapters encompass elements of traditional and European culture and belief, embodying their amalgamation or symbolising their oppositional nature. This fusion facilitates the negotiation and interrogation of often conflicting,

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<sup>72</sup> Godfrey Meintjes, 'André Brink's Prose Oeuvre: An Overview', in *Contrary: Critical Responses to the Novels of André Brink*, ed. by Willie Burger and Karina Magdalena Szczurek (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2013), pp. 37-95 (p. 85).

sometimes complementary, aspects of two distinct cultures. My study addresses the following key question: in each unique context, what purpose does the personification of a religio-cultural synthesis serve, and what role – if any – does the resultant trickster figure perform? Considering the diversity of the oral literature trickster figure antecedents, and the complex contextual circumstances surrounding the composition of each text, it would be erroneous to identify this work as a comparison of trickster figures in African literature. I hope, however, that this study will contribute to the trickster debate, neglected in recent years, while also illuminating how the prevalence of Christianity has influenced literary representations of the trickster and revealed the contradictory tensions within post-independence modern African nations.

## Chapter 1

### Wole Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960) and the role of the trickster in the independence struggle

#### Introduction

Soyinka's *The Trials of Brother Jero* presents the audience with Brother Jeroboam, an overtly fraudulent Aladura (Christian) prophet synthesised with the Yoruba 'trickster' divinity, Esu.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I begin by providing a brief introduction to Soyinka's early life, career and influences. Next, I summarise relevant critical responses to *Trials*. I then consider the tenets of traditional Yoruba religion in order to understand the significance of Jero as a Christianised Esu, referring to Soyinka's comments on Yoruba religion in general, and Esu in particular. In the next section, I discuss the impact of Christian missions to Yorubaland – including the ways in which the missionaries responded to Esu – and the importance of Aladura churches to *Trials*. Having completed these essential preliminaries, in the next section I proceed to the substance of the chapter, a close reading of *Trials* in which I illustrate the ways in which Jero is an incarnation of Esu. The next section continues my close reading, with a specific focus on the satirical function of Jero. I demonstrate that through this character, Soyinka explores the hypocrisy and potential for charlatanism in Christian doctrine and practice. Soyinka also draws striking parallels between ritual and drama, and this functional affinity will also be discussed. The weight of critical attention on *Trials* to date has centred on the play's efficacy as a social satire; in the final section I too consider Jero's potential as an agent of satire, in addition to the trickster's pertinence to Nigeria's independence, and argue that the key to the satirical nature of the play is the amalgamation of the Yoruba trickster divinity and an Aladura prophet.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aladura' is derived from *alaadura*, i.e. 'one who prays.' See Benjamin C. Ray, 'Aladura Christianity: A Yoruba Religion', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23:3 (Aug., 1993) 266-291 (p. 270). Esu's 'trickster' designation is contentious and will be explored below.

### Soyinka's early life, career, and influences

Born in 1934, Soyinka grew up in Aké, Abeokuta, in Western Nigeria. In a question and answer session with students in Harare, Soyinka explains that his family brought together the 'modern and the traditional': he had been raised in a 'Christian family in the midst of "pagan" manifestations.'<sup>2</sup> Nationalist sentiments had pervaded Soyinka's childhood, resulting in a sense that even before Nigeria's independence, colonialism was 'already dead.'<sup>3</sup> But when Soyinka listened to the first set of legislators from Nigeria – at the time partially self-governed – who were visiting Britain, he realised that the enemy was within as 'they were more concerned with the mechanisms for stepping into the shoes of the departing colonial masters', demonstrating 'the most naked and brutal signs of alienation of the ruler from the ruled, from the very first crop.'<sup>4</sup> Returning to Nigeria from London in January 1960, Soyinka had been awarded a grant by the Rockefeller Foundation to study drama in West Africa.<sup>5</sup> The final script of *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) won a play-writing competition sponsored by *Encounter*, a magazine funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom [CCF], which in turn was covertly funded by the USA's Central Intelligence Agency [CIA].<sup>6</sup> Successful productions of Soyinka's plays had enthused the student body and added fuel to the belief that African theatre was freeing itself just as Nigeria was becoming independent.<sup>7</sup> It was in

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<sup>2</sup> Wole Soyinka quoted in James Gibbs, 'Soyinka in Zimbabwe: A Question and Answer Session', in *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*, ed. by Biodun Jeyifo (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), December 1981, pp. 68-115 (pp. 71-72). Soyinka identified Amope, the petty trader character in *Trials*, as being similar to his mother. See Wole Soyinka, class discussion, 'Wole Soyinka: In Person, University of Washington, 1973', in *Conversations*, ed. by Jeyifo, April 1973, pp. 1-31 (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> Wole Soyinka, interviewed by Biodun Jeyifo, 'Realms of Value in Literature Art: Interview with Wole Soyinka', in *Conversations*, ed. by Jeyifo, 1985, pp. 116-128 (p. 117).

<sup>4</sup> Wole Soyinka, interviewed by 'Biyi Bandele-Thomas, 'Wole Soyinka Interviewed', in *Conversations*, ed. by Jeyifo, 1993, pp. 182-197 (p. 184).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert W. July, *An African Voice: The Role of Humanities in African Independence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 68-71.

<sup>6</sup> James Gibbs, "'America Land of the Free?'" Wole Soyinka's Early Encounters with the United States', in *Palavers of African Literature: Essays in Honour of Bernth Lindfors, Volume 1*, ed. by Toyin Falola & Barbara Harlow (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), pp. 175-201 (p. 188).

<sup>7</sup> July, *An African Voice*, pp. 68-69.

the midst of nationalistic fervour that Soyinka wrote *Trials*, which was first produced in April 1960.

The blending of different cultures, conventions, and influences recurs throughout Soyinka's work, an artistry that is seen clearly in *Trials*. The missionary education Soyinka received encouraged him to believe that 'Ogun is the pagans' devil who kills people and fights everybody', yet Soyinka continues to cite Ogun as an inspiration and proposed a theory of Yoruba tragedy based on Ogun's journey through the abyss.<sup>8</sup> What Soyinka has emphasised – again and again – is the value of utilising creative sources from a range of cultures. In response to accusations of Europhilia, Soyinka names his critics 'Neo-Tarzanists', describing them as follows:

[Throwbacks] who lack the intellectual capacity to even first of all appreciate the kind of exploration which I am making into points of departure as well as meeting points between African and European literary and artistic traditions and quite unabashedly exploiting these various complementarities, or singularities, or contradictions, in my own work.<sup>9</sup>

One of Soyinka's teachers at the University of Leeds, G. Wilson Knight, viewed drama as a kind of rite, 'more ceremony than entertainment.'<sup>10</sup> Soyinka's later work exploring the ritual origins of drama demonstrates Knight's influence, but while Knight considered the concept of audience affect in drama primarily in terms of individual psychological processes, synonymous with an individual's experience of ritual, Soyinka views the conclusion of the theatre, revolution and ritual experiences as a renewed social consciousness, potentially revolutionary in nature.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* and *Ìsarà: A Voyage Around Essay* (London: Minerva, 1994), p. 136. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 140-160.

<sup>9</sup> Soyinka, 'Realms of Value', p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ann B. Davis, 'Dramatic Theory of Wole Soyinka', in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, ed. by James Gibbs (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1980), pp. 147-157 (p. 148).

One particular strand of influence that Soyinka discusses at length, and aids a greater understanding of the interlinking elements of Yoruba and Christian belief in *Trials*, is the origin of modern Nigerian theatre. Soyinka has often commented on the similarities between ritual and drama, viewing ‘rites, rituals, ceremonials, festivals [as] such a rich source of material for drama’ because ‘they are intrinsically dramatic in themselves.’<sup>12</sup> Soyinka describes the origin of Yoruba Operatic Theatre: it began with ‘church cantatas which developed into dramatizations of biblical stories until it asserted its independence in secular stories.’<sup>13</sup> However, the Cherubim and Seraphim church movement (1925), and later Aladura churches, rejected traditional forms and secular stories in favour of dramatic biblical narratives. Soyinka refers to these groups as ‘prophetist’ cults, describing their widespread and fanatical mission to burn anything related to ‘pagan worship.’<sup>14</sup> This was, Soyinka claims, ‘the lowest ebb in the fortunes of traditional theatre.’<sup>15</sup> Discussing this era of Nigerian drama, James Gibbs comments that ‘it is no coincidence that Soyinka’s plays make extensive use of the setting which this theatre movement grew, for the worship of independent African churches is often intensely theatrical.’<sup>16</sup> In fact, Soyinka explicitly refers to Aladura churches in relation to *Trials*: ‘I wrote *Brother Jero* from personal contact with these churches; in youth I often attended the services or watched their ecstatic dancing through the windows.’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gibbs, ‘Soyinka in Zimbabwe’, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue*, p. 142; 301.

<sup>15</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 24. See also Christopher B. Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 216-217.

<sup>17</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue*, p. 301.

Amid this theatrical climate, Hubert Ogunde – considered the pioneer of modern Nigerian drama and undoubtedly an influence on Soyinka – moved away from the Christian elements of folk opera and developed it by incorporating motifs, themes, and symbols from the secular masquerades.<sup>18</sup> In the 1940s Ogunde had started a movement of using drama as a vehicle of nationalism and anti-colonialism. His plays were banned and he was imprisoned.<sup>19</sup> Bringing pre-colonial Yoruba culture onto the stage and weaving it into representations of Christianity, utilising slapstick for comedy, and criticising society were all hallmarks of the theatre Soyinka experienced in his formative years; all these elements combine in *Trials*.

### **Critical responses to *The Trials of Brother Jero***

The play focuses on Jero, a beach prophet, whose cunning and manipulative behaviour has enabled him to acquire numerous devotees. Jero is trying to avoid paying Amope, a trader, for a cape, while keeping one of his followers, Chume, from finding satisfaction in his unhappy marriage by beating his wife. Unbeknownst to Jero, Amope is Chume's wife. When the truth is revealed, Chume convinces himself that Amope and Jero are lovers. Jero plans to avoid Chume's wrath by arranging for him to be taken to an asylum, a project likely to succeed with the support of Jero's newest devotee: a member of parliament.

Soyinka apparently wrote *Trials* over a weekend in response to a request from the Students' Dramatic Society. It is a popular comedy that has been produced all over Africa, in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Gibbs identifies Jero as 'the most popular theatrical character in English-speaking Africa' in the fifteen years between the first

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<sup>18</sup> Gibbs, 'Soyinka in Zimbabwe', pp. 74-75.

<sup>19</sup> Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, pp. 88-90.

<sup>20</sup> For a production history up to 1977, see James Gibbs, 'The Masks Hatched Out', in *Research on Wole Soyinka*, ed. by James Gibbs & Bernth Lindfors (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1993), pp. 51-79 (pp. 53-54). A quick search on Youtube will yield recordings of productions as recent as 2018.



and second Jero plays.<sup>21</sup> Various study guides are available for the play, indicating its popularity as a school text.<sup>22</sup> Initially, however, the play provoked outrage for its perceived attack on Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Speaking in 1962, Soyinka described *Trials* as a ‘very light recital of human evils and foibles’, acknowledging its popularity.<sup>24</sup> Soyinka has also detailed the success of *Trials* when he toured it in rural Nigeria, despite the use of the English language.<sup>25</sup> Derek Wright comments that in all the African productions he has seen of *Trials*, the audience shouted, chanted, clapped and drummed, to a sometimes ‘deafening crescendo.’<sup>26</sup>

There has been much critical engagement with *Trials* since its first production, right up to the present day.<sup>27</sup> Many critics have explored the centrality of Yoruba beliefs to Soyinka’s plays, yet few have considered the presence of Esu in *Trials*. Commenting that Soyinka’s general omission of Esu from his use of Yoruba myth is remarkable, Biodun Jeyifo also notes that satire and parody are assigned to Esu.<sup>28</sup> Ngũgĩ explores Soyinka’s satires, identifying

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<sup>21</sup> Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> See for example, E. M. Parsons, *Notes on Wole Soyinka’s the Jero Plays* (London: Methuen, 1979); C. P. Dunton, *York Notes: Notes on Soyinka’s “Three Short Plays”* (Harlow: Longman, 1982); Cengage Learning Gale, *A Study Guide for Wole Soyinka’s “The Trials of Brother Jero”* (Gale Study Guides, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Wole Soyinka, interviewed by Lewis Nkosi, *African Writers Talking: A collection of interviews*, ed. by Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1972), August 1962, pp. 171-177.

<sup>25</sup> Soyinka, ‘In Person’, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Derek Wright, *Wole Soyinka Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993), p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> See for example: John Povey, ‘Wole Soyinka: Two Nigerian Comedies’, *Comparative Drama*, 3:2 (Summer 1969), 120-132; Bu-Buakei Jabbi, ‘The Form of Discovery in *Brother Jero*’, *Obsidian (1975-1982)*, 2:3 (Winter, 1976), 26-33; Tunde Lakoju, ‘Literary Drama in Africa: the Disabled Comrade’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 5:18 (1989), 152-161; C. U. Eke, ‘A Linguistic Appraisal of Playwright-Audience Relationship in Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*’, *Babel*, 42:4 (Jan., 1996), 222-230; Daniel Muhau, ‘Mocking Bad Leaders and Systems That Back Them’, *Africa News Service*, 18 January, 2011; Bawa Kammampoal, ‘The Transformative Vision of Modern Society in Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*’, *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1:10 (October 2013), 1-16; Bisi Adigun, ‘Pentecostalizing Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*’, in *African Theatre 13: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o & Wole Soyinka*, ed. by Martin Banham, Femi Osofisan with Guest Editor Kimani Njogu (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), pp. 29-31; Mahboobeh Davoodifar, ‘Power in Play: A Foucauldian Reading of A. O. Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*’, *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 6:6 (December 2015), 63-68; Christine Osaе, ‘The Quest for Happiness in Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero*’, *Indonesian EFL Journal*, 2:1 (January 2016), 12-22; Sobia Ilyas, ‘Power Dynamics in Wole Soyinka’s “The Trials of Brother Jero”’, *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 2:2 (March, 2019), 180-187.

<sup>28</sup> Biodun Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 36.

Brother Jero as ‘the best representative of religious hypocrisy’, although he considers Jero a cunning rogue rather than a trickster.<sup>29</sup> Samuel B. Olorounto argues that while some plays portray tricksters as powerful imposters who profess to be acting in the interests of the common good – similar to Esu – other plays, such as *Trials*, present trickster figures more closely resembling the animal tricksters of Yoruba folktales, such as Spider or Tortoise (*A Dance of the Forests* and *The Tortoise*, 1960).<sup>30</sup> The temporal proximity of these plays to *Trials* potentially indicates a conscious association with tricksters and Nigeria’s independence. Soyinka, Olorounto argues, ridicules the trickster in his plays, rather than presenting him as a figure engaged in ‘justifiable rebellion against any social or ethical system which appears to be detrimental to his position.’<sup>31</sup> Crucially, Olorounto emphasises that Soyinka’s adaptations of traditional trickster figures are stimulated by the political, social and economic circumstances of the time in which they were published: the immediate pre-independence and postcolonial context.<sup>32</sup> More pertinent to this study is Richard Priebe’s discussion of the ways in which Jero’s appearance and character bear close resemblance to Esu’s, particularly their roles as ‘mediator between men and god(s)’ and their ‘libidinous energy.’<sup>33</sup> Those who have considered Soyinka’s Jero as a trickster generally, or an embodiment of Esu specifically, have not considered the significance of recasting Esu as a Christian prophet.

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<sup>29</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, pp. 59-61.

<sup>30</sup> Olorounto, ‘Modern Scheming Giants’, p. 300.

<sup>31</sup> Olorounto, ‘Modern Scheming Giants’, pp. 297-298.

<sup>32</sup> See also Patrick Ebewo, *Barbs: A Study of Satire in the Plays of Wole Soyinka* (Kampala: JANyeko, 2002), pp. 25-26.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Priebe, ‘Soyinka’s Brother Jero: Prophet, Politician and Trickster’, in *Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Gibbs, pp. 79-86 (p. 80).

### **The tenets of traditional Yoruba religion, and Esu**

Soyinka's *Trials* requires a brief preliminary of relevant religious aspects to introduce the interpretation of Jero as an incarnation of Esu. Esu is not a named character in *Trials*, yet Soyinka's description of Jero's appearance at the opening of the play establishes the association. Jero has thick, high, well-combed hair – like Esu's long and phallus-shaped hair style – and he holds a divine rod, recalling the club that Esu carries.<sup>34</sup> In sculpture, Esu is presented as having a large phallus or phallic club – a symbol of his considerable libido, his association with fertility, and his role as the originator of erotic dreams.<sup>35</sup> Soyinka reinforces Jero's dual identity by revealing Jero's preoccupation with women; the encounters with women add little to the play's plot, suggesting that they occur only to signify the presence of Esu. Jero begins by admitting that his only weakness is women, which is why he keeps away from them and was disturbed to find Amope waiting for him when he awoke (pp. 146-147). He leers at women he sees on the beach (pp. 153-154), and in one stage direction he '*follow[s] the woman's exposed limbs with quite distressed concentration*' (p. 158). But these similarities – appearance and lasciviousness – merely trigger an initial recognition in the audience; as the play continues, far more significant and pertinent parallels can be drawn between Jero and Esu. Esu's position and duties in the *orisa* pantheon, and his characteristics, therefore need to be considered. As a contentious figure, Esu's social function is the focus of much debate, and the key ideas relating to this will also be discussed.

Soyinka has written and spoken frequently on the value of traditional Yoruba belief, and his use of Esu symbolism in connection with a professed Christian prophet and rogue is therefore

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<sup>34</sup> Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 145. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>35</sup> Allison Sellers and Joel E. Tishken, 'The Place of Esu in the Yoruba Pantheon', in *Esu: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*, ed. by Toyin Falola (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013), pp. 41-55 (p. 43).

curious. In addition to Ogun, Jeyifo identifies a second paradigm or arc in Soyinka's works, a "ludic" self born of an excess of signification and the unfinalizeability of "meaning," one that he considers 'strongly resonates with the ritual and mythic traditions of the Yoruba trickster god of chance, mischief and indeterminacy, Eshu.'<sup>36</sup> Esu's status within the Orisa pantheon is significant too: his relationship to the other deities illuminates his affinity with Jero. E. Bolaji Idowu's study of Yoruba belief, published only two years after Soyinka wrote *Trials*, is valuable here: belief evolves over time and Idowu's work provides a comprehensive and contextually relevant account of Yoruba religion. Such a comprehensive study of traditional Yoruba belief is appropriate for the beginning of the decolonisation process, particularly considering the impact of Christianity on the Yoruba peoples.

Idowu and Soyinka describe the deities in much the same way, and their definitions will be considered in conjunction.<sup>37</sup> Olodumare is the Yoruba Supreme Being, or creator-god. He brought into being all divinities (*orisa*) and, although he made each of them responsible for certain duties, he has absolute authority over them.<sup>38</sup> Orunmila is the oracle divinity, and was endowed by Olodumare with 'special wisdom and foreknowledge to the end that he may be His accredited representative on earth in matters relating to man's destiny.'<sup>39</sup> Through Ifa divination – a gift delivered to humankind by Esu – priests or *babalawos* communicate with Orunmila by questioning or petitioning him on behalf of suppliants.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jeyifo, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Soyinka criticises Idowu's study for its notion that monotheism 'represents the pinnacle of religious consciousness of which man is capable', a stance Soyinka attributes to Idowu's conversion to Christianity. See Wole Soyinka, *Of Africa* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 131.

<sup>38</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), p. 49. See also Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 164.

<sup>39</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, pp. 76-77; Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> Sellers and Tishken, 'The Place of Esu', p. 46. See also Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 77, and Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (London: University of California Press, 1980), p. 136.

Examining Esu more closely, it is possible to see how he could be likened to a prophet. One myth claims that Esu taught Orunmila how to divine.<sup>41</sup> When Orunmila declares Olodumare's will to people by prescribing sacrifices or ritual acts, it is Esu's duty to supervise the divination proceedings. In this sense, Esu may be seen as a mediator between the Supreme Being and all others. Yet he is far more than a messenger: he 'makes the supernatural world accessible to mere mortals.'<sup>42</sup> Olodumare knows the destinies of all people, and therefore divination enables individuals to 'learn their destinies, the will of the gods, and how to escape evil by offering sacrifices to feed the gods.'<sup>43</sup> Thus not only does Esu mirror a prophet's ability to communicate with gods, he also proclaims the will of god.

Writing in 1988, literary critic, historian, and former student of Soyinka, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. begins his study of the African-American folklore character, the Signifying Monkey, by delineating its origin: 'Esu-Elegbara', of Yoruba mythology.<sup>44</sup> In the divination process, sixteen palm nuts are used to direct the *babalawo* to specific verses within the Ifa corpus: there are over 150,000.<sup>45</sup> The verses are 'so metaphorical and so ambiguous that they may be classified as enigmas, or riddles, which must be read or interpreted, but which, nevertheless, have no single determinate meaning.'<sup>46</sup> It is Esu that enables supplicants to interpret the verses' relevance to their own lives, their destiny, or their dilemma. If Ifa is considered the 'god of determinate meanings', a metaphor for the text of divination, then Esu – the 'god of indeterminacy' – rules the process of interpreting the text.<sup>47</sup> Thus to Gates, Esu not only

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<sup>41</sup> Sellers and Tishken, 'The Place of Esu', p. 46. See also William Bascom, *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 106-107.

<sup>42</sup> Sellers and Tishken, 'The Place of Esu', p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> Sellers and Tishken, 'The Place of Esu', p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 25; 30. See also Sellers and Tishken, 'The Place of Esu', p. 46.

<sup>46</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 25.

proclaims divine will, he is the interpreter of it; Mary Klages refers to Gates' formulation as 'Esu-neutics.'<sup>48</sup> Soyinka notes that Esu has been appropriated 'for quite a respectable quota of hermeneutic functions', including that of the critical activity as proposed by Gates.<sup>49</sup> In fact, Obododimma Oha refers to Soyinka's theory of writers in exile within an Esu paradigm as 'an esuneutics', citing Nigerian listserv Krazitivity as the origin of the neologism.<sup>50</sup>

Such a beneficial gift delivered and service rendered to humankind may not seem like typical trickster behaviour, yet Esu is described by some as a trickster divinity with good reason.

Esu is, according to Soyinka in his recent publication *Of Africa*, associated with 'the crossroads, chance, the random factor', a 'god of contradictions' representing 'the principle of the chaotic factor, the random element in the well-laid plans of humanity'<sup>51</sup> Idowu explains that people fear Esu and seek to be on good terms with him because he 'holds the power of life and death over them as prosperity or calamity for them depends upon what reports he carries to Olodumare.'<sup>52</sup> When people fail to sacrifice, Esu is ready with a trick to punish them. Soyinka's description of Esu's messenger role strengthens Esu's 'trickster' designation: when Esu delivers a message, he is always truthful – but he might deliver the message in a way that could easily be misinterpreted, because ultimately 'he has a lesson to impart.'<sup>53</sup> For Soyinka, Esu is the messenger whose mischievous and unpredictable nature confuses wise people and gods. Soyinka explains that at festivals, 'mortals consider it wise

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<sup>48</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 11. Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: The Complete Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'EXILE: Thresholds of Loss and Identity', *Anglophonia*, 7 (2000), 61-70 (p. 67).

<sup>50</sup> Obododimma Oha, 'The *Esu* paradigm in the semiotics of identity and community', in *Global African Spirituality, Social Capital and Self-reliance in Africa*, ed. by Tunde Babawale and Akin Alao (Lagos: Malthouse Press, 2008), pp. 299-312 (p. 307).

<sup>51</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 20; 158; Soyinka, 'EXILE', p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 81; Soyinka, 'EXILE', p. 67.

<sup>53</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Of Africa', *Book TV*, online video recording, C-SPAN, 26 November 2012, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?309612-1/of-africa>> [accessed 19 August 2019].

to implore Esu to restrain his prankish temperament.<sup>54</sup> A ‘prankish temperament’ is certainly something the audience note in Jero, a characteristic explored below.

In addition to the role Esu plays in the divination process, various social functions have been attributed to him. Joan Wescott, like Idowu writing of Yoruba belief only two years after the first production of *Trials*, concludes that Esu enables the Yoruba to ‘compensate for the rigidity of their social system on the one hand, and externalise responsibility for any disruption that might occur on the other.’<sup>55</sup> Allison Sellers and Joel E. Tishken also describe Esu as a creative and destructive force because, ‘in bringing discord into humans’ lives, Esu oversees the movement from order to disorder, then to diagnosis (through divination) and the establishment of a new order (through sacrifice).’<sup>56</sup> Femi Euba, who is critical of Wescott’s interpretations, describes Esu’s nature as strikingly different from tricksters like Hermes, whose purpose is to deceive:

[T]ricksters such as Esu ... define or expose the negative complexes, and then (through trickery) incorporate them with a positive or creative aspect. In other words, they trick or dissemble in order to make a moral point, by calling the attention of the victim to his/her community to an awareness of the negative aspect with the hope of correcting it.<sup>57</sup>

Or, in Soyinka’s words, ‘Esu exists to teach humanity [that] there is always more than one side to every issue, more than one face to any reality, teaches you beware of appearances.’<sup>58</sup>

In Ngũgĩ’s examination of Soyinka’s works, he begins by describing a satirist as one who

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<sup>54</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 146.

<sup>55</sup> Joan Wescott, ‘The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba, the Yoruba Trickster: Definition and Interpretation in Yoruba Iconography’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 32:1 (Oct., 1962), 336-354 (p. 337; 345). See also Sellers and Tishken, ‘The Place of Esu’, pp. 47-48.

<sup>56</sup> Sellers and Tishken, ‘The Place of Esu’, pp. 47-48. See also Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 82; Pelton, *The Trickster*, pp. 143-144; John Pemberton, ‘Eshu-Elegba: The Yoruba Trickster God’, *African Arts*, 9:1 (Oct., 1975), 20-27 + 66-70 + 90-92 (p. 67).

<sup>57</sup> Femi Euba, ‘Ritual Satire: Esu-Elegbara and the Yoruba Dramatic Imagination’, in *Esu*, ed. by Falola, pp. 277-289 (p. 283).

<sup>58</sup> Wescott, ‘Eshu-Elegba’, p. 337; Wole Soyinka, ‘Of Africa’, *Book TV*, online video recording, C-SPAN, 26 November 2012, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?309612-1/of-africa>> [accessed 19 August 2019].

‘corrects through painful, sometimes malicious, laughter.’<sup>59</sup> Esu is, then, an embodiment of satire. Clearly, it is not only the verses of Ifa that are open to interpretation: Esu himself can be read in many different ways. These readings will depend upon context: Esu’s function is not fixed, but shifting. Another aspect of his trickster nature, Esu’s ambiguous role parallels Jero’s dramatic function.

### **The impact of Christian missions to Yorubaland**

To the other characters in the play, Jero is perceived as a reliable Christian prophet. There is a historical relationship between Esu and Christianity, and in this section I explore this relationship and its implications in *Trials*. Esu was recast by Christians and Muslims as the Devil/Satan/Iblis, and consequently the missionaries used Esu’s name for ‘Devil’ and ‘Satan’ in Yoruba translations of the Bible.<sup>60</sup> If there is any parallel to be made, however, the consensus is that Esu is most like Satan in the book of Job, whose role it is to try man’s faith on behalf of God.<sup>61</sup> Soyinka outlines the interaction between Christianity and Esu: missionary activity was often hindered by the absence of a devil-figure. The concept of sin was essential to the missionary endeavour because ‘only through the establishment of the notion of sin could these “heathens” be made aware of the peril in which their souls stood – unless they converted.’<sup>62</sup> J. D. Y. Peel explains that the devil performed a vital function in the making of Yoruba Christians, who could attribute any wavering faith they might experience to the meddling activities of malevolent spirits.<sup>63</sup> Thus, like Esu for adherents to traditional Yoruba religion, the devil could be used as a scapegoat to explain antisocial

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<sup>59</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, p. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Sellers and Tishken, ‘The Place of Esu’, p. 52; Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 89; 80; J. D. Y. Peel, *Aladura: A Religious Movement Among the Yoruba* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 33.

<sup>61</sup> Sellers and Tishken, ‘The Place of Esu’, p. 53; Idowu, *Olodumare*, p. 80.

<sup>62</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 145.

<sup>63</sup> J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 262.



behaviour or conflict between people. It is in this historical identification of Esu with the devil that I believe Soyinka's choice of Jero as a Christian prophet and parody of Esu is founded.

Soyinka has made it clear that decolonisation was at the forefront of his mind when he was working on *Trials*. Soyinka describes the missionaries as the 'religious Stormtroopers' of the European explorers, implying the missionaries were the vanguard of colonisation.<sup>64</sup> Soyinka has also cited the burning of works of art, the banning of traditional music, and the warnings missionaries gave that indigenous cultural activities were 'works of the devil' as evidence of cultural destruction.<sup>65</sup> Although Portuguese traders introduced Christianity to Nigeria in the fifteenth century, it was only in the 1840s that Christianity began to spread. Learning to read and write in English was a 'stepping stone' to a middle-class career by the late nineteenth century, and schools were the missionaries' domain in Nigeria until the 1920s.<sup>66</sup> Peel goes as far as to assert that 'the political nationalism of the period 1945-1960 is better seen as following rather than leading developments in the religious field.'<sup>67</sup> In his analysis of the impact of missionaries on West African nationalism, George W. Reid concludes:

[T]he role of missionaries was that of paving the way for European governmental occupation and the introduction and perpetuation of unequal European Christianity. Consequently, the church became a *provocateur* of African nationalism, but unwittingly so. Because the Christian church permitted a paradox between what it preached and what it practiced, Africans began to regard missionaries as tricksters whose Christianity was a means to an end.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Of Africa', *Book TV*, online video recording, C-SPAN, 26 November 2012, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?309612-1/of-africa>> [accessed 19 August 2019].

<sup>65</sup> Soyinka, 'Realms of Value', pp. 124-125.

<sup>66</sup> Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 127.

<sup>67</sup> J. D. Y. Peel, *Christianity, Islam, and Orisa Religion: Three Traditions in Comparison and Interaction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 155.

<sup>68</sup> George W. Reid, 'Missionaries and West African Nationalism', *Phylon*, 39:3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr., 1978), 225-233 (p. 232).

Reid's use of the word 'tricksters' may refer to Christianity's inherent contradictions, the missionaries' ideological ambiguity, or the disparity between their doctrines and their practice – surely all pertinent concerns at the time Reid was writing: during the decolonisation process. But there is also, in essence, something of Esu specifically in Reid's description of the missionaries. It recalls Soyinka's explanation of the lessons Esu teaches, which he elaborates upon in more detail:

When Esu teaches humanity about their folly in trusting to appearances or being dogmatic about any issue, he tends to do it in a rather painful way – you know – like a good teacher armed with a cane, a symbolic cane for adults who haven't learnt the wisdom of looking at both sides of a question. And his place is at the crossroads, where of course, which is a place where human beings get confused: which road do you take at a crossroads?<sup>69</sup>

If the missionaries bear any resemblance to a specific trickster figure, rather than the archetype, it is surely Esu: the missionaries brought the Word forcefully – a culturally biased message in which Esu came to figure as the devil – providing literal and metaphorical lessons which would ultimately lead to anti-colonial nationalism and independence, the epitomic crossroad. Jero as a Christianised Esu is, in fact, a multi-layered allegory.

Although much evangelisation was undertaken by indigenous people, the missionaries frustrated indigenous Christians by failing to treat them equally and perpetuating their subordinate positions both in the Church and in society. Jero is not associated with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), however: he is the leader of his own congregation and the church is identifiable as an Aladura church, the type cited by Soyinka as an influence when he was writing *Trials*. In the late nineteenth century, African Initiated/Independent Churches (AICs) were founded by indigenous converts who protested against the 'paternalism' of the CMS.<sup>70</sup> The first Aladura church, the Christ Apostolic Church (named so in 1941), was the

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<sup>69</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'Of Africa', *Book TV*, online video recording, C-SPAN, 26 November 2012, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?309612-1/of-africa>> [accessed 19 August 2019].

<sup>70</sup> Peel, *Aladura*, pp. 55-56.

third largest church in Western Nigeria in 1958, and attendees increased from 83,000 to over 100,000 in 1965.<sup>71</sup>

In order to recognise Jero's dual identity as Christian prophet and Esu, it is essential to understand how his 'church' can be identified as Aladura. Although Christianity in general was, according to Peel, 'widely conceived of instrumentally' – in essence 'efficacious in attaining this-worldly goals', the aim of the Aladura churches was to use the power of prayer to improve the well-being of adherents in all areas of life, including fertility, wealth, and protection against witchcraft.<sup>72</sup> Aladuras depend upon prophets, dreamers and seers to mediate the power of their spiritual allies – God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and angels – who will help them overcome their problems; prophets are also relied upon to receive and interpret visions and dreams.<sup>73</sup> Thus, in *Trials*, the prayers of Jero's followers uniformly appear as requests for material wealth or markers of status. Chume, Jero's most devoted follower, believes his career success has been, and will continue to be, dependent on Jero's prayers of intercession. Peel continues his description, illustrating the characteristics of Aladura churches that appealed to Yoruba converts:

While Aladura's theological content is strongly Christian, its ritual forms as well as its ontology of the spirit world owe much to the indigenous religious background. Dreams, visions, and ecstatic tongues ... [recall] aspects of both *orisa*-cult groups and of Ifa divination, but with prayer substituting for sacrifice as the medium of human address to God.<sup>74</sup>

Jero's church clearly possesses the hallmarks of Aladura, described by Peel as 'a concern for effective prayer and visionary guidance' and 'a more spontaneous, African style of music and worship.'<sup>75</sup> This is most evident in Scene III, when the stage directions have Jero's followers

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<sup>71</sup> Peel, *Aladura*, pp. 292; 55-70; 105-113.

<sup>72</sup> Peel, *Christianity*, p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> Ray, 'Aladura Christianity', pp. 271-272; 276.

<sup>74</sup> Peel, *Christianity*, p. 79.

<sup>75</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*, p. 314.

chorus ‘Amen’ or ‘Forgive him, Lord’ or ‘In the name of Jesus’ (pp. 156-157). In this scene too, the congregation clap hands and sing ‘I will follow Jesus’, and one woman ‘detaches herself from the crowd in the expected penitent’s paroxysm’ (pp. 158-159). When Chume gains confidence in leading the prayers, the congregation ‘rapidly gain pace’, punctuating his preaching with ‘Forgive us all’ and ‘Amen’ (p. 160). It is on the basis of Jero’s church as an Aladura church, and Jero the prophet presenting himself as a mediator between church members and the divine, that I proceed to a discussion of Jero as an incarnation of Esu.

### **Jero as an incarnation of Esu**

Although Jero appears on stage looking very much like Esu, this is only a façade, a deception. Jero’s opening monologue is identified by Wright as an inverted form of the Yoruba *glee*: in Yoruba Masque Theatre, an opening song or chant is delivered by the chief actor and the chorus, serving as a pledge to the spectators, ‘baba’ (the source of inspiration), and requesting the co-operation and protection of deities – including Esu.<sup>76</sup> In the Operatic Theatre, Ogunde popularised the Opening Glee, which typically acknowledged God as the source of inspiration.<sup>77</sup> As Wright comments, the *glee* is a ‘salute by the troupe leader to his lineage and to the leader from whom he received his training, and limited self-praise’, yet Jero’s opening speech demonstrates both the contempt he feels for his former Master, and the pride he feels for duping him (pp. 145-146).<sup>78</sup> Here the irreverent tone for the play is set: expectations will be subverted and respected institutions and beliefs will be satirised. Jero has been compared to the tricksters Ananse and Tortoise, in whose stories the narrator ‘often plays chorus to his own intrigues, using the first-person voice to give particularly shocking

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<sup>76</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, p. 28; J. A. Adedeji, ‘Trends in the Content and Form of the Opening Glee in Yoruba Drama’, *Research in African Literatures*, 4:1 (Spring, 1973), 32-47 (p. 32; 43-44).

<sup>77</sup> Adedeji, ‘Opening Glee’, pp. 39-40; 46.

<sup>78</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, p. 28.

effect to his frank admissions of defeat.’<sup>79</sup> Throughout the play, Jero’s monologues make the audience co-conspirators to his schemes, manipulations and exploitations, contradicting the prophet-persona he presents to the other characters. Ostensibly a mediator between men and God, the prophet is the mouthpiece of God and one who proclaims his will. While Esu genuinely fulfils this role, the audience can see that Jero merely professes it. ‘Jero’ is, according to Oyin Ogunba, Hausa prison slang for ‘criminal.’<sup>80</sup> I now explore the similarities between Esu and Jero, and consider significant points of departure.

In many ways, Jero is an embodiment of the association of conversion to Christianity and material gain: Jero’s self-serving and duplicitous nature has facilitated his success, and he recognises his followers’ prayers as a kind of business transaction. Jero views his profession as a trade (p. 145) or a business (p. 153), and refers to his worshippers as customers (p. 153). Jero helped his old Master acquire a section of the beach, boasting that the success of his campaign rested on ‘six dancing girls from the French territory, all dressed as Jehova’s Witnesses’ – something akin to an advertising campaign (p. 145). Jero subsequently ousts his Master from his section of the beach to claim it as his own (p. 146), revealing the competitive, business-like nature of the profession. He pretends to his worshippers that he sleeps on the beach (p. 155), but the audience see him sneakily emerging from his hut in order to avoid paying for a cape that he believes will distinguish him as superior to the other prophets (p. 147; 153). The followers must believe that he lives on the beach, because this area constitutes his ‘sacred space’, essential for Aladura churches and the efficacy of their prayers. It is clear that Jero maintains several elaborate deceptions in order to perpetuate the belief that he is poor and committed only to the service of God. For Soyinka, one virtue of

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<sup>79</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, p. 50.

<sup>80</sup> Oyin Ogunba, *The Movement of Transition: A study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975), p. 65. See also Dunton, *Soyinka’s “Three Short Plays”*, p. 23.

the Orisa religion is ‘the reduced status of priesthood in its accustomed intermediary role’, and although Soyinka acknowledges rare corruption among *babalawos*, he maintains that a *babalawo* is ‘the personification of the virtues of self-denial, abstemiousness, and even penury.’<sup>81</sup> Jero, although a ‘prophet’, is clearly not a parody of a *babalawo*. In fact, Jero is very ambitious. While caressing the cape in Scene III, Jero imagines his followers will call him ‘Immaculate Jero, Articulate Hero of Christ’s Crusade’ (pp. 152-153). When he later speaks with Chume, a devoted follower, he tells him that the new appellation was given to him by the Son of God, through a vision (p. 163). This is reminiscent of praise names used in Yoruba tradition and the parallel feature of secret divine names revealed to the founders of Aladura churches: these names ‘imply great intimacy with God and hence have great power against evil forces.’<sup>82</sup>

For Chume, Jero’s visions are evidence of his connection to God, but the audience knows that he fabricates visions to facilitate his ambitions. At the end of *Trials* the audience witness him converting a sceptical Member of Parliament into a follower (pp. 168-171). He accurately identifies that the Member’s ambition is to become a minister and persuades the Member that he must join his flock in order to make this objective a reality (p. 168-169). Jero maintains Chume’s commitment to him by ensuring that Chume does not beat his wife. He explains to the audience conspiratorially that if he permits Chume to beat his wife, Chume will ‘become contented, and then that’s another of my flock gone’ (p. 153). Thus the key to his power is keeping people dissatisfied, or satisfied just enough to guarantee that they trust him sufficiently to return to him for guidance. Jero keeps Chume in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction and reliance: Chume is deeply dissatisfied with his wife’s behaviour but is

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<sup>81</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 135; 149.

<sup>82</sup> Ray, ‘Aladura Christianity’, pp. 280-281.

forbidden from resolving his problem, yet he is given some satisfaction in the belief that if he heeds Jero's advice, it will please God, thereby securing his favour, acceptance into His kingdom, but also – crucially – promotions at work. The material gain associated with Christianity is reinforced by Chume's spontaneous appeals to God. When Chume leads the congregation in Jero's absence, he pleads with God to 'tell our wives not to give us trouble', continuing:

And give us money to have a happy home. Give us money to satisfy our daily necessities. Make you no forget those of us who dey struggle daily. Those who be clerk today, make them Chief Clerk tomorrow. Those who are Messenger today, make them Senior Service tomorrow (p. 160).

As the '*Amens grow more and more ecstatic*', Chume concludes, 'I say those who dey push bicycle, give them big car tomorrow' (p. 160). Chume's faith in Jero and God appears to bring material rewards in the sense that he has been promoted at work; yet, by forbidding Chume to beat his wife, Jero keeps Chume from achieving the spiritual satisfaction he is convinced he needs.

Jero's followers believe that he is a reliable intermediary between man and God, someone who will enable them to interact with God. In fact, the audience know that Jero merely pretends to have spiritual powers. Although he claims that he was born a prophet (p. 145) and that it is in his blood (p. 146), he admits that his prophecies are often 'safe' (p. 157). For example, he explains that predicting a man will live to eighty is prudent because 'If it doesn't come true, [...] that man doesn't find out until he's on the other side' (p. 157). Similarly, Jero prophesied that Chume would become an office boy, a messenger and subsequently promoted (p. 156). Since rising through these positions to Chief Messenger, Chume is convinced that his success has been prophesied by Jero, and therefore agrees not to beat his wife in the hope that he will become Chief Clerk. The implication is that if Chume beats his wife, God will be displeased and prevent him from being promoted. However, when Jero

realises that Chume's wife is the same trader who has been haranguing him for the money he owes, Jero considers whether the will of God might be that Chume should beat his wife because 'Christ himself was not averse to using the whip when occasion demanded it' (p. 162). This comical moment of flagrant heresy reinforces Jero's cunning and self-serving nature. When Jero needed more worshippers, he made a 'risky' prophecy that a faithful adherent would become Prime Minister of the new Mid-North-East-State: this adherent continues to visit Jero at weekends (p. 157). The Member dismisses Jero as a fraud until Jero mentions that he has seen the Member as a Minister of War: Jero questions if the Minister is worthy, asking if he must 'pray to the Lord to remove this mantle from your shoulders and place it on a more God-fearing man' (p. 169). Even Amope, who is not one of Jero's followers, was willing to give him credit for the cape without asking him any questions because Jero's 'calling was enough to guarantee payment' (p. 152). Like Esu, then, Jero's power relies on his knowledge of man's secrets and desires, and the reports he carries back to God. Unlike Esu, however, Jero's communication with God is fabricated.

One of the many places Esu's shrines might be found is the marketplace. Anthropologist John Pemberton describes the Yoruba marketplace as one where goods are exchanged and fortunes changed: it is a metaphor for the 'welter and diversity of forces for good and ill, of forces of change and transformation – personal and impersonal – that pervade human experience.'<sup>83</sup> The market is thus a marginal world, where Esu must be acknowledged.<sup>84</sup> Visually, Soyinka creates a link between Jero and the marketplace. While Amope is distracted by her argument with a fellow trader, which in itself reflects the atmosphere of the marketplace, the audience see Jero taking advantage of the exchange and escaping behind her

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<sup>83</sup> Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 25.

<sup>84</sup> Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 25.



(p. 151). Much of the play's action is fuelled by Amope's role as a trader pursuing Jero to secure payment, and Chume's ignorance of the link between his wife and his spiritual guide. In a more subtle sense, Jero is associated with the marketplace because he trades in souls. He accumulates converts as a means to wealth, yet he understands that some must be sacrificed or exchanged in order to acquire more valuable or more powerful converts. When Jero permits Chume to beat his wife, Chume discovers that Jero owes Amope money, concludes that they are having an affair and decides to kill Jero (pp. 169-170). As Jero wins the Member over to his flock, he decides to use the Member's influence to have Chume certified and placed in a lunatic asylum (p. 171). Jero is therefore similar to Esu in the sense that he has control over and can rewrite the destinies of those around him: Jero reinforces this power by winning their devotion or forsaking them. However, Jero does this to benefit himself, whereas Esu does this to bring harmony back to the community.

That Jero, like Esu, prompts men to argue is clear. Idowu describes Esu's ability to cause confusion and bring about complicated situations: his guile enables him to 'make enemies of very close friends, cause husband and wife to quarrel, and make antagonists of fathers and children.'<sup>85</sup> Chume and Amope's confrontation (pp. 163-166) is Jero's work. Yet again Jero causes confusion and disharmony to serve his own needs. Esu is consulted by those seeking revenge, and he is responsible for illicit sexual liaisons.<sup>86</sup> Chume evidently wishes to take revenge against his wife because of her sharp tongue, and it is to Jero he goes for advice and guidance (pp. 155-156). Lasciviousness is attributed to many trickster figures, but Jero is surprisingly restrained. There is an implication that, since his old Master cursed that women would be the source of Jero's downfall (p. 146), Jero keeps away from them in order to

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<sup>85</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>86</sup> Wescott, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 343.

maintain his success. He does, however, admit that women are his one weakness (p. 146). Thus in Wescott's comment that Esu is 'not only the symbol, but also the solution of man's conflict between instinctive desires and social demands', another similarity with Jero appears.<sup>87</sup> The difference is that while Jero is a symbol of the conflict, he only presents himself convincingly to his followers as the solution – whereas, of course – Esu really *is* the solution. Jero is clearly a parody of Esu, reflecting his characteristics, albeit in distorted form.

For Soyinka, among others, Esu is not the devil-figure the missionaries identified, intent on destroying lives. Jero is, like Esu, open to interpretation. While I do not agree with one critic's claim that by the time Chume leaves the stage in Scene II the audience have sympathised with his position so much that they feel they would very much like to see Chume thrash Amope, it is true that Jero's presence or absence at the opening of a scene will influence the audience's response to the action.<sup>88</sup> When Jero addresses the audience at the opening of the play and unashamedly discloses the truth of his profession – concealed from his devotees – the audience become co-conspirators, privy to Jero's plans. Indeed, watching Jero try to evade the aggressive and nagging Amope would encourage the audience to side with him. Yet I do not believe this feeling would last long. Although the audience might enjoy the comedic elements of the play, surely it is unlikely that they would admire Jero.<sup>89</sup> The questions Soyinka posed to University of Washington students following the rehearsal of a scene from *Trials* are illuminating: he considers whether Jero is being taken too seriously by the actors, asking if anyone has a 'lighter view' of Jero, and if they feel that he has any

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<sup>87</sup> Wescott, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 345.

<sup>88</sup> Priebe, 'Brother Jero', p. 83.

<sup>89</sup> Priebe, 'Brother Jero', p. 81.

‘redeeming qualities.’<sup>90</sup> Soyinka describes Jero as a ‘warped genius’, insisting on his intelligence as an admirable quality.<sup>91</sup> Considering these comments, Gibbs concludes that Soyinka felt the ‘Falstaffian vigour and roguish charm of [Jero] had been obscured.’<sup>92</sup> Jero’s opening monologue, however, seems more akin to that of Richard, Duke of Gloucester at the beginning of William Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: Jero uses this opportunity to demonstrate his cunning, determined to prove a villain, also employing prophecies for his own gain, and introducing himself as an actor playing a role. Perhaps Soyinka’s affection for Esu, his insistence that Esu is misunderstood and has been unjustly portrayed, manifests in his indulgent attitude towards Jero. There is an element of chance at work in the play: when hysterical, Amope reveals that Jero is her debtor, thus destroying Chume’s belief in Jero’s benevolence, and eventually sealing Chume’s fate in a lunatic asylum. However, Jero’s decision to resolve his problem with Chume in this way is not amoral: chance offers him a choice, and the choice he makes is distinctly *immoral*. Soyinka begins his discussion of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* by describing satire:

The sinister aspect of satire is easily overlooked – in exaggerating to a ludicrous degree it also poses a threat – suppose it really happens? Laughter, after all, is a two-sided affair: it expresses a superior attitude but it also covers up fear.<sup>93</sup>

*Trials* undoubtedly demonstrates the sinister aspect of satire: with the support of the Member, how many others might fall victim to Jero?<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Soyinka, ‘In Person’, pp. 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> Soyinka, ‘In Person’, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> Gibbs, ‘Masks’, p. 72.

<sup>93</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue*, p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> This question is partially answered by *Jero’s Metamorphosis* (1973), in which the military regime’s new ‘National Execution Amphitheatre’ provides Jero with the opportunity to form a group that will become the ‘spiritual arm of military rule.’ See Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, pp. 103-105.

### The satirical function of Jero

Perhaps, then, Jero's decisive trickster characteristic is the behaviour that seems immoral to some, and harmless or amusing to others, which leaves him open to interpretation – a quality he also shares with Esu. Esu's most pertinent roles – as interpreter of divine will and an embodiment of satire – will be considered in this section. At its most superficial, *Trials* satirises and critiques Christian beach prophets. Divination is the ritual most often performed by the Yoruba, and its purpose is to guide the client to understand the 'powers that are shaping his life and of others that might be employed to better his fortunes.'<sup>95</sup> Its equivalent in Aladura Christianity is the interpretation of divine revelations such as dreams and visions. Although Jero – professing to be an embodiment of Christian morality – claims to guide his devotees by interpreting his visions from God, the audience can see the disparity between what he says to his devotees, and what he reveals in his monologues. Olorunto explains this disparity:

[B]y calling himself a prophet of God, [Jero] has assumed a holy character, someone above earthly frailties, the kinds against which his followers struggle daily. His assumed holiness is a commodity that his clients would like to acquire and for which they are ready to pay. They want to be good, but they purchase the goodness from someone who is worse than themselves.<sup>96</sup>

Jero is not the only character guilty of this disparity. Chume and the Member commit themselves to God because of what they believe God is able to do for them. In his study of Soyinka's satire, Patrick Ebewo explains that the basis for the satire in *Trials* is 'the conversion of the spiritual realm by the false prophet into an article of trade and exploitation.'<sup>97</sup> Likewise, Ebewo explains that spirituality is not the goal of Jero's followers: they view the church as another club that will enable them to acquire wealth and prosperity.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 66.

<sup>96</sup> Olorunto, 'Modern Scheming Giants', p. 304.

<sup>97</sup> Ebewo, *Barbs*, p. 94.

<sup>98</sup> Ebewo, *Barbs*, p. 96.

In a 1997 interview with Ulli Beier, Soyinka describes the influence of prophets over a member of his family; he also describes the spate of prophesying as a ‘competitive mortification of people’ and ‘nothing but an attempt to bring powerful and wealthy people under the control of the priest.’<sup>99</sup> It is understandable that many people viewed *Trials* as an attack on Christianity and, although Gibbs maintains that people now recognise that the play is a condemnation of powerful hypocrites and their gullible followers, I believe that Jero’s identity as a Christian prophet is not simply a characterisation choice, an ‘easy target’ familiar to the audience of the time, which facilitates the satire.<sup>100</sup>

Before exploring Soyinka’s choice to embody and parody Esu in the form of a Christian prophet, I will consider the way in which traditional Yoruba religion may also be a target of Soyinka’s satire. Pemberton explains that in the divination verses, ‘the cosmos is likened to a closed calabash within which a hierarchy of beings and powers – human and spiritual, creative and malevolent – struggle with one another.’<sup>101</sup> Ifa divination enables the individual to ‘dispose or manipulate the various powers to the best of his ability for his own well-being.’<sup>102</sup> Ifa enables the client to understand which sacrifice he or she must make, and to whom it must be made, in order to secure a favourable outcome. This aspect of divination justifies Peel’s comment that the search for individual or collective power was ‘the dominant orientation of the Yoruba toward all religions.’<sup>103</sup> Historically, Yorubas enquiring about Christianity were searching for well-being, which was typically why people would want to ‘switch their devotion from one *orisa* to another’, a practice sanctioned by Ifa.<sup>104</sup> Enquirers would often have had a specific problem which they wished to remedy and, although it is

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<sup>99</sup> Wole Soyinka, interviewed by Ulli Beier, *Isokan Yoruba Magazine*, Summer 1997.

<sup>100</sup> Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, p. 59.

<sup>101</sup> Pemberton, ‘Eshu-Elegba’, p. 66.

<sup>102</sup> Pemberton, ‘Eshu-Elegba’, p. 66.

<sup>103</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*, p. 217.

<sup>104</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*, p. 227.

unlikely that converting to Christianity would fix the problem, it would at least have brought relief to the enquirer because conversion broke ‘the dispiriting and impoverishing cycle of expenditure on charms and sacrifices which many sick and barren people were driven to.’<sup>105</sup> While the promise of a reward after death is described as an additional appealing feature of world religions, the mass conversion to Christianity in Ijebu was also a result of their defeat by the British in 1892: the defeat ‘discredited the old gods who had failed to protect Ijebu.’<sup>106</sup> Thus it is clear that well-being, success, wealth and power were at the heart of traditional Yoruba religion and worshipping choices. As the divinity who delivered the Ifa system to the Yoruba, and the one who oversees its administration, Esu as mediator is also intertwined with this power because he is ‘the guardian of the ritual process and of sacrifice, which alone brings order and fruition to the affairs of man among the myriad powers that frequent the world and threaten to undo him.’<sup>107</sup> Both Esu and Jero are appealed to by people who seek amelioration, but it is important to reiterate again that Jero’s power is founded on his ability to make people *believe* that he is a guardian of God’s word.

The discussion above undermines the identification of Esu with the Devil. Esu is considered benevolent by some, ensures that sacrifices are received by the gods, and can bring positive change to people’s lives through revealing and enabling the resolution of underlying resentments and conflicts. Esu, in his Christian garb as Jero, loses the benevolence attributed to him by followers, merely creating an illusion of benevolence. Jero speaks to the audience of his diabolical plans and reveals a thorough absence of any Christian feeling towards his fellow men: he is clearly not concerned with pleasing God. When he exploits the unconcealed resentment between Chume and his wife, he does so for his own benefit: he

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<sup>105</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>106</sup> Peel, *Religious Encounter*, pp. 229-230; 148-149.

<sup>107</sup> Pemberton, ‘Eshu-Elegba’, pp. 68-69.

clearly does not wish them to develop a harmonious relationship, even if this had been the outcome. Jero, then, lacks the benevolence that Esu possesses, neglects any duty to God and specifically seeks to maintain the disorder he has created. The irony here is that while the missionaries used 'Esu' as the word for 'Devil' – and encouraged identification between the two – Esu in the role of a Christian prophet is far more diabolical than Esu ever was. Esu was viewed as evil by the missionaries and some converts, yet in *Trials* we see the Christian characters' ardent belief in Jero's benevolence, despite his exploitative and manipulative behaviour, because outwardly he is man of God. While Esu can benefit the community by creating order out of disorder, Jero undermines community by intentionally creating and maintaining disorder. In Jero, Soyinka has created a Christianised Esu that reflects the missionaries' view of traditional Esu. Jero is greedier, more immoral and more self-serving than Esu. Jero is Esu corrupted by Christianity, potentially symbolising the missionaries' sustained destruction of Yoruba religious belief and vilification of the *orisa*. Thus there is an implication that the Church corrupted inoffensive traditional belief, that it brings out the worst characteristics of a person, and that Christianity is a stifling religion which opposes change – both in the sense that Jero maintains Chume's unhappiness in order to ensure he remains devoted to him and that he perpetuates the disharmony he creates. Although Christopher Balme identifies *A Dance of the Forests* as the first of Soyinka's plays which draws on the dramaturgy of traditional Yoruba performance, citing *Trials* as an example of Soyinka's earlier plays which were 'greatly indebted to Western forms', I see Esu's signified presence in *Trials* as an aspect of Yoruba culture infiltrating the European farce genre.<sup>108</sup>

Yet, in some ways, Jero *does* enable change. I do not mean that it is the character's explicit intention, of course. Indeed it is clear that Esu takes pleasure in mischievous intervention,

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<sup>108</sup> Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage*, p. 80.

just as Jero does. Jero's transformative powers are, in fact, attributable to his liminality - the quality of existing on the border or threshold – and existence as a *dramatis persona*. I will consider first his liminality. Soyinka asserts that Esu is 'a creature of liminal existence', like the writer in exile, because 'distancing is essential to his function – it hones the faculty of perception and enhances the ability to peer into, penetrate where possible and even immerse itself within the reality that lies beyond.'<sup>109</sup> Although not precisely reflected in Jero's behaviour, Soyinka's description of liminality here perhaps finds an echo in Jero's self-imposed distance from all the other characters in the play. Jero appears to be part of the community – a respected preacher – but his deceptions prevent any positive relationships with other people, and signify his isolation. Amope is the only character who sees his true identity, and she despises him. Crucially, Jero's marginal position – his seemingly superior intelligence and lack of empathy – enables him to diagnose the weaknesses and desires of the other characters in order to exploit them: not only his followers, but also those who are sceptical, such as the Member. The comparison Soyinka draws between writers in exile and Esu bears close resemblance to Priebe's conclusions regarding *Trials* and Soyinka's 1969 conference paper, 'The Writer in a Modern African State.'<sup>110</sup> With reference to Soyinka as an artist, and Jero as a trickster, Priebe concludes:

[T]he artist and trickster know that style *is* everything, and to the extent that they can laugh at what they are doing, they maintain the power to invert old orders and revitalize their society. In short, the argument is that the artist, like the trickster, must be a type of culture hero.<sup>111</sup>

Referring to Jero as a culture hero is perhaps too much of a stretch, but Esu has certainly earned the title by virtue of delivering the gift of Ifa divination to humankind. In any case, the liminality Soyinka attributes to Esu is reflected to some extent in Jero; but as before,

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<sup>109</sup> Soyinka, 'EXILE', p. 68.

<sup>110</sup> Wole Soyinka, 'The Writer in a Modern African State', in *The Writer in Modern Africa*, ed. by Per Wästberg (New York: Africana, 1969), pp. 14-21.

<sup>111</sup> Richard K. Priebe, *Myth, Realism, and the West African Writer* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988), p. 136.



Esu's distance and liminality, like the writer in exile, can help him to identify problems and solutions, whereas Jero's liminality helps him to cause conflict.

It might seem possible to say that Jero is liminal because he is positioned on the threshold between men and God. However, it is clear that his position there is fabricated: just as he pretends to sleep on the open beach rather than in his hut, he pretends that he has a direct link to God through visions and dreams (p. 163; 169). Jero does not reside on, or crossover, the boundary between men and God. His liminality could, however, be seen as a consequence of his real circumstances. He is poor and marginal: his 'church' is located on the beach and is demarcated only by 'a few stakes and palm leaves' (p. 152). One environmental scientist, in his exploration of the beach as a liminal space, considers liminality as a metaphor to facilitate a way of moving from 'the accepted symbols of the profane to the blurred, ambiguous, and powerful symbols of the sacred.'<sup>112</sup> As a spiritual place, the beach is for believers 'an auspicious environment in which seek [sic] intercession with their deity'; for worshippers excited by a religious passion, the beach serves as a meeting ground with the sacred, an area in which 'normal statuses are temporarily suspended.'<sup>113</sup> For Priebe – who considers liminality in the works of Soyinka, among others – the liminal figure is 'the very epitome of paradox, being one who is no longer classified in his old state and not yet classified in a new one.'<sup>114</sup> Priebe describes Jero as maintaining 'a marginal, hence problematical relation to society, [and] the experience of liminality', whose alienation is a consequence of 'the anguish of an African going through his special *rite de passage*.'<sup>115</sup> The construction of Jero as a protagonist in the year that Nigeria became independent reflects both of Priebe's

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<sup>112</sup> Robert Preston-Whyte, 'The Beach as a Liminal Space', in *A Companion to Tourism*, ed. by Alan A. Lew, C. Michael Hall, and Allan M. Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 349-359 (p. 350).

<sup>113</sup> Preston-Whyte, 'The Beach', p. 353.

<sup>114</sup> Priebe, *Myth*, p. 23.

<sup>115</sup> Priebe, *Myth*, p. 137; 169.

interpretations of liminality. Fundamentally, however, I consider Jero to be a liminal figure because he represents the unification of Yoruba religion and Christianity: he is both a Yoruba divinity and Christian prophet or, as I have named him above, a Christianised Esu. He is not a genuine prophet, but he is also not quite Esu. His ambiguity reinforces his position as a trickster.

The domination of a Christian prophet's character by Esu, or the intrusion of Esu into the Christian sphere, could suggest that Jero represents a triumph of the *orisa* over the imported Christianity; Soyinka could be satirising not only the greed and materialism associated with the Church, but also demonstrating the superiority of the *orisa* religion. In *Of Africa*, Soyinka outlines the ways in which traditional Yoruba religious belief is more benevolent than Christianity and Islam: it prescribes tolerance, it 'is community', its essence is 'the antithesis of tyranny, bigotry, and dictatorship', it advocates respect and accommodation.<sup>116</sup> Soyinka refutes the Neo-Tarzanists' claim that writers such as Christopher Okigbo should follow the example of Aladura churches by domesticating and absorbing Christianity into the indigenous belief system. Soyinka refers to Aladura churches as 'rabid iconoclasts', and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church specifically were 'the most dedicated arsonists' of traditional artwork they considered represented 'pagan idols.'<sup>117</sup> Peel also identifies Aladura churches as iconoclastic and paradoxical: they offered 'a Christianity well in line with the traditional values of Yoruba religion' yet also 'brought a massive wave of iconoclasm directed against idols and the association of *orisa* with demons and other "powers of darkness."<sup>118</sup> It is worth noting that Soyinka has also identified Esu as an iconoclast in the

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<sup>116</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, pp. 166-168.

<sup>117</sup> Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>118</sup> Peel, *Christianity*, p. 220.

sense that he challenges the status quo.<sup>119</sup> Perhaps, in *Trials*, Jero is inhabited by Esu the iconoclast, who reasserts the prerogative of the *orisa*, undermining the destructive iconoclasm symbolised by an Aladura Christian beach prophet.

For Soyinka, Esu's mischief teaches people to be 'constantly on guard for the revelation of reality as only another aspect of liminality.'<sup>120</sup> Robert Pelton's claim that Esu 'embodies the liminal moment that is divination' similarly posits Esu as the interpretative act personified. But Pelton develops his theory of Esu's role in divination further: 'at every level of life – human, transhuman, subhuman, even posthuman – Eshu, the agent of metamorphosis, prepares for and completes the divinatory process as he shapes structures, rearranges hierarchies, and changes relationships.'<sup>121</sup> Is Jero, then, capable of this transformative power? The answer to this question – whether Jero could be considered a symbol of the liminal state – lies in Jero as a *dramatis persona*. Wescott describes Esu as 'a satirist who dramatizes the dangers which face men and the follies to which they are prone, and as such he serves as a red light warning.'<sup>122</sup> Soyinka is the satirist, of course, but through Jero he illustrates to his audience the power of hypocrisy and the danger of naivety. From both a social and political perspective, Jero appears to have lessons to impart.

It is clear that Jero and his devotees' actions reflect concerns about a gullible population and the villains who might swindle them. Considering Soyinka's distrust of the new ruling elite, it is worth noting that some critics have identified the similarities between Jero and

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<sup>119</sup> Soyinka, 'EXILE', p. 67.

<sup>120</sup> Soyinka, 'EXILE', p. 67.

<sup>121</sup> Pelton, *The Trickster*, p. 145; 138.

<sup>122</sup> Wescott, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 345.

politicians: while Priebe comments that Jero is ‘a perfect parody of a politician’, Wright outlines in greater detail the similarities:

The prophet’s almost parodic identification with the member of parliament issues a telling reminder that politicians also manipulate through dependency; they also nourish vain ambitions with empty promises and ambiguously worded prophecies that, like Jero’s, are usually either intelligent guesses or undetectable frauds.<sup>123</sup>

In *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006), Soyinka’s description of the leaders elected in anticipation of independence reveals more than a passing resemblance to Jero: he refers to their ‘ostentatious spending, and their cultivated condescension, even disdain, toward the people they were supposed to represent.’<sup>124</sup> They viewed the nation as ‘a prostrate victim to be ravished’ and bombarded Soyinka and his peers with ‘utterances that identified them as flamboyant replacements of the old colonial order, not transforming agents, not even empathizing participants in a process of liberation.’<sup>125</sup> Certainly, Jero’s efforts to acquire territory on the beach for his Old Master is a ‘microcosm of the division of the national spoils by equally phony politicians.’<sup>126</sup> In *Trials*, Jero’s followers remain devoted to him as a consequence of attributing to him their past material gains, and for the expectation that his help will bring further material gains in the future. It is thus material satisfaction that Jero provides, and spiritual poverty is the price paid for it: a reflection of politicians’ promises to improve the standard of living, only possible by using questionable, potentially unethical, means. Furthermore, for Priebe, Jero reflects the unspoken, universal truth: that the key to maintaining power is keeping people dependent.<sup>127</sup> While Jero’s admission of this fact clearly resonates with Soyinka’s views of the new ruling elite of independent Nigeria, it can also be seen as symbolising, on a larger scale, the neocolonialism that has plagued many

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<sup>123</sup> Priebe, *Myth*, p. 134; Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>124</sup> Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 42.

<sup>125</sup> Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, p. 42.

<sup>126</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, p. 51.

<sup>127</sup> Priebe, *Myth*, p. 133.

former colonies. Concluding his discussion of Soyinka's satire, Ebewo describes Soyinka as a philanthropist who 'likes people but thinks that they are blind and foolish.'<sup>128</sup> Soyinka's plays are 'not only a critique of prevailing society, but an attempt to change it' and he therefore writes satire to help people out of their ignorance.<sup>129</sup> Aside from attributing to Soyinka a patronising view of ordinary people – indeed, the naivety of Jero's followers is insulting as well as unconvincing – Ebewo's conclusion is perhaps a little simplistic with regard to the impact of Jero in *Trials*.

In fact, when Soyinka objects that no African deities are decapitated – or even present – in Hans Neuenfels's opera 'Idomeneo', he reveals a much more complex role for Esu, and consequently for Jero. Soyinka dismisses the anticipated suggestion that Orisa devotees would view the on-stage decapitation of their gods as sacrilegious. Foreseeing a potential accusation that he makes this claim only as 'a westernized sophisticate, indoctrinated and alienated by the cynical and irreverent ideologies of the west', he provides the following rejoinder:

Quite plausible, but if such voices first studied the nature of the god Esu, from the Yoruba pantheon, and the principle of demystification, the rejection of afflatus in life becomes lodged where it rightfully belongs. But the explication is also lodged in history. The world of the Orisa has been accustomed, is still accustomed [...] to the disdain, the contempt, and the blasphemous conduct of the worlds of Christianity and Islam for over two thousand years.<sup>130</sup>

Esu's role as interpreter encompasses demystification: the process of revealing the previously unknown, a function Soyinka connects with stage performance. It is also worth noting that Soyinka considers the Orisa as indifferent to being represented on-stage *because* they have been misrepresented by Christianity already. Jero is outwardly a Christian prophet, but in

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<sup>128</sup> Ebewo, *Barbs*, p. 195.

<sup>129</sup> Ebewo, *Barbs*, p. 195.

<sup>130</sup> Soyinka, *Of Africa*, p. 194.

essence he is Esu. Emmanuel Eze describes Esu as the mediation between text and reader, between text and meaning, and between truth and understanding; Esu is both ‘the way’ *and* ‘the barrier’ to truth and meaning – he reveals and conceals truth – and is therefore ‘crucial to any (successful or unsuccessful) experience of meaning, truth, or understanding.’<sup>131</sup>

Translated to the stage, this constitutes a contradictory role for Jero, too. Jero’s honesty when speaking to the audience, and his deception of Chume, Amope, and the Member, appear to embody Esu’s dual function: Jero demystifies when he reveals to the audience, but mystifies when he conceals from the characters. Jero is a character playing a character. I now proceed to a discussion of what Jero reveals to the audience and the transformative power contained within those revelations.

### **Jero’s potential as an agent of satire**

In Jero, Soyinka has created a contradiction. But what lies at the heart of this contradiction is not just his role as Christianised Esu or the disparity between how he presents himself and what he really is. I have established that through embodying these contrasts and contradictions, Jero is a trickster, a liminal entity, a manifestation of ambiguity, open to a multiplicity of interpretations. At the heart of the contradiction is Jero’s words and actions on the one hand, and the impact on his audience on the other. Jero wants to maintain his powerful position or increase it. The society within the play – made up of gullible and easily manipulated people who are desperate to enlist Jero and God’s help on their path to success – suits Jero well. In order to maintain this position, Jero gathers his followers to take part in a laughable service, which is presumably representative of Jero’s church every day (pp. 156-161). While Jero leads the service, he asks the Lord to forgive Chume for hardening his

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<sup>131</sup> Emmanuel Eze, ‘Truth and Ethics in African Thought’, *Quest Philosophical Discussions: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, 7:1 (June, 1993), 4-18 (pp. 8-9).

heart, explaining that Amope is Chume's cross to bear (pp. 156-157). The service is clearly ritualistic, particularly in the sense that Aladura church services are supplications to God to aid well-being. Jero's message – albeit hypocritical – is lost on his congregation. On stage, the impact of his scheming nature is seen when Chume takes over from Jero, and he pleads with God to stop wives nagging, to facilitate promotions and increase people's wealth from a bicycle to a car (p. 160). Somewhere between Jero and Chume, the former's reiteration of Christian forbearance – although it is insincere, perhaps *because* it is insincere – has become a request for well-being and success. Jero's followers have perhaps learned more of his materialism than he intended, and the service led by Chume becomes a parody of Jero's service, which is itself a farce because of its insincerity. Jero's service is performed merely as a token feature of Aladura Christianity, the empty observation of a ritual without the requisite piety or sanctity.

Likewise, between the stage and the audience, Jero's message becomes warped. If the audience are supposed to laugh at his tricks and respect his cunning, the sinister ending of the play – in which Jero reveals his intention to restrict Chume's freedom (p. 171) – undermines or negates any admiration the audience may have felt. The audience may have watched Jero's tricks and laughed at them, admired his cunning, yet felt uncomfortable, perhaps, when the curtain fell. It may be that members of the audience leave the theatre with a fresh awareness or understanding of society and its veiled villains. Jero is perhaps akin to John Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, a character also viewed as a trickster in line with Odysseus, who dazzles the readers with his grandeur while Milton reminds his readers that Satan is not worthy of their admiration – a trap set for the reader which enables a cathartic and revelatory experience.<sup>132</sup> Esu is, after all, a great leveller because he deceives the poor and the rich

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<sup>132</sup> See Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997).

alike, as Jero does with Chume and the Member.<sup>133</sup> When the audience laugh at the Member's gullibility, Jero has revealed the absurdity of those deemed powerful. *Trials* too invites the audience to question society, perhaps encouraging the individual audience members to challenge and change. What is the genuine catalyst for conscientisation? It is not just the shared laughter at Jero's tricks, the shared sympathy for Chume, or the shared unease at the end of the play. An overview of responses to the revolutionary potential of Soyinka's drama can begin to provide an answer to the question.

As Soyinka implicitly and Eze explicitly have shown, part of Esu's role as interpreter is demystification; this process is enacted on stage in *Trials*. Wescott's description of Esu too is pertinent to the idea of revolutionary theatre: he is 'the spanner in the social works, and beyond this he is a generating symbol who promotes change by offering opportunities for exploring what possibilities lie beyond the *status quo*.'<sup>134</sup> Tunde Lakoju, in his comparison of Ngũgĩ and Soyinka's 'revolutionary' theatre, is partially justified in claiming that in *Trials* religion is 'demystified': 'the mask is removed and the vicious elements of exploitation, manipulation, and opportunism that characterize religious practices in our society are revealed' – primarily through Jero's monologues – and 'for the apathetic, apolitical, middle-class intellectuals in our society, that is all they need to conscientize them.'<sup>135</sup> However, Lakoju's assertion that religion in *Trials* is 'not treated as an opium of the people' is questionable: I argue that Jero's deception of those around him is potentially a microcosm for all social systems containing religious institutions. Its efficacy lies in stoking ambition and desire for material wealth, and promising that faithful adherence to religious practices will

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<sup>133</sup> Pemberton, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 26.

<sup>134</sup> Wescott, 'Eshu-Elegba', p. 337.

<sup>135</sup> Lakoju, 'Literary Drama', p. 160.



deliver satisfaction, in this life or the next.<sup>136</sup> It is clear that Chume's blind faith in God – and Jero – has prevented him from recognising that he is being manipulated, or realising Jero's corruption. In any case, Lakoju sees the revolutionary power of *Trials* as a revelation to the oppressed: through the process of demystification, they can gain an awareness of who or what is really responsible for their oppression – and it is not God, as they have been told.<sup>137</sup>

Soyinka appears to describe a similar process when discussing satire's revolutionary purpose: satire 'sets out to demolish, to destroy', but should also 'breed in a politicized society the need to effect positive changes or to think of the possibility of creating something in turn.'<sup>138</sup> Breaking the audience's 'habit of thought, their habit of acceptance' must be accomplished by arousing in them a 'certain nausea' and showing them that they can laugh at 'the monster whom they thought could never be laughed at.'<sup>139</sup> Gibbs challenges the accusation that Soyinka 'attacks the individual villain rather than the species of villains or the system which produces villainy', satirising and criticising but failing to offer solutions.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, one of the questions Soyinka proposed to the university students reveals very clearly Soyinka's consideration of corrupted systems represented in his drama: 'What feeling do you get about a society which has produced and nourished and maybe deserves Brother Jero?'<sup>141</sup> While it may be true that, in the case of *Trials*, Soyinka offers no concrete solution to the social problems he delineates, it is undeniable that the play engenders an awareness of exploitation and manipulation in the wider society. If the audience identify Jero with their elected politicians, some measure of social change becomes possible. Yet there is more to the

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<sup>136</sup> Lakoju, 'Literary Drama', p. 160.

<sup>137</sup> Lakoju, 'Literary Drama', p. 161.

<sup>138</sup> Soyinka, 'In Person', p. 28.

<sup>139</sup> Soyinka, 'In Person', p. 28.

<sup>140</sup> Gibbs, 'Masks', p. 70.

<sup>141</sup> Soyinka, 'In Person', p. 2.

conscientisation than all of this. It is necessary here to consider the parallel Soyinka suggests between ritual and drama.

*Trials* is a work of social vision as defined by Soyinka because it possesses the following qualities: ‘a creative concern which conceptualises or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions.’<sup>142</sup> In order to understand exactly how *Trials* might be said to fulfil the second and third functions of social vision described here, it is necessary to turn to Soyinka’s theory of Yoruba tragedy. It begins with Ogun, who ‘came to symbolise the creative-destructive principle.’<sup>143</sup> In Yoruba myth, the gulf between humankind and the deities had become impenetrable and, when the gods needed to rectify their divine remoteness by reuniting with man, Ogun pioneered the way through the abyss.<sup>144</sup> Sacrifices, rituals and ceremonies of appeasement to the powers which lie guardian to the gulf diminish the gulf between humankind and the divinities.<sup>145</sup> The Ogun myth is thus the ‘prototype for [Soyinka’s] description of the ritual process.’<sup>146</sup> The tragic actor’s journey through the area of transition corresponds to Ogun’s journey through the transitional abyss. Whether it is Ogun, a votary of Ogun, or an actor, the protagonist in transition has the ability to create or destroy. Ann B. Davis summarises that, for Soyinka, ‘drama is the most potentially revolutionary art form because it always potentially embodies the ritual form.’<sup>147</sup> This is not to say that *Jero* is a manifestation of Ogun: *Trials* is not tragedy in the sense related above. Perhaps it is possible, however, to view *Trials* as an Aristotelian tragedy from Chume’s perspective: if his hamartia is his

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<sup>142</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 66.

<sup>143</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 28.

<sup>144</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 145.

<sup>145</sup> Soyinka, *Myth*, p. 31.

<sup>146</sup> Davis, ‘Dramatic Theory’, p. 150.

<sup>147</sup> Davis, ‘Dramatic Theory’, p. 150.

gullibility, and his error of judgement trusting Jero, his anagnorisis is his realisation that Amope and Jero know each other, and his downfall his incarceration in the asylum. At the very least, Chume's incarceration will keep Amope safe from the considerably unamusing threat of domestic violence. Whether the audience feel pity for him is debatable; certainly those who view *Trials* as a comedy – critics and actors discussed above – might find the laughter occasioned by satire cathartic. But, of course, catharsis is not enough: satire encourages reflection and inspires action. Tragedy or not, it is important to consider now what ritual process, specifically, could be at work in the drama of Jero.

Soyinka presents the audience with a comedy, undoubtedly, but its conclusion is sinister – if not tragic. Femi Osofisan offers an Esu-Orunmila alternative to Soyinka's Ogun model of tragedy. Of *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1991), Osofisan writes that he borrowed the structure of the folk-tale plot and 'consciously set out to destabilize it, and so opened out its concluding scene, such that instead of an authorial dictation, – in the manner of state decrees – it is the audience itself that is called upon to determine the end of the play.'<sup>148</sup> For Osofisan, the plays he writes with 'open endings, with self-contradicting, self-referential plots' illustrate that people are 'NOT programmed by any supernatural force for failure, or defeat; that society is always determined by the interventions we bring to it; that our present sorry predicament is not permanent or incapable of emendation.'<sup>149</sup> Because Esu is the god of indeterminate meanings and multiple interpretations, Osofisan's model rejects the fatalism of tragedy. Although the ominous ending of *Trials* alludes to an inevitable future in which Jero becomes more powerful, I believe that there is an epiphanous element in the play similar to that which Osofisan describes in his own work. Toyin Falola's description of Esu

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<sup>148</sup> Femi Osofisan, *Insidious Treasons: Drama in a Postcolonial State* (Ibadan: Opon Ifa Publishers, 2001), pp. 139-141.

<sup>149</sup> Osofisan, *Insidious Treasons*, p. 142.

exemplifies Jero's role in *Trials*: after Esu creates conflict or destroys, recuperation follows, and 'Esu's crossroads become the narrative of deep reflections about the roads not taken, the mistakes made, and also about the text of new ideas and the meanings that emerge as the consequence.'<sup>150</sup> What the end of *Trials* alludes to is therefore only one possible future: the Member is only powerful if the people give him their votes.

The intended audience of *Trials* – considering the play was written to be performed in a halls of residence dining-room at University College, Ibadan – would have occupied a country on the brink of independence, at a crossroads, in a liminal position itself.<sup>151</sup> Olorounto claims that in Soyinka's drama, the trickster figures have been given new tricks, 'appropriate to modern conditions of politics, pursuits of power, and rapacious desire for materialism.'<sup>152</sup> It is true that the satire in *Trials* is well-timed: Jero's opportunism and greed – when he takes his old master's land and begins his reign of exploiting the vulnerable – serve as an allegory for independent Nigeria's new ministers professing to represent ordinary people, but really intending to perpetuate their relative oppression. Wright notes Soyinka's prescience in Jero's conversation with the Member: the vision Jero relates to him is of their country 'plunged into strife', followed by a 'mustering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength', with the Member becoming the most powerful man in the country, the 'Minister of War' (p. 169).<sup>153</sup> After independence, there was a series of military coups in Nigeria, and in 1967, civil war broke out. Even more pertinent to this study, however, is Wright's comment that on the one hand, Jero diagnoses 'the symptoms of the disease across the whole range of society', while also maintaining that the dark ending of the play 'carr[ies] it into deeper waters than

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<sup>150</sup> Toyin Falola, 'Esu: The God without Boundaries', in *Esu*, ed. by Falola, pp. 3-37 (p. 13).

<sup>151</sup> Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>152</sup> Olorounto, 'Modern Scheming Giants', p. 298.

<sup>153</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, p. 51.

Soyinka had perhaps originally intended or knew how to get out of.’<sup>154</sup> This seems a disservice to Soyinka. The ending of the play is distinctly diagnostic in a ritual sense. Describing Soyinka’s transposition of religious rites into drama, Balme identifies several plays in which an understanding of Soyinka’s ‘ritual transposition’ is essential; yet Balme considers it is of minor importance for Soyinka’s comedies and satires.<sup>155</sup> In some ways, though, *Trials* does explore ritual transposition because aside from the ceremonies on the beach, Jero interprets his dreams to direct his followers’ paths. However, my contention is that *Trials* does not merely dramatise ritual, it *is* ritual.

Jero is, like Esu, facilitating and watching over Ifa, the divination rite. Ifa is a ritual through which knowledge is imparted to the client about the powers that surround him, and the possible ways to manipulate those powers. Pemberton explains that in the Ifa verses, ‘a vast array of symbolic selves is paraded before the client’, and he is ‘constrained to see himself in terms of a gallery of roles, to ask whether any speak to him, and to make a decision about his aspirations, anxieties, relationships, and appropriate responses.’<sup>156</sup> Gates frames this process in slightly different but related terms:

[T]he “speech” of the *babalawo* must be seen by the propitiate to be a chain of signifiers (like writing), which must be interpreted through a process of interpretation governed by Esu, a process that is always both open-ended and repeatable.<sup>157</sup>

Furthermore, ‘whereas Ifa is truth, Esu rules understanding of truth, a relationship that yields an individual’s meaning.’<sup>158</sup> This process, which is itself dependent on analogy, correlates with Soyinka’s audience’s experience. Soyinka’s discussion of Ifa in the interview with

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<sup>154</sup> Wright, *Soyinka Revisited*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>155</sup> Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage*, p. 81.

<sup>156</sup> Pemberton, ‘Eshu-Elegba’, p. 66.

<sup>157</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 45.

<sup>158</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 43.

Beier is illuminating. He illustrates that traditional Yoruba religion is accommodating and liberating because, when faced with a new phenomenon, the Yoruba consult Ifa:

[T]hey go to Ifa and they examine the corpus of proverbs and sayings; and they look even into their, let's say, agricultural practices or the observation of their calendar. Somewhere within that religion they will find some kind of approximate interpretation of that event. They do not consider it a hostile experience. That's why the corpus of Ifa is constantly reinforced and augmented, even from the history of other religions with which Ifa comes into contact.<sup>159</sup>

When Soyinka casts Esu as a founder of an Aladura church and a prophet, he expands the Ifa corpus and illustrates its adaptability, building on or adding to the traditional Yoruba religious elements found in Aladura. Ifa divination requires a pragmatic approach: its efficacy is based on interpretation of the verses and their application to the suppliant's situation. Esu is the guardian of this exchange in ritual; Jero is the guardian of this exchange in drama.

## Conclusion

Jero, who is a Christianised Esu symbolic of Ifa's flexibility, is a contradictory figure because he reverses the missionaries' interpretation of Esu as the Devil – appearing instead as a diabolical Christian prophet. He is a symbol of the liminal state not because he mediates between men and God, but because he is a trickster figure who enables the audience's transition through the Ifa ritual, traversing the boundary between morality and immorality, appearance and reality, revelation and concealment, fate and choice, Yoruba religion and the Christianity of Aladura churches. Considering Esu represents a 'plurality of meanings' in the process of Ifa divination, Soyinka's audience, like those who participate in Ifa divination, can take from Jero's performance what they will.<sup>160</sup> What matters is that Jero's tricks have

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<sup>159</sup> Soyinka, interviewed by Ulli Beier.

<sup>160</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 42.

created a moment of questioning and potential change. Soyinka emphasises this in his response to a question about drama as the most powerful force for making social analysis and criticism: the ‘question in a play is constantly being re-examined, re-examined in the light of new information, of new developments in society and of the increasing awareness of the participants in any play.’<sup>161</sup> With a representation of Esu as a protagonist, a figure who Gates describes as ‘the trope of critical activity as a whole’, it is no surprise that the ambiguous action within *Trials* must be interpreted according to circumstance.<sup>162</sup>

There is therefore no ‘moral’ to be found in *Trials*. Rather, as Ato Quayson observes, Soyinka is like a *babalawo*: ‘he engages with the myths of the gods to extract contemporary significance, but, unlike them, his prescription for coping with the stress of cultural transition is not propitiatory rites but an assertion of will to the utmost.’<sup>163</sup> Kacke Götrick identifies a similar role for Soyinka, although he refers specifically to *Death and the King’s Horseman*; nevertheless, his conclusion that ‘Soyinka’s hallmark is a combination of ritual models, and a communication of knowledge which is otherwise dealt with by liminal persons in the traditional society’ resonates with *Trials*.<sup>164</sup> Thus Soyinka ‘takes the place of liminal priests and actors in the traditional rituals and ritual theatres.’<sup>165</sup> Although Jero is a fraud, his performance to the audience may well mirror Esu’s role in the divination rituals. Ultimately, Chume is the sacrifice that is made. Oha discusses Esu’s reputation as a ‘sower of dissension’ – a role that is not viewed negatively, because his meddling is ‘a chief way he tries human beings and exposes their weaknesses to them, also by implication challenging

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<sup>161</sup> Gibbs, ‘Soyinka in Zimbabwe’, p. 81.

<sup>162</sup> Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, p. 40. For an example relating to Athol Fugard’s 1966 production, see Gibbs, ‘Masks’, pp. 68-69.

<sup>163</sup> Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), p. 72.

<sup>164</sup> Kacke Götrick, ‘Rituality and Liminality in Soyinka’s Plays’, *Anglophonia*, 7 (2000), 147-156 (p. 155).

<sup>165</sup> Götrick, ‘Rituality and Liminality’, p. 155.

them to design effective ways of maintaining their humanity.’<sup>166</sup> In *Trials* the trickster tale, Jero is an anamnesis, the ‘riddle that, once posed, brings the healing of the memory and the liberation of the imagination.’<sup>167</sup> Thus Soyinka does not need to offer solutions to society’s ills: his play is a catalyst for the awakening of the audience’s imagination. Esu eliminates complacency by destroying and then reestablishing order by ‘bringing to the surface conflicts and troubles that are hidden beneath routine, neglect, ignorance, or malice.’<sup>168</sup> Jero does the same, and the experience that Jero initiates in his audience continues with them beyond the performance to enable them to re-energise society. In this way Jero embodies the creative and revolutionary abilities of the trickster, releasing his audience from apathy and acceptance of the *status quo*.

On the brink of independence, Soyinka composed a play in which he amalgamates further Yoruba traditional religion and Christianity, further even than the practices of the Aladura churches. I believe that Soyinka’s decision to dramatise the activities of a Christianised Esu was a calculated choice for an audience occupying a country approaching independence. While it is clear that nationalism in Nigeria in some ways was an unintentional product of mission activity, it is important to remember that the missionaries also played a large role in instigating and maintaining colonisation. That Soyinka’s protagonist should be a contradictory figure, a reflective embodiment of the contradictory ideology and actions of the missions, as well as the consequences of their actions, is appropriate. Christianity, like Esu, created conflict. The recognition of this conflict eventually created a group of people who would campaign for and achieve independence. Thus Christianity, also, performed Esu’s role: harmony in the form of self-government – or at least the promise of harmony after

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<sup>166</sup> Oha, ‘The Esu Paradigm’, p. 300.

<sup>167</sup> Pelton, *The Trickster*, p. 275.

<sup>168</sup> Sellers and Tishken, ‘The Place of Esu’, p. 48.



independence – was achieved by exposing the conflict and addressing it. Soyinka's casting of Esu as a Christian prophet makes the parallel between Esu and the Church all the more apparent. The audience is reminded to look back as well as forward. Soyinka's Jero manipulates his victims, and tricks the audience into laughing at them. But ultimately his last trick is to inspire the audience to question their laughter and then the world around them. Initially appearing to represent the worst of Christian practice combined with the vilified Esu, it is nevertheless not only conflict that Jero stimulates: it is the potential for harmony.

## Chapter 2

### The trickster and cultural nationalism in Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975)

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I consider Sutherland's presentation of the West African spider-trickster, Ananse, in *The Marriage of Anansewa* (extract published in 1969, performed in 1971, full play published in 1975). I begin by briefly considering Sutherland's early life, influences and career up to the publication of *Marriage*. Sutherland was experimenting with *anansegoro* between 1955 and 1975, concurrently with productions of her other plays.<sup>1</sup> Through my integrated discussion of Sutherland's corpus and context, I intend to identify a pattern in the function of the plays. In the next section, I provide a preliminary summary of *Marriage*, an outline of features of *anansegoro*, the way in which *Marriage* was constructed, and relevant critical responses to the play. Next, I consider broad characteristics of the trickster figure Ananse as he is presented in folklore and compare him to the protagonist of *Marriage*; a summary of the conventions of *anansesem* will help to illuminate the figure's suitability for the stage. In the next section, I proceed to a close analysis of *Marriage*, its content and form, exploring to what extent it might, as Sutherland intends, serve as a tool through which society can criticise itself. Next, I explore the domestication of the trickster in *Marriage*, considering the following question: how successful is *Marriage* in fulfilling two ostensible functions, namely those traditionally attributed to *anansesem*, and those outlined by the post-independence nationalist agenda? In the penultimate section, I consider Sutherland's legacy in the appropriation of Ananse.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anansegoro*, a term coined by Sutherland, refers to the theatrical performance of *anansesem*, meaning a traditional Ghanaian storytelling art. *Ananse* refers to the spider trickster of West Africa who is said to be the owner of all stories.

The recurring conflict between money, political agendas, autonomy and art is central to my exploration of Sutherland's *anasegoro* and the extent to which it shaped the playwright's work. That Sutherland produced theatre in the service of post-independence nationalism is indisputable. What has not been adequately explored – and what I argue in this chapter – is that Sutherland's conservative appropriations of Anase risked undermining the spirit of *anasesem* entirely. My conclusion considers this aspect of Sutherland's work and to what extent the potentially critical and subversive function of *anasesem* is retained.

### **Sutherland's early life, career, and influences**

Sutherland was born in Cape Coast in 1924; some of her relatives were nationalists and members of the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society.<sup>2</sup> While attending St. Monica's Teacher Training College in Asante-Mampong, Sutherland produced the *Medea*, *Antigone* and *Alcestis*, attributing her interest in Greek tragedy to the annual performances she watched at her uncle's school.<sup>3</sup> After completing a Bachelor of Arts degree in England, Sutherland returned to Ghana in 1950. She continued teaching and, by 1951, she had started writing poetry replete with religious imagery and biblical allusions – evidence of the High Anglicanism Sutherland maintained.<sup>4</sup> Sutherland began experimenting with dramatisations of *anasesem* in the mid-1950s, culminating in the publication of *Marriage* in 1975; thus her career as a playwright was influenced by significant political upheaval.<sup>5</sup> Kwame Nkrumah considered theatre to be a medium through which to continue the process of decolonisation,

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<sup>2</sup> Kofi Anyidoho, 'Dr Efua Sutherland (A Biographical Sketch)', in *Efua Sutherland*, ed. by Adams and Sutherland-Addy, pp. 235-238 (p. 235). See also Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 93.

<sup>3</sup> Efua Sutherland, interviewed by Robert July, 'Here, Then, is Efua': Sutherland and the Drama Studio', in *Efua Sutherland*, ed. by Adams and Sutherland-Addy, pp. 160-164 (p. 160).

<sup>4</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, pp. 100; 124-125.

<sup>5</sup> Although *anasesem* is translated as 'Anase stories', it is used to refer to all stories, whether or not the spider-trickster Anase features in them.

seeing the development of African art forms as crucial in undermining colonialism's legacy.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, embedded within Nkrumah's policies following his election as Prime Minister to newly independent Ghana, and President upon Ghana becoming a republic (1960), was a call to develop indigenous traditions and customs to restore African cultural heritage in the arts. Sutherland responded to this call.

The National Theatre Movement (NTM), with its beginnings in the mid-1950s, was instrumental in furthering Nkrumah's cultural nationalist agenda. Sutherland's marriage to Bill Sutherland, at the time private secretary to Ghana's Minister of Finance, Komla Gbedemah, may well have brought her into contact with Nkrumah at the time he was contemplating a National Theatre.<sup>7</sup> Sutherland and Nkrumah clearly knew each other well. Maya Angelou, who worked alongside Sutherland in the early sixties, quotes Sutherland: 'Kwame has said that Ghana must use its own legends to heal itself. I have written the old tales in new ways to teach the children that their history is rich and noble.'<sup>8</sup> Sutherland's use of Nkrumah's first name gives some indication of the relationship between the two. J. H. Kwabena Nketia, a former colleague of Sutherland's, elaborated on the relationship between Sutherland and the President:

As a perceptive writer and philosopher in her own right, Efua Sutherland was someone Nkrumah listened to sometimes with rapt attention. She could advise or even criticise him where others might hesitate [...] Nkrumah had a soft spot for creative people of Efua's intellectual calibre.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Policies: An African-Centered Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 81-82. Botwe-Asamoah was a student at the School of Music and Drama from 1965.

<sup>7</sup> David Afriyie Donkor, 'Making Space for Performance: Theatrical-Architectural Nationalism in Postindependence Ghana', *Theatre History Studies*, 36 (2017), 29-56 (p. 33). See also Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Kwabena Nketia, 'Kwame Nkrumah and the Arts: A Personal Testimony', Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Lecture in *Gender: Evolving Roles and Perceptions* (Accra: Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2006), pp. 139-148 (p. 143).

Nkrumah and Sutherland appear to have had the same pragmatism and idealism with regards to the promotion of African culture and performance.<sup>10</sup>

In 1955, Nkrumah appointed Sutherland to a committee of ten people tasked with considering how best to begin a national theatre movement.<sup>11</sup> In a 1954 article by T. E. Lawrenson, *anansesem* is listed as one of the examples of ‘dramatic expression’ that could contribute to the development of a National Theatre.<sup>12</sup> In 1958, Sutherland set up the Experimental Theatre Players, working on *anansegoro* with them for performance in Akropong; one such *anansegoro* took place as early as 1959, and Sutherland was described as a ‘leading light’ in the first phase of the NTM due to her success.<sup>13</sup> Sutherland had written to Nkrumah requesting funding for a construction in which to develop her work. Nkrumah supplemented the funds already raised by Sutherland with money from the Government’s Arts Council.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that Sutherland had also been given financial support from the Rockefeller and Farfield Foundations, via the CCF.<sup>15</sup> Like Soyinka, Sutherland was also caught up in the CIA’s covert project to fund anti-Communist cultural endeavours in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s. Sutherland’s work appears to have been created in the shadow of both a post-independence, Marxist-Leninist, national hero *and* a world superpower committed to eliminating the threat of communism world-wide.

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<sup>10</sup> See Nketia, ‘Nkrumah and the Arts’, p. 145.

<sup>11</sup> Donkor, ‘Making Space’, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> T. E. Lawrenson, ‘The Idea of a National Theatre’, *Universitas*, 1:3 (1954), 6-10 (pp. 9-10).

<sup>13</sup> Jesse Weaver Shipley, *Trickster Theatre: The Poetics of Freedom in Urban Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), pp. 61-62; July, ‘Here, Then, Is Eƒua’, p. 163; Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. xix. Gibbs worked in the Department of English at the University of Ghana from 1968.

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, pp. 102-104; xix. July, *An African Voice*, p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 107.

The courtyard design of the Drama Studio and the *anansegoro* experimentation there made it a national theatre in all but name.<sup>16</sup> Adding weight to this designation was the inception of *Kusum Agromma* (culture/tradition players). Sutherland had recruited people from Atwia and rural parts of central Ghana to form the group, which focused on modernising storytelling techniques from rural villages for an urban audience.<sup>17</sup> This group would later concentrate on education theatre for rural development and propaganda plays pushing government messages relating to issues such as family planning.<sup>18</sup> Nkrumah inaugurated the new Drama Studio in 1961, attending *Kusum Agromma*'s production of Sutherland's unpublished play *Odasani*, an adaptation of the medieval morality play *Everyman*.<sup>19</sup> Nkrumah's interest in the Drama Studio is testament to its importance to the nationalist agenda.

In the foreword to *Marriage* Sutherland describes folklore Ananse as representing 'a kind of Everyman, artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve society as a medium of self-examination' (p. 3). That Sutherland's first project after the initial experiments with *anansegoro* should be an adaptation of *Everyman* is therefore significant. *Odasani*'s plot bears close resemblance to its stimulus, demonstrating the consequences of valuing too highly wealth and possessions.<sup>20</sup> The success of *Odasani* and its appeal was a consequence not only of the play's performance in languages other than English, but also of its

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<sup>16</sup> Donkor, 'Making Space', p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 71; Karin Barber, John Collins and Alain Ricard, *West African Popular Theatre* (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), pp. 19-20.

<sup>19</sup> July, *An African Voice*, pp. 73-74; Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought*, p. 168; July, 'Here, Then, is Efuwa', pp. 163-164. July details Nkrumah's arrival and Sutherland welcoming, then introducing him.

<sup>20</sup> A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (London: Everyman, 1993), pp. 195-225. For a summary of *Odasani*, see Scott Kennedy, *In Search of African Theatre* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), p. 169. Kennedy had worked with Sutherland on various projects at the Drama Studio, including the formation and inaugural production of *Kusum Agoromba*.

didacticism.<sup>21</sup> Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party (CPP) had used biblical language and imagery to deify Nkrumah and present themselves as the party of God. This gave credence to their political agenda and engaged a broad demographic, including Ghana's Christian community.<sup>22</sup> Sutherland's adaptation of *Everyman* seems particularly consistent with Nkrumah's political methods and agenda: Sutherland recognised the broad appeal of Christianity and produced a play that reflected her own beliefs as well as the propaganda of the CPP.

In Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a publication presenting a Marxist approach to theatre developed between the 1950s and the 1970s, Boal argues that the theatre – a medium that has immediate contact with the public and a greater power to convince – is an expression of the dominant class's perspective, sponsored and constructed to reinforce their power.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of medieval theatre was the indoctrination of desirable social behaviour, and Boal cites *Everyman* as an outstanding example of typical feudal dramaturgy: plays like *Everyman* were Aristotelian in the sense that they were intended to purge the audience of any ideas capable of changing society.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, some anthropologists interpret Ananse's anti-social antics in *anansesem* as performances that provide the audience with a vicarious experience of rebellious behaviour in a safe environment, offering 'a fanciful and cathartic escape from the confining obligations of social identity.'<sup>25</sup> It is thus possible to begin to identify a pattern in Sutherland's early work, with *anansegoro* and *Odasani* both promoting

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<sup>21</sup> For productions of the play and audience responses, see Louise Crane, *Ms Africa: Profiles of Modern African Women* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1973), p. 52; Kennedy, *African Theatre*, pp. 169-171; Etherton, *African Drama*, p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> See Ebenezer Obiri Addo, *Kwame Nkrumah: A Case Study of Religion in Politics in Ghana* (Oxford: University Press of America, 1999), pp. 65; 101-103; 109-110.

<sup>23</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia McBride and Emily Fryer (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> David Afriyie Donkor, *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 72.

desirable behaviour in Everyman/Odasani – the masses – and condemning the pursuit of pleasure in this world, to ensure a reward in the next. The play’s didactic nature is therefore inseparable from an authoritative political agenda. It may well have been appropriate that the first performance of *Odasani* occurred in a building funded by the Arts Council and the CIA combined, and attended by Nkrumah. Gibbs links the irony specifically to Ananse, contrasting the CIA’s betrayal of ‘organisations that had championed free, open debate’ with the subversion of those in receipt of the funding, like Sutherland, who exploited the situation:

It was appropriate that the uncrowned king of the Drama Studio in Accra, built partly with US tax dollars, was the trickster spider Ananse. A cynical manipulator accustomed to use guile to out-manoeuvre larger opponents, Ananse was able to exploit the competition between East and West.<sup>26</sup>

Further illumination of Ananse’s character will reinforce Gibbs’s interpretation of the Drama Studio as a symbol of subversion.

Productions of Sutherland’s two subsequent plays, *Foriwa* and *Edufa*, were performed at the Drama Studio in 1962 with the Studio Players. *Foriwa* is based on Sutherland’s short story ‘New Life at Kyerefaso’ (1960), and its plot appears to reflect Sutherland’s marriage to Bill Sutherland, with whom she had founded a school in the Volta region of Ghana.<sup>27</sup> *Foriwa* is clearly a vision of rural development, combining valuable traditions with aspects of modernity, and unifying different ethnic groups to build a nation, in line with Nkrumah’s politics and described by one critic as ‘transparently propagandist.’<sup>28</sup> *Foriwa* appears to have a similar function to that which Sutherland ascribes to *anansesem*: the audience should critically examine their own village and community, and how these might be improved

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<sup>26</sup> Gibbs, “‘America’”, pp. 177-179.

<sup>27</sup> Efua Theodora Sutherland, *Foriwa* (Accra: State Publishing, 1967); Efua Sutherland, ‘New Life at Kyerefaso’, in *Unwinding Threads: Writings by women in Africa*, ed. by Charlotte H. Bruner (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1983), pp. 17-23; Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 108.



through development efforts. In this sense, *Foriwa* can be seen as a precursor of the Theatre for Development (TfD) projects that would increase in the 1970s.

By the mid-sixties, Sutherland had started working with Nana Baa Okuampaa VI, a skilled storyteller from Ekumfi Atwia, who had become chief of the village. Recognising the village's strong story-telling tradition, fundraising and construction efforts, Sutherland used money from the Ford Foundation to build a theatre house in the village with the help of its inhabitants in 1966. The 'house of storytelling' (*Kodzidan*) was used for experimental drama described by David Donkor as contrasting with *anansesem* because it 'involves a more limited participation and features prerehearsed performers whose skills generate the *illusion* of free flow and participation.'<sup>29</sup> Sutherland clearly acknowledged the inadequacy of support provided by the State: according to a colleague who also participated in the Ekumfi Atwia project, Sutherland realised that 'in the face of poverty, environmental degradation, lack of sanitation and resources, and the fading influence of indigenous cultural values, developing countries needed a means for motivating the people to help themselves.'<sup>30</sup> Thus Sutherland's work at Ekumfi Atwia can be viewed as a realisation of the action presented in *Foriwa* – play intended to teach the audience a lesson about what constitutes desirable behaviour.

The second of Sutherland's 1962 plays, *Edufa*, was an adaptation or reinterpretation of Euripides' *Alcestis* to a mid-twentieth century Ghanaian context.<sup>31</sup> Some critics have identified *Edufa* as counter-hegemonic, a feminist critique of patriarchy, whereas others view

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<sup>29</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Sandy Arkhurst, 'Kodzidan', in *Efua Sutherland*, ed. by Adams and Sutherland-Addy, pp. 165-174 (p. 168).

<sup>31</sup> Several critics have connected the ease of adapting Greek drama to an African context as a consequence of similarities in Ancient Greek and African world-views. See Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 110. See also E. J. Asgill, 'African Adaptations of Greek Tragedies', in *African Literature Today 11: Myth and History*, ed. by Eldred Durosimi Jones (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1980), pp. 175-189; Chinyere Okafor, 'Parallelism Versus Influence in African Literature: The Case of Efua Sutherland's *Edufa*', in *Kiabàrà*, Vol. I (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt, 1980), 113-131.

it as a social commentary on the challenges presented by post-colonialism.<sup>32</sup> Although *Alcestis* is a problematic play that is not easily categorised, it is broadly identified as a tragedy. Like *Odasani*, *Edufa* appears to be an indictment of materialism and vanity. More tragic than *Alcestis*, Sutherland's *Edufa* could be seen as less problematic and therefore more likely to achieve the function Boal attributes to tragedy: the regulation and suppression of anti-social behaviour, in the interests of the ruling elite. *Odasani*, *Foriwa* and *Edufa* therefore all demonstrate some functional affinity with *anansesem*, the story-telling art that Sutherland was translating to the stage while writing and producing these three works.

Sutherland's early work at the Drama Studio ran concurrently with her attempts to decolonise children's literature, which included the production of the play *Ananse and the Dwarf Brigade* (unpublished).<sup>33</sup> This play is evidence of a specific thematic crossover with Sutherland's *anansegoro* work for adults. Although the Africanisation of children's literature did not appear to be one of Nkrumah's priorities, Sutherland dedicated herself as much to its furtherance as she did to her adult-focused drama. The broader question of how to define African literature – whether it is literature written only in indigenous African languages, or literature written by Africans – was explored at the CCF-funded Conference of African Writers of English Expression, in Makerere (1962). When Peter Kalliney presented his paper, 'Modernism, African Literature and the CIA', at the John W. Kluge Center in 2013, a member of the audience asked whether any women were involved in the conference. Kalliney responded that some women had been invited – one of whom was Sutherland, and

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<sup>32</sup> See Asgill, 'African Adaptations', p. 179; Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (London: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 69; Biodun Jeyifo, 'When *Anansegoro* Begins to Grow: Reading Efua Sutherland Three Decades On', in *Efua Sutherland*, ed. by Adams and Sutherland-Addy, pp. 24-37 (pp. 29-31); Okafor, 'Parallelism', p. 126; Linda Lee Talbert, 'Alcestis and Edufa: The Transitional Individual', *World Literature Written in English*, 22:2 (1983), 183-190 (p. 186).

<sup>33</sup> Sutherland's other publications were *Playtime in Africa* (1960), *The Roadmakers* (1960), *Vulture! Vulture!* and *Tahinta* (1968), *Children of the Man-Made Lake* (published in 2000), *The Pineapple Child*, *Nyamekye*, and *Tweedledum and Tweedledee* (all unpublished).

he speculated that her absence due to prior commitments must have had an impact on the rest of her career.<sup>34</sup>

Describing the role of the intellectuals working at the Drama Studio in the early 1960s, Kofi Awoonor, at the time part of the Drama Studio Players, comments that they ‘were like the foot soldiers of Nkrumah in the cultural field.’<sup>35</sup> Sutherland was clearly one such individual. In 1965, *anansesem* was seen as inseparable from the traditional dramatisation of Ghanaian stories, including music and dance.<sup>36</sup> Ananse had a great significance to Nkrumah’s cultural nationalists: he became ‘an adaptable icon embodying the characteristics of the new nation meant to create unity in shared tradition and inspire creativity.’<sup>37</sup> It is unsurprising, therefore, that one of Nkrumah’s proposals was a collection of Ananse tales: he wanted ‘a systematic and completely rewritten compilation of the traditional Ananse spider folktales.’<sup>38</sup> This research-focused endeavour seems somewhat distinct from another of Nkrumah’s projects. Nketia relates a conversation with Nkrumah in which the president explained his desire to collect ‘tales of excellence’ from the oral *anansesem* corpus, ‘translate them into English and have them properly edited by some professor of English.’<sup>39</sup> Although the project was not completed, the iconic Ananse was utilised by Sutherland in her work at the Drama Studio, making some contribution to the construction of a national identity. Thus a figure associated thoroughly with subversion was employed to further the ruling elite’s agenda.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Kalliney, ‘Modernism, African Literature and the CIA’, online video recording, The Library of Congress, 13 June 2013, <[http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature\\_wdesc.php?rec=6220](http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=6220)> [accessed 8 February 2019].

<sup>35</sup> Kofi Awoonor, interviewed by Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, 8 January, 1997. Quoted in Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah’s Politico-Cultural Thought*, p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> Félix Morisseau-Leroy, ‘The Ghanaian theatre movement’, *World Theatre*, 14 (January 1965), 75-77 (p. 75).

<sup>37</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> July, *An African Voice*, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> Nketia, ‘Nkrumah and the Arts’, p. 147.

In 1965, Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* severed his relations with America because it advocated the unity of Africa and non-aligned countries against Western neo-colonialism.<sup>40</sup> On February 24, 1966, Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup, supported by the police and some civil servants. The CIA were aware of the coup and encouraged its plotters, while continuing to withhold financial aid in order to increase domestic discontent. Nkrumah had also been encouraged by the United States government to leave the country on a peacekeeping trip to Vietnam in order to increase the likelihood of a successful coup while he was out of the country.<sup>41</sup> Sutherland saw Nkrumah's overthrow as a setback in terms of development and the support given to Ghana by African-Americans.<sup>42</sup> It is somewhat ironic that Sutherland was a central figure in shaping the progression of Nkrumah's cultural renaissance, described by Awoonor as a 'compelling aspect of total decolonization', and thus a reason for his overthrow.<sup>43</sup> In this sense Sutherland's work both supported Nkrumah's ideology and contributed to the reason the US deemed it untenable.

Sutherland appeared to have a lack of interest in post-independence politics. In the years leading up to the coup, Nkrumah's Preventive Detention Act (PDA, 1958) had become more stifling, and Bill Sutherland – whose marriage to Efua had begun to fall apart – wrote a letter to Nkrumah objecting to the PDA and, following a meeting with Nkrumah, subsequently left Ghana. At this time, Sutherland could not have been unaware of the precarious situation within Ghana, and the increasing authoritarianism of Nkrumah. In a 1968 interview, Sutherland dismissed concerns about problems in Ghanaian society, and specified that she

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<sup>40</sup> Matteo Landricina, *Nkrumah and the West: "The Ghana Experiment" in British, America, German and Ghanaian Archives* (Zürich: Lit Verlag, 2018), pp. 260-261.

<sup>41</sup> Landricina, *Nkrumah and the West*, pp. 262-264.

<sup>42</sup> Efua Sutherland, interviewed by Femi Osofisan, "'There's a Lot of Strength in Our People": Efua Sutherland's Last Interview', in *Efua Sutherland*, ed. by Adams and Sutherland-Addy, pp. 201-208 (p. 204).

<sup>43</sup> Kofi Awoonor, 'Why was Kwame Nkrumah Overthrown?', in *The African Predicament: Collected Essays* (Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2006), pp. 141-160 (pp. 149-150).

had ‘kept [her] mouth shut’ in relation to the dialogue concerning African literature, referring to discussions about the role of the writer as ‘all this rigmarole’, and insisting the focus should be on writing for children.<sup>44</sup> By 1974, shortly before *Marriage* was published, Sutherland would discuss ‘art for art’s sake’ as a ‘very European concern’, in contrast to her view of art’s role as representing ‘the individual’s sense of responsibility to his society.’<sup>45</sup> Sutherland expressed quite contradictory views on the role of art, arguably after losing Nkrumah’s agenda as a reference point.

Throughout her career up until 1975, when *Marriage* was first published, Sutherland had consistently complied with the changing political agendas. The complexity of Sutherland’s circumstances – on the one hand Africanising the theatre for the benefit of ordinary people, while on the other accepting funding from the State and covert CIA operations – is in some ways analogous to the dual functions of Ananse. Having considered theories that posit Ananse as a figure that either provides a didactic lesson on the consequences of greed, or acts as a safe form of transgression for the powerless, Donkor concludes that Ananse is ‘both subversive and supportive of the social order.’<sup>46</sup> Thus Ananse will ‘always be available to serve hegemony but will never be fully contained by it.’<sup>47</sup> Sutherland’s work, particularly *Marriage*, reflects this contradiction.

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<sup>44</sup> Efua Sutherland, interviewed by Maxine Lautré, in *African Writers Talking*, ed. by Duerden and Pieterse, April 1968, pp. 183-195 (p. 193).

<sup>45</sup> Efua Sutherland, interviewed by Lee Nichols, in *Conversations with African Writers: Interviews with Twenty-Six African Authors*, ed. by Lee Nichols (Washington, D.C.: Voice of America, 1981), July 1974, pp. 278-287 (p. 280).

<sup>46</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>47</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 73.

### Critical responses to *The Marriage of Anansewa*

Distressed by his poverty, Ananse shows a photograph of his daughter to four different chiefs and, when they all respond with marriage proposals, Ananse is pleased to receive gifts from them. Unfortunately, all four chiefs plan to visit Ananse on the same day to make a formal request for Anansewa's hand in marriage. Ananse must use his cunning and trickery to find a resolution, so he concocts a plan that involves Anansewa pretending to be dead, while messengers from each of her suitors visit to pay their respects. Of the four chiefs, Anansewa's favourite and the richest of her suitors – Chief-who-is-Chief – is the most upset by her death. Seeing that Chief-who-is-Chief cares greatly for his daughter, Ananse resurrects Anansewa and the marriage is arranged.<sup>48</sup>

The play's form showcases Sutherland's pioneering technique of combining the content and performance elements of traditional storytelling, with the formality of a scheduled and scripted dramatic production. Features of *anansesem* performance are adapted for the stage in numerous ways: the storyteller becomes the narrator, scripted *mbuguo* (musical performances or interludes) are incorporated into the plot, and the *anansesem* audience – who would spontaneously respond to the *anansesem* storyteller's narrative with their own interjections – are incorporated into *anansegoro* as a group of *Players*, situated within the audience to create the impression of audience participation. One particular aspect of *Marriage* that distinguishes it from most western drama is the collaborative nature of its construction, with potentially four different acting groups working with Sutherland to create various productions, only after which Sutherland would write a script.<sup>49</sup> Colleague and

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<sup>48</sup> Patience Henaku Addo describes improvising this particular Ananse story with Sutherland as early as 1962. See Addo, interviewed by Pietro Deandra, Accra, 18 August 1997 (unpublished). Quoted in Pietro Deandra, *Fertile Crossings: Metamorphoses of Genre in Anglophone West African Literature* (New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 190-191.

<sup>49</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 101; 139-142.

fellow playwright Mohammed ben Abdallah explained the process of Sutherland working on *Marriage* with an acting group:

What she does with them is that the group makes the play, she doesn't write, she works with them on the play. *The Marriage of Anansewa* was done like that. I was one of the original performers in it. It was done in Akan by the group, with her, and then when they finished she wrote the script in Akan and then translated it into English.<sup>50</sup>

It is clear that *Marriage* was not only experimental in form, but also in composition.

Furthermore, the collaborative effort in producing *anansegoro* reflects in some ways the collective production of *anansesem* within the community. The published script is, however, the authoritative version chosen by Sutherland and is thus published as her work.

Responses to Sutherland's *anansegoro*, and *Marriage* in particular, have been mixed.

Michael Etherton dismisses the theory that *Marriage* is an allegory for Ghana's non-alignment policy following independence, deconstructing the theory to demonstrate its absurdity; he also considers Sutherland's lack of social vision in *Marriage* as a consequence of her primary focus on recreating the form and content of traditional *anansesem*.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, David Kerr – who terms the synthesis of Western and pre-colonial theatre practices 'neo-traditional drama' – notes the irrelevance of *Marriage*'s content to contemporary Ghanaian society.<sup>52</sup> Gibbs, however, remarks that *anansegoro* dramatists have reversed the anthropologists' process of reducing Ananse stories to writing, recapturing the performance elements such as gestures and music; Sutherland, described by Gibbs as the 'Mother' of Ghanaian theatre, is credited with creating a new theatrical tradition by combining conventions of traditional oral narrative production and aspects of form from world theatre.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Mohammed ben Abdallah, interviewed by Jane Wilkinson, in *Talking With African Writers*, ed. by Jane Wilkinson (London: Heinemann, 1992), November 1984, pp. 32-45 (pp. 41-42).

<sup>51</sup> Etherton, *African Drama*, p. 26; 196-197.

<sup>52</sup> Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, p. 114; 119.

<sup>53</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. xv. Sutherland directed a production of the latter play upon her return to Ghana from England in 1957, as well as Sophocles' *Antigone*, Euripides' *Medea* and *Alcestis*, Brecht's *Mother Courage and*

Gibbs concludes that the ‘marriage’ that takes place in the play is a union of local and foreign dramatic conventions; the marriage ‘ceremony’ was thus performed by the people involved in the development of the play in the early ‘workshop’ productions.<sup>54</sup> Ola Rotimi describes *Marriage* as a ‘hydra-headed satire’ making a ‘genial swipe’ at ethnicism, self-interest, and the modern Christian churches, a play that signalled Sutherland’s realisation of her ambition to find ‘a form of scripted drama that is at once modern and intrinsically African.’<sup>55</sup> Jeyifo explores the difference between *anansesem* and *anansegoro*, positing that ‘the individual-community dialectic is more fully and consciously realised’ in the latter: in *Marriage* specifically, Ananse must rely upon the other performers to aid him in untangling his web of schemes, unlike in *anansesem* when his actions alone determine his fate.<sup>56</sup> Thus *anansegoro* provides a greater opportunity to examine ‘the contradictions, dilemmas and possibilities of the individual-community dialectic.’<sup>57</sup> In Osofisan’s 1978 response to Sutherland’s work he includes *Marriage* in a genre he refers to as the New Exotic, distinguished as ‘that esthetic paradox in which an active, even revolutionary form opposes a relative paralysis of the thought content.’<sup>58</sup> In short, the New Exotic is partly a challenge to imperialism by asserting the value of traditional culture through the use of traditional and western theatre conventions to create a ‘spectacular’, but not ‘profound’, dramatic production.<sup>59</sup> If this is the case for *Marriage*, Ananse’s ability to function as society’s medium for self-examination, as in *anansesem*, is called into question.

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*Her Children* and Anton Chekhov’s *The Proposal*, adapted by Sutherland as *Yaa Konadu*. Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 97; 129. See also Esi Sutherland-Addy’s interview with Adeline Ama Buabeng, ‘Drama in her Life’, *African Theatre: Women*, ed. by Martin Banham, James Gibbs & Femi Osofisan, with Guest Editor Jane Plastow (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2002), pp. 66-82 (p. 77); July, ‘Here, Then, is Efu’, p. 160.

<sup>54</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, pp. 127-142. See also Donkor, ‘Making Space’, p. 34.

<sup>55</sup> Rotimi, ‘Discovery’, pp. 20-22.

<sup>56</sup> Jeyifo, ‘*Anansegoro*’, pp. 25-26.

<sup>57</sup> Jeyifo, ‘*Anansegoro*’, p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, p. 46.



**Ananse, *anansesem*, *anasegoro*, and *The Marriage of Anansewa***

None of the critical responses to *Marriage* focus in detail upon the role of Ananse in the play, a lacuna I fill by comparing the traditional Ananse figure of folklore to his counterpart in Sutherland's play, George Kweku Ananse. I will also summarise how Sutherland has incorporated features of *anasegoro* into *Marriage*, as well as functions attributed to *anansesem*. Because Ananse was appropriated to serve as a unifying symbol in newly independent Ghana, I have considered a wide range of sources of Ananse tales in order to identify a consistent portrayal of the popular trickster figure's characteristics from a range of ethnic groups. Even in the present day, Ananse is referred to in diverse situations: hip-hop music, television advertisements, children's entertainment, religious preaching, and casual conversations.<sup>60</sup> In addition to describing folklore Ananse as representing 'a kind of Everyman, artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve society as a medium of self-examination' (p. 3), Sutherland has elsewhere identified *anansesem* as 'obviously created as a vehicle for satire.'<sup>61</sup> As Sutherland has clearly demarcated her interpretation of Ananse's function, it is on these terms that Ananse shall be considered.

Several stories reveal Ananse's importance through explaining the origin of the term *anansesem*: Ananse performs impressive displays of courage and cunning in order to fulfil a request from the Sky-god, and becomes the owner of all stories as a reward.<sup>62</sup> Ananse has also used his cunning to trap various animals in order to win the Sky-god's tales.<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere, Ananse also appears as special advisor to a king, a chief, and the sun.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, pp. 227-228.

<sup>61</sup> Sutherland, 'Venture into Theatre', p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Eric Adotey Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales* (New York: Exposition Press, 1968), pp. 19-23; Peggy Appiah, *Ananse the Spider: Tales from an Ashanti Village* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), pp. 3-26; Emmanuel V. Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales of Ghana* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), pp. 55-82; R. S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk-Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), pp. 256-261.

<sup>63</sup> Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 217-252; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 54-77; Susan Feldmann, ed., *African Myths and Tales* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), pp. 129-132.

<sup>64</sup> Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 29-111; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 141-378.

Sutherland's Ananse has no contact with deities, and in fact he has no direct contact with the authority figures of *Marriage*: his negotiations with the chiefs are conducted through messengers for the entirety of the play, reflecting an acknowledgement of the limitations imposed upon the lower groups in the social hierarchy. Folklore Ananse's trickery has been linked to his relationship with authority figures: while the people at the top of the hierarchy could use instrumental power to ensure survival, the people at the bottom of the hierarchy used native intelligence.<sup>65</sup> This preservationist interpretation posits Ananse's antics as a safe rebellion of the lower class, not seen as a threat to authority because the behaviour is expected and therefore helps to maintain the social order.<sup>66</sup> Sutherland's Ananse, by deceiving four chiefs and not being held accountable by any of them, receives numerous tokens of respect, and enjoys material gains without facing any form of retribution. It is true that Sutherland's Ananse successfully tricks the chiefs, making a mockery of them as well as extracting money and gifts from them. However, Ananse poses no threat to their position or challenge to their authority. Indeed, he is desperate to impress them.

Human characteristics are often attributed to folklore Ananse, enabling the audience to identify with him; Ananse is, in most stories, a farm-owner, husband and father. He is not a wanderer, searching for victims to exploit. Sutherland's Ananse cares for a daughter, Ananewa, a relationship presented in the first scene (pp. 9-24), and receives letters at his home, house No. AW/6615 Lagoon Street (p. 28). In folklore, many stories begin by describing Ananse's desperation in the face of famine and starvation.<sup>67</sup> Although Sutherland's Ananse is not searching for food, his opening speech and the Players' song that

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<sup>65</sup> John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp. 28-29.

<sup>66</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>67</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 26-30; Anna Cottrell, *Once Upon a Time in Ghana: Traditional Ewe Stories Retold in English* (Wilts: Cromwell Press, 2007), pp. 53-64; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 41-121; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 21-409; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 146-187.

precedes it reveal that Ananse is suffering in some way (pp. 9-10). Through the discussion with his daughter, the audience learns that Ananse is worried about money (p. 12; 21). In *anansesem*, Ananse's pursuit of food is frequently his downfall, and even when food is not scarce, his greed leads him into trouble.<sup>68</sup> Considering that drought and crop failure is a very real threat to many, this encourages sympathy for the humanised Ananse. In *Marriage*, Ananse's scheme is an effort to secure an advantageous match for his daughter, which will also financially benefit him (pp. 19-23). Ananse recognises that inviting four chiefs to begin the formal process of engagement may be problematic if it is pursued by more than one chief, but Ananse says he is 'counting on human nature to help disentangle' the situation (p. 23). Often, folklore Ananse's hunger is a result of laziness, a characteristic sometimes attributed to him at the outset, but in *Marriage* this is translated as a desire for money, material possessions, and comfort (p. 12).<sup>69</sup> Pride and jealousy are commonly cited as sources of folklore Ananse's deception, and he is often seeking to raise his status in the eyes of others.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Sutherland's Ananse is preoccupied with obtaining status items such as a refrigerator, a car, new suits, and – crucially for Sutherland's modernisation of *anansesem* – money to put into the church collection (p. 12).

In *anansesem*, Ananse's family are among those whom he deceives and some tales begin with an explanation of Ananse's close friendship with another member of the community: he tricks them, steals from them, borrows money he knows he is unable to pay back, or plays his adversaries off against each other – thus the animosity between natural enemies is attributed

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<sup>68</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 23-49; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 59-152; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 7-409; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 53-72; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 4-257.

<sup>69</sup> Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 41-137; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 17-406.

<sup>70</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 42-45; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 73-145; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 7-406; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 41-84; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 72-267.

to him.<sup>71</sup> In *Marriage*, Ananse first deceives his daughter when he asks her to write the letters to the chiefs without telling her that the ‘object of [the chiefs’] interest’ is her (pp. 14-17). Perhaps the most significant occasion that reveals Ananse’s capacity for deceit is when he has realised how to rid his daughter of four suitors by faking her death: the web screen behind which Ananse had concealed himself to read one of the chiefs’s telegrams is moved by the Property Man to a location immediately behind Anansewa (pp. 53-55). Thus Anansewa is framed in her father’s web, and the presence of the web itself reminds those watching the *anansegoro* that the man on stage is a personification of the spider trickster in the process of scheming his way out of trouble. Ananse’s mother and aunt need to be absent for Ananse’s scheme to work, and he tells them he has received a letter detailing the destruction of crops at the family farm, prompting them to leave immediately (pp. 62-65).

Through his tricks and deceit, folklore Ananse often undermines his community. Stronger animals also fall prey to Ananse: even Death and the Sky-god are duped.<sup>72</sup> Of course, Sutherland’s Ananse tricks his social superiors, the chiefs, by encouraging all of them to court his daughter, but he also deceives them when, in order to extricate himself from his entanglement and ascertain which of the four is the most generous, he enlists Christie’s help to inform each of the chiefs that she is dead (pp. 75-76). Folklore Ananse’s wisdom or cunning is emphasised in many tales, illustrating that power is not necessarily dependent upon physical strength. It is understandable that in *anansesem* Ananse is a popular figure, because despite his poverty and size, he can successfully challenge and out-manoeuvre those that ordinarily would have power over him. Sutherland’s Ananse recognises his ability to outwit others, telling Anansewa that ‘if it looks like [he] has tied a knot, [he hasn’t] tied it so

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<sup>71</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 47-51; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 41-137; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 13-406; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 53-64; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 42-253.

<sup>72</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 42-51; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 29-111; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 23-369; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 41-64; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 72-267.

tight that it cannot be untied' (p. 23). The close of the play confirms the success of his cunning and schemes. Some writers have explained the functional nature of traditional *anansesem*, their didactic element, whilst also stressing their aesthetic value: relaxation and entertainment are valued as highly as a clear moral about socially acceptable behaviour.<sup>73</sup> This interpretation is perhaps a little simplistic because in traditional stories, Ananse often commits theft or murder, yet retribution does not always close the tale.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, Sutherland's Ananse resolves his financial issues as well as securing a worthy husband for his daughter. Understandably, this has led some critics to question what kind of lesson can be learned from *Marriage*. Often, the Ananse of *anansesem* seems to acquire material possessions or a higher status through trickery and it is difficult to interpret tales of this nature as reinforcing acceptable social behaviour.

The consequences of folklore Ananse's subversive activities extend beyond the purely material – the acquisition of food by tricking others. He also exploits their fears and weaknesses, revealing himself to be a master of psychological manipulation. He resents or flouts acceptable behaviour and norms, and sometimes breaks taboos.<sup>75</sup> With regard to exploiting his family's fears and weaknesses, Sutherland's Ananse is exceptionally skilled. Anansewa recognises this when she tells her father that she will not let him sell her 'like some parcel to a customer' (pp. 19-20). To calm Anansewa, Ananse tells her that one of the four chiefs is Chief-Who-Is-Chief, and Anansewa is immediately pleased that she may be able to marry such an important man, responding 'What news is this that is so sweet?' (pp. 21-22). Sensing his advantage, Ananse admonishes Anansewa for her ingratitude, explaining

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<sup>73</sup> Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, p. i; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. xxiii-xxv.

<sup>74</sup> Addo, *Ghana Folk Tales*, pp. 23-51; Appiah, *Ananse*, pp. 29-121; Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 9-409; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 53-72; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 42-187.

<sup>75</sup> Asihene, *Traditional Folk-Tales*, pp. 41-256; Cottrell, *Ewe Stories*, pp. 75-84; Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, pp. 66-151.

to her that the school fees he has given her have come from Chief-Who-Is Chief, as an expression of his interest in her (p. 21). This scene is particularly unpleasant because Anansewa is coaxed into accepting her father's plan to 'sell' her for marriage when he claims that there is no other way he can pay the fees for her to complete her secretarial training (p. 11; 21). It is not only the fees that must be paid: Ananse must pay the last installment on his daughter's typewriter, asking his daughter, 'on whom is the burden of that need?' (p. 11). Within the opening scene, then, Ananse has successfully made his daughter feel first guilty, by reminding her of his poverty and financial obligations to her, and then grateful, by revealing that she is able to return to school, and finally submissive, because this is only possible as a result of his plan to find her a wealthy husband. There is even an occasion when, angry with her father, Anansewa threatens never to return to school and to stop eating the food her father buys; Ananse responds with a callous, 'I'll thank you if you stop' (p. 20). Anansewa, in various places, is described in stage directions as miserable, close to tears, and panicking (p. 12; 21; 22; 23).

Ananse makes cursory references to the importance of his daughter. As Anansewa prepares to play dead for the visiting messengers, her father laments:

I know that not all my ways can be considered straight. But, before God, I'm not motivated by bad thoughts at this moment. I have a deep fatherly concern for this only child of mine. If the world were not what it is, I would not gamble with such a priceless possession. So what I plead is this: may grace be granted so that from among the four chiefs who desire to marry my child, the one will reveal himself who will love her and take good care of her when I give her to him (p. 76).

An audience accustomed to seeing a character soliloquise on stage, revealing secret inner turmoil, might interpret Ananse's speech as a revelation of his 'true' nature as a father only wishing to ensure his daughter's happiness and security. However, Ananse has previously made several speeches – unheard by other characters – that demonstrate the self-serving

aspect of his plans. In fact, when Ananse begins his monologue, his first concern is, ‘Should this moment in which I’m trapped by any chance miscarry, I’m finished’ (p. 76). Then, adding as a ‘moreover’, he might ‘strike the fortune from [his] daughter’s lips’ (p. 76). It is possible that Christie hears Ananse’s speech as the stage directions place her on-stage at the time, and her presence perhaps makes it more likely that Ananse is dissembling. Upon hearing of Ananewa’s death, three of the four chiefs send gifts to Ananse, including cash. Responding to Chief-Who-Is-Chief’s messengers, Ananse obsequiously apologises: ‘I promised you that I would take good care of that precious possession of yours entrusted to me’ (pp. 84-85). The overall impression is that Ananse objectifies his daughter, using her to secure for himself the most comfortable life possible.

Elsewhere, Ananse exploits his mother’s love for him and her paranoia that the people of Nanka will seek to destroy the success of the family farm. He begins by pretending to cry and, when his mother is distressed and accuses Christie of upsetting him, he retorts, ‘Instead of packing up your things promptly and going where my enemies are to fight them for me, you stand there uselessly – and falsely – blaming poor Christie’ (p. 62). While Ananse moves closer to the web screen on stage, his mother’s anger is shown through her lamentations that Ananse will be poorer, ‘lamed and ruined’, by the actions of the ‘vipers’ (pp. 63-64). Ananse again admonishes her for remaining in his home when she should be returning to the farm to confront his enemies and, when his mother and aunt declare they will leave, he tells them immediately that a taxi will soon be arriving to collect them (p. 64). Christie’s affection for Ananse is also exploited. After Ananse has heard Christie asking aloud, ‘Can it be that he sees I am toiling for him?’, he sings and dances with her, telling her, ‘I can believe you are the one, more than anyone else I know in this world, who can assist me to do a deed’ (p. 66). Although Ananse misleads the chiefs, he reserves his manipulation

mostly for the female characters: he exploits his daughter's sense of filial duty, his mother's maternal love, and Christie's romantic interest. He uses each of these women to further his aim of making his life more comfortable. With the presence of other characters on stage in *anasegoro*, Ananse's fate is not entirely in his own hands, in contrast to *anasesem* when it is generally only Ananse who can extract himself from his web. This more community-focused approach is evident in *Marriage*, but it is clearly because Ananse has no qualms about using the women who love him for personal gain.<sup>76</sup> This is surely not the kind of community cohesion that Sutherland intended to promote, and indeed she seems critical of the very same manipulation of the loving wife Ampoma in *Edufa*.

There are few occasions when it is clear that Ananse is suffering. Act Two begins with the arrival of two messengers bearing money for Ananse from one of the chiefs, and after they leave Ananse announces he will go on a shopping spree for the latest cloth and suit (pp. 30-33). Ananse is particularly pleased that he will be able to go to church to 'deposit with the best of the spenders' (p. 33). He asks the Property Man to buy lots of newspapers and 'search them for notices of all memorial services and select for [him] the one which promises to draw the biggest crowd', the implication being that Ananse is willing to exploit another's death merely to display his wealth to as many grieving people as possible (p. 33). Ananse then provides instructions to a carpenter, a painter, and a mason for improvements on his house, also commenting that plumbers and electricians will be coming soon (pp. 34-35). While Ananse receives more money, gifts, and promises from the chiefs' messengers, the audience see him smoking cigars, drinking whiskey, wearing a new wrist watch and business suit, and benefiting from the use of an electric fan and a refrigerator (pp. 35-40). The Act clearly demonstrates the success of Ananse's schemes, and how much he is enjoying his ill-gotten

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<sup>76</sup> Jeyifo, 'Anasegoro', pp. 25-26.



affluence. At the end of the Act, Ananse receives notice from Chief-Who-Is-Chief that he will arrive in two weeks to conduct the formal betrothal ceremony for Anansewa (p. 41); Ananse realises he is in a difficult situation, retreats, complains of a headache, and declares he needs to see Christie (pp. 42-43). Ananse's greed and materialism is evident throughout the Act and, aside from a little worrying, he is hardly remorseful. During Anansewa's outdoor ceremony, her grandmother offers her an 'empty hand' that nevertheless provides a gift: a prayer that Anansewa's husband will be 'above all things, a person with respect for the life of his fellow human beings; a man who is incapable of...' (p. 51). Ananse, '*anxious to prevent whatever follows from being said*' interrupts by singing, presumably because he recognises his mother is about to refer to the type of man *he* is as being unsuitable for her granddaughter (p. 51).

If Sutherland is satirising anything in *Marriage*, it would appear to be materialism and greed in modern Ghana, and although the theory of Ananse representing Nkrumah and his Cold War non-alignment policy has been convincingly discredited, Sutherland would have been aware of accusations of government corruption during the 1960s. Exploring what exactly Sutherland might be satirising in *Marriage*, one critic describes Ananse as neither 'nasty nor really corrupt', seeing him as 'a satirical reflection of the hopes and fears of "ordinary people" who are hoping to get on in this world.'<sup>77</sup> This interpretation posits Ananse as the kind of 'everyman' Sutherland's introduction to the play suggests. However, like the Esu incarnation of Soyinka's Jero, Ananse seems far more manipulative and calculating than any of the other characters in the play – certainly more Richard III than Falstaff. Some critics have commented on the lack of satire in the play. Ananse's Machiavellian behaviour is praised by the Storyteller, and he encourages the audience to do the same; unlike powerful

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<sup>77</sup> Etherton, *African Drama*, p. 224.

satire, the audience laugh at the comedy, but are not encouraged to reflect on the content.<sup>78</sup> Going further, some critics have even suggested that Sutherland seems to approve of Ananse's dubious methods of acquiring wealth, or at least fails to comment on them.<sup>79</sup> The poverty that Ananse experiences at the beginning of the play is never connected to any particular cause; similarly, Ananse's greed is not attributed to the consumerism which surrounds him. Broadly, this analysis of *Marriage* has demonstrated that its content is not a critical examination of the root *cause* of social ills. The positive responses to the play have almost entirely focused on its pioneering form, rather than its content. It is the features of *anansegoro* that I wish to consider now.

The integration of traditional storytelling features into Sutherland's drama has been described thoroughly elsewhere.<sup>80</sup> In order to establish whether *Marriage* fulfils its author's claim that Ananse enables society to examine itself, I want to consider in detail some aspects of the way Sutherland has adapted *anansesem* for the stage. The play begins with a 'popular song' addressed to 'citizens' and 'friends' (p. 9) to recreate a communal storytelling experience more convincingly and to encourage the audience to feel closer to the characters. As well as conversing and singing with the Players, the Storyteller also addresses the audience directly: 'Do you see what has happened in this neighbourhood?' (p. 68); 'You were here, weren't you, when Ananse started drilling his daughter, Anansewa, in pretending dead?' (p. 69); 'You hear that?' (p. 70); 'What would you do, if you were Ananse?' and 'Do you notice that since we started thinking, we also have arrived right where the eye of the story is?' (p. 75). There is also, of course, the presence of *mbuguo*, musical performances that form part of the plot,

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<sup>78</sup> Ebewo, 'Reflections', pp. 38-39.

<sup>79</sup> Osofisan, 'New Exotic', p. 52; Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 115. Gibbs identifies the collaborative production of *Marriage* as potentially the reason the play lacks 'a single, tough, uncompromising vision.' See Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 142.

<sup>80</sup> See Etherton, *African Drama*, pp. 217-224; Hagan, 'Influence of Folktale'; Felicia and Adoma, 'Representations of Ghanaian Tradition'.

traditionally performed by people other than the storyteller. Sutherland incorporates musical *mbuguo* throughout the play, and they usually serve to illuminate the various characters' feelings (pp. 17-18; 24; 25-27; 30-31; 34; 35-37; 37-38; 42-43; 64-65). There are many other songs in the script – indeed, the majority of the play appears to be comprised of singing. One *mbuguo* is a short play in which two characters, Akwasi and Akosua, demonstrate the Storyteller's assertion that there is no law that states Ananse is not obliged to give his daughters in marriage to any of the chiefs whom he has contacted (pp. 25-27). In this brief interlude, the Storyteller interacts with the characters, as he does frequently elsewhere in the play, for example conversing with the Postman (p. 28) and Christie (p. 66).

The role of the Storyteller is, in fact, one of the most significant and problematic adaptations Sutherland has made for her *anansegoro*, a difficulty she acknowledges in her Foreword to the published text (p. 5). In *anansesem*, the storyteller is expected to demonstrate his skill by, according to Sutherland, 'refreshing and up-dating [sic] his story by spontaneous improvisation as he tells it' (p. 4). This is not possible in *Marriage*, as the Storyteller's lines are of course scripted. In *anansegoro*, Sutherland explains, the Storyteller plays the role of a narrator, who is 'the owner of the story', has a right to 'know everything' and to be 'personally involved in the action and to be capable of inducing his audience to believe they are there with him and similarly involved' (p. 4). The adaptation that has taken place has provided the Storyteller with more authority than he would have had in *anansesem*. Donkor defines *mbuguo* as 'knock down' because in *anansesem* these interludes are intended to 'displace the storyteller's narration and allow other participants to subvert, complicate and/or supplant the act.'<sup>81</sup> *Mbuguo* of this kind is not possible in *anansegoro*, thus the Storyteller remains unchallenged. Sutherland notes that traditional Ananse stories are 'under constant

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<sup>81</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 80.

revision for renewal and development’, and ‘contemporary interest inspires the composition of completely new stories to replenish the repertoire’ (p. 4). With a fixed script, albeit one produced after collaborative rehearsals, the scope for incorporating topical, specific, contextual concerns is lost entirely. While this may not present difficulties for most dramatic productions, an Ananse story cannot fulfill the purpose Sutherland attributes to it – a satirical reflection of society facilitating self-examination – if it cannot represent society as it is *in that moment*. An audience’s enjoyment of *anansesem* depends upon the storyteller’s effective use of genre conventions, but also his or her ability to adapt traditional stories to the current context.<sup>82</sup> The lack of improvisation and spontaneity on the part of the Storyteller reduces the potency of the performance. Even the Players, though they are in some ways intended to be part of the audience, have scripted laughter in response to the Storyteller’s comments (p. 24).

The light-hearted tone of *Marriage* and the expectation that the audience will laugh throughout seems inappropriate given the content of the play. Sutherland explains that in *anansesem*, the audience expect to be ‘hoaxed’, meant in a humorous sense (p. 5). When the Storyteller in *Marriage* addresses the audience, it is conspiratorial. A common opening of *anansesem* follows a pattern: ‘Ananse storytelling, we are here to trick you’, to which the audience respond ‘Trick me! Trick me!’ This frame establishes the relationship between the storyteller and the audience as one of consensual deceit: the ensuing story could make reference to local people and events, disguised as an allegory in which Ananse features.<sup>83</sup> Donkor sees the ‘ambiguous framing’ of *anansesem* as providing the storyteller, and the audience, with the protection of a ‘many-layered aura of misdirection and artistic ambiguity’, enabling ordinarily intolerable behaviour, ‘including indecency, critiques of sacrosanct

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<sup>82</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 75.

<sup>83</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, pp. 65-66.

values, and even insults directed at real-life organizations and political figures.’<sup>84</sup> Thus the framing technique facilitates a ‘community-wide, participatory investigation into the limits imposed by the social order and the possibility of alternative, critical outlooks.’<sup>85</sup> This initial exchange does not form part of the opening scene of *Marriage*, but at its close the Storyteller announces the end of the play, again addressing the audience directly: ‘Whether you found [the *anansegoro*] interesting or not, do take parts of it away, leaving parts of it with me’ (p. 91). Sutherland describes an opening with a similar sentiment in a Ghana Experimental Theatre Players production in the first issue of the literary journal *Okyeame*: the Storyteller begins with, ‘An Ananse story is not meant to be consumed’, with the Chorus responding, ‘It is meant to be stored.’<sup>86</sup> This opening suggests that something important will be imparted, and the audience will learn a lesson that they must consider later: essentially, the audience expect a moral or message within the narrative that should be reflected upon.<sup>87</sup> ‘Whether or not my telling is delightful, I put it on your head’ and ‘Whether or not my telling is delightful, keep it under your sleeping mat so that tomorrow, you may cook it with green plantains to eat’ are similar formulaic codas that bring a performance to a close:

These statements serve to remind the audience that they are not obligated to be just passive observers but are welcome to express their own judgement of the performance, to reinterpret after their own fashion, and to take critical possession of the stories (to “keep”, “cook”, and “eat” them) on their own terms.<sup>88</sup>

Thus the purpose of both *anansesem* and *anansegoro* is seen to be didactic, with the audience expecting and expected to learn something important.

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<sup>84</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 79.

<sup>85</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 79.

<sup>86</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 103.

<sup>87</sup> Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 103.

<sup>88</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, pp. 81-82.

The humour, trickery, and conspiratorial nature of *anansesem* is reflected in Sutherland's Ananse, but does not appear to be reflected adequately in the performance of *anansegoro*. These aspects of *anansesem* need to be explored in order to understand the potential impact – or rather lack of impact – in *Marriage*. Anthropologist R. S. Rattray describes the satirical nature of *anansesem*:

[I]t was also a recognized custom in olden times for anyone with a grievance against a fellow villager, a chief, or even the King of Ashanti, to hold him up to thinly disguised ridicule, by exposing some undesirable trait in his character – greed, jealousy, deceit – introducing the affair as the setting to some tale.<sup>89</sup>

As the stories were grievances aired in public, the king might be referred to as the Sky-god, and the complainant might appear as 'the Spider.'<sup>90</sup> What Rattray was considering in relation to the topical nature of *anansesem* – topical, that is, to the surrounding community, rather than to national politics – is elaborated upon by Shipley in detail: *anansesem* was talking metaphorically *about* someone, open to interpretation, and reliant on innuendo or other forms of indirection to 'address the sacred and the powerful.'<sup>91</sup> Thus the role of Ananse was not only a scheming trickster, but also a storyteller himself, who 'continually breaks the spatio-temporal frame to make metanarrative comments to the audience on his own action and that of others.'<sup>92</sup>

That the Storyteller in *Marriage* assesses Ananse's actions throughout the play is clear, and there are several prompts to the audience to do the same. Sutherland adapts the narrator role of *anansesem* when the Storyteller makes such comments as, 'It's very clear that [Ananse] knows the customs more than well. Notice how he has them at his finger tips, spinning them

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<sup>89</sup> Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, p. xi.

<sup>90</sup> Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti*, p. x.

<sup>91</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>92</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 65.

out, weaving them into a design to suit his purposes [...] His ways are certainly complicated' (p. 25), and later, 'Ananse is not doing badly for himself. What he hinted at in a roundabout way is what is happening before our own eyes' (p. 37). The Storyteller, however, rarely comments unfavourably on Ananse's selfish behaviour: when news has been spread that Anansewa is dead, the Storyteller laments, 'Parents are suffering in their guts for nothing. Oh, George K. Ananse' (p. 68). For the most part, the Storyteller clarifies the plot of the play, or moves it along by interacting with the characters briefly. Instead of prompting the audience to ask themselves pertinent questions that might change the way they think about society – questions that address Ananse's materialism and his exploitative nature – the Storyteller draws attention to the success of Ananse's schemes.

If Sutherland's Storyteller cannot fully occupy the role of an *anansesem* storyteller, modifying the narrative spontaneously in a way that relates the tale to members of the audience, the audience's participatory role in *anansesem* is diminished even further in *anansegoro*. The opportunity to interject is crucial for the kind of critique *anansesem* provides. Interjections could take the form of disagreeing with the narrator, offering a 'different story or an alternative perspective, goading the storyteller into ever more complex revisionary antics.'<sup>93</sup> Even if the audience are considering pertinent questions about the society in which they live, in *anansegoro* they have no opportunity to vocalise them or challenge the Storyteller. Donkor's summary of *anansesem* as 'a tradition that is grounded in collaborative fabrication and a rejection of mono-focal outlooks' substantiates the limitations of *anansegoro* outlined above.<sup>94</sup> In fact, the subversive nature of *anansesem* and, by extension, the Ananse character himself, is dependent on spontaneous interjections and

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<sup>93</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 82.

<sup>94</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 82.

interruptions. In *anansesem*, the story is not ‘the sole property of any single author or authority’ and the conflicting perspectives contributed by people other than the storyteller enables the tales to resist narrative closure.<sup>95</sup> The absence of closure contributes to the ‘ongoing ambiguity and questionable truth-status of the storyteller’s claims.’<sup>96</sup> Consequently, the collaborative method of constructing *anansesem* demonstrates that the social order is, too, a construct: ‘a pragmatic, fragmented, and continually reinvented construct that can turn ominous if it is allowed to coalesce into a domineering ideology.’<sup>97</sup> This interpretation of *anansesem* clarifies the importance of a participating audience, lest the narrative becomes fixed, authoritative, and hegemonic. Although *anansegoro* could be considered revolutionary because it blends European and traditional African theatre sources, Osofisan’s criticism of the New Exotic is clearly applicable to *Marriage*, with its lack of spontaneous audience participation: the playwright ‘would either slavishly repeat borrowed *clichés*, or would flagrantly demonstrate an uncritical attitude to society and its mores’, failing to offer a chance of epiphany to its audience and appealing only to tourists or those out of touch with traditional culture.<sup>98</sup> *Anansesem* becomes a commodity when adapted into *anansegoro*, in which the author’s voice dominates unchallenged. Again, the single-author aspect of the *anansegoro* form prevents it from fulfilling its subversive function, instead providing an illusion of collaboration and freedom of expression. *Marriage* may be an entertaining performance of *anansesem*, but it does not offer the same opportunity for dialogue.

Osofisan is, of course, exploring the drama of four playwrights, only one of which was Ghanaian, so it is perhaps more useful to consider the views of Joe de Graft, the first director

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<sup>95</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 80.

<sup>96</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 81.

<sup>97</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 82.

<sup>98</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, pp. 46-47.



of the Drama Studio, who worked at the Institute for African Studies (IAS) alongside Sutherland.<sup>99</sup> De Graft questions the value of ‘vociferous and disruptive [audience] participation’, extolling instead the benefit of ‘silent but intense participation’:

I think that the kind of theatre which invites audiences to think and feel through to the core of the conflicts of life and the problems of society is likely to be that which demands this kind of intensely silent but intellectually and emotionally active participation.<sup>100</sup>

Like Osofisan, de Graft considered the preoccupation with form an inhibiting aspect of drama, and detrimental to the social function of theatre. Writing of *Marriage* specifically, Osofisan comments that ‘from the thematic perspective, *Anansewa* is a gratuitous exercise in which authorial self-indulgence is so evident as to be embarrassing.’<sup>101</sup> The collaborative method employed by Sutherland to develop *Marriage* specifically, undermines the accusation of ‘authorial self-indulgence.’ But there is some validity in the accusation that Sutherland prioritised the spectacular over the profound, revealing a deeper concern for impressing and entertaining the audience, rather than encouraging a critical examination of society.

One final aspect of *anansesem* needs to be considered: its vulnerability. That *anansesem* seemed fitting as one possible basis for Ghanaian national theatre is not necessarily an acknowledgement of its inspirational and revolutionary value. The coloniser’s denigration of traditional culture worked alongside the promotion of British culture to reinforce the supposed inferiority of the colonised. Contributing to this was the tendency to view African tricksters as static figures, untouched by historical and political context.<sup>102</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>99</sup> Although colleagues, Sutherland and de Graft represent two distinctly different approaches to modern Ghanaian drama: while Sutherland sought to adapt traditional genres in order to challenge residual colonial mindsets, de Graft advocated theatre that would address the rapid changes occurring in modern Ghana. See Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 61. Shipley also reports that in a private interview, Nketia said Sutherland referred to de Graft as a ‘new colonialist.’

<sup>100</sup> Joe de Graft, ‘Dramatic Questions’, in *Writers in East Africa*, ed. by Andrew Gurr and Angus Calder (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1974), pp. 33-67 (p. 56; 64).

<sup>101</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, p. 51.

<sup>102</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 17.

trickster tales were viewed by colonials as harmless.<sup>103</sup> This view was perhaps also held by Nkrumah, who would not have suggested a publication of Ananse tales if he had thought the folklore figure could symbolise a challenge to his authority. Shipley refers to a private interview with Asiedu Yirenkyi, a drama lecturer who was also involved in Sutherland's work at the Drama Studio, summarising his view that Nkrumah's cultural nationalism seemed political, but in fact 'depoliticised' the arts by focusing on form rather than content; Sutherland is given as an example of an artist so consumed by elements of form, that she ignored the on-going political tensions and misconduct.<sup>104</sup> Stephanie Newell succinctly summarises the concerns of critics such as Yirenkyi, Osofisan and Jeyifo:

[A]ny artistic representation of 'traditional' culture in Africa should acknowledge that religion and culture are dynamic, produced by people within a historical dialectic and not by some external, transcendent force. Oppressed people are capable of analysing, resisting, and transforming this environment. Literary representations should not therefore suggest that the source of one's cultural identity is cut off from human reason and historical change: such a suggestion serves a neo-colonial purpose in helping to persuade the masses that political action is neither possible nor effective.<sup>105</sup>

Newell's explanation here recalls Sutherland's description of the function of Ananse: a tool for critical self-examination. In some ways, Sutherland has adapted Ananse to reflect Ghanaian society in the 1960s: his identity as a consumer is a consequence of the availability of goods imported through the global market, he attends church as well as observing the traditional betrothal process, and his daughter is training to be a secretary. Yet these minor adaptations, related to social and political change as they are, do not constitute a significant engagement with social and political concerns.

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<sup>103</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 64.

<sup>104</sup> Shipley, *Trickster Theatre*, p. 72.

<sup>105</sup> Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 163.

The focus on adapting traditional performance aspects to create distinct ‘African’, or Nigerian, or Ghanaian drama did not only depoliticise the arts: it also potentially reinforced the very notion it was intended to discredit – namely by romanticising traditional culture and rendering it apolitical. Critical of the supposed ‘orality versus writing’ dichotomy, Newell comments that, ‘it does not account for the fact that *writing is not neutral*: the pen is just as biased as the spoken word.’<sup>106</sup> Although Sutherland’s *Storyteller* is unable to revise and spontaneously embellish the narration in his role as a character in a scripted *anansegoro* – a freedom available to an *anansesem* storyteller – Sutherland has made authorial decisions to adapt *anansesem* in the manner outlined above. *Marriage* has the potential to reflect *anansesem* in the sense that, in its creation, the author can respond to the political circumstances of the time, if not a local community. And like a specific *anansesem* tale, its composition can be affected by external factors. Yet when Ananse is enlisted in the service of an authority, his inherently subversive nature means there is no guarantee that he will convey the prescribed ideology.<sup>107</sup> It is possible to posit that the authenticity of Sutherland’s *anansegoro* could have been compromised by her association with the State and the CIA; it would be equally possible to conclude that any potentially subversive or revolutionary function that might be found in *anansesem* could not be found in *anansegoro*. It is with this in mind that I wish to consider Sutherland’s plays, and *Marriage* in particular, as products of a particular moment in Ghana’s history.

### **Sutherland’s domestication of the trickster**

The scripted and rehearsed nature of *anansegoro* means that the creativity and spontaneity of *anansesem* cannot be translated to the stage. Consequently, the appeal of *anansesem* – its

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<sup>106</sup> Newell, *West African Literatures*, p. 68.

<sup>107</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 59; 177.

potential to provide a creative response to unique contextual circumstances and function as a forum for criticising individuals and institutions – is lost. There are, however, other avenues of subversion that Sutherland could be viewed as pursuing. Lloyd W. Brown links Ananse's critical diagnostician role to the nature of theatre in general:

[Ananse's] art of deception is therefore both an analogy and an integral part of theatre itself, for dramatic art is really a convention of hoaxing an audience that is already predisposed to be deceived, and to be instructed in the truth by way of deception.<sup>108</sup>

Thus *anansesem* can be seen to bear considerable similarity to the Marxist conception of socialist realism, in which realising a truth in theatre prompts action in reality. *Anansegoro* such as *Marriage* has the potential to inspire action.

Sutherland's designation of Ananse as an 'everyman' illuminates the satirical nature of *Marriage*: it mocks *ordinary* people. Sutherland expands on the symbolic nature of Ananse: 'For me Ananse is not a crook, but an amalgam of all sorts of anti-social strands in our society', thus his role is 'not to be bad, but to reflect all the wickedness in our society and expose it.'<sup>109</sup> It is worth recalling that Sutherland's *Marriage* excludes entirely any challenge to people in positions of authority, not even the chiefs. At most, Ananse makes the chiefs seem foolish for being drawn into his scheme. The audience, however, does not see Ananse tricking the chiefs on-stage and, without actually seeing the humiliated chiefs, the audience is unlikely to laugh at their expense. It is possible that the lowly Messengers might incur derisive laughter. Other figures of authority are noticeably absent, with the exception perhaps of the dubious 'church.' Far from intending to challenge the ostensibly acquisitive nature of the church, the play demonstrates that Ananse's greed is a consequence of

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<sup>108</sup> Brown, *Women Writers*, p. 80.

<sup>109</sup> Sutherland, interviewed by Pietro Deandra, Accra, 17 December 1993 (unpublished). Quoted in Deandra, *Fertile Crossings*, p. 213.

desperately trying to participate more conspicuously in the very activity that undermines the integrity of the church. Although Ananse's behaviour is anti-social, there is no rebellion as such, and even the audience's shocked and outraged response is staged. Rebellion is scripted, expected, accepted, and celebrated. Sutherland has, in a sense, attempted to constrain Ananse: by removing any possibility of spontaneous subversion, and instead scripting anti-social behaviour, she has undermined the core of *anansesem*. Ananse may be cunning and wily, but he is essentially an impotent rebel that causes discomfort only for his own family, and minor financial inconveniences for the chiefs.

In fact, *Marriage* appears to reinforce the patriarchal nature of society. A surprising interpretation of *Marriage* from one critic is that it constitutes 'the most aggressively feminist of Sutherland's works.'<sup>110</sup> Ananse has been identified as a synecdoche of 'every modern African man who exploits women and cultural traditions for his own ends by using the advantages of a Western education.'<sup>111</sup> There is ample evidence for this second statement, some of which has been explored above but is worth reiterating here: Anansewa typing the letters to the suitors without knowing they concern her betrothal demonstrates the submissive role of women – both as daughters and secretaries; alive or 'dead', Anansewa is an object to be viewed – particularly evident in the use of her photograph to attract suitors and the glass coffin that is bought for her corpse; while apparently dead and powerless, the decision is made to exchange the dominant male figure in Anansewa's life from her father to a husband, and finally, the other women in the play are presented as 'stereotypes of the harebrained female' who are treated as fools.<sup>112</sup> There are clearly feminist concerns explored in

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<sup>110</sup> Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, 'Efua Sutherland', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Caribbean and Black African Writers*, ed. by Bernth Lindfors and Reinhard Sander (London: Gale Research Inc., 1992), 284-290 (p. 288).

<sup>111</sup> Ogunyemi, 'Efua Sutherland', pp. 287-288.

<sup>112</sup> Ogunyemi, 'Efua Sutherland', p. 288.

*Marriage*, but the play's content does not challenge traditional gender roles, and the dénouement preserves the patriarchy. Of course, there is no punishment for Ananse, and the overall message appears to be that a man manipulating all the women around him is not cause for reflection. It is, in fact, cause for audience laughter, as *Marriage* is presented as a comedy and even contains stage directions for laughter. The fairy-tale ending prevents any acknowledgement or consideration of the play's more sinister elements.

If the enjoyable and didactic aspect of *anansesem* is accepted as a consequence of its construction within and by the community, and the appeal of stories about Ananse in particular is directly related to the lack of authorial closure and the possibility of multiple people contributing to their composition, *anansesem* and therefore *anansegoro* would be the ideal place to explore and contest hitherto accepted notions of authority, social roles and traditional lifestyles and customs. Victor I. Ukaegbu notes that Sutherland, instead of using the Ananse archetype and storytelling theatre to stage gender debates, 're-affirms the same patriarchal order and gaze, and the gender inequalities that traditional folktales and fairytales perpetuated in their day.'<sup>113</sup> Although Sutherland had voiced her view that the writer has a responsibility to their society, she refuses to acknowledge a feminist dimension to her work.<sup>114</sup> Brown, in fact, quotes a letter received from Sutherland in which she responded to the designation 'woman writer': 'Somehow, I find prescriptions like Women writers very entertaining, and can't manage to respond seriously to it.'<sup>115</sup> This dismissive attitude would be welcome if it were a result of complete systemic gender equality, but evidently in 1976 – when the letter was written – this was not the case. *Marriage* would be fertile ground for counter-hegemonic *anansesem*, yet Sutherland does not appear to acknowledge that female

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<sup>113</sup> Victor I. Ukaegbu, 'Written Over, Written Out: The Gendered Misrepresentation of Women in Modern African Performance', *African Performance Review*, 1:1 (2007), 7-23 (p. 11).

<sup>114</sup> Sutherland, quoted in Deandra, *Fertile Crossings*, pp. 210-211.

<sup>115</sup> Sutherland, quoted in Brown, *Women Writers*, p. 5.

oppression is one form of oppression that in fact her work *does* explore, albeit not convincingly in her *anansegoro*. Some of the female characters lament their treatment at the hands of the male characters, but they rarely take their fate into their own hands. Anansewa remains in her accustomed role and continues to participate in traditions which oppress her.<sup>116</sup> Sutherland's time in England, and her contact with Western culture, did not seem to make her aware of, or sympathetic to, the concerns of second-wave feminism.

It seems, then, that the plot of *Marriage* prevents the satirical and reflective potential from being fulfilled. Yet the way in which the play was constructed offered another opportunity for challenging the status quo. An integral part of Boal's poetics of liberation is that the theatre may not be revolutionary itself, but is at least 'a rehearsal of revolution.'<sup>117</sup> Instead of experiencing catharsis, the spectators become participants in the process of constructing drama, and 'the practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfilment through real action.'<sup>118</sup> This 'rehearsal theatre' recalls more convincingly the performance of *anansesem*: no clear distinction between performer and spectator, and no single writer dictating the direction of the action. Initial work on *anansegoro* also resembles Boal's 'rehearsal theatre', notably without the focus on finding solutions for a problem. In any case, *Marriage* was published as a definitive script, with authorship solely attributed to Sutherland. Considering that all of Sutherland's plays were written in accordance with the Nkrumah-backed cultural revival and nationalism, perhaps it is no surprise that ordinary people are blamed for the country's hardships and social problems, and ordinary people are expected to resolve them. The hedonism, idleness, cowardice and greed of Ananse is the cause of the conflicts and problems presented in the play. Anansewa's

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<sup>116</sup> Ukaegbu, 'Written Over', p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 155.

<sup>118</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, pp. 141-142.

obedience and fatalism make her complicit in her oppression. For Sutherland, then, the behaviour of ordinary people is the source of social ills, not the officially sanctioned – or corrupt – actions or inaction of the State and clergy, or the inhibiting attitudes relating to gender, class and/or age expectations.

Further complexity in Sutherland's situation was that the funding for her work came from the Arts Council as well as the CCF, which in turn received its funds from CIA fronts. By allocating funding to writers like Sutherland, the CCF could demonstrate its commitment to the promotion of intellectual and creative freedom, in contrast to the Soviet Union. An awareness of the CCF's agenda can be seen in Dennis Duerden's 1961 report for the CCF: Sutherland's response to hearing about people supporting Duerden was to 'immediately [pronounce] the Congress to be an anti-Marxist organization.'<sup>119</sup> Perhaps if Sutherland's work itself had been more radical, more Marxist in tone even, funding would not have been granted by the CCF. Ironically, as it was, the content of Sutherland's work was so innocuous it could not have been perceived as promoting Marxist ideology, or as a challenge to or protest against either Nkrumah's government or the interests of the US, different as those interests were. Despite being inextricably connected to two powerful, authoritative establishments, the Nkrumah government's agenda and the US's covert project to reduce the risk of Communism spreading in Africa, Sutherland and her work managed to remain distinctly apolitical. I contend that at least part of this circumstance was a consequence of Sutherland ascribing the function of *anansesem* to theatre in general, as well as using aspects of *anansesem* performance in her work. Sutherland's early work in the NTM could be seen as the progression of a playwright educated in the British colonial school system before

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<sup>119</sup> Gibbs, "America", p. 178.



attending British universities, to a post-independence nationalist embracing traditional dramatic forms in the service of the State.

Although he writes of the anti-colonial struggle for independence, the first and second of Fanon's three phases of the African intellectual outlined in 'On National Culture' are relevant to Sutherland's work.<sup>120</sup> Sam Ukala refers to the initial two stages as they relate to theatre: 'the theatre of surrender', in which the intellectual adapts European plays, and 'the theatre of re-awakening', in which the intellectual draws on traditional folklore, myth and history to create drama.<sup>121</sup> Sutherland's adaptations of *Everyman* and *Alcestis*, as well as stagings of Bertolt Brecht and Anton Chekhov, demonstrate her knowledge and experience of Western drama. *Foriwa's* Realism represents Sutherland's perception of everyday post-independence life in small towns, and functions as an example of a proto-TfD, albeit offering unrealistic solutions. Fanon's third phase, that of revolutionary literature, is thematically absent from Sutherland's repertoire. Nevertheless, Fanon's description of it sounds familiar: the intellectual 'contents himself with stamping these instruments with a hall-mark which he wishes to be national, but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism.'<sup>122</sup> Even in this stage, the artist 'turns paradoxically towards the past and away from actual events.'<sup>123</sup> Ukala adds to this a fourth stage, which involves researching and experimenting with traditional sources and form: *Marriage* is identified as one such play, and within the same bracket are 'plays devised in collaboration with rural communities, aimed at solving developmental or health problems' – in essence, TfD.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 178-179.

<sup>121</sup> Sam Ukala, 'Politics of Aesthetics', in *African Theatre: Playwrights and Politics*, ed. by Martin Banham, James Gibbs & Femi Osofisan (Oxford: James Currey, 2001), pp. 29-41 (pp. 30-31).

<sup>122</sup> Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 180.

<sup>123</sup> Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 181.

<sup>124</sup> Ukala, 'Politics of Aesthetics', pp. 31-32.

*Anansegoro* draws on and adapts traditional *anansesem* practices for the stage and, while Ananse may not always feature as a character within an *anansegoro* play, Sutherland underlines the satirical, social-examination aspect of the figure in her introduction to *Marriage*. In Fanon's formulation, culture can only be shaped by the struggle for nationhood. In Ukala's formulation, the fourth phase involves the liberated creative writer using folklore as 'dynamic material for the re-interpretation of history and projection into the future', and mirroring the African traditional creative artist by praising or damning 'the white man, his own king, president or god.'<sup>125</sup> Presenting Ananse on-stage could facilitate debate concerning the nature and legitimacy of authority, leaving the audience to form their own answers and continue their struggle, beyond independence, towards political and consequently cultural autonomy. If the notion is accepted that *anansesem* functions in a way synonymous with a Marxist interpretation of theatre, *anansegoro* could fulfill this too. However, with *anansegoro* in general and *Marriage* in particular, Sutherland started a process that was perfect for abuse when taken into the hands of authority, and would ultimately frame Ananse as a commodity.

Some of Sutherland's contemporaries had noted the hazards of appropriating *anansesem*, or the ideological tension such appropriation could create. Yirenkyi had been critical of cultural nationalism's impact on the theatre in the 1960s, claiming it was 'difficult to evaluate where political rhetoric ended and where cultural revival and arts began.'<sup>126</sup> When Ananse was mobilised, the line between politics and art became blurred, and not always in the sense that art was used to engage with and challenge the political sphere. Armah seems to reflect this

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<sup>125</sup> Ukala, 'Politics of Aesthetics', p. 31.

<sup>126</sup> Asiedu Yirenkyi, 'Kobina Sekyi: Founding Father of the Ghanaian Theatre', *The Legacy*, 3:2 (1977), 39-47 (pp. 39-40). Cited in Donkor, 'Making Space', p. 49.

concern specifically in relation to a brief, but disparaging, portrait of Sutherland in the figure of Akosua Russell in his novel *Fragments* (1969).<sup>127</sup> The novel's protagonist, Baako, refers to the use of a myth in one of Akosua's poems: "The myths are good," he said. "Only their use..." His voice died.<sup>128</sup> Broadly, Armah is critical of artists who appropriate traditional culture, and exploit their connections and funding opportunities to promote themselves, rather than offering opportunities to talented artists. By exercising her power through the funding she is given, Akosua is able to shape the emerging literary culture in accordance with her own views or those of the financiers. It is worth noting that, in her contribution to an Orientation to Ghana Committee publication aimed at new expatriates arriving in Ghana to work and contribute to the economy, Sutherland describes pre-colonial and post-colonial drama according to the premises on which her own work is based.<sup>129</sup>

One of the key issues with *Marriage* is precisely that its use of a traditional *anansesem* prevents it from fulfilling a key function of traditional *anansesem*: a criticism of social reality and the potential subversion of authority. The content of the *anansegoro* is stagnant. Using the plot of a traditional story without more than superficially adapting it to the present context prevents any meaningful challenge to the *status quo*. Ukaegbu summarises the irony: 'In the very act of re-contextualising the Ananse story in drama, Sutherland spotlights the theatre's role in re-interpreting events but she does not actually utilize the storytelling theatre's capacity to contest dominant, oppressive narratives.'<sup>130</sup> It seems that as *anansegoro*, *Marriage* has retained the preservationist element of *anansesem*: the perspective of the ruling

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<sup>127</sup> See Robert Fraser, *West African Poetry: A Critical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 141-142; Gibbs, *Nkyin-Kyin*, p. 120; William Lawson, *The Western Scar: The Theme of the Been-to in West African Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), p. 85.

<sup>128</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1974), p. 120.

<sup>129</sup> Efua T. Sutherland, 'Theatre in Ghana', in *Ghana Welcomes You* (Accra: Orientation to Ghana Committee, 1969), pp. 83-87.

<sup>130</sup> Ukaegbu, 'Written Over', p. 11.

elite is legitimised and reinforced. Perhaps, in colonial Ghana, Ananse could have been a potent anti-establishment anti-hero. Sanctioned by Nkrumah – who was later overthrown ostensibly for his draconian leadership – Ananse became an ‘everyman’ whose actions reflected those of an increasingly capitalistic society.

Sutherland’s response to calls to promote the value of Ghana’s cultural heritage, however, did not simply rely upon plots extracted from *anansesem*. Experiments with performance aspects of traditional storytelling – the incorporation of audience participation, songs, a storyteller, and *mbuguo* among others – are seen as prerequisites for authentic African theatre. Far from provoking revolutionary or subversive thought in the audience, these non-naturalistic features – which could potentially distance the audience from the action in order to help them view it critically – engages them in a way that prevents serious reflection. One critic commented that the dénouement of *Marriage* ‘smacks of escapism.’<sup>131</sup> Undoubtedly, offering an impressive spectacle that fails to engage seriously with social deprivation, or the State’s corruption and abuse of power, serves as an effective distraction from these issues. In his criticism of the New Exotic – which bears remarkable similarity to de Graft’s criticism of the trends in African drama exemplified in *Marriage* – Osofisan links the lack of ‘illumination or epiphany’ directly to the visual appeal of the drama that ultimately constitutes a ‘tourist attraction.’<sup>132</sup> Although Osofisan recognises the aesthetic value of plays such as *Marriage*, his assessment that ‘reality in good art has always been double-faced, one a reflection and the other the ammunition in exploding that reality’ forces the conclusion that, in fact, *Marriage* is not ‘good art.’<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, p. 119.

<sup>132</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, p. 46.

<sup>133</sup> Osofisan, ‘New Exotic’, p. 52.

In addition to the content of the play, then, the form of *Marriage* also reduces its impact. Of course the form was developed as a response, through the NTM, to Nkrumah's concept of the African Personality and the manner in which it can be expressed. Instead of extolling the value of African culture and dramatic forms, Sutherland perpetuates negative perceptions of African people, as outlined by de Graft in his list of stereotypes of Africans.<sup>134</sup> In 1978, three years after *Marriage* was published, Osofisan described the New Exotic as constituting plays that would provide 'a spell-binding excursion back into the past, into the wondrous, primitive age of our culture, the era of the "bon sauvage."' <sup>135</sup> These summations demonstrate the difficulties in adapting and developing traditional culture at the behest of Nkrumah in an attempt to reify the African Personality. The concept of the African Personality is a problematic one, and its complexity goes some way to explaining the contradiction of extolling traditional culture while simultaneously perpetuating damaging stereotypes. De Graft summarises the cause of the contradiction:

The idea of "the African Personality" needs looking at very critically, especially if at the centre of it is to be placed the African as a fossil, with all that constitutes his supposed "traditional culture", for the edification of curious scholars and easy-handed tourists.<sup>136</sup>

I would add to this that, in *Marriage*, Sutherland fossilises *anansesem*: by incorporating the formal aspects but removing the spontaneity of them, Sutherland has created a play that represents folklore as a static performance that culminates in closure dictated by the author. There is no opportunity for dissent, and thus no possibility of progress.

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<sup>134</sup> de Graft, 'Dramatic Questions', p. 54.

<sup>135</sup> Osofisan, 'New Exotic', pp. 46-47.

<sup>136</sup> de Graft, 'Dramatic Questions', p. 55.

### Sutherland's legacy

It is also possible to identify not only the appropriation of traditional culture and folklore to serve the State, but also its commodification. Loren Kruger's discussion of the reverence for and commodification of Brecht's work reflects Sutherland's use of Ananse: Kruger explores the way in which 'the capitalist culture industry thrives by marketing anti-capitalist messages as commodities.'<sup>137</sup> Much later, the commodification of Ananse was evident in the J. J. Rawlings administration of the 1990s, the subject of Donkor's *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism*; seeking investment from international tourism companies with a particular focus on attracting African diaspora tourists, the 'heir to Nkrumah' capitalised on Sutherland's legacy by using the kodzi theatre for tourists to witness "authentic" folklore performances.<sup>138</sup>

Overall, the achievement of *anansegoro* and *Marriage* can be stated as its successful commercialisation and commodification of Ananse, setting a precedent for Rawlings. Consider Donkor's comparison of Sutherland's Kodzidan, which he describes as an attempt to engage in an 'innovative, forward-looking, and collaborative fashion' with Ananse's 'open-endedness and multivocal spirit', to the use of Kodzidan in the 1990s:

The static, historical-preservationist framework that was later overwritten onto this theatre for the purposes of neoliberal tourism was something else entirely. It leaned much more strongly toward a univocal, externally imposed narrative that sought to constrain and objectify the spirit of Ananse as an economic commodity.<sup>139</sup>

This description is, in fact, equally applicable to Sutherland's work. It is worth noting that, prior to the heritage tourism projects discussed by Donkor, the 1985 Copyright Act (PNDC

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<sup>137</sup> Loren Kruger, *Post-Imperial Brecht: Politics and Performance, East and South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 173-177; p. 192.

<sup>138</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>139</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, p. 174.

Law 110) conferred the rights to works of folklore on the State, ‘as if the republic were the original creators of the works’ in order to prevent artists from capitalising on it.<sup>140</sup> Although this appears to be an undisguised abuse of State power exercised for financial gain, it is not so very different from Sutherland’s *anansegoro* work. In fact, the commercialisation of drama and the commodification of folklore continues beyond the example explored by Donkor. The repeal of the 1985 Copyright Act, resulting in the 2005 Copyright Act, prevents anyone from adapting folklore into a derivative work for commercial purposes unless they have applied for permission and paid an undetermined fee to the National Folklore Board.<sup>141</sup> In his analysis of the Act, Stephen Collins considers the irony of the State preventing the appropriation of folklore broadly, and Ananse specifically:

[T]he accusation that folklore is subject to commercialisation and exploitation that removes it from traditional patterns of transmission could just as easily be levelled at the development of Ghana’s post-independence theatre industry, where folkloric stories and storytelling devices have been transposed and translated from a traditional context to a modern theatrical context.<sup>142</sup>

Considering the use of folklore for the State’s immediate post-independence agenda, Collins sees the 2005 Act as the ‘next, logical step, in the state’s management of its cultural resources.’<sup>143</sup> Be that as it may, it undermines the very nature of *anansesem* and the spirit of Ananse altogether.

## Conclusion

By imposing herself as an author of Ananse, Sutherland has removed the spontaneity, characteristic lack of closure, and challenge to authority found in *anansesem*. Ananse extracted from his unique contextual circumstances in the oral tradition, where he was

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen Collins, ‘Who owns Ananse? The tangled web of folklore and copyright in Ghana’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (2016) 1-14 (p. 8).

<sup>141</sup> Collins, ‘Who owns Ananse?’, pp. 1-14.

<sup>142</sup> Collins, ‘Who owns Ananse?’ p. 10.

<sup>143</sup> Collins, ‘Who owns Ananse?’, p. 11.

embraced by the community as subversive and unpredictable, becomes a commodity himself. Ananse's myriad uses explain and justify his popularity, inextricable from his status as the owner of *anansesem*. To begin with, he was enlisted in the service of Nkrumah's agenda, a symbol of unity in a new nation. He was subsequently presented as the triumphant protagonist of a comedy that appears to promote a conservative and capitalistic social vision. At the same time, the formal elements of *anansesem* contributed entertaining but ultimately meaningless metatheatrical aspects of dramatic form to Sutherland's theatre, such as *mbuguo* and audience participation. Later, ownership of Ananse was transferred to the State, enabling his use in the promotion of neoliberal policies. Finally, if there is any money to be made using Ananse and *anansesem*, the State retains the right to veto it and, if they allow it, they receive their dues first. In all the roles in which Ananse has been cast, and all the functions he has performed, the one missing is notably the most significant: his role as an embodiment of the counter-hegemonic and subversive spirit. Given an author, directed and funded by authority, Ananse is thoroughly depoliticised. The question remains whether the artists who successfully apply to the State for the use of Ananse will release him from his exploitation, or whether he will continue to serve essentially authoritative, avaricious and individualistic ends. In the end, given Ananse's self-serving nature, this seems the most appropriate role for him in modern society.



### Chapter 3

#### The novel as trickster: Peter Nazareth's *The General Is Up* (1984)

##### Introduction

Nazareth – novelist, playwright and critic – was born in Uganda to Goan parents, and considers himself primarily an African writer.<sup>1</sup> Nazareth's study of Salkey, Ebejar and Reed's fiction, *In the Trickster Tradition*, asserts that a novel itself can perform a trickster function, leading the reader to an epiphany through careful crafting of the novel's form and structure.<sup>2</sup> Nazareth discusses his own work in relation to the trickster function, as do several other critics.<sup>3</sup> One such example is the focus of this chapter: Nazareth's *The General Is Up*, for which Nazareth points to the conclusion and epilogue as the moment when the reader should experience their epiphany.<sup>4</sup> I begin by summarising Nazareth's early life, influences, and career, including some brief discussion of his first novel, *In a Brown Mantle* (1972). *In a Brown Mantle* anticipated Amin's coup and the expulsion, and *The General* portrays its aftermath.<sup>5</sup> I therefore integrate detail about this moment in Uganda's history with Nazareth's assessment of Amin and the expulsion as presented in his non-fiction. Next, I consider Nazareth's role as a literary critic, specifically in relation to his contention that a novel can perform the same function as a trickster. In the next section, I provide a summary of critical responses to *The General*, including some comments Nazareth has made regarding his novel. Next, my close analysis of the novel considers Nazareth's portrayal of the General: his similarities to Amin are explored in relation to the western press's presentation of him. As an ostensibly devout Muslim, the General refers repeatedly throughout the novel

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<sup>1</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 1; Charles G. Irby, 'Goan Literature From Peter Nazareth: An Interview', *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*, 8:1 (1985), 1-12 (p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> McGuire, 'Historical Translator'; Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice'; Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*.

<sup>4</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 10. Peter Nazareth, *The General Is Up* (Toronto: Tsar, 1991). Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Nazareth, *In a Brown Mantle* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1972). Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

to his communication with God, and this aspect of the character will also be discussed. The subsequent section considers the ‘trick’ Nazareth claims can be found in *The General*, which provokes vital questions about the General’s role in the trickster function of the novel and what kind of epiphany might occur. The conclusion and epilogue of the novel affect the reader’s interpretation of the entire novel and, while some critics have explored potential re-interpretations in light of the conclusion and epilogue, I argue that they are fundamental to our reading of the General character, and therefore an understanding of Nazareth’s trick. My conclusion considers how the novel can be read bearing in mind that tricksters are open to interpretation and elude fixed meanings.

### **Nazareth’s early life, career, and influences**

Born in Kampala, Uganda in 1940, Nazareth spent his childhood reading American comics such as *Superman*. At Government Indian Secondary School, Nazareth wrote creatively, including a piece he claims to be embarrassed by, titled ‘The Story of Our Queen’ for Queen Elizabeth II’s coronation.<sup>6</sup> Nazareth’s description of the climate at Makerere University College is illuminating:

There was a heavy colonial pall over the place which made it quite hard to be creative instead of imitative, to challenge any of the norms. I mean, we were supposedly the elite who had made it up there and yet somehow there was this feeling that we were not good enough. We were not European. It fitted into the racial structure at Makerere: nearly all the lecturers were European, like the rulers of the country.<sup>7</sup>

Like Soyinka, Nazareth studied at the University of Leeds. He was thoroughly unimpressed with the deprivation and landscape in Leeds, wondering how England could be ruling Uganda.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Nazareth’s disillusionment was so distressing that he ‘had to completely

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<sup>6</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 197.

<sup>8</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, pp. 201-202.

reassess [his] ideas about England, about [himself], and about Literature.’<sup>9</sup> Consequently, a peer of Nazareth’s encouraged him to read Fanon, and Nazareth found him to be ‘a revelation.’<sup>10</sup>

Upon returning to Uganda in 1965, Nazareth took up a civil servant position in the Ministry of Finance, working under Prime Minister and President Apolo Milton Obote and later President Amin until 1973. The manuscript for Nazareth’s first novel, *In a Brown Mantle*, was with the publishers when the coup that brought Amin to power occurred; the novel was published just a few days before Amin, attempting to win the support of black Ugandans and citing benefits to the economy, issued an order to expel Ugandan Asians. Nazareth details his worries at that time: if Amin read the novel, Nazareth felt he might not be alive to write a second one. Furthermore, Nazareth did not feel that he could continue working for Amin’s government and maintain that his ‘hands were clean.’<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Nazareth left Uganda to accept a fellowship at Yale University in the United States shortly before Amin announced the expulsion.

*In a Brown Mantle* is, like *The General*, set in Damibia – a fictional country which bears considerable similarity to Uganda. A first reading of the novel leaves the reader with the impression that Nazareth is incorporating much of his own life into the narrative: indeed, Nazareth refers to several aspects of the novel that correlate with his own experiences or those of his friends.<sup>12</sup> However, the protagonist – Deogratius D’Souza – reveals himself to be corrupt and self-serving, and Nazareth insists he does not share these flaws with his main

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<sup>9</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Nazareth, ‘Adventures in International Writing’, *World Literature Today*, 61:3 (Summer, 1987), 382-387 (p. 382).

<sup>12</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, pp. 205-206.

character (pp. 141-142).<sup>13</sup> To explain the structure of this novel, Nazareth refers to his narrator's religion: like many Goans, D'Souza is Roman Catholic. The novel is 'a dialogue with his conscience', a confession made after D'Souza has started to accept bribes, sent money out of the country, and fled to England from Damibia.<sup>14</sup> The reader is encouraged to sympathise with the discrimination D'Souza faces, and identifies with him to the extent that they do not notice his regression from a revolutionary elite to a corrupt politician: this is, in part, because D'Souza leaves many gaps in his confession. It is D'Souza's immoral actions and the 'gaps' which appear in his explanation of the political reality of Damibia, Olatubosun Ogunsanwo claims, that require the reader to participate in 'creative "decoding"' which can 'reveal the hidden truths.'<sup>15</sup> Nazareth explains that 'any Catholic knows that while one confesses, one is both trying to tell the truth and to evade the truth.'<sup>16</sup> The novel is 'a riddle that must be worked out.'<sup>17</sup> It is the unreliable narrator that enables the reader to see, eventually, that people in D'Souza's position must take responsibility for their actions instead of blaming circumstances such as racial discrimination. In this way, Nazareth's first novel fulfils the kind of epiphanous function he attributed to his second novel.

As this study is concerned with Nazareth's portrayal of the Amin figure and its role in the trickster function of *The General*, it is pertinent to consider Nazareth's perception of Amin's actions, their motivations and their consequences. Amin overthrew Obote on 25 January 1971. Amin's coup, the maintenance of his fascist regime, and its eventual collapse, has been attributed to imperial powers – specifically Britain.<sup>18</sup> Presumably Nazareth is partially

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'Practical Problems and Technical Solutions in Writing My Two Novels', *Callaloo*, 11:13 (Feb. – Oct., 1981), 56-62 (p. 56).

<sup>14</sup> Nazareth, 'Practical Problems', p. 57.

<sup>15</sup> Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice', p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> Nazareth, 'Practical Problems', p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983), pp. 1-2; 61.

referring to his first novel when he claims that ‘the problems of colonialism and neo-colonialism take the form in Ugandan literature of warning about and waiting for an Amin, and then protesting about his appearance.’<sup>19</sup> Here Nazareth also highlights the causal link between Britain’s colonisation of Uganda and the rise of a military dictator, a link he elaborates upon under the pseudonym Mdogo Wako in his 1976 article, ‘Idi Amin and the Asians.’<sup>20</sup> The coup was British-Israeli sponsored, and the immediate support the British provided to the new regime included military equipment and training; the British were also the first to recognise the new regime as legitimate.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Mahmood Mamdani comments that the 1971 coup was ‘engineered by an alliance of foreign imperialism and local reaction’, and that ‘direct British-Israeli sponsorship of the Amin coup was something the imperialist media bothered little to deny in the first year of the regime.’<sup>22</sup>

There were, of course, many more factors which precipitated the coup which Nazareth, writing as Wako, lists.<sup>23</sup> Of particular interest is Nazareth’s explanation that Britain had become dissatisfied with Obote: he cites Obote’s ‘Move to the Left’ as a reason for Britain supporting the coup.<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, Nazareth writes that Amin was ‘put into power by the colonizers to protect their interests.’<sup>25</sup> These ideas are discussed by some of Nazareth’s characters in *The General* (p. 62; 73). Ironically, the British were also concerned by Obote’s plans to ‘phase out’ from key economic positions the Asians with British citizenship.

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Nazareth, ‘Waiting for Amin: Two Decades of Ugandan Literature’, in *The Writing of East & Central Africa*, ed. by G. D. Killam (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Mdogo Wako, ‘Idi Amin and the Asians’, *Afriscopes*, 6:12 (1976), 33-38.

<sup>21</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>22</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>23</sup> Wako, ‘Idi Amin’, p. 33. See also Phares Mutibwa, *Uganda since Independence: A Story of Unfulfilled Hopes* (London: Hurst & Co., 1992), pp. 74-75; Jan Jelmert Jørgensen, *Uganda: A Modern History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 267-268.

<sup>24</sup> Wako, ‘Idi Amin’, p. 33. See also Mutibwa, *Uganda*, p. 76.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Nazareth, *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature Volume 7: Edwin Thumboo: Creating A Nation Through Poetry* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2008), p. 83.

Nazareth muses that an Englishman probably wrote the list of reasons for the coup that Amin read to the nation.<sup>26</sup> In 1972, seeking public approval, Amin took advantage of black Ugandans' perceived resentment of Asian Ugandans due to their comparative wealth and self-imposed segregation, and saw the expulsion of Asians as an opportunity to acquire wealth and property which could be redistributed to his supporters.<sup>27</sup> Calling it 'Economic War' because it would wrest control of the economy from Asian hands into African, Amin attributed his plan to guidance from God.<sup>28</sup> The expulsion was thus framed as a nationalistic project, guaranteed to win the regime popularity.

Considering the Asians had originally been brought from Asia by the British to construct the Uganda Railway in the late nineteenth century and later to assist in the colonial administration, their expulsion was also viewed as an attack on the British and their imperialism.<sup>29</sup> Nazareth explains that the Asian presence in Uganda was a means to further British colonial interests: 'people from one colonially exploited country, India, were brought at exploitatively low wages to another colonially exploited country, East Africa, to assist in further colonial exploitation.'<sup>30</sup> Writing as Wako, Nazareth labels the Asians 'helpless scapegoats':

[A]ll colonialism and neocolonialism needs a foreign, visible and apparently powerful but actually helpless scapegoat. It is the function of this scapegoat to be in daily touch with the people of the country so that it is accessible and can be blamed for things going wrong in the economy, which should properly be blamed on the linkage with the international economy and the (former) colonial power as well as the local agents.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Wako, 'Idi Amin', pp. 33-35.

<sup>27</sup> Mutibwa, *Uganda*, p. 93. See also Michael Twaddle, 'Was the Expulsion Inevitable?', in *Expulsion of a Minority: Essays on Ugandan Asians*, ed. by Michael Twaddle (London: The Athlone Press, 1975), pp. 1-14.

<sup>28</sup> Jørgensen, *Uganda*, p. 285; D. A. Low, 'Uganda Unhinged', *International Affairs*, 49:2 (Apr., 1973), 219-228 (p. 219); Mutibwa, *Uganda*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Low, 'Uganda Unhinged', p. 227.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'The Asian Presence in Two Decades of East African Literature', *The Toronto Review*, 13:1 (Fall, 1994), 17-32 (p. 20).

<sup>31</sup> Wako, 'Idi Amin', p. 37.

Thus black Ugandans were encouraged to direct their resentment towards the Asian communities, instead of the previous colonial and present neo-colonial rulers. Mamdani explains that, 'British economic interests in Uganda, particularly trade relations, were mediated through an agent-class that was predominantly of Asian origin, and the expulsion eliminated this class in one single sweep.'<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the expelled Asians with British citizenship would go to Britain, who was reluctant to accept them.<sup>33</sup> Despite claiming their support had been withdrawn, both Britain and the United States would continue to supply Amin with training, surveillance equipment and arms.<sup>34</sup>

In response to the other accusations levelled against the Asians, Nazareth begins by acknowledging that the Asians of Uganda were no more 'angelic' than any other group; they were a diverse community which only came together as a group when Amin demanded to speak to the 'Asian elders' in 1971.<sup>35</sup> He recounts his own experience at the Immigration Department: after 33 hours, half his family's citizenship was taken away, while the other half was confirmed.<sup>36</sup> Unable to return to Uganda after the Yale fellowship ended in June 1973, Nazareth went to work at the University of Iowa. After Cyprian Ekwensi advised Nazareth to write a novel about Amin, Nazareth wrote the first draft of *The General* in nine days. Extracts from the novel were published as early as 1974: Nazareth had therefore been away from Uganda for only a year when he began to portray Amin in his fiction, but Amin was not the only target of Nazareth's criticism. Discussing the expulsion of Asians in the novel, Nazareth claims it 'tracks the problem back to all its homes (including England and the

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<sup>32</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, p. 65. Dent Ocaya-Lakidi, 'Black Attitudes to the Brown and White Colonizers of East Africa', in *Expulsion of a Minority*, ed. by Twaddle, pp. 81-97 (p. 88).

<sup>33</sup> Mutibwa, *Uganda*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>34</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, pp. 78-82.

<sup>35</sup> Wako, 'Idi Amin', p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> Wako, 'Idi Amin', p. 35.

United States).<sup>37</sup> Nazareth laments that the consequence of the expulsion was that ‘Amin’s image has changed and he has been metamorphosed from a reactionary killer into a great, patriotic, Pan-African revolutionary.’<sup>38</sup> It is the *image* of Amin represented through Nazareth’s portrayal of the General that I wish to explore, as it is this that the reader must reevaluate when they reach the end of the novel, and thus performs the ‘trick’ to which Nazareth refers.

### **Nazareth as literary critic**

Nazareth’s explanations of how texts can perform the trickster function are illuminating because he claims to use similar techniques in his own novels. Before scrutinising Nazareth’s theories concerning the ways in which the form of fiction can perform the trickster function, it is necessary to clarify what Nazareth believes the trickster function is. Of course, Nazareth’s cultural experiences would shape his attitude to trickster tales: trickster figures fulfil different functions in oral and written literature depending on *inter alia* region, era and ethnic or social group. However, Nazareth does not attempt to clarify what the trickster figure means to him, specifically. This is a surprising omission. Although Nazareth writes little of traditional, oral trickster tales, it is possible to glean what he believes are the key functions of them. In the introduction to *Trickster Tradition*, Nazareth comments that his ‘unique background’ made him aware that ‘there were many different ways of seeing reality.’<sup>39</sup> He continues:

If, then, there were many ways of seeing reality, it meant that many people missed seeing essential elements of reality because of their background and moment in time. They were blind. The audience was not outside the problem. How could I make it see? The problem was to break past the defences, to trick the audiences into seeing.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Nazareth, ‘Waiting for Amin’, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Wako, ‘Idi Amin’, p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 1.



Following these introductory comments, Nazareth summarises previous articles he has written about the ways in which novelists and playwrights break down their reader or audience's defences to help them see reality. The following chapters of Nazareth's book explore the same theme for Salkey, Ebejar and Reed. Implicit in Nazareth's discussion of each writer is his own theory of the trickster which assumes that trickster tales, or tricksters themselves, can illuminate hidden problems or iniquities within a society by forcing the listener or reader to re-examine their beliefs. Other comments by Nazareth suggest that he believes a key function of a trickster is to draw attention to exploitative conditions of which people may not have been aware. For example, Nazareth summarises the relevance of 'Anancy' the spider to Salkey's fiction by explaining that 'Anancy is a trickster: one function of the Anancy story is to bring buried contradictions to the surface.'<sup>41</sup> More generally, *Trickster Tradition* refers to so many contradictory approaches to the trickster figure, from Jung to Gates, that it is impossible to establish a single coherent theory of the trickster figure. One notion of Nazareth's is evident: he believes he has a superior insight and he must 'trick' the reader to help them gain this insight.

Referring to a range of texts which perform the trickster function, Nazareth concludes that all the writers use their works to raise an awareness of exploitation and its consequences. He explains: 'Some artists see that it is not enough to identify the problem or to show the way out. The way the people see must be broken through.'<sup>42</sup> In Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, the trickster element is present in the function of the chorus: Nazareth explains that 'all the talk by the chorus about Tragedy was calculated to show the audience that there was no tragic

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<sup>41</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 11.

inevitability about the situation.<sup>43</sup> Antigone asserts her autonomy, showing the audience that she made a decision to die, rather than simply submitting to the myth created about her and her role in tragedy. Nazareth's interpretation of Anouilh's *Antigone* suggests a reversal of the kind of function Boal attributed to Greek tragedy.<sup>44</sup> In fact, this is a particularly interesting text for Nazareth to identify as having a 'trickster' function, as it has been interpreted as both supporting fascist ideals, and challenging the Nazi occupation of 1944 Paris: these contradictory interpretations are testament to the ambiguous politics of the play, lending it a clear trickster quality.<sup>45</sup>

Nazareth explains that one method used by Salkey is to build up or reinforce the reader's clichéd perceptions formed by colonialism, before undermining them so that the reader has to re-evaluate them.<sup>46</sup> The novels of Salkey, Ebejar and Reed, Nazareth asserts, 'lie' by telling the truth. Through the creation of characters that are similar to themselves, the authors mislead the reader: the clues turn out to be red herrings.<sup>47</sup> Nazareth claims that the 'appearance of the novelist in the novel is a clue that we should pay attention to *the novel*.'<sup>48</sup>

A more recent article of Nazareth's about the trickster function of fiction concerns Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. One technique that Conrad uses to condemn the inhumane nature of colonialism is to hint to the British reader that they share a 'common humanity' with colonised peoples. Consequently, Conrad 'opens a wedge in the consciousness of the

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Nazareth, *Literature and Society in Modern Africa: Essays on Literature* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1972), p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, p. 46.

<sup>45</sup> See for example, Katie Fleming, 'Fascism on Stage: Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*', in *Laughing With Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163-186.

<sup>46</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> For a similar analysis of Kole Omotoso's fiction, see Peter Nazareth, *The Third World Writer: His Social Responsibility* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978)

<sup>48</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 238.

English audience through which more things can be driven.’<sup>49</sup> In response to claims that Conrad’s novel appears to provide a justification for imperialism, Nazareth comments, ‘To judge Conrad’s work by saying he receives a pat on the shoulder from the West could mean not that he is supporting their ideology but rather that they do not understand that he is undermining that ideology.’<sup>50</sup> Nazareth’s comments regarding ‘trickster’ texts reveal that he considers most people to be too willing to accept the surface meaning of what they read. Nazareth refers to this as reading a novel ‘straight.’<sup>51</sup> Readers who are part of the problem will not be able to recognise the trickster element of what they have read, and will misread both the text and its message. Trickster novels, therefore, bear considerable similarity to the tricksters already considered.

Nazareth’s expectation that the reader needs to interpret and recognise irony is reflected in his attitude towards literary critics, too. In his response to unfavourable comments about *The General* made by critic Abasi Kiyimba, Nazareth helpfully poses fourteen questions concerning his second novel in order to draw attention to the ‘tricks’ he feels Kiyimba has missed.<sup>52</sup> I do not intend to systematically answer all the questions Nazareth poses: he has answered many of them himself elsewhere and at great length. Although Nazareth seeks to nullify Kiyimba’s criticisms, the solutions implied by Nazareth’s questions are not always convincing. What is clear, however, is the ‘message’ Nazareth believes he is imparting to the reader. The crucial detail to bear in mind is Nazareth’s insistence that the critic, like the reader, must *interpret* the novel, rather than reading it ‘straight.’

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Nazareth, ‘Dark Heart or Trickster?’, *Nineteenth Century Literature in English*, 93 (2005), 291-321 (p. 297).

<sup>50</sup> Nazareth, ‘Dark Heart’, p. 295.

<sup>51</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Abasi Kiyimba, ‘The Ghost of Idi Amin in Ugandan Literature’, *Research in African Literatures*, 29:1 (Spring, 1998), 124-138; Peter Nazareth, ‘Forum’, *Research in African Literatures*, 29:3 (Autumn, 1998), 240-241 (p. 240).

### **Critical responses to *The General is Up***

The novel follows a range of characters living in Damibia under the rule of the General.

Each chapter is written from the perspective of one of the characters, although the character whose experiences are explored in the most detail is David D'Costa. D'Costa's life resembles Nazareth's in many ways: he is Goan by ethnicity; he admires Elvis Presley; he got married in the midst of his post-graduate studies in England; his wife moved to England with him; his first child was born while he was in England; after returning to his home country he worked for a government ministry; while in his home country he was the president of a Goan Institute; his citizenship was taken away, and he left his home country voluntarily. The novel begins with the General having a nightmare that Captain Oma is trying to assassinate him. The General announces that God has told him to expel Asians from Damibia. The events of the novel form a countdown to the deadline for leaving Damibia: different responses to the expulsion order are presented and depend upon which character is the focus of each chapter. Most characters apart from the General recognise not only the unjust aspect of the expulsion, but also the devastating impact it will have on the economy.

In most respects, the events that form the backdrop of the characters' lives reflect exactly the events in Uganda under Amin: the similarities are made clear when a British reporter reviews information about Damibia before travelling there (pp. 12-13) and when other characters discuss the country's political history (pp. 61-62). Yet the short final chapter depicts a rapid sequence of events which culminates in the General's death: he shoots himself in the head when he thinks Captain Oma – a recently exterminated enemy – has come to assassinate him (pp. 132-133). The General's head 'flew off like a missile' (p. 133), contributing to the absurdity. However, in the epilogue it becomes clear that one character – Ronald D'Mello, who apparently stayed on in Uganda after the expulsion – composed the novel, leaving the

manuscript with Charlie, a man he met while in America. Charlie, the narrator of the epilogue, describes the manuscript:

It was a most incredible story, what I could read of it. There were several paragraphs of gory descriptions of murders which had been deleted, along with the deletion of some names. It seemed like a work of fantasy or a draft horror film-script. But it was promising, I thought. I couldn't put it down until I had finished. But it would need more work and some editing [...] So he was gone, leaving me, the son of a Lebanese immigrant, with the handwritten pages of an exotic novel about Africa (p. 144).

The reader, then, is told that Ronald is the author of the manuscript, yet the comments made by the American narrator of the epilogue suggest further editing choices might have been made.

Some critics responded to *The General* favourably, discussing Nazareth's skilled use of an unreliable narrator. Nazareth particularly recommends J. R. McGuire's 1987 interpretation of the novel which posits that, in the final chapter, Ronald is punishing all those he believes deserve punishment.<sup>53</sup> McGuire contends that the epilogue reveals 'a photographic representation of reality was not the intention of the writer', and this view is echoed by other critics.<sup>54</sup> For Ogunsanwo, the 'omissions and silences' left in the narrative by Nazareth invite the reader to draw their own conclusions, which in turn encourages them to question their perception.<sup>55</sup> Charles Sarvan explores Nazareth's fiction, prefacing his discussion:

There is no depiction without interpretation. Thus neither the work [...] nor the writer is to be trusted, and yet the belief persists that literature tells truths; that if it tells lies (inventing character and action), it is in order to tell more important truths.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> McGuire, 'Historical Translator', p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> McGuire, 'Historical Translator', p. 20. See also Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice', p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice', pp. 15-16.

<sup>56</sup> Charles Sarvan, 'The Writer as Historical Witness: With Reference to the Novels of Peter Nazareth', in *The Writer as Historical Witness*, ed. by Edwin Thumboo and Thiru Kandiah (Singapore: UniPress, 1995), pp. 64-72 (p. 65).

Sarvan suggests that the disclaimer contained within Nazareth's 'Author's Note' 'itself points to an external, non-fictional reality.'<sup>57</sup> Considering the General, Sarvan also refers to the oral tradition, claiming that heroes are often exaggerated:

[B]ut when a monstrosity like Amin materialises, the creative writer confronts a problem: he cannot be exaggerated for effect, for he is already an exaggeration; nor can he be minimised without diluting impact, and so one leaves him as the caricature-come-alive that he was: a maniac in power; a nightmare extending into the day.<sup>58</sup>

For Sarvan, the General seems to be an accurate portrayal of Amin, with Nazareth's agenda being to show how ordinary people's lives are destroyed by such a man. By contrast, Kiyimba comments that Nazareth's General 'has nothing to offer that we shall not get from exaggerated Western newspaper reports and historical records about Amin and his rule – which is far less than a creative writer should do.'<sup>59</sup>

Nazareth has written extensively of his own fiction, seemingly seeking to justify the content of *The General* in relation to its form. Nazareth states that he did not want to publish *The General* while Amin was 'murdering people for what was said in print.'<sup>60</sup> The novel is, according to Nazareth, on one level 'a full account of what really happened during the Asian expulsion.'<sup>61</sup> Nazareth asks how the discovery that the novel has been written by Ronald D'Mello – in America calling himself Ronald D'Cruz – affects our reading of the novel, and whether it is significant that the novel could have been edited or 'tampered with' by an American of Lebanese descent.<sup>62</sup> Nazareth confirms McGuire's interpretation when he explains that in the 'stylized, comic book chapter', Ronald decides to be 'God as artist' and

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<sup>57</sup> Sarvan, 'Historical Witness', p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> Sarvan, 'Historical Witness', p. 70.

<sup>59</sup> Kiyimba, 'Ghost of Idi Amin', p. 131. See also Danson Sylvester Kahyana, 'Negotiating (Trans)national Identities in Ugandan Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2014), p. 212.

<sup>60</sup> Nazareth, 'Waiting for Amin', p. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Nazareth, 'Waiting for Amin', p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> Nazareth, 'Forum', p. 240.

punish those who needed to be punished to avenge the suffering of the people.<sup>63</sup> Changing his name from D'Mello to D'Cruz ('of the cross') is symbolic of Ronald's guilt.<sup>64</sup> I do not wish to dwell on Nazareth's question regarding the descent of the American narrator, except to comment that Ali Mazrui has compared Uganda and Lebanon, asserting that much strife has been caused in both countries by arbitrary boundaries drawn by imperial powers.<sup>65</sup>

Nazareth's choice of a Lebanese-American narrator perhaps alludes to the possibility that the final narrator is sympathetic to Ronald D'Cruz's suffering in Damibia, and may have altered the manuscript to suit his own anti-imperial agenda.

How does Nazareth believe his trick works? Discussing *In a Brown Mantle* in an interview with Bernth Lindfors, Nazareth explains the trick in a way that recalls Brechtian dramaturgy:

I believe that the work of fiction has to interact with the audience or reader, who are part of the problem. Just as you read a book, the book reads you. I always search for a technique that will challenge the reader's or audience's assumptions. One way is to construct a narrative which seems bland and straightforward so that the reader or listener gets carried along and things appear quite calm. But underneath come the points at which I challenge the reader: "Aha! You were fooled here. You didn't see this. Look back. Was it all as simple as it seemed?"<sup>66</sup>

For McGuire, the final chapter and the epilogue 'superimpose a new optic on the preceding pages, forcing the reader to interrogate drastically, and perhaps modify, his initial perception of the book.'<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Ogunsanwo sees literature as a product of social ideas: 'art is set apart from objective reality to which it refers, and it is this distance that gives the work of art the power of criticizing [sic] social reality and functioning "pragmatically" within that objective reality as an irritant.'<sup>68</sup> Nazareth has identified *The General* as 'a novel about how

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<sup>63</sup> Nazareth, *Interlogue*, p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> Nazareth, *Interlogue*, p. 126.

<sup>65</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, 'Between Development and Decay: Anarchy, Tyranny and Progress under Idi Amin', *Third World Quarterly*, 2:1 (Jan., 1980), 44-58 (p. 51).

<sup>66</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 207.

<sup>67</sup> McGuire, 'Historical Translator', p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice', p. 19.

to deconstruct the media.’<sup>69</sup> Why, then, does Nazareth show Ronald’s representation of the General to be a reflection of the western media’s perception of Amin? In what sense could it be considered an ‘irritant’, and what does this portrayal encourage us to re-examine?

### **Nazareth’s character of the General and Idi Amin**

I will begin by exploring Nazareth’s portrayal of the General throughout the novel, as it is related by Ronald D’Cruz/D’Mello. Until the epilogue, the reader is under the impression that the character’s lives are depicted by an omniscient narrator, before discovering in the epilogue that the novel is a manuscript written by one of the characters: initially, the General’s private life and thoughts appear to be authentic. Ronald offers the reader an irrational, unreasonable, volatile and arrogant leader. The reader might laugh at his petulant nature, despite the devastating callousness with which he behaves. Yet the portrait is almost hackneyed in its predictability. Kiyimba’s comments, before the reader knows Ronald is the author, seem perfectly just. By considering the ways in which the portrayal corresponds to the western media’s representation of him, I intend to show that – through Ronald’s narration – Nazareth offers the reader a trite depiction of Amin.

It is of course important to be wary of identifying the narrator too closely with the author. However, Ronald makes similar observations to Nazareth’s views expressed elsewhere: the value of Elvis Presley and ‘country ‘n’ western’, the Portuguese colonisers’ success in ‘entering the minds of the conquered’ and the British colonial government’s efforts to make sure that ‘there was no racial mixing, no pooling of resources of the non-white peoples’ (pp. 16-17). If Nazareth is always aware of the line between his characters’ voices and his own,

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Nazareth, review of Simon Gikandi and Evan Mwangi, *The Columbia Guide to East African Literature in English Since 1945* (2007), *Research in African Literatures*, 39:2 (2008), 149 (p. 149).



his decision to present some of Ronald's opinions as a reflection of his own is significant: thus, 'Ronald's' presentation of the General is all the more worth examining. I explore, therefore, the unreliability of Ronald's portrayal of the General, and the ways in which his prejudices – informed perhaps by western representations of Amin – might help the reader to understand Nazareth's own views of Amin. Initially the reader is presented with a comical villain who lacks complexity, the type of neo-colonial despot constructed by the media for shocking headlines. This is the General Nazareth gives us if we perform only a 'straight' reading of the novel. The 'trick' in the conclusion and epilogue forces the reader to question the validity of this presentation.

The opening chapter of *The General* sets a farcical tone, recalling a ludicrous villain that could be found in a comic book. In response to his nightmare about Captain Oma, the General fires at his imaginary opponent, and the 'Plop, plop, crack wram!!!!' (p. 1) description of his shots establishes the absurd nature of the General and his actions. The narrator also emphasises the General's arrogance and vanity. Although the General admires his uniform, he wants more medals: he calls in his valet to demand them (p. 2). When he is later decorated with ten honours, including the Victoria Cross and 'Anti-Imperialism, First Class', the chain holding them is so heavy that it breaks, causing the General to curse and accuse his enemies (p. 3). The narrator appears to find considerable humorous mileage in replicating Amin's illiteracy. Because the General's English is not very good, he announces that he carried out the coup to 'destroy democracy and impress corruption' rather than 'restore democracy and repress corruption' (p. 38). Following this blunder, the General begins to attend a crash course in English. Instead of referring to the Asians 'milking the cow of the economy', he calls them 'milk like the cows' and later says that they 'cowed the milk' (p. 100). The General also – ironically – struggles to pronounce 'sophisticated': he claims his

new international airport will be ‘equipped with the most modern and sophis-sophis-ti-cate gadgets’ (p. 128). Abdul Aziz and James Wabinda – two of the General’s advisers – chose the word ‘sabotage’ for the General’s accusation against the Asians because he ‘likes some of those big words they have been teaching him in his English classes’ (p. 69). Presumably, these pointed references are intended to accentuate the General’s stupidity and absurdity.

The narrator’s frequent exemplification of the General’s illiteracy in English seems distasteful – not to mention banal – particularly considering that young Amin would have had little access to education. We might not be sympathetic to Amin, or the General, but because Muslims had no missionaries, they could not receive a western education – through which they could learn English – unless they accepted the Christian teachings which accompanied it. One of the most illuminating portrayals of Amin, and an indication of how he was viewed by the West, can be found in *The Collected Bulletins of Idi Amin* (1974) by Alan Coren, originally published in *Punch* magazine.<sup>70</sup> As well as mocking Amin’s brutally violent methods, Coren pokes fun at his illiteracy – suggesting that Amin uses the *Big Boys Book O’ Adjectives* to help him with words.<sup>71</sup> Coren depicts Amin as a sulking child, for example when he is disappointed that he has not received an invitation to ‘Sir Alec Douglas-Home’s birfday party at Number Ten’:

Bin sittin’ by de door, jus’ like last week, waitin’ for one o’ dem cards wid Winnie de Pooh on an’ Piggerlet where you open it an’ it say *We’re havin’ a party an’ we’d like you to come please*, lotta pitchers o’ balloons an’ funny hats an’ stuff an’ all de animals clearly havin’ a damn fine time. Nothin’ comin’, though.<sup>72</sup>

The voice in the bulletins and the presentation of Amin in the newspapers are clearly similar to the narrator’s portrayal of the General. Coren’s satire of an African despot relies on racist

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<sup>70</sup> Alan Coren, *The Collected Bulletins of Idi Amin as taken down verbatim in the pages of Punch each week* (London: Robson Books, 1974).

<sup>71</sup> Coren, *Collected Bulletins*, p. 68.

<sup>72</sup> Coren, *Collected Bulletins*, pp. 45-46.

stereotypes for ‘comic’ effect, and in turn Nazareth uses the same stereotype to present the General.

However, encouraging the reader to laugh at the General’s stupidity is risky: the similarities with the way Amin was presented in the press demonstrate the consequences of such a portrayal. David Martin, who was ostensibly expelled from Uganda for reporting Amin’s massacres to *The Observer*, suggested that many people viewed Amin as a funny figure because ‘he fits their prejudices about the black man.’<sup>73</sup> The General’s ludicrous antics reflect the western media’s portrayal of Amin but, as Martin writes, ‘it is neither true nor adequate to write him off as mad, or to suggest by some euphemism that he has venereal disease.’<sup>74</sup> This comment anticipates a broadsheet newspaper article by a man claiming to be Amin’s doctor, which carried surprisingly distasteful and sensational text: ‘Syphilis symptoms... Attacks of frenzy... Victim’s liver eaten... Archbishop shot in the mouth while praying... Worst still to come...’<sup>75</sup> John Kibukamusoke attributes Amin’s brutality to hypomania, much like Dr D’Souza speculates – along with the possibility of syphilis – in *The General* (p. 62).

The General’s inner monologue, even in the opening chapter, reveals to the reader a profound lack of humanity. Violence without remorse is introduced as a key feature of the General’s behaviour. Recovering from his nightmare, the General recalls the ways in which he disposes of his enemies: acid baths, beatings, shootings, and tossing into the lake (p. 1). When the General’s chain breaks and he blames his enemies, he gives orders to ‘Cut their throats! Pluck out their eyes! Feed them to the crocodiles!’ (p. 3). After hearing of the expulsion

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<sup>73</sup> David Martin, ‘The Unfunny Truth about Idi Amin’, *Observer*, 23 June 1974, p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Martin, ‘Unfunny Truth’.

<sup>75</sup> John Kibukamusoke, ‘Amin’s Madness’, *Observer*, 1 May 1977, p. 11.

order, Ronald considers whether to stay in Damibia or leave, but he knows what the General is capable of: ‘Hadn’t he killed so many Damibians, without a trial? Like most of the people in Abala, Ronald had stopped eating fish because too many bodies were being found in the lake’ (p. 15). Moses Maphela, after the expulsion, compares the General to Macbeth because he is going mad due to all the blood he has spilt and has started to target the families of his potential opponents (p. 120). Interestingly, Martin closes his extract by comparing Amin to Macbeth: it’s possible that Nazareth had read Martin’s book – or at least extracts from it – when he wrote *The General*.<sup>76</sup> When the soldiers or assassination squad commit violence, it is reiterated that they are always acting on behalf of the General or in accordance with his wishes (p. 40; 105). Claiming a car accident was responsible, the soldiers kill a priest by shooting him and cutting his throat (pp. 124-125). These examples imply that the General is ultimately – directly or indirectly – responsible for all lawlessness and violence in Damibian society.

The General justifies his violence in many ways, while onlookers – like journalists responding to Amin – view him as irrational and speculate that he is insane. In another extract from his book, Martin opens by explaining that, ‘By playing the buffoon, General Idi Amin has been able to distract attention for a time from the massacres carried out on his orders since the first day of his dictatorship.’<sup>77</sup> One character in *The General* protests that the expulsion was not a shrewd move: it was the work of ‘lunatic’ (p. 62). The General ‘arbitrarily’ listens to the first adviser who approaches him, and Al Kamena – an academic – thinks that ‘it had been a grave miscalculation to believe that a stupid fellow like the General would make the ideal leader because he could be absolutely manipulated by advisers!’ (p.

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<sup>76</sup> David Martin, ‘Amin Massacres and Messages From God’, *Observer*, 30 June 1974, p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> Martin, ‘Amin Massacres’.

56). Aziz and Wabinda make extra money by copying foreign press articles about the General and distributing them covertly: one article from a British newspaper carries the headline, ‘He is Nuts!’ (p. 70). This particular phrase recalls an article which appeared in *The Observer* in late 1972 – after the expulsion order – claiming that the term ‘nuts’ was too easy to justify Amin’s strange behaviour.<sup>78</sup> The reporter goes on to comment that ‘He may act irrationally, but he does not act crazily. For this reason, he should not be underestimated.’<sup>79</sup> Colin Legum, writing for *The Observer* as their Commonwealth Correspondent in August 1972, describes Amin as ‘temperamentally unstable and unpredictable: one moment he is a genial giant exuding warmth and good fellowship, the next his large moon face clouds over in black moods of rage.’<sup>80</sup> Like the narrator’s General, the uncontrollable nature of Amin is emphasised. D’Costa comments that the foreign interests thought they could control the General because he was ‘so greedy and stupid’ (p. 94). Their mistake was to forget that ‘even a stooge must have minimal intelligence’ (p. 94). Nazareth’s unreliable narrator here reinforces the link between the General’s regime and the imperial powers, indicating the British are responsible for the General’s tyranny.

The General’s allegiance to the British is evident from the first chapter of the novel: he reminisces about ‘the good old days’ when he ‘exterminated rebels’ (p. 2), presumably an allusion to Amin’s time fighting for the British against the Mau Mau in Kenya.<sup>81</sup> The General wants to be admired and referred to as a ‘Britannic door’ because of Britain’s honour (p. 2). He also thinks of the Queen fondly: ‘Ah, her Britannic Majesty was a great lady! A Great Lady!’ (p. 2). The General’s reverence for British institutions is also emphasised.

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<sup>78</sup> John de St. Jorre, ‘Fear made Amin a tyrant’, *Observer*, 12 November 1972, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> St. Jorre, ‘Fear’.

<sup>80</sup> Colin Legum, ‘The Perils of Amin’, *Observer*, 13 August 1972, p. 6.

<sup>81</sup> Mutibwa, *Uganda*, p. 79.

Although the opening chapter asserts that the General is suspicious of the white people, it also reminds the reader that they were once the General's best friend: 'they had trained him, he had fought with them in neighbouring territory, and he had had a white pilot' (p. 1). Thus, from the first page of the novel, Nazareth's narrator reminds his reader that Amin was a product of British military training. When the General 'contemptuously' waves at the Asians queuing outside the Immigration Department, D'Costa thinks of him as 'an honorary White Man, a leper in the ranks of the non-white people' (p. 44).

In response to criticism, Nazareth reveals his desire to highlight the role of the British when he asks, 'Who are some of the shadowy characters in the novel, one of whom has written the reasons for the coup broadcast on the radio? Why are we not told who they are working for?'<sup>82</sup> One of the characters in Ronald's manuscript that Nazareth is referring to is Graham Moore-Diamond who, along with Head of the Department of Civil Bureaucracy David Michaels, drew up the twenty-four reasons for the coup (p. 38). The pair was also responsible for helping the General with his plans to invade Leshona (p. 38). Moore-Diamond is described as 'an Englishman who turned up in Damibia one month before the coup' (p. 38) and later as an 'old reactionary, imperialist agent' (p. 66). His advice to the General was 'meant to be in favour of the West and Western interests, business and political, and to sow the seeds of division among radical and progressive African leaders' (p. 66). It is clear that Nazareth's narrator wants to remind the reader of Amin's reliance upon the British. The references in the novel are in keeping with comments Nazareth has made elsewhere about the role the imperial powers had in Amin's military success, his coup, and his rule.

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<sup>82</sup> Nazareth, 'Forum', p. 241.

The connection with the British is further reinforced in the third chapter, and also reflects some of the western media's presentations of Amin. Contrasted with the General in the first chapter are the thoughts of Alan Mansfield, a reporter with British newspaper *The Onlooker*. Upon learning that he is being sent to Damibia to report on the expulsion, Mansfield thinks about the British media's satisfaction that the military government in Damibia had overthrown its left-leaning predecessor while its leader was at a Commonwealth Leaders Meeting abroad (p. 13).<sup>83</sup> Shortly after Amin's coup, an article in *The Guardian* noted that Amin was 'already highly regarded for his bravery, cheerfulness, and close touch with the people.'<sup>84</sup> By April, the same newspaper stated Amin's poor English might have given the impression that he had a poor grasp of affairs, but in fact he had 'shown both skill and flair in dealing with the problems facing him'; Amin is also credited with furthering schemes favourable to the British, with whom he intended to have friendly relations.<sup>85</sup> Amin's actions between the January coup and April had shown that 'there need be no anxiety about security in the Ugandan capital.'<sup>86</sup> Mansfield's initial assessment of the General's rule in Damibia reflects a similar optimism. However, Mansfield is later arrested and deported because the General is angry that another reporter from *The Onlooker*, Cecil Greaves, did not fall for the General's trap when he invited him to Damibia to see the 'truth' for himself (p. 76; 78). There are, within the novel, numerous explanations of who has disappeared and why: a lawyer connection of Mansfield's, Ramesh Thakore, for example, is stabbed. His eyes are gouged out and his body is incinerated (p. 60; 78).

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<sup>83</sup> Amin's coup occurred while Obote was attending a Commonwealth Conference in Singapore. However, Mansfield's comment also recalls the CIA-backed coup that ousted Nkrumah while he was on a peacekeeping trip to Vietnam.

<sup>84</sup> Geoffrey Taylor, 'Confident Amin ends Uganda emergency', *Guardian*, 22 February 1971, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> David Saxby, 'Amin rides the crest', *Guardian*, 22 April 1971, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Saxby, 'Amin'.

Here, the narrator highlights the hypocrisy of the British press. Mansfield's favourable impression of Damibia was informed by positive reports in the British press, but once the expulsion was announced, the British press promptly changed their approach. The contrast within the British press is reflected in the contrast between Mansfield's expectations and the reality he found in Damibia, and the cause of the reversal seems to be the General's unpredictable nature. The press within Damibia is also unreliable. Kamena sees his job as concocting clever things to say about various African leaders 'so that the people would get confused' (p. 53). He laments the difficulty of his assignment after the General announces the expulsion, asking 'How could anyone have made any credibility of such a lumbering ox!' (p. 55). Eventually, he decides to make a public statement so full of difficult words that his criticism of the General's actions would be disguised (p. 57). The narrator also depicts Aziz and Wabinda devising a way to make the expulsion seem more palatable: they eventually come up with the 'economic war' slogan, deciding to use the word 'sabotage' because it sounds sinister (pp. 66-69). They realise that some Asians must be exempt in order for the economy to function, and they believe that this humane gesture of the General's will give him the 'image of being a tough, militaristic, no-nonsense African nationalist, as well as a humane, non-racist, benevolent father of the nation' (pp. 69-70). In his exploration of Amin's persona, Legum claims that the African press's presentation had been favourable, with dire consequences: 'he became something of a popular hero', a 'true African patriot, the scourge of imperialists, the true enemy of foreign exploiters who successfully repossessed Uganda for its own people, the friend of liberation movements.'<sup>87</sup> Mazrui describes the ways in which Amin was both a hero and a villain: a 'brutal tyrant' and a 'warrior of liberation.'<sup>88</sup> He also claims that Amin was 'a towering symbol of naive but heroic resistance to the mighty

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<sup>87</sup> Colin Legum, 'Behind the Clown's Mask', *Transition*, 50 (Oct., 1975 – Mar., 1976), 86-96 (p. 86).

<sup>88</sup> Mazrui, 'Between Development', p. 58.



nations of the world – a symbol of the semi-literate standing up to the pretensions of sophistication, a symbol of the underprivileged standing up to the all powerful.’<sup>89</sup> Of course, the Ugandan media would not have been able to criticise Amin during his rule. The difficulty of reporting accurately on events in Uganda created what Mazrui terms an ‘information gap’ – a disparity between what really happened in Uganda, what people knew about, and what the rest of the world reported.<sup>90</sup>

Nazareth illustrates this in *The General*: when D’Costa contemplates whether the Damibians hated Asians, he recalls that the foreign press had reported a ‘fanatical’ hatred (p. 43). Yet he also recalls that after the expulsion announcement, ‘Damibians of all classes came to apologise to him, to weep, to bear gifts’ (p. 43). The Binda’s dancing and singing is misinterpreted as a celebration of the expulsion: in fact, the Binda are singing funeral songs when the General visits them (pp. 45-46). The foreign press also participate in the misrepresentation:

The foreign press had printed photos of Damibians dancing and say that they were dancing with joy when the General announced his expulsion. Well, one could always get photos of Africans dancing and say that they were dancing for this or that reason. This was an old game of the colonialist press (p. 107).

Perhaps the most significant illustration of the Damibian people’s feelings is the chapter in which D’Costa’s servant deplores the expulsion of the family he worked for (pp. 123-125). He has worked for the family for so long, and has been treated so well by them, that he cannot imagine life without them. He resents the General for sending all the Asians away, the ‘good ones’ and the ‘bad ones’, but not ‘the bad ones of our own kind’ (p. 124).

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<sup>89</sup> Mazrui, ‘Between Development’, p. 53.

<sup>90</sup> Mazrui, ‘Between Development’, p. 46.

Lamenting that ‘the *Generali* has done bad’, the cook reveals his uncertainty through a series of questions:

Where will the *Muindi* and *Mugoa* go? [...] And who will look after me?  
Where will I find a home? Where will I find a job? Who will give me a  
place to stay, *kazi* to do so that I can pay for my children to go to school?  
Who will teach in the schools now? (p. 124).

Here, ordinary people deeply regret the expulsion, and it has a devastating impact on their lives. Ronald’s discovery that the cheap television sets sold by Damibian Teleservices and marketed as Ugandan products are in fact imported from Japan, is perhaps a metaphor for the unreliability of news sources (p. 51). The emphasised disparity in the press – both Damibian and foreign, Kamena’s work, and the conversation between Wabinda and Aziz, reveal that Nazareth is preoccupied with the presentation of Amin in all media, reinforced by the use of an unreliable narrator also choosing to relate these conflicting views in his manuscript.

The western tabloid press’s reporting style was, of course, even more sensational in their presentation of Amin than the broadsheet papers. Shifting from admiration to condemnation, the more widely-read tabloid papers perhaps most reflect the West’s perception of the General. In July 1972, *The Mirror* was reporting that Amin was considered ‘a thoroughly nice man’ by London after Amin’s visit to Britain: he was liked on personal and political grounds, and in conversation he was noted to be ‘as gentle as a lamb.’<sup>91</sup> Apparently, ‘even his guile had charm.’<sup>92</sup> By September 1972, *The Mirror* was calling Amin ‘Big Daddy,’ claiming that his ‘diplomatic pressures are as subtle as the stroke of a rifle butt’ and that he was ‘as fearless and cunning as a fighting bull.’<sup>93</sup> The rhetoric intensified, with *The Mirror* reporting on its front page a week later that Amin, by arresting the Chief Justice, had proved

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<sup>91</sup> ‘The guileful lamb’, *Daily Mirror*, 15 July 1971, p. 4. See also John Monks, ‘The "champ" who rose from the ranks to seize power’, *Daily Express*, 26 January 1971, p. 6, and ‘I visit the man who ousted Obote’, *Daily Express*, 27 January 1971, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> ‘The guileful lamb’.

<sup>93</sup> Donald Wise, ‘Big Daddy’, *Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1972, p. 4.

he was ‘a power-mad dictator without a shred of humanity.’<sup>94</sup> Instead of referring to Amin’s heavy-weight boxing successes as before, Gordon Jeffery explains that he had been considered a ‘genial fat giant’, and was now an ‘irresponsible thug.’<sup>95</sup>

In many ways, then, Ronald’s portrayal of the General most matches the western press’s representation of Amin, as opposed to the African press’s depiction. Ronald’s manuscript seems to have been written after he has left Damibia and is residing in America, just as Nazareth wrote *The General* while in America, shortly after leaving Uganda. Nazareth’s increased exposure to western media may well have found its echo in Ronald’s portrayal of the General. In response to Amin’s demand that the British media must end the malicious propaganda against Uganda, Martin comments that ‘it has been explained time after time to Amin that in Britain the government does not control the media.’<sup>96</sup> Discussing the aftermath of Amin’s coup, M. Louise Pirouet explains that ‘wildly exaggerated’ reports in the western press were so inaccurate that they could be denied easily, thus preventing a resolution to end the violence.<sup>97</sup> Nazareth’s narrator reproduces these ‘wildly exaggerated’ reports in his manuscript: they are indeed unbelievable, but they also contribute significantly to Nazareth’s trick.

One of the General’s most significant traits – because Nazareth’s narrator has chosen to emphasise it – is the General’s references to his ordinance by, and reliance on guidance from,

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<sup>94</sup> Gordon Jeffery, ‘Danger Man’, *Daily Mirror*, 22 September 1972, p. 1.

<sup>95</sup> Jeffery, ‘Danger Man’. See also David Martin, ‘The nightmare of an Englishman at the kangaroo court of King Amin’, *Daily Express*, 12 June 1975, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Martin, ‘The nightmare’. For other articles demonstrating the British presentation of Amin as an erratic buffoon, see David Wright, ‘Big Daddy’s boast to the Mirror... I have won’, *Daily Mirror*, 3 July 1975, p. 1, and ‘End of a Good Day’s Work’, *Daily Mirror*, 11 July 1975, pp. 14-15; Paul Callan, ‘Beatrice is Big Daddy’s Girl Now’, *Daily Mirror*, 29 July 1975, p. 11, and ‘A World Askew’, *Daily Express*, 10 September 1975, p. 8.

<sup>97</sup> M. Louise Pirouet, ‘Religion in Uganda under Amin’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 11:1 (1980), 13-20 (p. 17).

God.<sup>98</sup> Perhaps two of the most controversial aspects of Amin's regime – the initial coup and the Asian expulsion – are both repeatedly attributed to God in the novel. In the opening chapter, the General's concerns about Captain Oma are framed by his sense of divine right:

The trouble was that the Captain did not accept him as the Rightful Leader, ordained by God to lead the country to salvation. Why not? Had God not sent him white men to push out his predecessor? Just because the man had been elected while he had come to power with a gun – that is, several guns supplied by friends! Well, the ways of God were strange, did not the people know? Was it natural to elect leaders or to have them chosen by God? (p. 1).

That Amin's estrangement from Obote was indicated by his comment that he feared no-one but God has been noted by several scholars.<sup>99</sup> When guerrillas from neighbouring country Leshona attack Damibia, the General wonders how Mboye – Leshona's president – could 'refuse to accept the dictates of God?' (p. 38). English adviser Michaels told the General to pretend God had brought him to power in the coup (p. 68). However, Ronald narrates that as the General 'had begun to gather the reins of power into his hands, he actually began to believe that stuff about God putting him into power!' (p. 68).

In the first chapter of the novel, Nazareth's narrator clarifies that the General also attributed the expulsion to God: the General claims, 'I said last night to the soldiers that all East Indians must leave this country! God told me so!' (p. 4). The General's claim is given enough weight for the news reader to specify it in a reminder to the 'East Indians': 'His Excellency the General has announced that, in accordance with a dream from God, East Indians have to leave Damibia by the next moon' (p. 27). People gathered at the Goan Institute bar after the expulsion announcement find it difficult to believe that the General could expel the Asians, before acknowledging that 'the General was crazy enough to do anything; he had delusions

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<sup>98</sup> See for example Pirouet, 'Religion', p. 17; Mazrui, 'Between Development', p. 54.

<sup>99</sup> See for example Omari H. Kokole, 'Idi Amin, "the Nubi" and Islam in Ugandan Politics: 1971-1979', in *Religion and Politics in East Africa: The Period Since Independence*, ed. by Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (London: James Currey, 1995), pp. 45-55 (p. 52).

that God had brought him to power, maybe because white men had helped him, and anything was possible' (p. 7). Aziz and Wabinda must work hard to devise a more convincing reason for the expulsion than that it was a directive from God (p. 68). When the student-leader Magambi-Mukono challenges the General's decision to expel the Asians, the General replies with 'God himself told me to get rid of all dangerous East Indians' (pp. 101-102). Elsewhere in the novel, the General claims not only that God speaks to him, but also that he is a prophet (p. 117; 127).

The western press also reported this aspect of Amin's character, rendering him all the more ridiculous. Martin cites Amin's own justification of the expulsion:

A dream came to me that the Asian problem was becoming extremely explosive and that God was directing me to act immediately to save the situation and win. The economic war which is going to be embarked on is definitely a problem. In that dream I was advised never to look for assistance from brave people but to have confidence in God and it was only through God that I was able to succeed in this particular problem.<sup>100</sup>

Coren's Amin often uses his close relationship with God to threaten his enemies, or his 'friends', such as the Queen and Brind, who 'occasionally forgettin' that I got a direck link, too, an' mine is wid de Almighty, and he getting' pretty choked off lately...'<sup>101</sup> Coren also mocks Amin's professed wisdom: 'Gotta whole load o' ideas up de sleeve, such as levitatin', havin' a word wid God, changin' into a gull fo' a week or two.'<sup>102</sup> A corrupt minister in *The General* is also associated with God: he compensates for his corruption by building a chapel in memory of his father. In response to the General calling the Minister a 'great, religious God-fearing son of the nation', a spectator responds, 'No wonder the Minister and the General himself fear God: God is the only person whose body they cannot throw into the

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<sup>100</sup> Martin, 'Amin Massacres'. See also Legum, 'Perils', and Jeffery, 'Danger Man'.

<sup>101</sup> Coren, *Collected Bulletins*, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Coren, *Collected Bulletins*, p. 62.

lake' (p. 42). The General's loss of faith in the Grace of God is what prompts him to appeal to General Effendi – a North African leader presumably representing Colonel Gaddafi – for aid (p. 40). These constant reminders that Amin attributed his power and cruel actions to God invite the reader to deride him for his insanity and sense of grandeur, making him all the more ridiculous. The implication is clearly that Amin can justify any act – however inhumane – by attributing it to the direction of God. Consequently, he is not only more ridiculous, he is more unpredictable and dangerous.

In the General's monologue (pp. 127-131), there are a considerable number of references to God. Aside from the comment that he is a prophet – 'the chosen one', 'the representative of God' who was sent down to earth by God himself and therefore did not need to go to university – the General observes that the people are fools because instead of carrying out God's orders communicated through him, they waste taxpayers' money (pp. 127-128). Between communications with God, the General must relax: this is his justification for acquiring fast cars (p. 128). The General laments the deviousness of the masses, who offer him gifts such as cattle, goats, sheep, shoes, spears, bows and arrows, fresh fish and even their daughters, before plotting against him (p. 129). However, the General accepts these gifts 'with grace and honour' because he is 'a man of God' (p. 129). Attempts to confuse him with figures in the Development Plan are pointless, as Allah cannot be confused (p. 127). The General's own plan has been discussed and agreed with God, and executing the plan will be easy because he will listen to God every night (p. 127). When the General describes his plan to build God's house, it becomes clear that he is assimilating his identity with God: 'It just will be the tallest building so that my people can easily see and feel the presence of God' (p. 127). Captain Oma and his supporters are condemned for not being men of God:

They have no mission. I have a mission. They are men of earth, I am a man of God [...] I know their hearts because as a man of God, I can read

the hearts of everyone on this earth. I know that they have been spoiled by politicians, imperialists, Zionists and their agents. They have been brainwashed. They can't see things my way – that is, the way of God (p. 129).

The General even claims that his PhD in Economic War was awarded by God (p. 130). After listing sinister plans – such as winning over the masses by tying some of their sons to trees to be beaten – the General concludes his monologue: '*At this historic moment, I will have carried out my plan, I will have achieved my objectives as ordained by God*' (p. 131, emphasis in original).

For such a brief chapter, the references to God really are considerable. Piety is clearly an aspect of Amin's character that Nazareth chooses to focus on. Nazareth has clarified that, like many Goans, he is a Roman Catholic.<sup>103</sup> Tensions between different religions and denominations were present during Amin's years, as they had been in Uganda for decades. After a visit to Gaddafi in 1972, Amin began to emphasise the Islamic nature of his regime: but he claimed that the decision to 'Islamize' Uganda came to him through celestial communication.<sup>104</sup> The Israelis were expelled shortly after Amin's visit to Libya, and Christians became apprehensive about the introduction of Islamic courts for Muslims, the banning of small Christian sects, and the disappearances of prominent Christians.<sup>105</sup> Initially, Amin had supported a variety of religions, but widespread discontent with the regime prompted Amin to turn to Islam in order to garner allies.<sup>106</sup> Consequently, the churches became 'an alternative focus of loyalty', particularly as the brutality of the regime had

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<sup>103</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 201.

<sup>104</sup> John A. Rowe, 'Islam under Amin: a case of déjà vu?', in *Uganda Now: Between Decay and Development*, ed. by Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (London: James Currey, 1988), pp. 267-279 (p. 267).

<sup>105</sup> Rowe, 'Islam under Amin', pp. 267-268.

<sup>106</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, pp. 55-56.

become apparent.<sup>107</sup> Some Muslims felt that Amin was discrediting Islam, and feared reprisals against themselves if Amin was ousted.<sup>108</sup>

It seems that Ronald's manuscript, through its emphasis on Amin's religiosity, reveals a prejudice held by the narrator: a resentment of the General's insistence that God dictates his actions. It is possible that Ronald – raised as a Christian in an environment such as this – might resent and therefore deride the ostensible piety of a Muslim, particularly if their religious beliefs are frequently offered as an excuse for exceptionally cruel actions. The Uganda Muslim Supreme Council, set up by Amin, was one of the organisations that benefited most from the expulsion, receiving buildings and houses left behind by the expelled Asians.<sup>109</sup> Resentment directed at this group by a Goan Ugandan/Damibian would be understandable. Muslims and Christians in Uganda were both victims of Amin's regime, however: thus they became united in their opposition.<sup>110</sup> Whether Ronald was also united with them is unclear, but one of his characters – Feroze Hussein – certainly argues that the General's actions were not 'in keeping with true beliefs of Islam' (p. 61).

What, then, does the pious aspect of the General's personality reveal about Nazareth's 'trick'? To begin with, the references to God emphasise the absurd and – for believers – blasphemous nature of the General. This serves a dual purpose: first, the General absolves himself of any responsibility for his behaviour because he is merely obeying God's commands. Throughout the novel, the General is presented as imbecilic, not crafty: the character is not capable of master-minding such a shrewd move as the expulsion. For most

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<sup>107</sup> Pirouet, 'Religion', p. 25.

<sup>108</sup> Pirouet, 'Religion', p. 25.

<sup>109</sup> Kokole, 'Idi Amin', p. 53.

<sup>110</sup> Pirouet, 'Religion', p. 18. See also Kevin Ward, 'The Church of Uganda amidst Conflict', in *Religion and Politics in East Africa*, ed. by Hansen and Twaddle, pp. 72-105 (p. 81).



believers, the suggestion that God could speak to and inspire a tyrant to commit such atrocities is a shocking profanity. In turn, this reinforces Nazareth's portrayal of the General as comically villainous. On the opening page of the novel, the General implies that his capacity for violence – in this instance the disposal of Captain Oma's body – is enabled by God: 'God had not made the crocodiles for nothing' (p. 1). Second, the General's belief that he communicates with God emphasises his lunacy, making him more absurd and worthy of derision. Of course, as a Goan affected by the expulsion order, Nazareth – or Ronald – would be expected to create an unfavourable portrayal of the General/Amin. However, I do not believe that Nazareth's motivation is as unequivocal as this.

### **The General and Nazareth's 'trick'**

Thus far I have established that Nazareth's portrayal of the General, through Ronald's unreliable narration, emphasises his absurdity, reflecting media portrayals of Amin during the time of his rule. I have also clarified that Nazareth believes the trickster function of a novel, including *The General*, is achieved through structuring the novel in such a way that the reader is prompted to reinterpret the novel: the reinterpretation reveals a truth originally concealed by misleading or unreliable narration. What, then, is the 'truth' that Nazareth's 'trick' reveals? In the essay 'Waiting For Amin', Nazareth explains that his second novel 'plays tricks with the reader's consciousness', and that 'even the general is seen as part agent, part actor.'<sup>111</sup> Nazareth questions whether his different portrayals of Amin in various genres suggest that 'the genre/form of the writing and the position/experience of the writer condition the "information" and so we need several perspectives, some deconstructing others, to understand instead of trivializing the trauma.'<sup>112</sup> It is necessary to ask then, what role the

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<sup>111</sup> Nazareth, 'Waiting for Amin', p. 25.

<sup>112</sup> Nazareth, 'Forum', p. 241.

‘agent’ or ‘actor’ General plays in this fiction. Several critics have failed to distinguish Nazareth’s own personal views on Amin from the view of Amin as expressed by the narrator of *The General*. Arlene Elder comments that the General’s violent actions are ‘presented in a detached, reportorial style and serve primarily as a backdrop against which the situation of Nazareth’s protagonists can be judged.’<sup>113</sup> Yet the presentation of the General (Amin) himself is clearly not detached and reportorial: every aspect of the General’s character within the manuscript comes from Ronald, leading the reader to question Ronald’s agenda – and the reason for emphasising some characteristics while omitting others.

Ronald’s General is evidently modelled on the western media’s portrayal of Amin. Amin was a joke: he became a figure to be laughed at and, in many ways, fulfilled the racist stereotype some in the west might have had of Africans at the time. Coren’s portrayal of Amin draws its humour from mocking Amin’s sense of grandeur, his constant recourse to violence, his outrageous claims and demands, and his stupidity – but it is also frequently racist. In fact, one critic comments astutely that as Amin was a ‘barbarian and buffoon, cunning yet devoid of elementary knowledge, mad, cruel and crude’ he was a ‘marvellous gift’ to anti-African racists; another criticises western writers – including Nazareth – for creating an Amin myth of their own, ‘sometimes in ways that sustain and propagate certain age-old racist stereotypes about the African people.’<sup>114</sup>

One particularly surprising aspect of the novel is the D’Costa household’s cook’s response to the masters leaving (pp. 123-125). Although this may be the way in which exiled Goan Ronald wants to view African servants, the narrator fails to explore a range of perspectives on

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<sup>113</sup> Arlene A. Elder, ‘Indian Writing in East and South Africa: Multiple Approaches to Colonialism and Apartheid’, in *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. by Emmanuel S. Nelson (London: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 115-139 (p. 130).

<sup>114</sup> Sarvan, ‘Historical Witness’, p. 70; Kiyimba, ‘Ghost of Idi Amin’, p. 133.

this particular topic: most of the African and Goan characters have differing views on the expulsion, and it is almost as if Nazareth wants to reproduce verbatim the debates that were occurring in Uganda at the time, through clumsy exposition (see for example pp. 7-10; 59-63). But the *servants* are denied multiple voices and perspectives in the narrative. One critic comments on the chapter in which D'Costa's African cook laments the expulsion of the Asians and the loss of his job: it suggests the exploitation of the African at the hands of the Asian, and the servant's modest ambitions translate into a 'retrogressive peasant mentality whose celebration demeans the novel's orientation to racial justice.'<sup>115</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, D'Costa's housegirl, Rosa, laments the imminent departure of 'the Indian *dukawallas*' because they are kinder than the Gembes (p. 44). The voices of the servants are only present to reinforce the point that the Damibian people wanted the Goans to remain. Similarly, none of the chapters consider the expulsion from a woman's perspective. When D'Costa's wife Josephine is distressed by the news that her husband has lost his citizenship and wants to discuss what will happen to their family, D'Costa steers her to the bedroom, locks the door, takes off her skirt, and separates her thighs, exclaiming 'Cuntmail!' (pp. 74-75). The reader hopes this is not one of the many personal experiences of his own that Nazareth incorporated into the novel. Overall, the characters' attitudes to servants and women makes for uncomfortable reading.

Furthermore, the novel's characters make racist comments frequently and casually – another aspect of the novel condemned by some critics.<sup>116</sup> Aside from the General's discrimination against Asian and Jewish people, George Kapa considers ironically that his friend D'Costa 'did not have the hang-ups of most Goans, the tendency to stereotype', and 'Puritanism and

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<sup>115</sup> Tirop Peter Simatei, *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* (Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 2001), p. 111.

<sup>116</sup> Kiyimba, 'Ghost of Idi Amin', p. 131.

guilt was a very European thing, which the Goans seem to have caught' (p. 25). With reference to the sexual activity of English women in post-independence Damibia, Kapa thinks that the 'White Goddess off her pedestal was nothing but a bitch in perpetual heat' (p. 26). The reader could infer that, as the author of the manuscript, a resentful Ronald intends to present an unfavourable impression of a black Damibian. However, the chapters in which Ronald is the focus reveal his tendency to stereotype too: he labels the Goans 'hoarders' and the Damibians 'squanderers': 'two sides of the same coin in their excessive devotion to money' (p. 18). The Goans 'were very Victorian' (p. 18) and 'felt superior to those money-grubbing Indian businessmen for they, the Goans, were serving the government' (p. 19). Ronald also believes that the Goans and Indians 'both agreed on one thing: they were both superior to Damibians' (p. 19). Even the narrator of the epilogue, Charlie, is angered by Ronald's criticism of the United States and describes his grin as 'Mephistophelean' (p. 135). Overall, Ronald is not a particularly likeable man: Nazareth admits he's a chauvinist.<sup>117</sup>

After finding himself a prostitute for consolation, Ronald muses, 'There was nothing like a Damibian woman, Ronald thought. She would give him his money's worth and enjoy herself too, without verbalising her desires', unlike European and American women who are obsessed with talking about their sexual desires (p. 21). There are many more examples of racist stereotyping throughout the novel – too many to list. Yet the only character whose prejudices are condemned as a symptom of madness, cruelty and absurdity, is the General.

The General's admiration for the British is emphasised throughout the novel, but the immediate post-expulsion animosity between Amin and the British is notably omitted from Ronald's presentation of the General. In Uganda, the expulsion had taken place between September and November 1972; on 1 December, the UK cancelled all aid to Uganda. Amin

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<sup>117</sup> Nazareth, *Interlogue*, p. 67.

is quoted as criticising Britain in December 1972, referring to ‘the British imperialists who are still milking the country’s economy.’<sup>118</sup> In April 1972, Amin withdrew his offer to compensate expelled British nationals.<sup>119</sup> Chapters 25 to 30 of *The General* deal with post-expulsion Damibia, including the General’s monologue. Although Ronald’s manuscript posits him as an omniscient narrator, there are few representations of Amin’s contempt for Britain: even when the General awards himself the ‘Anti-Imperialism’ honour, he has just thought about how much he loves the Queen (pp. 2-3). The General briefly refers to Damibian civil servants as ‘Imperialists and Zionists agents’, ‘people of brown and white skins, all of whom are my enemies’ (pp. 127-128), but there is no direct criticism of the British. Implicit in these references is that the General does not quite understand the link between imperialism and Britain – but Amin did. The omissions from Ronald’s manuscript, the occasions when he deviates from the western perception of Amin, are as revealing as what *is* included in the manuscript – and surely form a part of Nazareth’s ‘trick.’

Many of the questions Nazareth poses concerning the trick in *The General* draw attention to Britain’s role in enabling the General to rule Damibia. In Ronald’s manuscript, the expulsion specifically is discussed in relation to the former colonial power. Britain’s culpability is overt throughout the novel. In the opening chapter, the General justifies his undemocratic rule asking, ‘Did the people elect leaders when the British had been in charge of the country, by Grace of God?’ (pp. 1-2). Immediately following chapters in which the General makes his propensity for violence clear, and a range of characters laugh at the possibility of the General expelling East Indians, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Onlooker* tells Mansfield he will be safe in Damibia because Britain ‘taught them during our years of rule, we have [sic] them our own

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<sup>118</sup> Mamdani, *Imperialism*, p. 66.

<sup>119</sup> Benoni Turyahikayo-Rugyema, *Idi Amin Speaks: An Annotated Selection of His Speeches* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1998), p. 93.

Rule-of-Law and a written Constitution’ (p. 11). Rather than alluding to Britain’s naïve assessment of the situation in Damibia, this example suggests violence, murder, and corruption has been caused by Britain. An inconsistency in Ronald’s character is evident when he concludes his extensive racial stereotyping by blaming Britain for the lack of unity in Damibia’s diverse peoples, thinking ‘We are all children of Divide-and-Rule’ (p. 19). This term is also used by Professor of History, Al Kamena (p. 55).

D’Costa – whose story most resembles Nazareth’s own – sees the expulsion in sacrificial terms, labelling it ‘Calvary’ (p. 44); his attitude to Britain is perhaps the most perceptive. When considering Britain’s role in the expulsion, he wonders how it might be beneficial for Britain: ‘Britain could pick and choose the [East Indians] she needed to prop up her tottering, empire-less economy. She could do this quietly and if the news leaked out, she could hide behind a humane image’ (p. 35). D’Costa asks himself a series of questions about the exploitation of Asians in Uganda, including, ‘Who had been so subtle as to turn the two exploited non-white groups against each other instead of against the real enemy?’ (p. 44). ‘The devious British’ is D’Costa’s answer to all the questions concerning who is to blame for the expulsion (p. 44). In an argument with D’Costa, George Kapa asks, ‘But, man, didn’t you always say that the situation of East Indians and Goans here is a political problem, caused not by African hatred but by the British colonialists, who need scapegoats?’ (p. 88). ‘Scapegoat’ here recalls Nazareth’s comments writing under the pseudonym Wako. Later, Dr. D’Souza and Feroze Husseini argue about politics, with the latter commenting that government corruption and the apathy of the masses enable ‘these foreign-trained army men [to] become the guardians of Western economic interests’ (p. 62). Initially, D’Costa responds that Britain would not want the East Indians expelled and the economy disrupted (p. 62), but ends the

argument with the comment, ‘we have to be the pallbearers for the dying British Empire’ (p. 63).

Kamena’s articles are crafted to prevent readers from looking too closely at foreign involvement in events such as the General’s coup (p. 53). Blaming the ‘buffer’ class brought in by the British for slow economic progress and development is part of the game played by leaders of newly independent countries – but expelling the *whole* of this class is economically unwise. Faced with the challenge of making the General’s behaviour credible, then, Kamena identifies European-owned banks, the European shipping cartel, and European building contractors as responsible for much of the Damibian people’s dissatisfaction. British characters in the novel are indeed ‘shadowy.’ Two of the General’s British advisers, Moore-Diamond and Michaels, are referred to by other characters in the novel (pp. 66-68), but do not appear themselves. Although their influence on the General is considerable, they are clearly working behind the scenes, with their influence hidden from ordinary Damibians. Presumably Ronald is aware of them due to his position as an employee of the Ministry of Public Information (p. 117). By including the anti-imperial perspectives of ordinary men, and excluding Amin’s opprobrium of the British in the presentation of the post-expulsion General, Ronald – or Nazareth, since he is the ultimate author – is clearly selective about which Damibian/Ugandan views are presented: Britain is one of the General’s allies, and is responsible for the expulsion. In this way, then, Ronald’s manuscript deviates from the western press’s portrayal of Amin.

Like western representations of Amin, however, Ronald’s presentation of the General – particularly in the monologue chapter – seems foolish and ridiculous. Yet just as Amin’s ostensible stupidity masked his Machiavellianism, the presentation of the General masks an

idea much more complex. The reader is presented with the buffoonish General in order to make them laugh: the rationale behind his antics are so outrageous and laughable that, despite the gruesome consequences of his actions, the reader is drawn in by his Corenesque comical comments and farcical behaviour. But it is important to remember that Nazareth explicitly states that it is the *form* of his novel that performs the trickster function, not a character.

Lindfors hints at the trickster function when he writes of East African literature dealing with the tyranny of Amin:

The impulse, even in literature devoted to the maniacal and the macabre, is to laugh. There may be tears behind the laughter but there is not as much blatant bitterness as in West African writing. The humour in East African literature may reflect a need or determination to maintain a buoyant mental attitude, even in the face of severe adversity.<sup>120</sup>

Indeed, we laugh at the General, but Nazareth wants us to do more than that.

On one level, laughing at Amin by presenting him as a buffoon becomes a way to avoid looking directly at his crimes and inhumanity: something the British in particular might want to do. In fact, the British press's portrayal of Amin could be viewed as a way of refusing to accept any responsibility for Amin and the consequences of his rule. If the man is mad, there is nothing that can be done to temper his behaviour, and no further explanation required for his inhumane actions. Without accepting any responsibility for Amin's actions, the British at least might feel free to laugh at him. But I do not believe that Nazareth wants the reader to laugh at Amin. Nazareth's comments about the way that the trickster function works in Ebejar and Salkey's novels are pertinent here. While Salkey 'finds it necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals may rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths', Ebejar pinpoints 'the danger of people mythifying things and people that should not be

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<sup>120</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "'East is East and West is West": Points of Divergence in African Literary History', in *Awakened Conscience*, ed. by C. D. Narasimhaiah (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978), pp. 42-49 (p. 48).



mythified or mythifying incorrectly and thus repeating old patterns that come from habits of powerlessness under oppressive rules.<sup>121</sup> It seems that part of Nazareth's 'trick' is to repeat the pattern of an unimaginative, cartoonish representation of Amin in order to undermine the myth surrounding him, thus releasing the reader from a form of powerlessness and oppression. Nazareth states that literature is 'simultaneously a product of a situation and an attempt to master that situation.'<sup>122</sup> The novel's final epigraph, 'History is sometimes changed by idiots' points to Ronald as the idiot who has re-written history: after condemning other Goans for their cowardly decision to leave Damibia, Ronald bravely remains, presenting himself as a hero who instigates the chain of events which lead to the General's death (p. 118; 132).

Evidently, Nazareth wishes to draw attention to the fact that his presentation of the General is part of his trick. He asks, 'What is the novel's judgment on various media reports (local and British) about the General?'<sup>123</sup> Presumably, Nazareth is referring to the local news praising the General and reiterating his message about the Asians. But the judgement about the British reports – those that Mansfield uses to gauge the safety of travelling to Damibia – is more complex. The 'novel's judgement' seems like another way of saying 'Ronald's judgement', since Ronald is ostensibly the narrator. Yet the reader knows that Ronald is unreliable – he even admits to Charlie that his manuscript is 'an attempt by a non-violent man to deal with a violent world' (p. 143). The reader is therefore left to question whether the 'novel's judgement' is Nazareth's judgement, distinctly different from Ronald's. But if Ronald is the 'idiot' in this sense, he must also be the 'idiot' who chooses to present the General in a comedy-villain manner. Considering Nazareth's question, it could also be

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<sup>121</sup> Nazareth, *Trickster Tradition*, p. 20; 11.

<sup>122</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'A twenty-first century foreword', in *Pivoting on the Point of Return – Modern Goan Literature*, ed. by Peter Nazareth (Goa: Goa, 1556 and Broadway Book Centre, 2010), p. lviii.

<sup>123</sup> Nazareth, 'Forum', p. 241.

conceded that Ronald has *changed history* by presenting the General in this way – and that this change makes him an idiot. Ultimately, Ronald’s portrayal of the General requires a second look: Amin, Nazareth suggests through his trick, was not a buffoon to be laughed at, nor was he merely a lunatic. Nazareth does not want his reader to accept Ronald’s clichéd perception. Alternatively, it is perhaps the western press who are the ‘idiots.’ It is their myth which should be rejected. Like Salkey, Nazareth offers a clichéd or mythified perception only to undermine it so that the reader must then re-evaluate it. I consider now the ‘truth’ that could be revealed when the reader re-evaluates.

When Nazareth comments that the General is ‘part agent, part actor’ he is perhaps referring to the idea that the General is playing a role assigned to him by the imperial powers, including and predominantly Britain.<sup>124</sup> Thus the General acts out his role of ‘buffoon’ or ‘clown’ or ‘Big Daddy.’ The General is therefore a creation of the west in two senses. First, his character as a foolish, fickle and maniacal buffoon is modelled on the western press’s portrayal of him. Second, his coup and rule were enabled and maintained not only with the support of Britain, but also by the conditions in Damibia created by Britain before and after Damibia’s independence. Nazareth’s concluding comments on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are pertinent here:

The words of *Heart of Darkness* expose European imperialist exploitation of an African people who have their own religion and spirituality. Using strategy, Conrad is penetrating, not creating, the *cordon sanitaire* set up by imperialist propaganda – in order to bring home the story of what was really being done to Africa by Europe.<sup>125</sup>

Nazareth aims for a similar penetration by showing that the General – and therefore Amin – was a product of the west, by replicating their portrayal of him. The challenge this presents

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<sup>124</sup> Nazareth, ‘Waiting for Amin’, p. 25.

<sup>125</sup> Nazareth, ‘Dark Heart’, p. 316.

to the reader's perception is akin to the 'irritant' to objective reality referred to by Ogunsanwo.<sup>126</sup> The 'trick' is, then, to draw attention to Britain's culpability. Mazrui describes the creation of Amin succinctly: 'The tantrums of Idi Amin were due to the man himself, to the nature of Ugandan society in a historical perspective, and to the consequences of imperialism and the continuing external manipulation of Third World societies at large.'<sup>127</sup> It is this that Nazareth wishes the reader to 'see.'

Of course, the British absolve themselves by labelling the General inherently mad – and therefore not their fault – while continuing to distance themselves from the despot. In the novel, this is symbolised by a photograph on the front page of a British Sunday paper: the General had been photographed with the Prime Minister, but the latter had been cut out and the headline read, 'He is Nuts!' (p. 70). It is the notion of righteous, unimpeachable and inculpable Britain – part of the reader's 'blindness' – which Nazareth intends to challenge.<sup>128</sup> What Nazareth draws the reader's attention to with his 'trick', then, is Ronald's unreliable presentation of the General. The reader must see beyond the clichéd depiction of the General to acquire an awareness of his origin: the exploitative and manipulative imperial powers. In fact, it is not really Ronald's presentation of the General we should question: it is the origin of it – the myth – the western press's hyperbolic portrayal of Amin which absolves them of their responsibility for his atrocities, the portrayal criticised by Kiyimba.

When Ronald tells Charlie about his job in the Radio Division of the Ministry of Public Information, and that he writes 'various things to inform people about what is happening', his manuscript is given a significance it may not warrant. Ronald could embody the media and

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<sup>126</sup> Ogunsanwo, 'Art and Artifice', p. 19.

<sup>127</sup> Mazrui, 'Between Development', 58.

<sup>128</sup> Peter Nazareth, 'Letter to Editor', *Research in African Literatures*, 13:4 (Winter, 1982), 573-575 (p. 575).

their unreliability. Despite his claim that *The General* deals with Amin ‘head-on’, perhaps Nazareth is like Alumidi Osinya – who wrote the animal fable *The Amazing Saga of Field Marshal Abdulla Salim Fisi (Or How the Hyena Got His!)* (1977) because he ‘finds it unbearable to look directly at Amin and his doings.’<sup>129</sup> Nazareth cites the influence of Columbian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a writer recommended to him by Peruvian novelist José Antonio Bravo. Bravo wanted to write about Amin, but believed it was Nazareth’s story to write, so he encouraged Nazareth to read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) to help him ‘know how to write about Amin.’<sup>130</sup> Shortly after writing about Marquez in order to ‘say things obliquely about Amin’, Nazareth started work on *The General*.<sup>131</sup> How fascinating an Amin humanised in the same manner as the formidable figures of, for example, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) or *The General in His Labyrinth* (1975) would have been. Nazareth does, however, quote from *No One Writes to the Colonel* (1961) in the first epigraph of *The General*:

“You look as if you’re dressed for some special event,” she said.  
 “This burial is a special event,” the colonel said. “It’s the first death from natural causes which we’ve had in many years.”

Such an epigraph fits a novel primarily concerned with the outrageous violent antics of a despot.

## Conclusion

Yet the problem with Nazareth’s portrayal of the General is that in some ways he absolves him – and thus Amin – of responsibility: he implies that the west made him and set up the conditions to facilitate the brutality of his regime. Just as the General attributes his monstrous actions to God’s direction, the characters in Ronald’s manuscript attribute the

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<sup>129</sup> Nazareth, ‘Waiting for Amin’, pp. 23-24.

<sup>130</sup> Nazareth, ‘Adventures’, p. 383.

<sup>131</sup> Nazareth, ‘Adventures’, p. 383.

creation of the monster to the British. By emphasising the unreliability of Ronald's narrative and suggesting that Charlie made further edits, Nazareth in fact renders every aspect of his novel meaningless in terms of representing and critiquing events in Damibia/Uganda. Any 'trick' at the end of the novel that is intended to bring the reader to an awareness of Britain's culpability is overshadowed by the amusing, sensational, and ultimately distracting portrayal of the General. Perhaps this is an editorial choice of Charlie's: give the American reader – already familiar with wild stories of violence and corruption in Damibia – the General they want and expect. A trick such as this in the novel would mirror the trick played by the western press on western readers, who do not want to know that their country was complicit in the General's reign of terror. Or perhaps a trick calculated by Amin himself: the shrewd and Machiavellian tyrant wearing the mask of an affable and simple-minded clown. Yet tricksters are always open to interpretation. Nazareth recognises this when he commented in a 1986 interview:

I know now that a work of fiction may have multiple levels of meaning, all of which are valid, and the author has no right to claim that he alone understands what he has written. He may draw attention to some scenes, as I do; he may point out that not only the words but also the silences are important. But the work stands on its own. The author can learn from it as much as anyone else.<sup>132</sup>

Such a thorough and patronising response to Kiyimba's interpretation of the novel in 1998 was therefore unjust. By pointing to clues that contribute to his 'trick', Nazareth seeks to impose a single, authoritative meaning onto his novel, removing the open-ended ambiguity of the trickster entirely. The reader must be free to interpret: so this reader's interpretation of *The General* is that, as a mimicry of the western press's sensational portrayal of Amin and a clumsy indictment of British imperialism, it does not perform the trickster function at all.

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<sup>132</sup> Nazareth, *Africa Talks Back*, p. 208.

## Chapter 4

### Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1987): the trickster protagonist as anti-colonial icon?

#### Introduction

A very different use of the trickster to Nazareth's is evident in Ngũgĩ's novel *Matigari* (1989; published first in Gikũyũ in 1986), which depicts a freedom fighter returning home after defeating his adversary in the mountains. The protagonist, Matigari, has been compared to a diverse range of figures: some critics explore his similarities with Christ, while one critic even refers to Superman and the Terminator.<sup>1</sup> Although many critics have considered the ways in which *Matigari* honours and reflects the oral tradition, as yet the trickster nature of Matigari has not been explored thoroughly.<sup>2</sup>

In order to appreciate the centrality of the trickster figure to an understanding of Ngũgĩ's character Matigari, I first consider Ngũgĩ's early life, influences and career. I focus specifically on four aspects of Ngũgĩ's formative years: his experiences with Christianity, his response to the oral tradition, the ways in which the conflict between the British and the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA, also known as 'Mau Mau') affected him directly, and Ngũgĩ's later Marxism. *Matigari* is a composite of these four strands, and Matigari's trickster nature is grounded within them. Ngũgĩ demonstrates in his fiction and non-fiction an enduring interest in the conflict between the British and the KLFA from 1952 to 1960. In a recent interview, Ngũgĩ discusses the difference between KLFA and Mau Mau: the British

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<sup>1</sup> David Maughan Brown, 'Matigari and the Rehabilitation of Religion', *Research in African Literatures*, 22:4 (Winter, 1991), 173-180; Stewart Crehan, 'Review of Herta Meyer's "Justice for the Oppressed...": The Political Dimension in the Language Use of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o', *Research in African Literatures*, 24:1 (Spring, 1993), 121-123 (p. 123).

<sup>2</sup> F. Odun Balogun, *Ngũgĩ and African Postcolonial Narrative: The Novel as Oral Narrative in Multigenre Performance* (Quebec: World Heritage Press, 1997); Padma Malini S. Raghaven, 'Myths Crafted and Myths Created: The Use of Myth and History in *Matigari*', in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. by Mala Pandurang (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007), pp. 153-163; Nicholas Kamau-Goro & Emilia V. Ilieva, 'The Novel as an Oral Narrative Performance: The Delegitimization of the Postcolonial Nation in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari Ma Njirũngi*', in *African Literature Today 32: Politics & Social Justice*, ed. by Ernest N. Emenyonu (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), pp. 7-19.

used the term ‘Mau Mau’ because, ‘it’s meaningless – as if to say it was a meaningless movement. If they had said, ‘Land and Freedom Army’, as [the fighters] called themselves, then they would be articulating the aims of the movement, right?’<sup>3</sup> Much of Ngũgĩ’s work unambiguously expresses his support for the KLFA’s cause, and explicitly challenges those who deny its legitimacy. *Matigari* can be read as a justification for the return of Mau Mau. In the second section, I summarise critical responses to *Matigari*. Next, I summarise the characteristics of the Gikuyu trickster figure, Hare, to whom Ngũgĩ refers in his memoirs. Hare tales, which relate the often violent exploits of an anti-authority figure, are a natural resource – traces of which can be found in *Matigari*, detailing as it does the conditions precipitating an armed struggle. In the next section, I explore Ngũgĩ’s presentation of *Matigari* as a trickster figure, in relation to the popular folk trickster Hare specifically, the characteristics of trickster figures more generally, and the ‘functions’ attributed to them. Next, I consider New Testament tropes in *Matigari*, followed by an exploration of Old Testament tropes in *Matigari*. Ultimately, *Matigari* can be interpreted as a new kind of trickster – one who embodies the strands of Ngũgĩ’s influences. My conclusion considers the consequences of the unresolved ideological tensions inherent in *Matigari*.

### **Ngũgĩ’s early life, career, and influences**

Ngũgĩ was born in Kimiriithu, Limuru, in 1938. In the evenings, Ngũgĩ enjoyed listening to his father’s first wife, Wangarĩ, tell stories around her fire: an activity he describes as ‘a very important art of communication and values.’<sup>4</sup> One story would lead to another, or to discussions about current affairs which Ngũgĩ enjoyed as ‘part of the oral universe of

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<sup>3</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Neil Munshi, ‘‘It was defiance’: an interview with Ngugi wa Thiong’o’, *Financial Times*, 16 November 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Meli, Essop Pahad, Mandla Langa, ‘The Role of Culture in the African Revolution: Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Mongone Wally Serote in a Round-Table Discussion’, in *Ngugi wa Thiong’o Speaks: Interviews with the Kenyan Writer*, ed. by Reinhard Sander & Bernth Lindfors (Oxford: James Currey, 2006), 1998, pp. 239-259 (p. 239).

storytelling’, and he would later interpret current events in biblical terms.<sup>5</sup> Ngũgĩ’s experiences with orature at home, and his Christian mission education in Kamandūra, made him a ‘product of two traditions of education.’<sup>6</sup> Ngũgĩ’s description of his initial experience with the Old Testament, a ‘book of magic’, reveals the extent to which it replaced traditional oral narratives when Ngũgĩ was alone.<sup>7</sup> Ngũgĩ found David particularly appealing because he ‘the victor over giants, is like trickster Hare, in the stories told at Wangarĩ’s, who could always outsmart stronger brutes.’<sup>8</sup>

When Ngũgĩ was in the middle of grade three at Kamandūra, he transferred to Manguo. Ngũgĩ’s description of Kamandūra and Manguo schools reveals the way in which he responded to Christianity at this formative age. Kamandūra, a Kĩrore school, is associated with ‘church, silent prayer, and individual achievement.’<sup>9</sup> The Sunday services relied on New Testament texts, prayers and hymns translated from the Church of Scotland Mission hymnbook: Ngũgĩ describes the melodies as ‘slow, mournful, almost tired.’<sup>10</sup> As a missionary school, Kamandūra was seen to be ‘deliberately depriving Africans of knowledge, in favor of training them to support the colonial state.’<sup>11</sup> The Protestant emphasis on self-denial and self-discipline prepared the students to be obedient and diligent workers. Furthermore, the teachers and pupils of Kĩrore schools were asked to sign a declaration ‘against the practice and also the politics of resistance.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Dreams in a Time of War* (London: Vintage, 2011), pp. 28-29; 141.

<sup>6</sup> Meli et al., ‘The Role of Culture’, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, pp. 111-112.



In contrast to this, Manguo, a Karĩng'a school, connotes for Ngũgĩ 'performance, public spectacle and a sense of community.'<sup>13</sup> Affiliated with the African Orthodox Church, which reconciled Christianity with traditional beliefs and customs, Manguo employed teachers who had refused to make the anti-resistance declaration.<sup>14</sup> The Sunday service, also in the school building, featured an Old Testament text and hymns that were 'recent compositions, evoking contemporary events and experiences through biblical imagery', also containing lines and images from the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup> Kĩhang'ũ, the preacher, had a profound effect on Ngũgĩ because he incorporated features of traditional oral literature into his sermons, made biblical stories relevant to contemporary events and 'implored his God, the God of Isaac and Abraham, to do for the present people what he had done ages ago for the children of Israel, freeing them from oppression.'<sup>16</sup> Ngũgĩ's recognition of the relationship between the topical, revolutionary ideology of the Old Testament, oral literature content and performance, and a united community, is clear. Ngũgĩ and Kĩhang'ũ had not been alone in interpreting contemporary events biblically.<sup>17</sup> Harry Thuku's Anglican Church Missionary Society supporters believed he had been chosen by God to lead them out of slavery, just as Moses or David had been called to challenge Pharaoh or Goliath.<sup>18</sup> Presbyterian students replaced 'Jesus Christ' in their hymnbooks with 'Jomo Kenyatta', who was viewed as a 'Black

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<sup>13</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 115.

<sup>14</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>16</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty & Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa: Book II: Violence & Ethnicity*, Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale (London: James Currey, 1992) pp. 315-468 (p. 370).

Moses', or a messiah.<sup>19</sup> *Nyimbo*, translated as 'Mau Mau hymns', 'compared Kikuyu with the children of Israel and the British with the Egyptians.'<sup>20</sup>

Ngũgĩ's 1967 novel, *A Grain of Wheat*, explores ideas relating to the biblical nature of resistance leaders. Some critics have considered the way in which *A Grain of Wheat*'s Kihika is a forerunner of Matigari, and Old Testament figures clearly inspire Kihika.<sup>21</sup> Ngũgĩ's presentation of Kihika reveals him to be a Christian patriot who views the inherent message of Christ – to love your neighbours and sacrifice yourself for them – as relevant to and inseparable from the Mau Mau cause.<sup>22</sup> Ngũgĩ presents Kihika's approach through underlined passages in his Bible. Some are taken from the New Testament, but some sanction a more confrontational and forceful approach to resistance, such as, 'And the Lord spoke unto Moses, | Go unto Pharaoh, and say unto him, | Thus saith the Lord, | Let my people go' (Exodus 8:1).<sup>23</sup> Talking of India's fight for independence, Kihika revolts Mumbi with a fervent description of violent and 'murky' scenes, in which 'blood flowed like water.'<sup>24</sup> The imagery here is reminiscent of Exodus 7:17-21, in which Moses turns the waters of Egypt into blood because Pharaoh refuses to liberate the Israelites. Kihika later adopts a light-hearted tone, removing the 'murkiness' of his message by switching his focus to the more palatable ideology of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Kihika later tells Karanja that 'you, Karanja, are

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Landau, 'Language', in *Missions and Empire*, ed. by Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 194-215 (p. 198); Patrick Williams, *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: Contemporary World Writers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 50. See also Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy', p. 443. 'Kikuyu' is the Anglicised spelling of Gikuyu.

<sup>21</sup> Balogun, *Ngũgĩ*, p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Balogun, *Ngũgĩ*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Ngũgĩ, *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> Ngũgĩ, *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 87.

Christ. I am Christ. Everybody who takes the oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ.’<sup>26</sup> In many ways, Matigari echoes these sentiments.

After writing a letter to the Department of Information requesting a copy of their magazine, *Pamoja*, Ngũgĩ received many publications written in English which detailed atrocities committed by the KLFA. When Ngũgĩ discussed these stories with Mzee Ngandi, a family friend, he began to understand that the English print news did not provide an unbiased account of events. Ngũgĩ refers to learning about Kenyatta’s trial:

For me the trial of Jomo Kenyatta becomes a vast oral performance narrated and directed by Mzee Ngandi with the ease and authority of an eyewitness. I presume that Ngandi, like some of his audience, has to read between the lines of the settler-owned newspapers and government radio. But he enriches what he gleans here and there with rich creative interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

In his memoir, Ngũgĩ also recounts Ngandi’s attitude towards Louis Leakey, initially the court interpreter in Kenyatta’s trial: Leakey had grown up among the Gikuyu, and his fluency in Gĩkũyũ enabled him to gather information on Mau Mau, referred to by Ngandi as a ‘spy’, ‘Karwĩgĩ’ (Hawk), and a ‘Trojan horse.’<sup>28</sup> In 1954, Leakey published *Defeating Mau Mau*, in which he identified Mau Mau as a religion.<sup>29</sup> Some of Leakey’s ideas have been superseded by later historians, and his cynical analysis of Mau Mau may not reflect the reality, but at the time he worked with the government to counter the rebellion. Consequently, Leakey’s influence made the idea of Mau Mau as a subversive religion widely accepted during Ngũgĩ’s adolescence, and is therefore worth considering.<sup>30</sup> Leakey asserted that Mau Mau exploited

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<sup>26</sup> Ngũgĩ, *A Grain of Wheat*, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 187.

<sup>28</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> L. S. B. Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau* (London: Methuen, 1954), pp. 41-52.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce J. Berman, ‘Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Modernity: The Paradox of Mau Mau’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 25:2 (1991), 181-206 (p. 183). See David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Phoenix, 2005); Myles Osborne, ‘The Rooting Out of Mau Mau from the Minds of the Kikuyu is a Formidable Task’: Propaganda and the Mau Mau War’, *Journal of African History*, 56:1 (March 2015), 77-97.

the Gikuyu's familiarity with Christianity in forming its creed: Kenyatta replaced Christ and, in the oath ceremony, prayers, priests and a parody of baptism confirmed the inseparability of Christianity and Mau Mau. Propaganda disseminated through rewritten hymns made Christianity a subversive tool. The reliability of Leakey's interpretation is questionable because his relationship to the Gikuyu and settlers was complex; although he condemned Mau Mau, he also advocated reforms that would acknowledge the rights of the Gikuyu. Certainly people such as Ngandi viewed Leakey as an enemy.

After Kenyatta was sentenced to seven years' hard labour, Field Marshal Dedan Kĩmathi became the main character of Ngandi's stories: 'how Kĩmathi can crawl on his belly for miles and miles; how he makes his enemies think they have seen him, but before they can pull out their guns they don't see him, they see a leopard glaring at them before leaping into the bush.'<sup>31</sup> For Ngũgĩ then, the anti-colonial fight became part of the oral tradition:

In the facts and rumours of the trial and imprisonment of Jomo Kenyatta and the heroic exploits of Dedan Kĩmathi, the real and the surreal were one. Perhaps it is myth as much as fact that keeps dreams alive even in the times of war.<sup>32</sup>

Ngandi's description of Kĩmathi is echoed in Ngũgĩ's portrayal of the invincible Matigari. The armed conflict affected Ngũgĩ's home life in other ways: his half brother was shot dead, another brother was a member of the supply wing of the KLFA and forced to hide in the mountains, and his mother was periodically imprisoned and interrogated.

Although 'snared' by a visiting evangelist at Alliance High School, Ngũgĩ continued to associate the ideology of New Testament Christianity with servitude and submission.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 195.

<sup>32</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *In the House of the Interpreter* (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), p. 88.

Ngũgĩ's first visit home from Alliance was a shock: his whole village had disappeared, and the villagers' homes – including Ngũgĩ's family's – were being rebuilt elsewhere. This was 'villagization', part of the colonial government's efforts to prevent any contact between villages and KLFA fighters. While travelling home to his mother, Ngũgĩ's was detained and imprisoned. Ngũgĩ details the folktales his cellmates told while awaiting a court appearance: tales featuring Hare, Hyena, and Chameleon.<sup>34</sup> Ngũgĩ's first encounter with Marxist literature occurred at the University of Leeds, where he identified with its 'radical intellectual tradition.'<sup>35</sup> One of Ngũgĩ's peers introduced him to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Ngũgĩ subsequently read the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin and Nkrumah.<sup>36</sup>

While employed at University College, Nairobi, Ngũgĩ advocated the use of African languages in African literature, and proposed a Department of African Literature and Languages replace the Department for English. In 1976, Ngũgĩ ceased using the baptismal name he had chosen, James, and became known as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. With Ngugi wa Mirii, Ngũgĩ wrote the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)* in 1977, which was performed at Kamiriithu and proved immensely popular. However, the same year the licence for further performances was withdrawn, and Ngũgĩ was arrested and imprisoned at Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. Books by Lenin, Marx and Engels were confiscated from his home. Ngũgĩ's comments on his imprisonment exemplify his condemnation of neocolonialism. In a 1982 interview he explained that the neo-colonial rulers, 'see the people as their enemy, because they... serve foreign interests which are obviously hostile to the

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<sup>34</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Interpreter*, pp. 226-229.

<sup>35</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, interviewed by Amooti wa Irumba, 'Ngugi on Ngugi', 1979, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 99-108 (pp. 104-105).

<sup>36</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Maureen Warner-Lewis, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o Interviewed', 1984, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, pp. 199-224 (p. 219).

people of the country'; Ngũgĩ's imprisonment was thus a 'symbolic act' calculated to warn others against his way of thinking.<sup>37</sup> The government's response to the play was, according to Ngũgĩ, a consequence of its production being a collective effort by factory workers, peasants, university intellectuals, school teachers and secretaries – an undesirable alliance.<sup>38</sup> Ngũgĩ remained in prison for a year. In *Detained: A Prison Writer's Diary* (1981), Ngũgĩ expressed his contempt for the kind of leader Kenyatta had become. He began as a spokesman of the peasants and workers, but his conduct as president led Ngũgĩ to characterise his behaviour as 'petit bourgeois vacillations and opportunism.'<sup>39</sup> Following the death of Kenyatta in 1978, Daniel arap Moi became acting president, and was later sworn in as President without the promised election taking place. Ngũgĩ was released in the amnesty following Kenyatta's death.

In response to a question about *Devil on the Cross* (1982) and *Matigari* taking a distinct 'leftist turn', Ngũgĩ refers to his experience of working with peasants as the catalyst for this change: 'I started moving towards a position where I was not only writing *about* peasants and workers, but *for* peasants and workers, and especially in a language they could understand.'<sup>40</sup> In an interview at around the same time, Ngũgĩ explained his reasons for utilising biblical imagery, language, and tropes, in addition to his concerns about Christianity. Alluding to the District Commissioner's thoughts at the end of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), he summarises his position:

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<sup>37</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Raoul Granqvist, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o: An Interview', 1983, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 167-171 (p. 168).

<sup>38</sup> Ngũgĩ, 'An Interview', p. 168.

<sup>39</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary* (London: Heinemann, 1981), pp. 161-162. When Ngũgĩ re-edited *Detained* and published it as *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir* (London: Vintage, 2018), he added a footnote explaining that his assessment of Kenyatta was 'too harsh', because he had been the 'symbolic head of the anticolonial resistance' for almost forty years, and was responsible for leading Kenya to independence. See *Wrestling with the Devil*, p. 248.

<sup>40</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Emman Omari, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks! "I am not above the contradictions which bedevil our society"', 1981, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 129-135 (p. 134).

Christianity and the Bible were part and parcel of the doctrine of pacification of primitive tribes of lower Africa. This doctrine of non-violence is a contrast to the doctrine of struggle, of resistance to foreign aggression, foreign exploitation and foreign occupation of our people's country.<sup>41</sup>

While Ngũgĩ attended the launch of *Devil on the Cross* in London, an attempted coup to overthrow Moi failed. Ngũgĩ remained in exile, first in London and then elsewhere, not returning to Kenya until 2004. In 1983, while in London, Ngũgĩ wrote *Matigari ma Njiruungi*: it was published in Gĩkũyũ in 1986, and in English as *Matigari* in 1989.

Before turning to a summary of *Matigari* and its critical reception, it is important to consider the political climate in Kenya under Moi. The attempted coup gave Moi an excuse to intensify efforts to repress dissent. Historian and university lecturer Maina wa Kĩnyattĩ, who was imprisoned by Moi in June 1982, describes the situation in Kenya and reflects Ngũgĩ's views:

The Moi regime consolidated its leadership – silenced an already sodomised parliament, created a more subservient judiciary, closed down public universities indefinitely, built torture-chambers and ordered the arrest of militant students, Marxist university academics, and the anti-imperialist elements in the ruling party and parliament. Never before had the police force been granted such immense powers, and never before had censorship of thought been so strictly tightened and brutally reinforced.<sup>42</sup>

Kĩnyattĩ was one of the key leaders of an underground movement, which stemmed from the Workers' Party of Kenya (WPK), a clandestine party with a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist approach; Ngũgĩ was recruited to the party as a member of the 'second ring' of leadership.<sup>43</sup>

Kĩnyattĩ explains that theatre was an important part of the WPK's activities, including the

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<sup>41</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Onuora Ossie Enekwe, "“We Are All Learning From History”": Interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o", 1982?, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 137-152 (p. 143).

<sup>42</sup> Maina wa Kĩnyattĩ, *Mwakenya: The Unfinished Revolution* (Kenya: Mau Mau Research Centre, 2014), p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> Kĩnyattĩ, *Mwakenya*, p. 38.

staging of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* and *The Trial of Dedan Kĩmathi*.<sup>44</sup> In 1985, the WPK was renamed ‘Mwakenya’ and, in 1990, Ngũgĩ was named as its official spokesperson.

When Kĩnyattĩ and other WPK members were arrested, Ngũgĩ was still in London, and was therefore spared.<sup>45</sup> He was, however, still involved in political activism such as remaining part of the WPK arm based in London. The first essay in Ngũgĩ’s collection *Barrel of a Pen* (1983), ‘Mau Mau is Coming Back’, was a paper written for the 30th Anniversary of the Mau Mau Freedom Fighters Day (22 October 1982). Ngũgĩ pays homage to the recently imprisoned Kĩnyattĩ’s work and cites Kĩnyattĩ’s insistence on the legitimacy of Mau Mau as the reason for his arrest and imprisonment for six and a half years; there was a public outcry expressed by crowds singing defiant liberation songs, and refusing to be dispersed by police.<sup>46</sup> Ngũgĩ’s paper closes with the hopeful – ‘The spirit of Mau Mau is coming back!’<sup>47</sup>

### **Critical responses to *Matigari***

Written less than a year after the paper described above, Ngũgĩ’s *Matigari*, in fact, depicts the return of the spirit of Mau Mau. ‘Matigari’ originally meant leftovers of food or drink, but in 1963 came to be used to refer to the surviving Mau Mau fighters remaining in the forest after Kenya’s independence.<sup>48</sup> ‘Matigari’ can also mean both ‘the people’ and ‘memory of the people’s struggles.’<sup>49</sup> Ngũgĩ refers to the eponymous protagonist as ‘representing the collective worker in history’, and a character of ‘the representative type you might find in

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<sup>44</sup> Kĩnyattĩ, *Mwakenya*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>45</sup> Kĩnyattĩ, *Mwakenya*, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya* (London: New Beacon Books, 1983), pp. 15-16.

<sup>47</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Barrel of a Pen*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>48</sup> Raghaven, ‘Myths Created’, p. 154.

<sup>49</sup> Ann Biersteker, ‘*Matigari ma Njirũũngi*: What Grows from Leftover Seeds of “Chat” Trees?’, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, ed. by Cantalupo, pp. 141-158 (p. 147).



myth.<sup>50</sup> In the novel, Matigari explains that he has cleared the bush, cultivated and sowed, built a house, produced everything in the factories, tilled the land, made clothes and served as a driver.<sup>51</sup> He also claims to have been in the unnamed country since the time of the Portuguese, the Arabs, and the British (p. 45). Ngũgĩ insists that these details are not to be interpreted in a literal sense: Matigari, because he represents the people as a collective, metaphorically built all the houses, cultivated all the fields, worked in all factories, and so on.<sup>52</sup> Matigari therefore is not an adult male character as such, but rather the embodiment of an ideology.

Matigari returns home after years of fighting with Settler Williams in the wilderness, finding his country much changed. Gũthera, a prostitute, and Mũriũki, an apparently homeless boy, become Matigari's followers. Matigari finds that his house (symbolising the country) is now owned by John Boy Junior (symbolising the country's new black leadership); his friend and colleague, Settler William's son (symbolising neo-colonialists), owns the opposite estate. Matigari is beaten by John Boy Junior and imprisoned. After escaping from prison, Matigari travels the land, seeking truth and justice. At the same time, Matigari's escape has excited the people, and rumours about him spread throughout the country. By the time Matigari escapes from an asylum, he is being discussed as the Second Coming, the saviour of the country. Believing a rumour that a miracle will happen, ordinary people have flocked to John Boy Junior's house. Betrayed by one of his cell-mates, Matigari drives to John Boy Junior's house and sets the house on fire, while crowds of people, television crews and the police remain outside. While the people chant their support for Matigari, he escapes and is reunited

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<sup>50</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Maya Jaggi, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Matigari* as Myth and History: An Interview', 1989, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 261-273 (pp. 262-263).

<sup>51</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Matigari*, trans. by Wangũi wa Goro (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), p. 38. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>52</sup> Jaggi, 'Matigari as Myth and History', p. 263.

with Gũthera and Mũriũki. Matigari and Gũthera are caught by police dogs just before they plunge into the river and drift away; Mũriũki is able to cross the river and dig up Matigari's weapons. The novel closes with Mũriũki armed with Matigari's weapons, thinking that he could hear the voices of all workers, peasants, students, and patriots of all nationalities singing, 'Victory shall be ours!'

Perhaps the most surprising response to *Matigari ma Njiruungi* was Moi's. The Gĩkũyũ edition of the novel was published in October 1986 and, by February 1987, all copies were seized from shops by the police. Ngũgĩ describes the initial response of ordinary people: the novel was read in public, and people started 'talking about Matigari as though he were a living person.'<sup>53</sup> And in a later interview, Ngũgĩ referred to Moi specifically:

The story goes that the president, Moi, heard people talking about a man called Matigari who was going around the country preaching revolution. He asked for the arrest of that man. The police were going around the country asking for Matigari, but then they came back and told him, "No, he's not a real man, he's only a character in a book."<sup>54</sup>

The English edition of the novel was also unavailable in Kenya. The oral transmission of the novel, however, was appropriate considering Ngũgĩ's inspiration. In the English edition, Ngũgĩ explains in a prefatory note that the novel is partly based 'on an oral story about a man looking for a cure for an illness' (p. vii). He meets many different people, asking each of them where he can find an old man, Ndiiro, who he believes can cure him. He eventually finds the old man, and is cured. Ngũgĩ goes on to explain that as the story progresses, 'Ndiiro, whom we never actually meet, looms large and dominant, a force, a god, a destiny' (p. vii). In fact, this oral narrative is one of only two stories Ngũgĩ's mother told in the evenings, and was very popular with Ngũgĩ and the other children.<sup>55</sup> Although it seems that

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<sup>53</sup> Jaggi, 'Matigari as Myth and History', p. 270.

<sup>54</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Dasenbrock, 1991, in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks*, ed. by Sander & Lindfors, pp. 305-324 (p. 316).

<sup>55</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, pp. 31-32.

ordinary people enjoyed Ngũgĩ's reimagining of the story in a novel form considerably, the response from critics has been mixed.

Several critics have explored *Matigari* in relation to Gikuyu oral tradition and the ways in which Ngũgĩ blends its tropes with Christian symbolism. Perhaps most pertinent to this study is Padma Malini Raghaven's response, which briefly considers *Matigari* and the Minister as trickster figures: the Minister has tricked the people; *Matigari* discovers the trick and tries to rectify it; consequently the Minister views *Matigari* as a trickster because he challenges the stability of the new rulers.<sup>56</sup> For Raghaven, the Christian symbolism used creates a satirical element: the people's saviour appears as a Christ-figure to highlight the hypocrisy of Christianity as utilised by the coloniser or neocoloniser.<sup>57</sup> F. Odun Balogun examines *Matigari* as an oral-narrative performance, hagiography and mythology.<sup>58</sup> Lupenga Mphande also considers Ngũgĩ's use of a Christ-figure, questioning how Ngũgĩ can say that 'Christianity/religion is the opium of the people, and then turn round and make [his] own Jesus to whom people must turn?'<sup>59</sup> David Maughan Brown offers alternative explanations for *Matigari*'s Christian orientation: in addition to acknowledging that 'the Bible was the only literary frame of reference common to most Kenyans', Brown posits that during Ngũgĩ's exile, he would have encountered liberation theology.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, in the 1980s, Christian churches had been critical of the Kenyan government, and Ngũgĩ might have recognised the advantage of his agenda being associated with high-profile political opposition.<sup>61</sup> Oliver Lovesey explores *Matigari* as a Bunyanesque allegory, in which Ngũgĩ demythologises

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<sup>56</sup> Raghaven, 'Myths Created', pp. 162-163.

<sup>57</sup> Raghaven, 'Myths Created', p. 159.

<sup>58</sup> Balogun, *Ngũgĩ*.

<sup>59</sup> Lupenga Mphande, 'Ngũgĩ and the World of Christianity: A Dialectic', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 39 (2004), 357-377 (p. 376).

<sup>60</sup> Brown, 'Rehabilitation', p. 178.

<sup>61</sup> Brown, 'Rehabilitation', p. 178.

Christianity and reinterprets the biblical call for social justice as a call for a united community.<sup>62</sup> John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is compared to *Matigari*, with Lovesey noting the former text's popularity in Africa.<sup>63</sup>

Michael Andindilile, however, reconciles Ngũgĩ's use of Christianity to further a Marxist agenda: Ngũgĩ reduces Christianity and its symbols to 'rhetorical tools'; consequently, the Second Coming referred to in *Matigari* is not a Christ-figure, but 'a political realisation that the nation reeling under exploitation needs a saviour for corrective actions to materialise.'<sup>64</sup> Ngũgĩ's subversive message is 'repackaged' in Christian symbolism and thus rendered familiar to Kenyan Christians, who make up 78% of the country's population.<sup>65</sup> Although writing of *I Will Marry When I Want*, Lakoju's comments on revolutionary drama are perhaps equally relevant to *Matigari*: he posits that 'revolutionary' writers such as Ngũgĩ 'keep the oppressed happy and fatalistic because the socialist revolution has already been fought and won, in the fiction of their art.'<sup>66</sup>

The critical responses of Gitahi Gititi and Abdulrazak Gurnah are also pertinent to this study. Gititi writes of the dictator in *Matigari* that he poses as the eternal "Father of the Nation"; 'arrogates to himself the status of a deity', and considers himself superior to a populace that are illiterate and irresponsible.<sup>67</sup> Gititi asserts that the dictator possesses a 'monopoly on the

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<sup>62</sup> Oliver Lovesey, "'The Sound of the Horn of Justice' in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Narrative", in *Postcolonial Literature and the Biblical Call for Justice*, ed. by Susan Van Zanten Gallagher (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), pp. 152-168 (p. 168). See Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of 'The Pilgrim's Progress'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>63</sup> Lovesey, 'Horn of Justice', p. 158.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Andindilile, "'God Within Us": Christianity and Subversion in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Fiction', *Scrutiny* 2, 22:3 (2017), 40-61 (p. 44; 57).

<sup>65</sup> Andindilile, "'God Within Us'", p. 47.

<sup>66</sup> Lakoju, 'Literary Drama', p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> Gitahi Gititi, 'Ferocious Comedies: Henri Lopes' *The Laughing Cry* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* as 'Dictator' Novels' in *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Charles Cantalupo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1995), pp. 211-226 (p. 215).

truth' which is essential to acquiring power, and harbours disdain for the people and a 'sense of the importance of his role in the history of a continent.'<sup>68</sup> In fact, much of Gititi's description of the ruling party as a dictator could be applied to Matigari, a view expressed convincingly by Gurnah. Gurnah suggests that Ngũgĩ's portrayal of patriots and traitors is a 'dangerous oversimplification' which expresses 'the intolerant social vision that informs the novel', concluding that *Matigari* is a 'simple and unattractive polemic.'<sup>69</sup> Gurnah also condemns Ngũgĩ's presentation of the 'gullible' people as children of the patriarchal Matigari, who has spuriously claimed the right to leadership.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore Gurnah, like others, criticises Ngũgĩ's presentation of women.<sup>71</sup> Ngũgĩ's female characters, including Gũthera, have been identified as submissive and representative of traditional gender ideals. They can only become heroic through the sacrifice of sex or death: this is also identified as a feature of Gikuyu oral literature.<sup>72</sup>

Further criticisms of *Matigari* are made with reference to the novel's grounding in orature and composition in Gĩkũyũ. Lewis Nkosi, for example, refers to the novel as a 'political fairy-tale' and questions the value of constructing a novel that, like many others, simply 'assemble[s] characters who would act as human agents in a narrative already outlined many years ago' – that is, in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>73</sup> But it is Nkosi's comments on the use of Gĩkũyũ that seem to undermine Ngũgĩ's agenda – to rid African literature of the language of the coloniser and oppressor – most convincingly:

African languages are not innocent vehicles of national and working-class consciousness. Like the oral traditions African languages, through their historical links with traditional structures, have been used to underpin clan authority, patriarchy and gender dominance. [...] If it is true that European

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<sup>68</sup> Gititi, 'Ferocious Comedies', pp. 218-219.

<sup>69</sup> Gurnah, 'Matigari', p. 172.

<sup>70</sup> Gurnah, 'Matigari', p. 172.

<sup>71</sup> Gurnah, 'Matigari', p. 172.

<sup>72</sup> Inge Brinkman, *Kikuyu Gender Norms and Narratives* (Leiden, CNWS Publications, 1996), p. 206; 213.

<sup>73</sup> Nkosi, 'Reading *Matigari*', pp. 197-200.

languages are bearers of imperial codes of social and political dominance, African languages, too, constitute a veritable battleground of local ideologies which have nothing to do with European colonization.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the considerable amount of engagement with Ngũgĩ's use of orature and Gĩkũyũ, few critics have considered the trickster nature of *Matigari*. Before proceeding to a discussion of the trickster figure in *Matigari*, I want to consider briefly the links that have been made between Ngũgĩ, his work, and the trickster.

In a 2006 interview, Ngũgĩ reinforces the relevance of the trickster figure to his work:

The trickster is very interesting because he is always changing. He always questions the stability of a word or a narrative or an event. He is continually inventing and reinventing himself. He challenges the prevailing wisdom of who is strong and who is weak.<sup>75</sup>

In her exploration of Ngũgĩ's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), Dobrota Pucherova claims that the novel is narrated by many different tricksters, including the Ruler.<sup>76</sup> Pucherova describes the protagonist: 'Like *Matigari*, he is a trickster figure surrounded by mystery, a natural leader with unique mental powers capable of influencing others.'<sup>77</sup> Raoul J. Granqvist, exploring 2006 as a significant year in Ngũgĩ's prolonged exile, notes *Wizard's* trickster protagonists, and considers their relevance to Ngũgĩ himself:

Trickster-like Ngugi seems to be torn between the universalizing rhetoric of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and postcolonial nostalgia, on one hand, and the two competing sites of enunciation, the American academy and an increasingly (2006) present and relocated Kenya on the other.<sup>78</sup>

One particularly pertinent strand of criticism cited by Granqvist comes from journalist Mwangi Muiruri and critic Simon Gikandi. Both writers respectively lament what they

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<sup>74</sup> Nkosi, 'Reading *Matigari*', p. 204.

<sup>75</sup> Ngũgĩ, interviewed by Ken Olende, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o interviewed on his new novel, *Wizard of the Crow*', *Socialist Worker*, 4 November 2006.

<sup>76</sup> Dobrota Pucherova, '*Wizard of the Crow* (2006) as a postcommunist novel', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55:1 (2018), 5-19 (p. 8).

<sup>77</sup> Pucherova, '*Wizard*', p. 14.

<sup>78</sup> Raoul J. Granqvist, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o in/and 2006', *Research in African Literatures*, 42:4 (Winter, 2011), 124-131 (p. 128).

consider to be Ngũgĩ's hypocritical condemnation of Africans embracing Western culture, and his insistence on the importance of decolonising the mind and writing in the vernacular, from his position as an employee at a university in the United States.<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, Granqvist concludes, Ngũgĩ's trickster persona is a mediation of many voices, like the trickster protagonists of *Wizard*.<sup>80</sup> Although the focus of my close analysis is not Ngũgĩ's trickster nature, Granqvist's observations point at a complex merging of agendas, precepts, and influences. It is with this in mind that I proceed first to a brief examination of the Gikuyu trickster figure, Hare, and his characteristics, followed by some discussion of general trickster characteristics and possible functions.

### **Hare: a Gikuyu trickster**

There are several collections of Gikuyu folktales, demonstrating Hare and Wakahare [squirrel] as the most popular trickster figures.<sup>81</sup> Ngũgĩ cites his experiences with oral literature as evidence for the importance of writing African literature in African languages; crucially, too, Ngũgĩ identifies Hare's function:

Hare, being small, weak but full of innovative and cunning, was our hero. We identified with him as he struggled against the brutes of prey like lion, leopard, hyena. His victories were our victories and we learnt that the apparently weak can outwit the strong. We followed the animals in their struggle against hostile nature – drought, rain, sun, wind – a confrontation often forcing them to search for forms of co-operation. But we were also interested in their struggles amongst themselves, and particularly between the beasts and the victims of prey. These twin struggles, against nature and other animals, reflected real-life struggles in the human world.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Simon Gikandi, 'Traveling Theory: Ngugi's Return to English', *Research in African Literatures*, 31:2 (2000), 194-209, and Mwangi Muiruri, 'Queries over Ngugi View on Vernacular', *Kenya Times Newspaper*, 4 November 2006, cited in Granqvist, '2006', pp. 128-129. See also Peter Nazareth, 'Saint Ngũgĩ', in *Critical Essays on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, ed. by Peter Nazareth (New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000), pp. 1-16 (p. 12).

<sup>80</sup> Granqvist, '2006', p. 129.

<sup>81</sup> Other animal and human trickster figures are present but less prevalent. See C. Cagnolo, 'Kikuyu Tales', *African Studies*, 11:1 (March 1952), 1-15 (pp. 4-10) and Ngumbu Njururi, *Agikuyu Folk Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 40-105.

<sup>82</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 10.

Hare has received less critical attention than other trickster figures such as Ananse or Esu, and less even than Br'er Rabbit, Hare's African-American descendant.<sup>83</sup> In Gĩkũyũ folktales, Hare appears as a small but wily protagonist who is able to defeat powerful opponents such as Lion and Hyena by using his cunning.<sup>84</sup> In her collection of folktales, Rose Gecau explains that the Gikuyu value communal unity, hard work and honesty. Hare represents an animal embodiment of human qualities such as childishness, carelessness, trickiness and unreliability, and the listener is shown the consequences of 'human follies, faults and weaknesses.'<sup>85</sup> Conversely, Hare also represents the way in which the Gikuyu value intelligence over physical prowess. Trickster tales are therefore narratives which illustrate the beliefs of the group.<sup>86</sup>

Other significant functions of Gikuyu folktales identified by Gecau are entertainment and social education.<sup>87</sup> Hare's antisocial antics help children to understand the importance of community and obeying the behaviour code of the group. Hyena is often Hare's dupe: the audience is impressed by Hare's cunning, and they laugh at Hyena's stupidity. When Hare uses the sweetness of honey to persuade Hyena to let him sew up his anus, he 'treats Hyena like a stupid child' and 'passes a moral judgement on him.'<sup>88</sup> The narratives are therefore often didactic, and the listeners are shown that they must behave wisely in order to avoid becoming the victim of the group's derision.<sup>89</sup> In one tale, Hare is able to defeat Lion

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<sup>83</sup> Roberts explores the differences between Hare and Br'er Rabbit. See Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, pp. 17-64.

<sup>84</sup> Leonard J. Beecher, 'The Stories of the Kikuyu', *Journal of the International African Institute*, 11:1 (Jan., 1938), 80-87 (p. 87); Njururi, *Agikuyu*, pp. 31-39; W. Scoresby Routledge and Kathe Routledge, *With A Prehistoric People: The Akikuyu of British East Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), pp. 303-304; Rose Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1970), pp. 57-61.

<sup>85</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>86</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>87</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 6-29.

<sup>88</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, p. 12.

<sup>89</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 9-12.



because he uses the law he created and his size against him.<sup>90</sup> Another notable tale features Hare's exploitation of Hyena's fear of Lion and his laws.<sup>91</sup> Hare is clearly marginalised; he uses the power relations between other animals to ensure his escape. In both these narratives, drought threatens the community, and Hare's combination of reasoning and violence enables his survival. He retains contradictory characteristics: he represents the cleverness admired by the Gikuyu, and the physical force that often triumphs. When Hare turns Lion's rules against him, he temporarily levels the status of the ruler with his own. Gecau concludes her analysis of Gikuyu folklore by claiming that folktales have become a thing of the past, explaining that 'their alienation from society started when social education and entertainment passed from the hands of the mother in her hut, the wise old man in his hut to the hands of the missionary and government teachers.'<sup>92</sup> The comparison Ngũgĩ makes between Hare and David, who defeated Goliath, perhaps corroborates Gecau's view.<sup>93</sup>

Hare is cited as the most common trickster of African language oral literatures.<sup>94</sup> In addition to the Gikuyu, the Kisii, Swahili, Meru and Luhya peoples of Kenya narrate Hare stories.<sup>95</sup> In his 1983 collection of African folktales, Roger D. Abrahams provides Hare narratives from a range of peoples elsewhere in Africa, such as the Baganda, Ila, and Yao.<sup>96</sup> Mmutle, the Setswana Hare trickster of the Batswana explored by Musa W. Dube, bears considerable resemblance to the Gĩkũyũ Hare. Several trickster narratives provided by Dube from her native Botswana demonstrate similarities in both plot and theme. Dube's analysis leads her

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<sup>90</sup> Njururi, *Agikuyu*, pp. 36-39.

<sup>91</sup> Njururi, *Agikuyu*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>92</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, p. 52.

<sup>93</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Dreams*, p. 66.

<sup>94</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, p. 335.

<sup>95</sup> See Njururi, *Agikuyu*.

<sup>96</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *African Folktales: Traditional Stories of the Black World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

to the following conclusion, which she believes will resonate with all societies within which trickster narratives are performed:

[T]he whole Mmutle trickster corpus models ways of being in the world for the vulnerable and demonstrates the importance of being committed to resistance and liberation from all oppressors and potential oppressors, as well as being in solidarity with the Other who is oppressed.<sup>97</sup>

Of particular interest is the Hare tale in which horses [Batswana] or donkeys [Luhya] seek Hare's help in resisting capture and domestication by humans. Hare is able to paint some of the horses/donkeys with black and white stripes, enabling them to escape as zebras. In both versions, it is the impatience of the petitioners which prevents all of them from being saved. Dube elsewhere posits that the Hare trickster discourse 'underlines the *a luta continua* posture in the struggle for justice.'<sup>98</sup> The Mozambique Liberation Front's rallying call to armed resistance against first the Portuguese and then the Mozambican National Resistance, *a luta continua* was subsequently adopted by other southern African countries seeking liberation from colonial oppression; Dube emphasises its relevance to all former colonies.<sup>99</sup>

It is important to approach Matigari as a trickster figure constructed in unique circumstances with a unique purpose, but Hynes' list in *Mythical Trickster Figures* provides a suitable starting point for a definition, and will be reiterated. Hynes acknowledges that the specific nature of each individual trickster figure is dependent upon the society in which it is found, but he also identifies six common trickster figure features.<sup>100</sup> Aside from 'the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster' are the following five traits: '(2) deceiver/trick-player, (3) shape-shifter, (4) situation-inventor, (5) messenger/imitator of the

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<sup>97</sup> Musa W. Dube, 'The Subaltern Can Speak: Reading the Mmutle (Hare) Way', *Journal of Africana Religions*, 4:1 (2016), 54-75 (p. 68).

<sup>98</sup> Musa W. Dube, 'A *Luta Continua*: Toward Trickster Intellectuals and Communities', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 134:4 (Winter, 2015), 890-902 (p. 901).

<sup>99</sup> Dube, 'A *Luta Continua*', p. 896.

<sup>100</sup> Hynes, 'Mapping', pp. 33-45.

gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur.’<sup>101</sup> Similarly, attributing a ‘function’ to a trickster or trickster narrative, or indeed any oral literature, is problematic.<sup>102</sup> Finnegan cautions against functionalist interpretations of oral literature:

[The functional approach] implicitly insinuates the assumption that, to put it crudely, ‘primitive peoples’ (i.e. Africans) have no idea of the aesthetic, and therefore the only possible explanation of an apparent work of art, like a story, is that it must somehow be *useful*.<sup>103</sup>

While on the one hand recognising that universalist statements about the trickster figure’s functions ignores the context of production and reception, Finnegan offers some reasons for the popularity of animal tales, and specifically trickster narratives, in oral literature: they are often humorous and entertaining, satirise human behaviour, particularly humankind’s faults, and sometimes – like parables – offer a moral.<sup>104</sup> Trickster narratives which depict an ‘inordinate or outrageous’ character can offer ‘a kind of mirror-image of respectable human society, reflecting the opposite of the normally approved or expected character and behaviour.’<sup>105</sup> Functionalism is fundamentally flawed but, as it is clear that Ngũgĩ composed *Matigari* as an allegory with a specific agenda, it is reasonable to consider whether the novel reflects the kinds of functions usually attributed to trickster narratives.

Guided by Ngũgĩ’s perception of Hare, the very specific context in which *Matigari* was composed, and Hynes’ overview of the trickster’s defining characteristics, I intend to explore specifically *Matigari* as a bricoleur, but also – crucially – his identity as a bricolage. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which Ngũgĩ synthesises his myriad influences and concerns to construct a trickster figure that in some ways resembles the one figure that has

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<sup>101</sup> Hynes, ‘Mapping’, p. 34.

<sup>102</sup> For a summary of six functions commonly attributed to trickster narratives by anthropologists, see Babcock-Abrahams, “A Tolerated Margin of Mess”, pp. 182-185.

<sup>103</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, p. 322.

<sup>104</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, pp. 337-341.

<sup>105</sup> Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, p. 343.

not been considered in all the criticism outlined in the previous section – Hare – but also, to construct a trickster figure that is entirely new.

### **The trickster figure in *Matigari***

A cursory reading of *Matigari* would suggest its protagonist is morally unambiguous, and not an obvious choice for a trickster study. However, some elements of *Matigari* accord with common trickster narrative scenarios, and these will be considered first. Matigari enters the scene of action from the wilderness (pp. 5-6); he wanders, homeless, encountering various antagonists in his travels; he attempts to subvert the power of the oppressive rulers and therefore challenges the norms of society; he embodies the spirit – the pain – of the oppressed people, and he escapes or avoids restraint (p. 65; 131; 170; 174). His life-span appears indeterminate (p. 45; 112). He is a marginal figure, pursued by the authorities and not entirely accepted by the common people. Matigari's behaviour is the focus of gossip precisely because it is unconventional and shocking. Contradictory descriptions of his appearance reveal him to be a shape-shifter of sorts (p. 3; 17; 19; 31; 60; 76; 111; 124; 159). In the original *Gikūyū*, Matigari's gender is unclear because pronouns are not gender-specific.<sup>106</sup> Matigari is also both elusive and omnipresent (p. 159), and linked inextricably with divinity. He appears to possess supernatural powers, as he rarely eats, drinks or suffers harm, and seems to be protected by a powerful charm (p. 17; 41; 94; 173). Tricksters are often presented as foolish enough to break society's taboos: Matigari places himself in danger by asking where he can find truth and justice. The people warn him of the potentially fatal consequences of his actions (p. 82; 90; 92). Finally, he returns to the wilderness (p. 86; 174).

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<sup>106</sup> Biersteker, '*Matigari*', p. 147.

It is possible, too, to match commonly identified functions of trickster narratives to *Matigari*. The popularity of *Matigari* – evidenced in the widespread public readings – suggests its success as entertainment, much like Ngũgĩ’s enjoyment in hearing the exploits of Hare. The didacticism of *Matigari*, criticised by so many, is evident in Matigari’s searching questions, and his repeated recitation of the injustices suffered by ordinary people at the hands of the elite. Other aspects of potentially instructive oral literature are incorporated into *Matigari* too. Kenyatta’s 1938 ‘Gentlemen of the Jungle’ utilised the same riddle concerning him-who-sows and him-who-reaps-where-he-never-sows (p. 21; 38; 46; 57-58; 97-98; 113) in Gĩkũyũ oral style, rather than in the language of a biblical narrative.<sup>107</sup> Ogres are also a prevalent feature of Gikuyu oral literature. Gecau describes ogres as ‘alienated and dehumanised member[s] of society’ who represent ‘destructive forces that disrupt social stability and [are] often defeated by the actions of a united community.’<sup>108</sup> When Matigari challenges the Minister, he cites a Hare and Leopard parable, and when he is in the psychiatric hospital he considers the need for violence when a husband discovers his wife is being starved by an ogre (p. 112; 131). A popular Gikuyu story describes the sacrifice of a girl in a river or lake in order to save the community from drought.<sup>109</sup> In *Matigari*, the country has experienced an oppressively hot day when Gũthera, one of Matigari’s followers, is dragged into the river by Matigari at the close of the novel, resulting in an immediate ‘deluge’ of rain (p. 174). The ogre theme and Matigari’s references to folklore are evidence that Ngũgĩ has incorporated elements of Gikuyu oral tradition, specifically those elements which offer some guidance about correct behaviour.

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<sup>107</sup> Jomo Kenyatta, ‘The Gentlemen of the Jungle’, in *African Short Stories*, ed. by Chinua Achebe and C. L. Innes (London: Heinemann, 1985) 36-39. Mphande, ‘World of Christianity’, p. 371; 374.

<sup>108</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 36; 26-27.

<sup>109</sup> Njururi, *Agikuyu*, pp. 60-62; Routledge, *Agikuyu*, pp. 287-290; Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, pp. 72-75; Wanjikũ Mũkabi Kabira and Karega wa Mũtahi, *Gĩkũyũ Oral Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1988), pp. 13-17; 89-90.

The popularity of Matigari among the people of the novel, and among the people of Kenya disseminating Ngũgĩ's novel as orature, perhaps relates to another function typically attributed to trickster narratives: a social or psychological 'steam-valve.' Matigari becomes mythical through the transmission of his story by the people, elevating him to the position of a prevalent oral literature protagonist (pp. 69-82). The people take pleasure in sharing stories about Matigari because they admire his revolutionary challenge to oppression: it gives them hope. One person repeats a rumour that Matigari ma Njirũnji have 'come back with flaming swords in their hands' to 'claim the products of our labour' (p. 72).<sup>110</sup> As Matigari continues his search for truth and justice, he encounters people who 'were so absorbed in the extraordinary tales of Matigari that they often forgot to drink their tea or eat their food' (p. 74). A group of women admire Matigari for telling the hidden truth about their country:

Serves the imperialists and their servants right! They have milked us dry. Yesterday it was the imperialist settlers and their servants. Today it is the same. On the plantations, in the factories, it is still the same duo. The imperialist and his servant. When will we, the family of those who toil, come into our own? (pp. 78-79).

The rumours concerning Matigari contrast with the frequent 'Voice of Truth' bulletins on the radio, which refer to Matigari as a group of terrorists and threatens to arrest those who propagate the rumours. The ordinary people, animated as they are, will not emulate Matigari's behaviour for fear of the consequences. He acts out their desires: discussing his rebellious antics provides temporary respite from their wretchedness. Matigari, like Hare, offers a narrative form of *a luta continua*.

### **New Testament tropes in *Matigari***

Yet Matigari's nature reveals him to be more than the protagonist of narratives providing entertainment, social education, and vicarious rebellion. Considering the trickster's role as an

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<sup>110</sup> Here the speaker is referring to Matigari ma Njirũnji as a collective: a group of patriots.

imitator or messenger of gods, Matigari's Christ-like nature is worth exploring in more depth. Initially, Matigari's similarities to Christ might seem incompatible with a trickster figure designation. As an adult, Matigari is baptised as 'seeker of truth and justice' and Christ's baptism is referred to explicitly (p. 62). The Last Supper is parodied: Matigari is imprisoned with twelve men, who talk and share food together, one of whom – Gĩcerũ – will later betray Matigari (p. 52-66; 106). The people question whether he is the Second Coming (p. 81; 156) and although Matigari seems eager to separate himself from this connection, even the priest worries that the rumours he has heard of the Second Coming are true (p. 93). Matigari's testament – love and sacrifice – also parallels Christ's, although it is made relevant to contemporary circumstances.<sup>111</sup> Matigari emulates Christ's language and uses parables (pp. 18-19; 33-38; 57-59; 61; 97-98). He has a special relationship with children (p. 155) and Gũthera, a woman forced into prostitution to survive, reminding the reader of Mary Magdalene (pp. 33-37). Balogun also connects Matigari's acceptance of the need for arms very clearly to Christ's words and actions in Luke 22:36-38 and Luke 22:51.<sup>112</sup> Matigari ostensibly sacrifices himself for his country (p. 173) and is resurrected through the child, Mũriũki (p. 175), whose name means 'resurrection and rebirth.'<sup>113</sup> By the time Matigari escapes from the police and hurls himself into the river, he is revered by the people.

The ruling party, on the other hand, is associated with institutional religion, using Church doctrine as a pacification tool: for example, the Ten Commandments are recited by a priest at the Minister's meeting with the workers (p. 120). The Church's paradoxical approach has been expressed by Ngũgĩ in his non-fiction, and although accepting the principles on which the faith is based, his portrayal of Matigari constitutes a condemnation of the way in which

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<sup>111</sup> Balogun, *Ngũgĩ*, pp. 113-117.

<sup>112</sup> Balogun, *Ngũgĩ*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>113</sup> Biersteker, 'Matigari', p. 150.

the Church condoned and sustained inequality and oppression. Matigari reveals a Christ-like ideology free from hypocrisy, and the conflict between Matigari and the authorities – particularly a priest (pp. 93-100) – is evidence of the hypocrisy of the Church and its failure to adhere to its professed ideology. When Matigari describes Gũthera's harrowing life and asks who created 'a world so upside-down', the priest accuses him of blasphemy (p. 96-97). The priest, clearly mocked, gives Matigari a ludicrous answer to his question about where truth and justice can be found, telling him that 'Christ is the only one who can right a world which is upside-down' (p. 99). Perhaps, in this way, Ngũgĩ criticises the Church's ability to serve the needs of the people, and the futility of relying on a saviour: it is possible that Matigari's function is, instead, to inspire the ordinary people to examine their society, recognise its flaws, and take action to address those flaws. Interestingly, this function of the narrative could correspond to the reflective-creative purpose attributed to trickster tales.<sup>114</sup>

In any case, the presentation of Christ as the people's saviour is complex. The reader is encouraged to assess everything the ruling party says as lies; thus, when the ruling party deny the rumours of Christ's return, the reader is more inclined to believe that Matigari is not simply a satirical parody of the figure (p. 84; 105). Ngũgĩ described Christ as a champion of the oppressed and suggested that if he had been present in Kenya in 1952, he may have been 'crucified as a Mau Mau terrorist, or a Communist.'<sup>115</sup> Ngũgĩ also proposes the establishment of a Church which would act as a 'meaningful champion of all the workers and peasants of this country.'<sup>116</sup> Matigari could be the champion of this remodified church: a representation of the true Christ, purified of the missionaries' corruptions and thus ridding Christianity of its hypocrisy. By utilising the principles, language and imagery of

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<sup>114</sup> Babcock-Abrahams, "A Tolerated Margin of Mess", p. 183.

<sup>115</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, p. 34.

<sup>116</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, p. 34.



Christianity, *Matigari*, like Hare, also turns one of the tools of oppression against the oppressor.

Although it is not my intention to establish the extent of Ngũgĩ's Marxist ideals and their influence on the themes of *Matigari*, it is worth considering the precise way in which *Matigari*-as-Christ is reconciled with Marxist ideals. Ngũgĩ has joined the Mau Mau struggle – recall Kenyatta substituted for 'Christ' – and Marxism in the character of Gũthera's father (p. 35; 70; 106-110). Christian ideals are also clearly combined with Marxism: this is evident when the drunken prisoner parodies Christ's speech at the Last Supper, closing with the words 'Do this to one another until our kingdom comes, through the will of the people!' (p. 57). *Matigari* tells the children that Imperialism has tried to kill the God within them, but when he returns they will say in one voice: 'Our labour produced all the wealth in this land' (p. 156). Ngũgĩ may attempt to utilise Christianity in order to emphasise and criticise its role in colonialist and capitalist exploitation, and his use of a Christ-like saviour could be reconciled with his Marxism through the emphasis on *Matigari*'s collective identity: he represents the spirit of resistance. Micere Githae-Mugo, referring to Ngũgĩ's portrayal of the hysteric people in *A Grain of Wheat* who idolise Mugo the traitor because they believe he is a hero, describes the way in which Ngũgĩ exposes 'the folly of man's depraved search for saviours, so chronic that people will even create some where none exist.'<sup>117</sup> Ngũgĩ criticises the people's tendency to spend 'so much energy looking for "messiahs" to enthrone and victims to stone' when they should be searching themselves and addressing the problems in their own lives.<sup>118</sup> This interpretation seems to be at odds with the ideology of *Matigari*,

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<sup>117</sup> Micere Githae-Mugo, *Visions of Africa: The Fiction of Chinua Achebe, Margaret Laurence, Elspeth Huxley and Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1978), p. 181.

<sup>118</sup> Githae-Mugo, *Visions of Africa*, p. 181.

unless it can be agreed that Ngũgĩ wishes to reveal the insufficient heroism of Christ-like Matigari.

Ngũgĩ emphasises that the Matigari-Christ conflation blinds the people, impeding their understanding of Matigari's message (p. 85). Indeed, when the people exaggerate Matigari's deeds, elevating them to miracle status, the reader is shown the way in which Christ's actions may also have escalated into miracles by word of mouth: thus the authenticity of the stories from the New Testament is undermined, and their content potentially demythologised. Satire, by prompting re-evaluation and re-examination of existing conditions and beliefs, can potentially initiate a desire for change, another possible function of a trickster narrative.<sup>119</sup>

Christ is not the only figure Ngũgĩ draws on for his presentation of Matigari. When he challenges Settler Williams Junior, John Boy Junior, and the Minister, Matigari seems remarkably similar to Ngũgĩ's portrayal of Kĩmathi in *The Trial of Dedan Kĩmathi*, specifically when Kĩmathi addresses the judge: 'Two laws. Two justices. One law and one justice protects the man of property, the man of wealth, the foreign exploiter. Another law, another justice, silences the poor, the hungry, our people.'<sup>120</sup> Matigari's ability to avoid detection also recalls the shrewd Kĩmathis of Ngandi's stories. In some ways, Matigari tries to become the leader of an armed struggle. His initially peaceful approach, symbolised by the burial of his weapons (p. 4), cannot last. Matigari believes he is returning to an independent and equal society, free of colonial rule: he does not believe that weapons will be needed. Matigari trembles with the 'rage of a newly found dignity' which makes him 'human' (p. 22) when he turns on Settler Williams before they enter the forest. Indeed,

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<sup>119</sup> Babcock-Abrahams, "A Tolerated Margin of Mess", p. 183.

<sup>120</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae-Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kĩmathi* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 2014), pp. 25-26.

Matigari then spends an indefinite number of years pursuing and fighting Settler Williams, eventually murdering him triumphantly (p. 22). After his return, Matigari instinctively reaches for his weapons when attacked by children (p. 17), during his confrontation with the police (p. 30) and again when he is whipped by John Boy Junior (p. 47). He later acknowledges the need to combine weapons with words (p. 131). Matigari tells Gūthera: ‘The enemy can never be driven out by words alone, no matter how sound the arguments. Nor can the enemy be driven out by force alone’ (p. 138). The enemy can therefore only be defeated by a combination of reasoning and violence: a lesson taught by Hare.

Ngũgĩ has indeed concentrated his biblical imagery on the life of Christ, ostensibly removing the ambiguity, and the hypocrisy, of Christianity. Perhaps Ngũgĩ assumes that the basic doctrine of Christianity provides a clear polarised morality which will remove any potential ambiguity in his own ideology. The connotations of Christ’s submissiveness are unsuitable, but cannot be removed; consequently they must be combined with forceful resistance. Furthermore, the peaceable figure of Christ is at odds with Ngũgĩ’s understanding of effective characterisation. Ngũgĩ recognises that, for most people, the warrior inspires ‘more awe and admiration than the peacemaker.’<sup>121</sup> Matigari’s position as patriot-soldier, and the meaning of his name, bind him inextricably with violence. Matigari refers to shedding his weapons as the moment he went ‘astray’ (p. 139).

Matigari certainly has not adopted a stance in which he turns the other cheek to his enemy, he does not always love his neighbour, and he often casts the first metaphorical stone. Matigari is not just a violent Christ, however. His perspective offers a damning judgement of ordinary people, not just the ruling elite. Aside from Gurnah’s valid criticism of Ngũgĩ’s presentation

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<sup>121</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Interpreter*, p. 122.

of Gũthera and women in general, it is worth noting that Matigari is surprised that women work (p. 25) because their role is to ‘uphold the flame of continuity and change in the homestead’ (p. 27). Gũthera, the other prostitutes, and the gossiping, oblivious women are the only female characters spoken to by Matigari in the novel. Ngũgĩ presents the group of orphaned children as ‘hounds which had smelt blood’ (p. 18), and bullies who imitate the behaviour of the corrupt authorities (p. 12; 16-19). The ordinary people appear as pitiable, ignorant children whose ‘heads were so full of rumours ... they just stared at [Matigari] as though they did not understand’ (p. 85). Most of the ordinary people gossip about Matigari to liven up their ‘otherwise drab lives’ (p. 71); they repeatedly fail to recognise him, dismiss him as a drunkard and subsequently reject him with disapproval when he approaches them (pp. 72-85). Despite spreading his story and elevating him to legend status, the people fail to recognise their saviour. When Matigari is pelted with stones by the children, shopkeepers and workers pass by, disinterested (p. 18). Cars stop by the roadside ‘to give passengers a chance to enjoy the scene of children pelting an old man with stones’ (p. 17). When Gũthera is terrified that the policemen will release their vicious dog on her, a crowd stands watching: ‘some people laughed, seeming to find the spectacle highly entertaining’ (p. 30). Speaking to Matigari, a small trader says he does not know or care about truth and justice, but he knows how to make a few cents’ profit (pp. 82-83). Ngarũro, a worker involved in the strike, springs up ‘as if new strength and confidence had been instilled in him by his brief contact with Matigari’ (p. 24). Ngarũro’s subsequent speech to the workers is noted as all the more impressive and inspiring due to his conversation with Matigari (p. 74). Without Matigari’s influence the ordinary people are barely able to think for themselves or act positively and humanely.

Even the characters who accompany Matigari – Gūthera and Mūriūki – are portrayed as immoral and greedy. Gūthera's brazen behaviour reveals the extent of her degradation, when she 'walked up to Matigari and without more ado sat on his lap, put her arms around his neck and looked at him with feigned love in her eyes' (p. 28). Matigari rejects her desperate advances, even though she offers him her services on credit: 'Pleasures are very expensive, you know. But at this time of the month, prices are usually low. We even give favours on credit. You can pay at the end of the month' (p. 28). Referring to Mūriūki, a little boy, Gūthera claims, 'The most important thing is money. Even if a boy like this one came to me with money in his pocket, I would give him such delights as he has never dreamt of' (p. 29). Mūriūki has also been corrupted by Western materialism: he wants to fly in a 'winged Mercedes-Benz' (p. 42), and is beside himself with excitement when he is able to travel in one that Matigari steals (pp. 145-147). The overall implication is that it is not only fear which has subdued the ordinary people (p. 87), but ignorance, apathy and corruption too. Only those who come into close contact with Matigari are able to redress their moral code.

The prisoners are presented less contemptuously. With them, Matigari occupies a cell caked in 'human sweat and blood' (p. 52), which encourages the reader to perceive the inhabitants as oppressed workers. The accounts the prisoners give of their crimes reveal them to be justifiable or even honourable (pp. 53-56). One prisoner decries the people's failure to help Gūthera, claiming they stood 'as if their very backbones were made of fear' (p. 76). The prisoners are clearly aware of the failures of society. They have, however, been separated from society: they are therefore marked out by Ngūgĩ as exceptions, whose crimes demonstrate the discord between them and society's endemic corruption. When they resort to violence, Matigari commands them to put their knives away: his 'powerful voice' forces them to obey (p. 64). After their escape, back in the toxic society, the prisoners become cowardly

(pp. 89-92). Ironically, they speak freely against the ruling party while imprisoned, but their return to the corrupt society contaminates them and they revert to individualism until they are re-arrested, when they find courage once again.

Ngũgĩ's synecdochic presentation of Matigari is more exclusive than it first appears: he *only* represents patriots. Gũthera's father, a church elder who is arrested and executed for supplying bullets to the Mau Mau by hiding them in his Bible, claims that there are only two types of people: patriots and sell-outs (p. 34). The existence of only patriots and traitors is later reiterated by Matigari (p. 37; 152). In all respects, Gũthera's father is depicted as an admirable man whose morality and ideology separate him from the masses. He believes that the greatest commandment is love, and that there is nothing greater than giving up your life for your country (pp. 34-35). Gũthera's father equates the greatest of Christ's commandments explicitly with the Mau Mau cause: 'that men and women should give up their lives for the people by taking to the mountains and the forests' (p. 35). His dogmatic view of patriots and sell-outs is unpleasant, but not surprising given his devout Christianity, which allows for no ambiguity.

The people later adopt this polarised view under Matigari's influence (p. 126). The ignorant people encountered by Matigari are clearly not patriots: does Ngũgĩ, then, condemn them *all* as 'traitors'? In his conversations with the student and subsequently the teacher, Matigari is prompted to consider that there are two types of students or wise ones: 'those who love the truth, and those who sell the truth' (p. 90; 92). He is superior to the other inmates because he has not abandoned the search for truth; he tells the teacher:

Since we parted last night I haven't slept a wink. I haven't rested either. I have wondered all over the country looking for somebody who can tell me where a person who has girded himself with the belt of peace can find truth and justice! (p. 92)

In the meeting between the workers and the ruling party, Ngarũro is brave enough to question the minister and becomes the first person to stand up in public to ‘oppose a presidential decree’ (p. 122). Ngarũro’s fate causes the other workers present to remain silent in fear: Matigari is the only person who has the ‘courage and strength’ (p. 112) to challenge the minister, while the people wonder that ‘anybody could be so brave as to ask a question after what had happened’ (pp. 111-112). Following this, the people stand ‘silently in total admiration’, lamenting that it had been such a long time ‘since they had last seen such courage’ (pp. 114-115).

Ngũgĩ satirises Moi and his regime through his portrayal of the Minister, the ‘Voice of Truth’ bulletins, and state-sanctioned corruption and injustice. The ruling party has been compared to ogres and a dictator, but the description Gititi provides of the dictator ruling party – a god-like, arrogant Father of the nation, who owns the truth – is a description which could also be applied to Matigari. Matigari regards himself as a father to all the children of the land, such as when he sees a group of children running away and laments ‘My children...!’ (p. 10), and when tells Mũriũki, ‘I first lost my home; then my children were scattered all over the country’ (p. 15). He also views Gũthera as one of his children: witnessing her torture at the hands of the police officer, Matigari asks himself, ‘Of what use is a man if he cannot protect his children?’ (p. 30). John Boy Junior, too, is a child to Matigari, even though he owns a house and much land. Matigari challenges him: ‘You’ve dared to raise a whip against your own father?’ (p. 48). Matigari’s perception of the people is condescending. He clearly views himself as playing a seminal role in the history and future of the country. This is not to claim that Matigari is a dictator – and it is clear that the ruling party is. However, Matigari is an authoritative and patriarchal figure, whose power is founded on a prejudicial assessment of the masses and his status as a morally superior leader. His power is such that his pleas to

Robert Williams and John Boy Junior are almost successful, despite their role as villains, because he has ‘a kind of authority in his voice and demeanour, which made people listen to him’ (p. 51).

Matigari’s function as inspiration for the masses is implausible, however, because the ordinary people presented in *Matigari* do not appear to have the potential to instigate change. Whether Ngũgĩ intends Matigari to be a genuine saviour, or a tool to reveal the futility of believing that a saviour will come – thereby prompting the people into taking action themselves – is irrelevant. In either case, the people are easily manipulated and led to follow Matigari’s doctrine. The authoritative narrative voice of Ngũgĩ, which pejoratively judges the people through Matigari’s eyes, undermines the possibility that the people are capable of and ready for revolution. Mphande writes that the ‘super-heroic, Christ-like qualities of Matigari obviously prevent us from recognizing the true heroic qualities of the ordinary worker and peasant – qualities that would make people rise above their depression.’<sup>122</sup> But the juxtaposition of Matigari and the masses does more than this: it invites a comparison which encourages the reader to judge the people as distinctly inadequate. Although they congregate outside Matigari’s house and chant his name at the climax (pp. 163-169), their portrayal throughout the rest of the novel renders it impossible to believe they could become revolutionaries. When they chant demands for everything to burn, it is hard to believe that these are the same people who laughed at the suffering of others and frequently revealed their vices and greed for material possessions. It seems more plausible that their behaviour at the climax is merely a fleeting moment, a consequence of herd mentality, rather than evidence of an epiphanous rebellion.

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<sup>122</sup> Mphande, ‘World of Christianity’, p. 371.



Ngũgĩ's suggestion that a Christ-like figure, genuine or parodied, is the only person who can affect this overwhelming change is puzzling. New Testament Christianity – with its focus on individual salvation and pacifism – is insufficient. It should be asked why Ngũgĩ chose this ideology as a component of his doctrine, since it distinctly separates a few superior, saved individuals from the community. Although Leakey's interpretation of Mau Mau's use of Christianity is problematic, it was accepted because it explained conveniently – more conveniently than an acceptance that colonial power was unjust and unwelcome – why so many people chose to join or at least support the armed struggle.<sup>123</sup> Ngũgĩ would certainly have been aware of this cynical connection between Mau Mau and Christianity. It is possible, then, that Ngũgĩ chose to conflate Christianity and the Mau Mau cause for the same reason: the tool of Christianity enables manipulation of the people. As *Matigari* unfolds, the reader witnesses the increasing violence of the people: a surprising response to ostensibly Christian teachings. Furthermore, the idea of Mau Mau as a manipulative and exploitative religion undermined the authenticity of the Mau Mau cause: Ngũgĩ's appropriation of this link also undermines the legitimacy of Matigari's cause.

The disparaging presentation of ordinary people recalls Hare's judgement of Hyena as childlike. Hyena is, like the ordinary people of *Matigari*, derided for his stupidity and desire for immediate pleasure: the audience laugh when he suffers the deserved consequences.<sup>124</sup> Hyena's failure to recognise the flagrant trick being played on him is also echoed in the ignorance of *Matigari*'s masses. Hare is characterised by selfishness. At the close of the novel, Matigari does not, in fact, sacrifice himself for the country. He flees from the police after burning down the house he was trying to reclaim: he is merely fulfilling his promise that

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<sup>123</sup> See Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged*, pp. 282-284.

<sup>124</sup> Gecau, *Kikuyu Folktales*, p. 28.

John Boy will never sleep in his house again (p. 124; 138-139). This aspect of Matigari's character has been largely ignored, but deserves attention. How is it possible that a character with such overt connections with Christ – albeit a combative Christ – could possess the vital trickster element of moral ambiguity? Partly, the answer lies precisely in the association between Matigari and Christ: his language and behaviour encourages a link between the Son of God and himself, and it is worth noting that one of the six key characteristics Hynes attributes to the trickster figure is that he presents as an imitator or messenger of gods. Indeed, one of the imprisoned workers refers to Matigari as 'the God of us workers' (p. 61).

### **Old Testament tropes in *Matigari***

Ngũgĩ's admiration for some Old Testament figures perhaps also provided some inspiration for Matigari. Interestingly, the Gikuyu's pre-missionary faith was in some ways similar to Old Testament theology.<sup>125</sup> The creator-god, rituals and sacrifices had been important aspects of Gikuyu life: the idea of the Son of God as humankind's saviour was absent. In *A Grain of Wheat*, the violence of resistance in Exodus represents Kihika's fundamental approach, but his recourse to Christ and self-sacrifice is employed as a persuasive device when the bloody imagery of the Old Testament inspires more fear than support. So too in *Matigari*, in which Ngũgĩ attempts to reinterpret and reconcile the message of Christ with the moral justification of revolution and challenge of oppression. And, if Kihika is a forerunner of Matigari, the allusions to Exodus and violence have been reduced in the latter character. However, there are many ways in which Matigari resembles Moses.

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<sup>125</sup> Leakey, *Defeating Mau Mau*, p. 128. See also R. Mugo Gatheru, *Child of Two Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 5-6; Donald L. Barnett and Karari Njama, *Mau Mau From Within* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1966), p. 101.

Moses, in fact, provides a relevant example of a biblical figure interpreted as a trickster. Nicholas cites his initially marginal status, deception and transformation as evidence for his trickster status; however, Jacob/Israel is named as the greatest trickster of the Pentateuch.<sup>126</sup> Although Nicholas has been criticised for, among other things, conflating the motif of deception with the trickster story, it is not only deceit which qualifies Moses as a trickster figure.<sup>127</sup> Nicholas concludes that the function of the Pentateuchal tricksters is to inspire ‘hope in the in-between time of desperate hopelessness.’<sup>128</sup> It is clear that Matigari inspires hope, and bears some similarity to the prophet Moses. Moses is initially separated from his people (Exodus 2:2-3) due to Pharaoh’s order that midwives should kill the sons of all Hebrews (Exodus 1:16); Matigari, too, returns to his community after years away only when he believes it is safe to do so. Moses murders an Egyptian, buries his body in the sand and then, when he is found out, flees to Midian (Exodus 2:12-15); Matigari’s defeat of Settler Williams in some ways reflects this. For Moses, it is in exile that God tells him to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites to freedom (Exodus 3:4-22). A clear parallel is drawn in the novel when one of the prisoners states that the neo-colonial leaders ‘have hearts as cold as that of Pharaoh. Or even colder than those of the colonialists. They cannot hear the cry of the people’ (p. 53). Like Matigari, Moses later positions himself as judge over the very people he wanted to liberate (Exodus 18:13). Nicholas begins his study of the trickster in the Pentateuch by acknowledging that deception is ‘a vexing problem for readers of the biblical text.’<sup>129</sup> However, it is not necessarily Moses’ deception which disquiets the modern reader and defines him as a trickster. When Moses becomes the saviour and leader of the people, his behaviour is often disconcerting. For example, the slaughter of three thousand people is,

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<sup>126</sup> Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, pp. 63-71; 100.

<sup>127</sup> Francis Landy, Review of *The Trickster Revisited: Deception as a Motif in the Pentateuch*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 73:1 (Jan., 2011), 132-133 (p. 133).

<sup>128</sup> Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, p. 100.

<sup>129</sup> Nicholas, *Trickster Revisited*, p. 1.

without doubt, disproportionate to the misdemeanour for which they are punished (Exodus 32:26-28), particularly because Aaron led the Israelites to worship the molten calf he created (Exodus 32:2-5).

Moses is a problematic prophet. Like Moses, Matigari is also a saviour of the people, who challenges oppression and injustice with force; he is ostensibly morally superior to the people he strives to save; he occupies an elevated status that sanctions his right to judge the frequently inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour of the people, and he lays down laws for the people to follow. For Moses, these are laws which conveniently position his family as privileged, who become the recipients of offerings and tithes in the form of money, cattle or land (Exodus 39:1;41; 40:12-15; Leviticus 8-9; 27). Matigari asks for no object in exchange for his leadership, but he does expect the people to change their lives entirely. The ordinary people attribute Matigari's escape to a miracle: he is a man who can 'make prison walls open', which confirms his status as a legend (p. 66). Of course, Moses parts the Red Sea and tricks the Egyptians into following the Israelites so that God can drown them in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:22-28). At the law courts, people gossip about Matigari's escape from prison, comparing it to the miracles performed by Moses (p. 81). The reader later learns that Gūthera is Matigari's saviour – she, with the help of Mūriūki, is responsible for the 'miracle' (p. 95). Matigari's friendship with Mūriūki separates the child from his proxy family of orphaned children (p. 19). In recruiting his disciples, Matigari receives sacrifices far more valuable than material possessions from his followers: he is 'inspired by the depth of Gūthera's and Mūriūki's commitment to him', feeling their agony and their suffering (p. 88). Thus the reader's uneasiness concerning Moses' conduct resembles the reader's response to Matigari. One essential similarity is clear: the Israelites, and the masses of Ngūgĩ's novel, are both

portrayed as ungrateful. The reader questions whether the authors – or the authoritarian protagonists – believe they are worth saving at all.

However, the individualistic and evangelistic tone of *Matigari* remains clear: only Gũthera and Mũriũki are truly saved through their belief in and dedication to Matigari-as-Christ. Following the incident with the police dogs, Gũthera abandons her fellow prostitutes to accept Matigari as her personal saviour, standing next to him ‘humbly’ (p. 33). Gũthera later tells Matigari that her entire life had been dominated by men; her life had been like that of an animal (p. 140). She asks if women will always ‘follow the paths carved out for [them] by men’ (p. 140). The reader is impelled to question what is so very different for Gũthera now: she dedicates herself to Matigari and his doctrine as whole-heartedly as she dedicated herself to her father, God, and their doctrines. Ngũgĩ, who revelled in the Old Testament narratives while he was at the Karĩng’u school, understood the ways in which the Orthodox Church reconciled Christianity and Gikuyu tradition. The hierarchical and patriarchal structure of the Orthodox Church may have reflected and legitimised the pre-missionary hierarchy and patriarchy of Gikuyu society. Folktales also reinforce and justify male domination.<sup>130</sup> Matigari in some ways also embodies this return to tradition and orthodoxy. For example, he admires Gũthera’s ‘indigenous dress’ when she first appears.<sup>131</sup> Although she has embraced Christianity, she does not dress as Europeans do. Abandoning indigenous tradition, including adopting European clothes, was considered a measure of true Christianity according to the Church of Scotland Mission: this is condemned by Ngũgĩ.<sup>132</sup> As the only developed female character – though only very *slightly* developed – Gũthera is humiliated and taunted by the police and on-lookers, before being saved, enlightened and then judged by Matigari. Her

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<sup>130</sup> Brinkman, *Kikuyu Gender Norms*, p. 234; Kabira and Karega, *Gĩkũyũ Oral Literature*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>131</sup> Brinkman, *Kikuyu Gender Norms*, p. 206.

<sup>132</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Homecoming*, p. 32.

deference to him seems involuntary. Gūthera breaks her eleventh commandment – not to prostitute herself to policemen – in order to ensure Matigari’s release from prison (p. 95).

The escape is unjustly attributed to Matigari’s ability to perform miracles, but more disturbing for the reader is that the sacrifice Gūthera made for Matigari is one she refused to make even to save her father’s life. Matigari’s response to Gūthera’s sacrifice is to question the measure of her sinfulness:

The line that divided truth from lies, good from bad, purity from evil, where was it? What was the difference between right and wrong? Who was the evil one? Was it the one who led the other into sin, or the one who actually sinned? (p. 85).

His despair causes him to retreat into the wilderness. Finally, Gūthera’s death in the river superficially reflects the necessity of the individual sacrificing themselves for the good of the community in Gīkūyū folktales.<sup>133</sup> In fact, Gūthera’s death at the end of the novel is unnecessary and pointless – except perhaps to reflect the oral narratives which reinforce the expectation that women sacrifice themselves for the benefit of men.

Within *Matigari*, there is a clear value judgement of every character, named and unnamed, whose motives are considered selfish. The villainous John Boy Junior is contemptuous of the masses, and advocates an individualism incompatible with Matigari’s ideology (p. 49). After his escape from prison, the student also turns to a self-saving individualism because he is afraid (p. 90). The personal saviour is a premise embedded within evangelical Christianity. Gūthera longs for her life to have meaning: following Matigari and dying for his cause ostensibly supply this meaning. Ngarũro also commits himself to his saviour, employs the violence advocated by Matigari, and is subsequently shot by the police (p. 151). The reader witnesses the masses’ lack of self-denial and self-discipline: two essential Protestant

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<sup>133</sup> Kabira and Karega, *Gīkūyū Oral Literature*, p. 13.

dispositions, analogous to Matigari's doctrine. The masses, in fact, refuse to accept redemption for their sins through their personal saviour, or at least do so only superficially in the finale, and are therefore not saved. The legendary status Matigari acquires only serves to alienate him further from the people; they prefer to 'turn their attention to the much more exciting tale about Jesus, Gabriel, Matigari ma Njiũũngi' (p. 85). Their desire to burn everything belonging to the oppressor exemplifies their deindividuated state and consequent unthinking recourse to violence, echoing the depraved hysteria of Mugo-worship in *A Grain of Wheat*.<sup>134</sup>

Ultimately, Matigari's doctrine amalgamates the self-denial, self-discipline and individual salvation through Christ found in evangelical Protestantism, and the hierarchy, patriarchy and strict adherence to tradition inherent in Orthodox churches and the Old Testament. Perhaps Ngũgĩ intends to reclaim Christ as a revolutionary figure, liberating him from the missionaries' tainted account of the New Testament which emphasised passivity, servitude and obedience. However, Ngũgĩ seems unable to liberate himself, and his Christ-figure, from the missionaries' interpretation of the New Testament and the evangelism he had experienced and emulated during his formative years. Christ-like passivity cannot liberate the people. Thus when Matigari decides to retrieve his weapons and use force, he must trample his belt of peace (p. 131). Ngũgĩ's presentation of Matigari transitions to Old Testament figures, who use force and violence to challenge oppression and free their people. Figures such as Moses, although initially defying unjust authority, are in fact inherently authoritarian and patriarchal. The oppressed people – even after their liberation – are subject to their leader's judgement. Even prior to Matigari's resort to arms, he reflects these key characteristics of Old Testament figures. This is not surprising when we consider that the Kenyan people, including Ngũgĩ,

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<sup>134</sup> Githae-Mugo, *Visions of Africa*, p. 181.

conflated them with political leaders and the Mau Mau cause. Kenyatta's epithet, 'Black Moses', is imbued with a more potent significance, considering the parallels between the two figures which transcend their roles as liberators. In *Detained*, Ngũgĩ offers an analogy which alludes to Kenyatta and Moses' failures as leaders:

My reception of [Kenyatta's] death was then one of sadness: here was a black Moses who had been called by history to lead his people to the promised land of no exploitation, no oppression, but who failed to rise to the occasion.<sup>135</sup>

Interestingly, this analogy was edited out of *Wrestling with the Devil*, Ngũgĩ's re-edit of *Detained*, along with Ngũgĩ's lamentation that Kenyatta was a 'tragic figure' who chose the side of the neocolonial exploiters rather than his own people. Ngũgĩ also explains that through his characterisation of Mugo, 'who carried the burden of mistaken revolutionary heroism' he tried to hint at the kind of leader Kenyatta might become.<sup>136</sup> In his portrayal of Mugo, and his assessment of Kenyatta and Moses, Ngũgĩ seems to renounce liberators of both the Old and New Testaments – yet Matigari is a synthesis of all these figures.

The two brands of Christianity are incompatible: a single figure with consistent principles cannot, on the one hand, embody the salvation offered by Christ, and on the other hand, mete out damnation. A leader who promises salvation cannot embody an ideology which rejects messianism. A people who are enthralled and comforted by tales of Christ and Gabriel cannot recognise religion as an oppressive tool. Or, if they *do* recognise religion as an oppressive tool, they cannot simultaneously accept the teachings of a messiah-figure so whole-heartedly that they abandon all previous beliefs and ways of life. Truth, justice, equality and liberation cannot be offered by someone who judges, manipulates, exploits, and deceives. This is one source of the unresolved tensions in the novel: Christianity, Mau Mau,

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<sup>135</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Detained*, p. 162.

<sup>136</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Detained*, p. 90.



Marxism, and orthodoxy. Here is the contradiction that transforms Matigari undoubtedly into a trickster figure. Patriarchy, judgment, and servitude are inextricable from Christianity, and are difficult to reconcile with Marxism. When Matigari feels alienated from the people, his resolve weakens. He is lonely and confused, unable to decide which he should right first: ‘the condition which led people to sin, or the souls of the people who sinned?’ (p. 86).

Matigari’s status removes him from, and places him above, the ordinary people. If Ngũgĩ had privileged Gĩkũyũ oral tradition over Christianity, he may have created a less ambiguous tract, despite the pervasive gender inequality issues. It is true that in some narratives, Hare helps other animals – but he also judges, tricks and murders some too. Matigari can therefore be read as a bricoleur: he seems to unify the teachings of Christ, the violence and vengeance of Moses, the ideology of Mau Mau, and a remedy for Marx’s concept of alienation, against a backdrop of tropes and themes from traditional Gikuyu folklore.

### **Conclusion**

Matigari is a trickster figure because he challenges the people to act; he challenges the authority of the ruling party and he challenges the reader to question Christian ideology. Like Hare, he symbolises *a luta continua*, the call of a united liberation effort. Matigari, though, is not only a trickster because of his moral ambiguity, his role as conflicting amalgamation of Moses and Christ, or his position as protagonist of a narrative which could arguably fulfil many – but not all – of the commonly posited functions of trickster narratives. Despite Ngũgĩ’s insistence that Matigari has a collective identity, his inner monologue is characterised by those anxieties, desires, judgements and frustrations which are the prerogative of a discrete individual. If Matigari’s strategic and violent approach combines Kenyatta and Kĩmathi, perhaps the reader’s final disappointment in Matigari’s behaviour reflects the disillusionment felt by Ngũgĩ in Kenyatta’s presidency – a disappointment felt by

so many other inhabitants of post-colonial countries.<sup>137</sup> Matigari may be the hero of an essentially didactic allegory, but his most subversive act – his most significant challenge – is the one he presents to his creator. The relentless vanguardist ideology of Matigari – Ngũgĩ – constitutes a frustrated voice which criticises and patronises the very people it hopes to reach out to. Ultimately, Ngũgĩ attempts to challenge authority by employing an authoritative voice. I offer the following as a symbol of Ngũgĩ’s personal tensions: the first quotation from Ngũgĩ in this chapter, in which he discussed the importance of referring to the resistance movement as KLFA rather than Mau Mau, was from a recent interview published by *The Financial Times*. But I have also quoted from a recent interview with Ngũgĩ conducted and published by *Socialist Worker*, in which he commented on the role of the trickster figure. Recalling Hynes’ description of the trickster as a ‘sacred/lewd bricoleur’, and my contention that Matigari is also a bricolage embodying Ngũgĩ’s influences – the Old and New Testaments, oral literature, the Mau Mau cause, and Marxism – it seems the components of Ngũgĩ’s bricolage do not hold together.<sup>138</sup>

Presented by a Christ- or saviour-patriarch, Matigari’s revolutionary call is too sermonical and mythic. Writing of the reflective-creative function of the Jacob and Samson trickster narratives, Kathleen Farmer comments:

The virtue of the trickster tale lies in the obliqueness of its message: it never counsels us overtly, never tells us outright who we are or how we should behave. Thus, when we recognize that our inner selves are mirrored in the trickster, our recognition comes to us as a discovery (rather than as a lesson imposed from without) and carries with it the conviction characteristic of revelation.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ngũgĩ, *Detained*, pp. 161-162.

<sup>138</sup> Hynes, ‘Mapping’, p. 34.

<sup>139</sup> Kathleen Anne Farmer, ‘The Trickster Genre in the Old Testament’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Southern Methodist University, Texas, 1978), p. 127.

Farmer's assessment connotes Rudolf Bultmann's writings concerning the demythologising of the New Testament. For Bultmann, once the New Testament is shorn of its mythological elements, the salvation-event can be interpreted for all Christians as a process: repeated obedience to God's will in every action of daily life.<sup>140</sup> The proclamation, or *kerygma*, can only retain its relevance to modern life, and speak to those who accept science as truth rather than a 'mythological world picture', if it is demythologised.<sup>141</sup> In a sense, Ngũgĩ *re*mythologises Christ in the form of Matigari: although the reader knows Matigari has not performed a miracle, that he is not the Son of God, the ordinary people in the novel do not. And if Matigari is not a real man but a collective identity – the spirit of resistance – then he is in fact *more* mythic. The result is that the people of Matigari's unnamed country revere a being whom they deem to be supernatural: his actions are miraculous and cannot be copied, and obedience to his teachings is less likely. It seems unfeasible that the ordinary people could be inspired by Matigari to such an extent that, from the moment the novel ends, they choose to challenge oppression and injustice every time it is encountered. The revelation offered by Matigari becomes redundant.

If Ngũgĩ had hoped to reignite the desire for revolution in the ordinary people of Kenya, to inspire a movement focused on ridding the country of neocolonialism and its consequences, a more positive, or even nuanced, portrayal of those very people might have aided his cause. After all, neocolonialism in Kenya persists: the Ruler in *Wizard of the Crow* exemplifies its more modern manifestation. Matigari is the embodiment of a paradox: he represents both the amalgamation and juxtaposition of equality and liberation for the oppressed and, conversely,

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<sup>140</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner, 1934). See also Rudolph Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 1-44.

<sup>141</sup> Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology', p. 9.

adherence to a strict code of behaviour. This code is set out by one man: it is a code that derides anyone who fails to satisfy the criteria. Thus, Matigari's reprimand of John Boy Junior, whose education is not dissimilar to Ngũgĩ's, may seem ironic: 'Don't you remember that you intellectuals are greatly indebted to the very masses whom you are now calling idiots?' (p. 49). Ngũgĩ condemns intellectuals and saviours – but he *is* an intellectual and appears to view himself as a saviour, adopting the role of a messiah whose words are truth and must be heeded. Throughout the novel, Matigari's dogmatic voice echoes the ideas found in interviews with Ngũgĩ and in his non-fiction writings. But while Ngũgĩ's beliefs concerning Christianity are generally unambiguous, Matigari the trickster embodies 'incompatible frames of reference.'<sup>142</sup> For Mphande, these are Christianity and Marxism, two imported Western ideologies. The Protestant ethic propounded by Matigari is bound inextricably to individualism and thus the triumph of capitalism; there is no place for *Harambee*.

I suggest that two further incompatible frames of reference present are Old Testament and New Testament theology: violence made ambiguous by reason – Matigari's rage, revenge and judgement contradicted by his pacifism, self-sacrifice and humility. It is part of the very same paradoxical hypocrisy of Church doctrine that Ngũgĩ criticises, but it ensnares him nevertheless. The Church of Scotland Mission and the African Orthodox Church's creeds, so influential to Ngũgĩ, cannot be harmoniously embodied within one man. And if they are, that one man cannot criticise the hypocrisy he sees without, while ignoring the hypocrisy festering within. Additionally, a folklore tradition in which women are vulnerable or nagging wives, or innocent girls sacrificed by the community, cannot be revered and mirrored while also being employed to legitimise a rallying call for women to commit to a revolution requiring

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<sup>142</sup> Babcock-Abrahams, "A Tolerated Margin of Mess", p. 184.

courage and agency. By failing to reconcile all these incompatible frameworks, Ngũgĩ enables the trickster of his own creation to undermine his intention and subvert his message to the people.

## Chapter 5

### The ambiguities of the post-apartheid trickster-saviour in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000)

#### Introduction

Drawing upon different oral traditions to West and East African writers, South African writers Zakes Mda and André Brink appropriate trickster figures in new ways to address the South African transition to democracy. After more than a decade of writing anti-apartheid drama, Mda claims the collapse of the apartheid regime gave him the freedom to tell a story, rather than using his works primarily to 'propagate a political message.'<sup>1</sup> Mda's third novel, *The Heart of Redness* (2000), has received much critical acclaim. Winner of many notable literary awards, it has been praised as a 'contemporary classic.'<sup>2</sup> *Redness* depicts a diverse range of voices, from the Xhosa, Khoekhoe and British witnesses of the mid-nineteenth century Cattle-Killing, to the late-twentieth century residents of a rural village. Critical responses to the novel thus far have focused on *inter alia* ecological and development issues, Mda's portrayal of female characters, the magical realism genre, and the ways in which *Redness* is comparable to Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*.<sup>3</sup> Arguably the most remarkable

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Austen, 'The Pen and the Gun: Zakes Mda and the post-apartheid novel', *Harper's Magazine*, February 2005, 85-89 (p. 86).

<sup>2</sup> David Bell and J. U. Jacobs, 'Introduction: Zakes Mda: Ways of Writing', in *Ways of Writing*, ed. by Bell and Jacobs, pp. 1-14 (p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> Harry Sewlall, 'Deconstructing Empire in Joseph Conrad and Zakes Mda', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 19:3-4 (Dec. 2003), 331-344; Anthony Vital, 'Situating Ecology in Recent South African Fiction: J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31:2 (June, 2005), 297-313; Harry Sewlall, "'Portmanteau biota" and Ecofeminist Interventions in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 23:4 (2007), 374-389; Gail Fincham, 'Community and Agency in *The Heart of Redness* and Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*', in *Ways of Writing*, ed. by Bell and Jacobs, pp. 191-206; Meg Samuelson, 'Nongqawuse, National Time and (Female) Authorship in *The Heart of Redness*', in *Ways of Writing*, ed. by Bell and Jacobs, pp. 229-253; Harry Sewlall, 'The Ecological Imperative in *The Heart of Redness*', in *Ways of Writing*, ed. by Bell and Jacobs, pp. 207-227; Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 137-153; Grzęda, 'Magical Realism'; Ana Luisa Oliveira Goncalves Pires, 'From Neglected History to Tourist Attraction: Reordering the Past in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 44:1 (2013), 127-151; Amy Duvenage, 'Patriarchal forms of national community in post-apartheid literature: Re-examining ubuntu and gender in Sindiwe Magona's *Mother to Mother* (1998) and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000)', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2020), 1-12. In his autobiography, however, Mda clarifies that the title's similarity to Conrad's was merely coincidental and regrettable, as he has never read the novel: see Zakes Mda, *Sometimes There is a Void: Memoirs of an Outsider* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), pp. 410-411.

criticism of Mda's novel is the accusation that he plagiarised his primary historical source.<sup>4</sup> In response, Mda specified that the Khoekhoe characters and their beliefs were not taken from his historical source: they were inspired by his experience of the Cwerha Gxarha's oral tradition, his mother's clan and descendants of the Khoekhoe.<sup>5</sup> The Khoekhoe characters enable Mda to explore aspects of Khoekhoe cosmology. One key figure, the Khoekhoe forefather Heitsi Eibib, has been neglected in critical responses to the novel, with very little consideration of the way in which Mda has adapted the oral literature figure to suit his agenda. Two children in the novel are named Heitsi and, while they play minor roles in the plot, I argue that these characters are also much more significant than their limited presence might suggest.<sup>6</sup>

I begin with a summary of Mda's early life, influences, and career. In the second section, I summarise relevant critical responses to the novel. Next, I explore Mda's presentation of Christianity in the novel: Mda deviates from his source material by adding to and omitting a considerable amount of information about Christianity's role in the Cattle-Killing. Mda minimises the influence of missionary teachings on Nongqawuse's prophecies, and this silence is revealing. In the next section, I summarise characteristics of Heitsi Eibib both as he appears in oral literature, and in Mda's novel. In addition to being considered the Khoekhoe ancestor, Heitsi Eibib is also characterised by Mda as a saviour. In the subsequent section, I explore to what extent Mda's protagonist, Camagu, and Mda himself, can be read as prophet-saviours. In the next section I consider Camagu's son Heitsi as a prophet-saviour figure too.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Offenburger, 'Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:3 (Fall 2008), 164-199. Offenburger claimed that Mda's reliance on J. B. Peires' *The Dead Will Arise* constituted plagiarism, comparing nearly ninety passages from both texts to reveal virtually identical wordings. See J. B. Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Zakes Mda, 'A Response to "Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*" by Andrew Offenburger', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:3 (Fall 2008), 200-203 (p. 200).

<sup>6</sup> The two children are referred to as 'Heitsi' in order to distinguish them from the Khoekhoe figure Heitsi-Eibib.

Oral tradition, however, presents Heitsi Eibib as a more ambiguous figure, often portrayed as a trickster. In the penultimate section, I argue that Heitsi, like his namesake Heitsi Eibib, is a trickster figure, demonstrating more similarities with the ambiguous figure of oral literature hitherto largely ignored. In response to criticism that his novel does not ‘revolutionise’ the nineteenth century narrative, Mda insists that he ‘revolutionises enough’ with the present-day narrative.<sup>7</sup> Overall, I conclude that Mda ‘revolutionises’ not only through his portrayal of Camagu’s ideology at the close of the novel – as he claims – but through the contemporary Heitsi who, to some extent, reveals Mda’s own conflicting ideologies.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mda’s early life, career, and influences**

Mda was born in the Orlando East suburb in Soweto, in 1948. Mda’s mother Rose Mda was a nurse, and his father Ashby Peter Solomzi Mda (A. P. Mda) was a high school teacher and a university lecturer in English Literature before he qualified as a lawyer.<sup>9</sup> Mda’s reverence for his father underpins his autobiography: there seems to be no greater influence on Mda’s life. He describes his father as ‘totally dedicated to the struggle for the liberation of South Africa and his clients’, whose ‘fulfilment came from serving the community selflessly instead of accumulating wealth’, ‘the most generous and the most compassionate of men.’<sup>10</sup> Mda wanted to be a lawyer like his father, and later two of his brothers, explaining, ‘Law ran in our blood.’<sup>11</sup> Mda started a correspondence law degree but, when he decided to give it up so that he could focus on his painting, he decided not to tell his father ‘because he would have

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<sup>7</sup> Offenburger, ‘Duplicity and Plagiarism’, p. 175; Mda, ‘Response’, p. 201.

<sup>8</sup> Mda, ‘Response’, p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> For his political writings, see *Africa’s Cause Must Triumph: The Collected Writings of A. P. Mda*, ed. by Robert Edgar and Luyanda ka Msumza (Cape Town: Best Red/HSRC Press, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 138-139; 170.

<sup>11</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 113.



been very disappointed.’<sup>12</sup> Mda closes his autobiography by comparing himself to his father, not altogether favourably:

Father haunts me in such a way that I cannot extricate myself from his ghost [...] Like him, I work with peasants in the villages, and despite myself I am satisfied with the little that I have, and give the rest away. We differ, though, because he was doing it for the people, as part of his commitment to the struggle. I am doing it for myself. For my own happiness. Yet the void widens.<sup>13</sup>

The overall impression is that Mda’s achievements are valued against the backdrop his father’s beliefs and achievements.

A. P. Mda co-founded the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League and took over as its president in 1947. Nelson Mandela was a personal friend of Mda’s father, as well as his lawyer.<sup>14</sup> Of Mandela in the 1950s, Mda writes: ‘Mandela was a fire-breathing revolutionary then, a far cry from the benevolent statesman he became.’<sup>15</sup> Mda also writes affectionately of other ANC members he encountered in his youth. However, in 1959, A. P. Mda left the ANC to help form the breakaway organisation Pan African Congress of Azania (PAC), as a consequence of the Communist Party of South Africa’s perceived influence over the ANC. Mda details the family meetings in which his father would ‘lecture’ his children about the liberation struggle: A. P. Mda advocated an armed struggle and, like Nkrumah, a nonalignment policy.<sup>16</sup>

After Mda’s father was arrested and detained in 1963, the family lived in exile in Lesotho, at that time the British Protectorate of Basutoland. Mda describes crossing the Telle River into

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<sup>12</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 208-209; 219.

<sup>13</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 552.

<sup>14</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Zakes Mda, ‘Nelson Mandela: neither sell-out nor saint’, *The Guardian*, 6 December 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 38-41.

Lesotho at night, fearful that he would be caught by the Boers.<sup>17</sup> Mda's initial experience of Peka High School was overshadowed by the 'hazing' process: at one time, his antagonists taunted him with, 'The Bathapu want to fight! Nongqawuse's offspring want to fight!'<sup>18</sup> The teachers at Peka High were Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) leaders, and Mda describes Peka High as a 'breeding ground' for the BCP, which was an ally of the PAC. Mda had accompanied the president of the BCP and the acting president of the PAC when they went campaigning in Quthing, acting as an interpreter and embellishing the two leaders' speeches.<sup>19</sup>

Mda attended a Catholic church, but he was given an anathema by the priest because he was a student at Peka High: the priest accused Mda of being a Communist.<sup>20</sup> In his autobiography, Mda links this incident with his atheism, an issue relevant to his presentation of Christianity and the Cattle-Killing in *Redness*. Mda notes the irony that he was involved with spreading the Gospel, despite being an atheist. An article Mda wrote for the school newspaper asked, 'What arrogance makes the Christians think that they are right and everyone else is wrong?'<sup>21</sup> He identifies religious beliefs as works of fiction, an approach evident in *Redness*.<sup>22</sup> In 1970, Mda was working as a teacher and had enrolled with a British organisation which offered distance courses to international teachers; Mda cites this as his reason for declining the opportunity to join the guerilla army of the BCP formed to overthrow the Basotho National Party's leader.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 64-66.

<sup>18</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 81-82; 106.

<sup>20</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 139-142.

<sup>21</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>22</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 199-201.

Mda notes that his play *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1979), about veterans of the liberation struggle who are marginalised after liberation has been won, has been referred to as ‘prophetic.’ However, he comments that the aftermath of independence in countries such as Kenya showed clearly that, ‘the dominant black classes in South Africa would hijack the liberation project to serve their own class interests.’<sup>24</sup> Again Mda declined to join the BCP’s armed wing, recognising that the success of his book, even though it had been banned – *because it had been banned* – made him ‘a soldier for freedom who was now using other weapons.’<sup>25</sup> Although Mda did not resign his membership of PAC, his ideology shifted towards the ANC’s. Mda felt that the PAC concept of nationalism had moved away from including people of all ethnicities, as A. P. Mda believed, towards only black people of African descent, and that it promoted ‘chauvinistic and patriarchal values in the name of Africanism’, advocating a return to ‘some glorious pre-colonial past.’<sup>26</sup> In contrast, Mda felt that the ANC was progressive and inclusive.

After returning to Lesotho from his studies in the United States, Mda worked at the National University of Lesotho. J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990) inspired Mda to write his first novel; Mda realised that his characters needed to be psychologically justified, and that the ‘grey’ areas – the motivations of Afrikaner villains, for example – needed to be explored.<sup>27</sup> After teaching at Yale University and the University of Vermont, Mda returned to South Africa in 1994. Initially excited that he would contribute to the ‘reconciliation’ in South Africa, Mda was overwhelmed by the publicity which occasioned his return: theatres in Johannesburg held a festival of Mda’s plays.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 236-238.

<sup>25</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>26</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 249-250.

<sup>27</sup> Zakes Mda, ‘Justify the Enemy: Becoming Human in South Africa’, *Boston Review*, 1 May 2008. Accessed via <http://bostonreview.net/mda-justify-the-enemy> [21 August 2020].

<sup>28</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 402.

Not long after his return to South Africa, Mda felt disappointed by Mandela and the ANC.

Mda's articles and appearances on television were interpreted as attacks against Mandela, as well as a BBC radio feature described in Mda's autobiography, in which he said:

[M]ost of the problems that we had in Africa began with the deification of our political leaders. They had fought for our liberation and as soon as they took over government we gave them such titles as the Messiah and the Redeemer. Why would they not have a Jesus complex? Megalomania developed, cultivated in them by us. We the intellectuals became useful idiots in the service of the petty dictators. [...] I went on to say South Africa showed promise of going against that trend. We resisted the deification of the leaders.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Mda's desire to contribute more to eradicating apartheid's residual 'absurdities', he found that his job applications were unsuccessful: Mda claims that Mandela and his colleagues were preventing him from succeeding.<sup>30</sup> In December 1997, Mda wrote a letter to Mandela outlining his concerns about 'nepotism, patronage and corruption' and that the 'concept of the Aristocrats of the Revolution has taken root.'<sup>31</sup> Mandela telephoned Mda in response, and a meeting was arranged between some of his ministers and Mda. It is interesting that Mda complained of nepotism and the privileging of ANC members over other equally qualified and experienced South Africans, when it is possible that Mda received a personal telephone call from Mandela precisely because of his father's position in the earlier years of the ANC. In any case, Mda comments that the meeting with the ministers did not occasion change.<sup>32</sup>

Mda was commissioned to write an episode for a television programme called *Saints, Sinners and Settlers* (1999), a series in which historical figures were tried in a contemporary court.

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<sup>29</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 421.

<sup>30</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 423-426.

<sup>31</sup> Mda reproduces the letter in full in *Void*, pp. 426-432.

<sup>32</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 433.

Mda's episode was about Nongqawuse, a prophet responsible for the 'mass suicide' of thousands of amaXhosa, which 'enabled the British to finally subjugate the amaXhosa people once and for all.'<sup>33</sup> Mda was familiar with the Cattle-Killing story already, but Jeff Peires, the author of *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (1989), was appointed as his consultant. When Mda visited Qolorha-by-Sea for research, its beauty inspired him to write a novel about the place, and incorporate its past as well as its present.<sup>34</sup> In response to Andrew Offenburger's accusation that Mda plagiarised Peires's work, Mda clarified that he had looked at the work of other historians, but felt that Peires's account 'suited the kind of magical story [he] wanted to tell because it was very romantic.'<sup>35</sup>

Peires's history of the Cattle-Killing relates the following: Nongqawuse, who resided in Qolorha-by-Sea, claimed to have met with two strangers who told her that the dead would arise, bringing new cattle and grain with them, if the Xhosa slaughtered their existing cattle and ceased cultivation. The strangers told Nongqawuse that the existing cattle were contaminated due to the Xhosa's use of witchcraft, and that witchcraft must not be practised.<sup>36</sup> Some Xhosa, who came to be known as the amaThamba – the 'soft ones' who prioritised the well-being of the community over individual wealth – obeyed Nongqawuse's commands.<sup>37</sup> Others, the amaGogoty – 'stingy' or 'disloyal' people – refused to slaughter their cattle and cease cultivation. As a result of the cattle-killing, 600,000 acres of the Xhosa's land was lost, with 'Xhosaland' incorporated into British South Africa; an estimated

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<sup>33</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 407.

<sup>34</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 408.

<sup>35</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 409.

<sup>36</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 79. 'Witchcraft' could refer to malevolent sorcery as well as immoral behaviour, including incest and adultery. See Helen Bradford, 'Women, Gender and Colonialism: Rethinking the History of the British Cape Colony and Its Frontier Zones, C. 1806-1870', *Journal of African History*, 37:3 (1996), 351-370 (p. 363).

<sup>37</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 175.

40,000 Xhosa died, and many of those who survived were forced to enter the colonial labour market.<sup>38</sup> *Redness*, which moves between this period and the South Africa of 1998, draws parallels between the Xhosa's situations at both historical moments.

### **Critical responses to *The Heart of Redness***

The nineteenth century narrative of *Redness* follows the lives of twin brothers Twin and Twin-Twin, as they respond to the prophecies of Nongqawuse. Twin belongs to the amaThamba camp, whereas Twin-Twin is an amaGogotya. The present day narrative runs concurrently to the nineteenth century story, with Twin and Twin-Twin's descendants in Qolorha-by-Sea, Zim and Bhonco respectively, disagreeing over almost every aspect of their daily lives, but particularly whether a new casino and holiday resort should be built in the village. The characters from both narratives are largely divided into Believers and Unbelievers: in the nineteenth century narrative the Believers are those who obeyed the command to kill cattle and cease cultivation, the Unbelievers those who did not. In the contemporary narrative, the Believers wish to preserve tradition and oppose the tourism development, while the Unbelievers favour modernity, specifically the holiday resort. The colonial presence in the nineteenth century, however, is paralleled with the South African government of 1998, with emphasis placed on their similarly exploitative and greedy qualities. The twentieth-century characters claim that the 'Middle Generations' – those living through colonial South Africa and apartheid – have neglected the Believers and Unbelievers' war, reinforcing the idea that oppression unites people and that the nineteenth century colonisers are comparable to the late-twentieth century neo-colonialists.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, pp. 317-319.

<sup>39</sup> Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 4. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

Camagu, an exile who returned to South Africa to vote in the 1994 elections, is angered by his inability to find work due to the preference shown to the families and associates of the ‘Aristocrats of the Revolution’, an ‘exclusive club that is composed of the ruling elites’ (p. 36). The disappointment in the failure of Nongqawuse’s prophecies is thus reflected by the disappointment of the post-1994 years, and Mda’s experience is fictionalised in Camagu’s. Camagu pursues an attractive woman to Qolorha-by-Sea and becomes a member of the community, refusing at first to align himself with the Believers or the Unbelievers and unable to make sense of their patterns of belief (p. 105; 135). He is, initially, attracted to Bhonco’s daughter Xoliswa Ximiya, a pro-modernisation headteacher infatuated with American culture. After Camagu has spent more time in the village, however, he falls in love with Zim’s daughter Qukezwa. Zim’s ancestor, Twin, married a Khoekhoe woman named Quxu (renamed Qukezwa by the Xhosa). The contemporary Qukezwa has much in common with her female ancestor. When she and Camagu conceive a child before their marriage, she names him Heitsi, as Twin and his wife had almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. Camagu starts a co-operative business with some of the village’s female residents and, by the end of the novel, a solution to the village’s conflict has been found: Nongqawuse’s Valley is declared a national heritage site and instead of a casino and holiday resort, Qolorha-by-Sea will host a holiday camp.

As half the novel is historical fiction, I will begin by considering the interpretations of *Redness* as a contribution to this genre. The exchange between Offenburger and Mda raises some important questions about historical literature. Offenburger states that *Redness* ‘must be seen as a plagiarizing, unoriginal work, a derivative of Peires’s historical research.’<sup>40</sup> A further accusation, and one that is particularly relevant to this study, is that Mda’s novel ‘does

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<sup>40</sup> Offenburger, ‘Duplicity and Plagiarism’, p. 168.

not challenge or revolutionize' the nineteenth century narrative through plagiarism in a way that is considered permissible for postcolonial writers to create a new identity.<sup>41</sup> Mda responded that he did not intend to revolutionise the Cattle-Killing Movement in his re-writing of it, claiming in parentheses: 'I think I have "revolutionized" enough with my fictional character Camagu, the Aristocrats of the Revolution, and the saving of Qolorha-by-Sea from environmental rape.'<sup>42</sup> Mda and Offenburger at least agree that the Khoekhoe characters introduce an innovative dimension to the nineteenth century narrative.<sup>43</sup> It will be important, then, to establish specifically what the Khoekhoe characters and beliefs bring to the narrative.

Indeed, Mda *does* revolutionise Peires' account of the Cattle-Killing, through his omissions and additions. Brink, who claims the role of historical fiction is precisely to fill a silence by giving voice to marginalised peoples, says that in *Redness* Mda 'unfortunately does not fully reimagine' the events of the Cattle-Killing from a black perspective.<sup>44</sup> The debate concerning the extent to which historical literature should depend on or depart from historical facts and records will not be restated here. Rather, a consideration of Mda's adaptations of the past's narrative will reveal much about the present. Mda explains that when he decided to write a novel about Qolorha, he knew it would 'have to illustrate that the past is always a strong presence in our present.'<sup>45</sup> Hilary P. Dannenburg summarises the link Mda creates between the two timeframes in *Redness*:

One of the key functions of the colonial time level is to underline the present-day dangers of embracing the neo-colonial forces of globalisation

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<sup>41</sup> Offenburger, 'Duplicity and Plagiarism', p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> Mda, 'Response', p. 201.

<sup>43</sup> Offenburger, 'Duplicity and Plagiarism', p. 172; Mda, 'Response', p. 200.

<sup>44</sup> André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), p. 231; André Brink, 'Imagination, After Apartheid', *Washington Post*, 7 December 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Mda, *Void*, p. 408.



from the West; the novel does this by presenting the two historically separate invasions as analogically dangerous processes.<sup>46</sup>

David Bell and J. U. Jacobs claim in their introduction to critical essays on Mda's oeuvre, that Mda's novels continue to show a concern for social and political issues, but the emphasis is now on presenting diverse voices in the new South Africa.<sup>47</sup>

Mda's presentation of women in *Redness*, however, has been criticised for its polarisation.

Whether reading the novel as a rejection of either 'the possibility of recuperating the prophetic voice of the past' or 'female authority', Dirk Klopper claims that Qukezwa is identified with the 'pre-modern and autochthonous', and her son is 'projected as a symbol of the future.'<sup>48</sup> Meg Samuelson summarises Mda's presentation of women:

The alacrity with which the novel – itself located in literate culture – dismisses Xoliswa Ximiya, the only highly literate woman in the story, is revealing. Women bear men's messages through their bodies and are firmly discouraged from seizing the tools of writing themselves.<sup>49</sup>

It seems that in Mda's vision, women contribute practical skills to development efforts, rather than intellectual. Samuelson also sees in Peires and Mda's accounts an 'androcentric strategy at work', as Nongqawuse's prophecies are presented as 'little more than a pastiche of previous prophecies by Nxele and Ntsikana', two earlier Xhosa prophets.<sup>50</sup>

Several critics have explored the extent to which Mda's novel challenges binary oppositions.

Renée Schatteman explores the ways in which the characters' ideologies blur, before surmising that, '[W]hile the novel appears to conclude by favouring one camp over the other,

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<sup>46</sup> Dannenburg, 'Culture and Nature', p. 171. See also Shane Graham, *South African Literature After the Truth Commission: Mapping Loss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 176.

<sup>47</sup> Bell and Jacobs, 'Introduction', p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Dirk Klopper, 'Between Nature and Culture: The Place of Prophecy in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Current Writing*, 20:2 (2008), 92-107 (p. 104).

<sup>49</sup> Samuelson, 'Nongqawuse', p. 243.

<sup>50</sup> Samuelson, 'Nongqawuse', p. 233.

it also exposes the falseness of the village's investment in simplistic binaries by showing the syncretic nature of the beliefs and actions of all the characters.<sup>51</sup> What is interesting about Schatteman's interpretation is that she traces the 'blurring of traditional and modern influences' back to Nongqawuse's prophecies, in which she combined traditional Xhosa beliefs with Christian ideas.<sup>52</sup> Dannenburg suggests that in the nineteenth century narrative, it is the Christian beliefs that are censured: they are 'defamiliarised and undermined as part of Mda's critique of the British colonisation of Africa.'<sup>53</sup> For Paulina Grzęda, magical realism is perfect for 'thematis[ing] the collision of incompatible categories, be it the rational and the magical, the core and the periphery, the pre- and post-capitalist, fact and fiction, as well as the past and the present.'<sup>54</sup> *Redness* is cited as one such magical realist novel, a genre 'well-suited for the task confronted by post-apartheid fiction, namely the one of a reshaping a present that is impregnated with remnants of a violent past while simultaneously seeking to counteract the consequences of blossoming capitalist development.'<sup>55</sup>

In addition to challenging binaries, Mda's work has been interpreted as advocating unity. Schatteman explores similarities between both *Quekzwas*, concluding that naming their sons after Heitsi Eibib demonstrates their 'openness to intercultural permeation', which is an example of the way in which the novel reveals its 'overarching endorsement of pluralism over division.'<sup>56</sup> *Quekzwa* – according to Klopper – means 'the person elected to bring the community together, to facilitate social integration.'<sup>57</sup> Heitsi in both time frames is cited by many critics as a symbol of cultural hybridity and unity. Writing of the nineteenth century

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<sup>51</sup> Schatteman, 'Xhosa Cattle-Killing', p. 288. See also Dannenburg, 'Culture and Nature', pp. 174-189; Sewlall, 'The Ecological Imperative', pp. 217-218.

<sup>52</sup> Schatteman, 'Xhosa Cattle-Killing', p. 288.

<sup>53</sup> Dannenburg, 'Culture and Nature', p. 182.

<sup>54</sup> Grzęda, 'Magical Realism', p. 158.

<sup>55</sup> Grzęda, 'Magical Realism', p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Schatteman, 'Xhosa Cattle-Killing', p. 289.

<sup>57</sup> Klopper, 'Between Nature and Culture', p. 101.

Heitsi, Jacobs explains that ‘the cultural hybridity embodied in the young Heitsi is a metonymy of the cultural hybridity, political compromise and religious syncretism that is thematised in Mda’s novel and also analysed in Peires’s history of the period.’<sup>58</sup> The synthesis of Camagu’s Western education and Qukezwa’s local knowledge, Bell suggests, is symbolic of uniting tradition and modernity, and it produces what Mda considers to be a visionary solution: Camagu and Qukezwa’s son Heitsi is symbolic of this union.<sup>59</sup> Samuelson sees the birth of Heitsi as Qukezwa bearing Mda’s message, but her reading of him is more nuanced: she sees Qukezwa’s virgin birth as drawing together Xhosa, Christian and Khoekhoe cosmologies, ‘with Khoikhoi beliefs taking ascendancy as syncretism gives way to autochthony.’<sup>60</sup> Consequently Heitsi, named after the male Khoekhoe prophet-god Heitsi Eibib, becomes the messianic figure replacing Nongqawuse, the Xhosa prophet-woman.<sup>61</sup>

One critic who has focused closely on Khoekhoe belief in *Redness*, Kate Highman, identifies Theophilus Hahn’s *Tsuni-//Goam: The Supreme Being of the Khoi-Khoi* (1881) as the source of Mda’s information concerning oral literature.<sup>62</sup> In part defending Mda against Offenburger’s plagiarism accusation, Highman first reminds the reader that Mda has claimed the oral tradition presented in *Redness* was passed on to him by his mother’s people – not only in his response to Offenburger, but also in an article in which he stated the oral tradition in his novel constituted ‘previously unrecorded texts.’<sup>63</sup> Highman then draws comparisons

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<sup>58</sup> Jacobs, ‘*Umngqokolo*’, pp. 230-231.

<sup>59</sup> Bell, ‘Intimate Presence’, pp. 104-105.

<sup>60</sup> Samuelson, ‘Nongqawuse’, p. 240. ‘Khoikhoi’ is the former orthography of Khoekhoe.

<sup>61</sup> Samuelson, ‘Nongqawuse’, pp. 240-241.

<sup>62</sup> Kate Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowals of Tradition: The Question of Plagiarism in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*’, *Research in African Literatures*, 47:3 (Fall, 2016), 124-143 (pp. 127-134); Theophilus Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam: The Supreme Being of the Khoi-Khoi* (London: Trübner & Co., 1881).

<sup>63</sup> Mda, ‘Justify the Enemy’; Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowals’, p. 127.

between several passages in *Redness* and the tales related by Hahn.<sup>64</sup> Highman emphasises that her purpose is not to level another accusation of plagiarism, but to consider the reason Mda acknowledges his debt to Peires while neglecting to mention Hahn. She also notes that Mda does not consider the intercultural mediation that permeated the work of nineteenth-century scholars such as Hahn.<sup>65</sup> Overall, Highman concludes that Mda used the tales collected by Hahn because they offered a ‘parallel’ set of Khoekhoe beliefs to run alongside Christianity in the nineteenth-century.

Hahn specified that his collection did not include any oral narratives that seemed to have been influenced by missionary activity; consequently, drawing on Hahn, Mda is able to present what he sees as an ‘authentic’ oral tradition.<sup>66</sup> For this reason too, Mda removes from the Khoekhoe the ‘Christian fervour’ described by Peires. It is worth noting that whereas Hahn was an old-fashioned nineteenth-century ethnographer, Peires is a respected historian, fluent Xhosa-speaker, and former ANC Member of Parliament – yet Mda adheres to the former’s work more closely than the latter’s. Arguably, Mda’s decision to acknowledge his debt to Peires rather more prominently than the one he owes Hahn reflects Highman’s assertion that oral narratives in written literature are frequently presented as ‘authentic’, when in fact they are often repetitions of print narratives written by earlier historians, anthropologists, or philologists. In relation to Mda specifically, Highman concludes:

Notably, in downplaying his use of Peires and his occlusion of Hahn, Mda disavows the impact of print culture on oral tradition and the latter’s mediation by the former. [...] As has often been noted, print culture is intimately bound up with colonial and missionary violence. It is perhaps partly for this reason that there exists a residual affiliation of anticolonial resistance with orature, and orature has come to signify a precolonial African authenticity.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, pp. 128-129.

<sup>65</sup> Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, pp. 135-136.

<sup>66</sup> Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, p. 130.

<sup>67</sup> Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, p. 137.

Offenburger and Highman offer distinctly different yet persuasive interpretations of the ways in which Mda's 'intertextuality' functions in *The Redness*, but there is more to be said on both topics. Although references to Heitsi Eibib occur throughout the novel, and his namesake has been cited as a symbol of unity, critics have failed to address the figure as a crucial component to reading the novel. I turn now to the presentation of Christianity in Mda's novel, considering departures from Peires, before exploring the extent to which Heitsi Eibib has been similarly reimagined.

### **Christianity in *The Heart of Redness***

Despite being criticised for a lack of imagination, it is my contention that Mda *does* reimagine some aspects of the Cattle-Killing narrative, and that these reimaginings are significant. Peires' account understandably focuses on the Xhosa, although he does discuss the impact of a 'new and revolutionary brand of Christianity' introduced by the Khoekhoe rebels to the Xhosa.<sup>68</sup> There are four key departures from Peires's account in Mda's portrayal of Christianity in *Redness*. Firstly, although Peires explains that 'the Cattle-Killing owed its very existence to biblical doctrines', Mda somewhat disregards the part Christian teachings played in the movement and Nxele, Ntsikana and Nongqawuse's prophecies.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, Mda emphasises the anti-white beliefs of Nxele and the horror of crucifying the Son of God. Thirdly, Mda derides Christian beliefs and presents them as absurd. Fourthly, Mda emphasises the damage caused by Christian beliefs, and presents Xhosa Christians as villainous. Overall, the ways in which Mda has altered Peire's account of Christianity is significant because it contributes to the trickster nature of Heitsi Eibib and Heitsi.

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<sup>68</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 135.

<sup>69</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 134.

Peires clarifies that the Believers felt that the Bible corroborated Nongqawuse's prophecies, and that 'the Christian element was an essential component of the identity of the spirits who appeared to Nongqawuse.'<sup>70</sup> Ntsikana and Nxele had both combined elements of traditional belief with Christian teachings. Nxele maintained that Mdalidephu was the God of the black man, Thixo the God of the whites, and Thixo's son was Toyi [Tayi], who had been murdered by the whites. As a punishment for this murder, 'the whites had been thrown into the sea whence they had emerged to trouble the sinful Xhosa nation.'<sup>71</sup> The plight of the Xhosa, then, was a direct consequence of the white man murdering Christ. When Nongqawuse began prophesying, many Xhosa were still awaiting Nxele's return – unaware that he had died trying to escape from Robben Island. Nxele too had predicted that the dead would arise one day (pp. 14-15).<sup>72</sup> Janet Hodgson explains that both Nxele and Ntsikana responded to colonial aggression by appropriating and mobilising Christian symbols.<sup>73</sup> Peires's interpretation of Nongqawuse's prophecies asserted that the Cattle-Killing beliefs, such as sacrifice and resurrection, owed much to Nxele.<sup>74</sup> The combination of traditional and Christian beliefs is also found in Nongqawuse's prophecies:

Familiar beliefs concerning sacrifice, Creation and the ancestors rooted the movement in a conceptual world which the Xhosa understood and trusted [...] The new concepts of an expected redeemer and an earthly resurrection, unwittingly disseminated by the missions via the prophet Nxele, seemed to provide a possible means of escape from the hopeless and desolate situation in which the Xhosa found themselves.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 136.

<sup>71</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>72</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 2; 32.

<sup>73</sup> Janet Hodgson, 'A Battle for Sacred Power: Christian Beginnings among the Xhosa', in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History*, ed. by Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), pp. 68-88 (p. 71).

<sup>74</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 135.

<sup>75</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 138.

Although some aspects of Peires's history has been questioned in more recent scholarship, much of it was published after *Redness* and, in any case, Mda states that he did not consult any historical material other than Peires's.<sup>76</sup>

First, in terms of Mda's omissions from Peires' account, Christianity's influence on Nxele, Ntsikana, and Nongqawuse's prophecies is barely recognised in *Redness*, except for a handful of conversations between Twin and Twin-Twin. In the first conversation, the twins agree that Nxele and Ntsikana were authentic prophets (p. 54), but nowhere in the novel is their Christianity acknowledged. Although Nxele had 'turned sharply against mission Christianity', he did not abandon Christian ideas about the crucifixion of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.<sup>77</sup> One of the strangers who appeared to Nongqawuse was Napakade, the son of Sifuba-sibanzi; most Xhosa associated the latter name with Ntsikana, who had 'maintained cultural continuity by filling elements of the Xhosa tradition with Christian content.'<sup>78</sup> The prophecies of these two men, Nxele and Ntsikana, were clearly bound to their Christianity. Whereas Twin believes that Nongqawuse could be a new prophet, able to save the Xhosa, Twin-Twin insists that she is just the mouthpiece of her uncle, Mhlakaza (p. 85). Twin-Twin rejects Nongqawuse's prophecies because Mhlakaza – acting as an assistant to Anglican archdeacon Nathaniel Merriman, under the name of Wilhelm Goliath – had been 'spreading lies, telling us that we must follow the god of the white man' (p. 85). The contemporary John Dalton's assessment of the relationship between Nxele and Nongqawuse emphasises Mhlakaza's Christian influence over Nxele's: Nongqawuse had 'vaguely heard of the teachings of Nxele about the resurrection ... and the Christian version of it, as her uncle

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<sup>76</sup> See for example: Helen Bradford, 'Akukho Ntaka Inokubhabha Ngephiko Elinye (No Bird Can Fly on One Wing): The 'Cattle-Killing Delusion' and Black Intellectuals, c. 1840–1910', *African Studies*, 67:2 (August, 2008), 209-232.

<sup>77</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 33.

<sup>78</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, pp. 136-137; Hodgson, 'Battle For Sacred Power', p. 72.

had been a Christian at some stage' (p. 283). Nxele's beliefs about resurrection are clearly dissociated from the Christian Mhlakaza's. Thus the Christian influence on Nongqawuse's prophecies that Mda *does* acknowledge is associated with a white gospel man's former assistant. Similarly, the Khoekhoe characters of Mda's nineteenth-century narrative are not Christians, contrary to Peires's description of them as mission products and firm believers.

Secondly, Nxele's teachings, a fusion of his contact with missionaries and the 'increasing threat of the colonial advance', are employed by Mda further, in order to emphasise the danger the whites posed.<sup>79</sup> When the whites refuse to participate in the cattle-killing, the Believers' contention that they are beyond redemption is confirmed: what else could be expected of 'people who were so unscrupulous that they killed the son of their own god?' (p. 153). When he thinks about the potential for salvation in Nongqawuse's prophecy that the risen ancestors would sweep the white people into the sea, Twin wonders:

Who would not want to see the world as it was before the cursed white conquerors – who were capable of killing even the son of their own god – had been cast by the waves onto the lands of the amaXhosa? (p. 87).

Twin's thoughts echo the teachings of Nxele, who claimed that the white people had originally 'been cast into the sea for murdering Tayi, the son of Thixo' (pp. 52-53). Again, Nxele's influence on the beliefs of the Xhosa is alluded to, and it is worth remembering that Nxele claimed to be the younger brother of Tayi.<sup>80</sup> While this reference recognises the impact of a prophet who combined traditional beliefs and missionary teachings, the emphasis on Christ's murder serves to illustrate the grim basis of the Christian faith. Grant Farred details the way in which *Redness* is 'suffused' with the discourse of Christianity, describing

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<sup>79</sup> Hodgson, 'Battle for Sacred Power', p. 71.

<sup>80</sup> Hodgson, 'Battle for Sacred Power', p. 72.



the Believers' criticism of the crucifixion as a 'constant, but singularly unconvincing, refrain throughout the novel.'<sup>81</sup> Farred asks:

[H]ow could a community of believers willing to put their all, their faith, their future and their material well-being in the hands, or words, more precisely, of a pubescent girl, not comprehend the possibility of a miraculous death or rebirth?<sup>82</sup>

Sacrifice and resurrection were key components of the Believers' beliefs precisely because Nxele had adapted them from Christianity to suit the Xhosa's circumstances, and Mda's disingenuous emphasis on murder rather than sacrifice, although acknowledging Nxele's influence, presents an unlikely interpretation of Christ's sacrifice.

Thirdly, despite minimising and depreciating the influence of Christian beliefs, Mda utilises Peires' theory that Nongqawuse's prophecies built on the teachings of Nxele, Ntsikana, and Mhlakaza, and that Goliath and Mhlakaza were the same person. The latter conflation had been questioned before *Redness* was published, and Mda defended his use of it even after Sheila Boniface Davies offered ostensibly irrefutable proof that Mhlakaza and Goliath were two completely different men.<sup>83</sup> In response to Offenburger's suggestion that Davies' evidence could make it necessary for Mda to amend his novel, Mda stated that he knew of the Mhlakaza-Goliath debate before he wrote the novel.<sup>84</sup> He goes on to explain that historical accuracy was not important to him, and that Peires' version was 'the more romantic of the interpretations and therefore serves [his] fiction best.'<sup>85</sup> It is interesting that Mda should choose to draw attention to the possible influence of former 'gospel man' Mhlakaza/Goliath (p. 52), as well as prophets Nxele and Ntsikana, on Nongqawuse's prophecies, yet also

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<sup>81</sup> Grant Farred, 'A Politics of Doubt', in *Ways of Writing* ed. by Bell and Jacobs, pp. 255-276 (p. 257; 262).

<sup>82</sup> Farred, 'A Politics of Doubt', p. 262.

<sup>83</sup> Sheila Boniface Davies, 'Raising the Dead: The Xhosa Cattle-Killing and the Mhlakaza-Goliath Delusion', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33:1 (Mar., 2007), 19-41.

<sup>84</sup> Offenburger, 'Duplicity and Plagiarism', p. 172; Mda, 'Response', p. 202.

<sup>85</sup> Mda, 'Response', p. 202.

choose to write out explicit links between the prophecies and the Christian teachings. Most of Goliath's utterances caused laughter among the Xhosa, as he claimed that the way to enter heaven was by wearing trousers (pp. 53-54). Condemnation of the Christian converts – or amaGqobhoka – is echoed in the contemporary narrative through Xoliswa Ximiya's criticisms of traditional Xhosa attire. She considers it a sign of 'backwardness and heathenism', and wishes that instead her mother would wear suits and dresses like her – like amaGqobhoka: 'enlightened ones' (pp. 47-48). Justification of the Believers' willingness to embrace the idea of resurrection in Nongqawuse's prophecies is also established early on in the novel, with this particular belief being the only one preached by the gospel men that 'made sense' to the Xhosa because they would have liked to see their relatives again (p. 54). Two Christian converts, Mjuza and Ned, share with Twin-Twin their 'Christian nonsense', telling him that 'it was wrong to seek happiness in this world' (p. 209) – a statement which clearly emphasises the damaging impact Christian teachings can have on people's lives. Here, Mda explicitly ridicules the Christian teachings.

Fourthly, Mda refers to Christianity only in order to emphasise its destructive nature. The villain of the nineteenth century narrative, Sir George Grey, specifies that 'the advance of Christian civilisation will sweep away ancient races' (p. 237). The nineteenth century Xhosa who had become Christian converts believed in Grey's 'civilising' mission, described satirically by Mda as taking indigenous peoples' land in exchange for a European idea of civilisation (p. 95). Elsewhere, Mda reiterates the link between the Christian converts and the colonisers by explaining that new converts 'sang praises of the queen of the conquerors' (p. 153). Nxele's son, Mjuza, praises Grey unequivocally (p. 96), and he later joins Major Gawler's police force, becoming a 'servant of his colonial masters' (pp. 266-267). He is a Christian in *Redness* (p. 181; 209), but Peires makes no such claim in his account. Indeed,

Peires claims that Mjuza's alliance with Gawler was a consequence of his grudge against Mhala.<sup>86</sup> Peires maintains throughout *The Dead Will Arise* that the majority of chiefs allied with the British were not Christians, and that Christian chiefs such as Kama allied themselves with the British primarily for the support such an alliance could provide.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the Unbelievers – whether Christian, proponents of traditional religion, long-standing allies of the British, or enemies of them in previous wars – were forced into an alliance with the British because they were scapegoated by and under attack from the Believers after the prophecies failed.<sup>88</sup> It is interesting, therefore, that Mda should stress that Xhosa Christians aligned themselves with a man that Peires describes as opportunistic and ruthless.<sup>89</sup>

The way Mda utilises Christian beliefs, and embellishes Peires' account, is important because it reveals something about Mda's attitude towards Christianity. The way in which Mda refers to Christians and Christian teachings suggests a prejudice surprising for a novel that has been praised for advocating the acceptance of pluralism and cultural hybridity; the disdain Mda expresses for Christianity in his autobiography permeates the novel. Brink explains that writing about the past, because it involves the memory, can be comprised of 'acts of recovery but also processes of suppression.'<sup>90</sup> Consequently, narratives created through the memory, even when attempting to encompass as diverse a range of narratives as possible, are at risk of being constructed around their own 'blind spots and silences.'<sup>91</sup> Brink's solution – the reinvention of history as a story – is pertinent to Mda's novel:

[E]ven when a story tacitly narrates an event 'based on reality' it is infused with, and transformed by, the notoriously unreliable complex of private

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<sup>86</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 205.

<sup>87</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 68; 168-171.

<sup>88</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>89</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, p. 318.

<sup>90</sup> André Brink, 'Stories of history: reimagining the past in post-apartheid narrative', in *Negotiating the Past: The making of memory in South Africa*, ed. by Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 29-42 (p. 36).

<sup>91</sup> Brink, 'Stories of history', p. 37.

motivations, hidden agendas, prejudices, suspicions, biographical quirks, chips on the shoulder, and conditionings that constitute the idiosyncratic, individual mind.<sup>92</sup>

If Mda first downplays the indirect impact of mission teachings on Nongqawuse's prophecies, secondly focuses not on ideas about Christ's redeeming power but instead refers to his execution, thirdly ridicules Christianity, and fourthly reiterates the links between Christianity and the violence of the colonisers, it is perhaps in order to emphasise the redemptive potential of Nongqawuse's prophecies in traditional Xhosa terms. The nineteenth century Xhosa Christian converts are offered as antagonists to the Believers, yet it is clear that Christian beliefs such as resurrection were embraced by the Believers. Furthermore, through associating Christianity with the white men in the nineteenth century, Mda aligns its ideology with colonial greed, evidenced in the references to material displays of faith such as wearing trousers and dresses.

The colonisers' twentieth century neo-colonial counterparts are also vilified in this way. The materialism of the chief, for example, reflects the nineteenth century Christian attitude: the chief is bribed by 'white folks' with cell phones and satellite dishes, and even names his children after these objects (p. 76). If Mda intends to challenge polarisations in his novel, this at least is a polarisation he labours to reinforce: the Christian converts are traitors to the Xhosa, aligning themselves with the colonisers. This equivalence necessitates Mda's refusal to acknowledge Christian beliefs as core components of Nongqawuse's prophecies, and his tendency to deride Christians, because the Believers in both timeframes must not share any beliefs with the colonisers or neo-colonisers. Clearly, religious syncretism is not always possible in Mda's imagination.

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<sup>92</sup> Brink, 'Stories of history', p. 39.

## Heitsi Eibib

It is clear that Mda places a high value on his inclusion of Khoekhoe characters and their beliefs in the nineteenth century narrative. Perhaps Mda's efforts to romanticise the Cattle-Killing story prompted him to include the Khoekhoe, in order to honour post-1994 conceptions of South African identity. In his discussion of South Africa's new Coat of Arms, Barnard explains that 'Khoisan people are not just any people, but, in the eyes of politicians and the public alike, the original people; and thus through them a virtual primordial identity for the nation as a whole can be imagined.'<sup>93</sup> Quxu is certainly a romantic figure, as she has an affinity with nature. The connection between autochthony, oral literature, and resistance detailed by Highman also offers a convincing reason for Mda's creative additions to the nineteenth-century narrative. It is also possible to interpret Mda's comments about the source of his knowledge concerning Khoekhoe belief – orally from his mother's people, rather than from Hahn's published work – as evidence of valuing the oral over the written: an ironic perspective for a novelist. Mda's choices need to be interrogated more closely.

Hahn explains that 'Heitsi-Eibib' has been interpreted to mean 'prophet': *heisi* meaning 'prophet' or 'foreteller', to tell, to give a message, or to order, and *eibe* meaning 'beforehand' or 'previously.'<sup>94</sup> However, through close attention to the components of 'Heitsi Eibib', Hahn surmises that the 'only correct translation' of the name must be, 'One who has the appearance of a tree', and the practice of throwing branches and pieces of wood onto Heitsi Eibib's cairns supports this theory.<sup>95</sup> Hahn relates several tales collected by Rhenish missionary Hans Knudsen in the mid-nineteenth century which describe Heitsi Eibib to be a

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<sup>93</sup> Alan Barnard, 'Coat of Arms and the Body Politic: Khoisan Imagery and South African National Identity', *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, 69:1 (March, 2004), 5-22 (p. 19).

<sup>94</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 132.

<sup>95</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 132-134.

prophet and saviour of his people who died and was resurrected many times.<sup>96</sup> Heitsi Eibib also annihilated enemies who threatened his people.<sup>97</sup> One tale relates Heitsi Eibib saving his people by parting a river and leading them to safety, while the enemy drowned in pursuit; this story may well have been influenced by the missionaries disseminating tales of Moses and the Red Sea, but Hahn insists on its originality.<sup>98</sup> Hahn does, however, treat his sources cautiously, recognising that misinterpretations of Khoekhoe beliefs were commonplace. Nevertheless, Peter Carstens claims that Heitsi Eibib should not be seen as a 'heroic mediator' between the Khoekhoe and their 'High God', as he is associated exclusively with individual good fortune or luck.<sup>99</sup> In *Hunters and Herders* (1992), Barnard explains that parallels between Heitsi Eibib and Christ have been noted by Khoekhoe Christians, although the two figures are not regarded as aspects of the same being.<sup>100</sup> Research has uncovered a merging of the two figures by some Christian Nama and Dama, who referred to Haiseb [Heitsi Eibib] as 'our Jesus of old times.'<sup>101</sup> Hahn makes no such comparison in his collection.

While connections between Christianity and the Xhosa prophets, and the Khoekhoe, are diminished in *Redness*, Mda portrays Heitsi Eibib as remarkably similar to Christ. The decision to mirror the self-sacrificing Son of God figure of Christianity in Heitsi Eibib, while excluding and adding other beliefs, is revealing.<sup>102</sup> Twin's Khoekhoe wife Quxu explains that Heitsi Eibib, the son of Tsiqwa, 'lived and died for all the Khoikhoi, irrespective of clan'

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<sup>96</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 55-57.

<sup>97</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 56; 65.

<sup>98</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Peter Carstens, 'Some Implications of Change in Khoikhoi Supernatural Beliefs', in *Religion and Social Change in Southern Africa: Essays in honour of Monica Wilson*, ed. by Michael G. Whisson and Martin West (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), pp. 78-95 (pp. 84-85).

<sup>100</sup> Barnard, *Hunters and Herders*, p. 263.

<sup>101</sup> Guenther, *Tricksters and Trancers*, p. 116.

<sup>102</sup> Highman, '(Dis)Avowels', p. 131.

(p. 24).<sup>103</sup> This comforts Twin later, when his favourite horse has died of lungsickness: ‘In the same way that Heitsi Eibib saved the Khoikhoi, we need a prophet who will save the amaXhosa’ (p. 85). Twin wants to give Nongqawuse a chance, but Twin-Twin compares the Khoekhoe belief in Heitsi Eibib to the white man’s beliefs in Christ; Twin defends his beliefs by stating that, ‘Unlike the white people, the Khoikhoi did not kill the son of their god’ (p. 86). In Mda’s formulation, then, Heitsi Eibib does not just save his people, he dies *for* them. For Highman, Mda is extending ‘implicit’ parallels already evident in Hahn’s study.<sup>104</sup> The idea that the Khoekhoe forefather sacrificed himself for the benefit of the community is an apt reflection of the demands Nongqawuse made of the Xhosa.

Yet Heitsi Eibib also provides a convenient Khoekhoe counterpart to Nongqawuse’s role as a prophet and potential saviour of the Xhosa people. In the following passage, Mda reinforces the Xhosa/Nongqawuse and Khoekhoe/Heitsi Eibib link, recounting one of Twin’s dreams:

He used the dreams to transform himself into the new Heitsi Eibib of the amaXhosa people, the one who would lead them across the Great River, in the same way that the true Heitsi Eibib of old had led the Khoikhoi people. The same way that he had instructed the water to part, and when it obeyed he had led his people to safety. But when the enemy tried to cross between the parted water... when the enemy was in the middle... the water closed in again and the enemy drowned [...] Whenever Twin awoke from such dreams, his fervour for the girl-prophets multiplied tenfold (pp. 146-147).

Nongqawuse’s prophecies, however, did not come to fruition, whereas there appears to be no question of Heitsi Eibib’s power as saviour and prophet. Mda also precludes any possibility of the reader assuming that the legend related above might have been a variant of Exodus 14:21-29, when Camagu remembers learning from Qukezwa that ‘the Khoikhoi people were singing the story of Heitsi Eibib long before the white missionaries came to these shores with

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<sup>103</sup> Highman notes that ‘Tsiqwa’ is probably Mda’s adaptation of Tsui-//goab, the supreme creator in Khoekhoe belief, but not generally considered to be the father of Heitsi Eibib. In 1737 George Schmidt, the first missionary to the Khoekhoe, used the word ‘Tiqua’ to refer to ‘Our Father’ in a prayer. This is recorded by Hahn. See Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 43 and Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, p. 128.

<sup>104</sup> Highman, ‘(Dis)Avowels’, p. 131.

their similar story of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea' (p. 288). Heitsi Eibib, as a Khoekhoe saviour pre-existing Christianity, is presented as superior to Nongqawuse, who is vaguely influenced by Christianity.

Even more illuminating is that Heitsi Eibib's identity as a trickster is omitted entirely by Mda. Heitsi Eibib is clearly described as a saviour and prophet in the earlier narratives Hahn cites, but in those recordings that Hahn claims as his own, Heitsi Eibib is undoubtedly a trickster.<sup>105</sup> He is able to take many different forms, such as a bull and a cooking pot – the latter so that he can consume all the fat that has been put in the pot by other people; he tricks a murderer; he tries to escape from his wife after he has risen from the dead; he outwits and defeats Gama-gorib by negotiating with the hole he has fallen into, saving his people in the process, and he ambushes Lion to cut his wings off.<sup>106</sup> In fact, there are several narratives which relate Heitsi Eibib using his cunning to save his people from Lion. One story tells that Heitsi Eibib was born of a girl who ingested grass juice and became pregnant; another story depicts Heitsi Eibib as a naughty child who suddenly became a man and raped his mother.<sup>107</sup> More recently, Barnard explains that in Nama and Damara mythology, Heitsi Eibib replaces the Jackal and Hare tricksters of the /Xam, !Kung, and Nharo, although he also claims that Heitsi Eibib only uses his powers to do good.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, the general impression given of Heitsi Eibib from a range of sources is that he is morally ambiguous.

It is my contention that one of the reasons Mda disregarded the trickster element of Heitsi Eibib and portrayed him as self-sacrificing was to illustrate the similarities between different

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<sup>105</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 65-71.

<sup>106</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 56-57; 65-68.

<sup>107</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>108</sup> Barnard, *Hunters and Herders*, pp. 258-259.



belief systems – particularly the need all people have for a saviour to provide hope at a time of crisis. Mda reduces Heitsi Eibib’s moral ambiguity to create a simpler, more palatable saviour figure, suitable for a Believer such as Twin to admire when he is asked to sacrifice everything by Nongqawuse. The essential saviour figure manifests in oral literature only, and can be traced through the figure of Heitsi Eibib, to Quxu, her son Heitsi, to Qukezwa, Camagu and – finally – the twentieth century Heitsi. I intend to explore this progression, before considering how the twentieth century Heitsi retains elements of the Khoekhoe trickster figure despite Mda’s cautious removal of trickster characteristics from Heitsi Eibib.

### **Camagu and Mda as Saviour and Prophet**

Heitsi Eibib’s role as a saviour and prophet, in both oral literature and *Redness*, illuminates Mda’s ideas concerning saviour figures in general, but specifically Camagu in the novel.

Camagu’s role as a saviour is dependent on his relationship with Qukezwa – but it also seems to reflect the way Mda views himself. I consider now how Mda’s presentation of Camagu is complicated by his interactions with Xoliswa and Qukezwa.

It is Quxu who disseminates Heitsi Eibib’s legend to the Xhosa and names her son after him at a time of crisis (p. 87). Qukezwa is descended from Quxu and, presumably, the nineteenth century Heitsi. Qukezwa’s interest in Heitsi Eibib is clear when she explains his cairns to Camagu, encouraging him to add a stone (p. 121), and when she names her son after him without hesitation (p. 258). Qukezwa also carries her female ancestor’s knowledge of and passion for the natural world; her appearance emphasises the similarities between the two women (p. 40). Quxu and Qukezwa have been compared thoroughly elsewhere, and it is not my intention to repeat all the similarities here.<sup>109</sup> The comparison is important, however, as it

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<sup>109</sup> See for example Dannenburg, ‘Culture and Nature’, pp. 185-189; Schatteman, ‘Xhosa Cattle-Killing’, p. 289.

indicates that perhaps Nongqawuse's prophecies were fulfilled: Qukezwa seems to be Quxu resurrected, and at the close of the novel Quxu and Qukezwa's identities become indistinguishable (pp. 319-320). Zim tells his daughter that she can be a prophetess like Nongqawuse if she works hard enough, and she dreams of Nongqawuse before later recounting Nongqawuse's prophecies to Camagu (p. 52; 120). Qukezwa's insistence on removing foreign plants reveals the extent to which she understands the consequences of allowing imported plants to ruin indigenous wildlife (pp. 248-249), perhaps symbolic of the damage caused by imported governing systems and ideologies. Quxu, like the women in Camagu's co-operative a century and a half later, harvests from the sea for the survival of her family (p. 212; 313), and it is from Qukezwa that Camagu learns about the potential in the oyster trade (p. 116). Both Quxu and Qukezwa have a survival strategy which involves using yet preserving the natural environment. In this sense, the Qukezwas form a significant aspect of Camagu's Qolorha-by-Sea preservation project. Quxu is prophetic in the sense that she anticipates Qukezwa, and Qukezwa's wisdom is presented as essential for Camagu's – and Mda's – visionary solution for the problems of rural South Africa's marginalised peoples.

Mda describes the area as 'the land of the prophets' (p. 52) and it is clear that Quxu and Qukezwa are presented as prescient. However, it is Camagu's role that I wish to consider more closely. Klopper explores the way in which Camagu acts as a traditional Xhosa diviner: even his name – meaning 'Amen and Be Satisfied, O Great Ones' – is a term of address for an ancestor or diviner.<sup>110</sup> Peires explains that the Xhosa would shout 'Camagu' when a sacrificed animal made its last bellow, and that Nongqawuse probably referred to this sound when she said that the breath or soul of the sacrificed animal should be preserved.<sup>111</sup> As

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<sup>110</sup> Klopper, 'Between Nature and Culture', p. 99.

<sup>111</sup> Peires, *Dead Will Arise*, pp. 104-105.

Qukezwa teaches Camagu about the natural environment surrounding Qolorha-by-Sea, Camagu begins to disapprove of the holiday resort development and favours a solution that will preserve the natural beauty of the area (pp. 117-118; 134; 275-276). Part of the solution is, of course, that rural South Africans need to be self-reliant. Camagu tells John Dalton, who appears to favour paternalism:

Your people love you because you do things for them. I am talking of self-reliance where people do things for themselves. You are thinking like the businessman you are... you want a piece of the action. I do not want a piece of any action. This project will be fully owned by the villagers themselves and will be run by a committee elected by them in the true manner of co-operative societies (p. 286).

The co-operative society that Camagu has set up with MamCirha and NoGiant reflects Mda's role in a beekeeping project described in his autobiography (pp. 158-159).<sup>112</sup> In this way Camagu, Qolorha-by-Sea's saviour, is a reflection of the way Mda sees himself.

Other similarities between Mda and Camagu are clear, such as their experience of returning to South Africa to vote and trying to secure employment in post-1994 South Africa (pp. 31-38).<sup>113</sup> Mda's voice is heard clearly when Camagu thinks about the current situation in South Africa: he believes that politicians have 'their snouts buried deep in the trough, lapping noisily in the name of the poor, trying to outdo one another in piggishness' (p. 198). In contrast, the co-operative he founds challenges the legitimacy of this established system: 'Disillusioned with the corruption and nepotism of the city, Camagu had come to Qolorha in search of a dream. And here people are now doing things for themselves, without any handouts from the government' (p. 198). Mda suggests that Camagu's ecotourism and co-operatives are initiatives that the people of South Africa need to embrace. Camagu's idea for a backpacker hostel created from natural resources and solar power are two such suggestions

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<sup>112</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>113</sup> Mda, *Void*, pp. 422-433.

(pp. 275-276). Thus Mda offers Camagu as a prophet and saviour: the parallels between Camagu and Mda indicate that Camagu's salvific solutions are Mda's own. Another notable example of Mda's prescriptive approach is perhaps reflected in Camagu's suggestion that Dalton should use his television to show documentaries on developmental issues that will 'encourage community dialogue' rather than 'old movies that have no relevance to the people of Qolorha-by-Sea' (p. 257). This idea would surely not prove popular with the village's children, who enjoy the old movies considerably (p. 6). In places, Camagu's words sound much like a lecture Mda might give concerning how to solve economic problems, encompassing everything from electricity sources, to ecotourism, to what children should do in their free time.

When Camagu uses Qukezwa's knowledge to moderate his views and eventually offer an alternative solution to the villagers' poverty, tradition and modernity are synthesised. Indeed, Camagu's faith in his clan's totem, Majola the brown mole snake, surprises and awes the villagers because, 'they did not expect a man with such great education, a man who has lived in the lands of the white people for thirty years, to have such respect for the customs of his people' (pp. 112-113). These are two of many occasions when Camagu is able to unite seemingly incompatible ideologies, polarisations and binaries. The ludicrousness and irrationality of the feud between the Believers and the Unbelievers is certainly emphasised throughout the novel, as Mda illustrates the destructive nature of binary thinking. However, Mda's vilification of Christians and derisive presentation of Christianity's core belief undermines any intention to accommodate religious pluralism. Sardonic portrayal of Christianity aside, it would seem that in *Redness* Mda advocates unity and collaboration. It is significant that the only occasion in the novel when a Believer and an Unbeliever agree is when the suggestion is made that their common ancestor's head could be in the Natural

History Museum, London (p. 194); thus opposition to imperialism, thoroughly linked by Mda to Christianity, is also presented as a uniting factor.

Yet Christianity is not the only target of Mda's criticism: his presentation of the two women Camagu is attracted to, for example, reveals an unpleasant tendency to polarise, and complicates his role as saviour. While both women's attractiveness is initially appraised, Xoliswa is gradually revealed to be the unqualified opposite of Qukezwa: because Qukezwa is portrayed as wise, Xoliswa – despite being intelligent and successful – must be ridiculed throughout the novel. Xoliswa's greed is emphasised when she tells her parents she wants to move to a city and work in the Ministry of Education because, 'People I have been to school with are earning a lot of money' whereas she remains in a 'stifling village' earning 'peanuts' (pp. 11-12). Xoliswa praises America to Camagu and boasts of the six months she spent there, citing its beautiful people – Eddie Murphy and Dolly Parton – and its technology as 'fairytale' features (p. 71). When Camagu clarifies that, like Mda, he has spent a long time in America and only recently returned to South Africa, Xoliswa is humiliated (p. 73). When Xoliswa's friend Vathiswa expressed a desire to visit America, Camagu tells her that Xoliswa's 'adulation' is misleading, because America is full of 'racial prejudice and bully-boy tactics towards other countries' (pp. 73-74). Xoliswa interrupts the conversation because she considers Camagu too important to be speaking with her less educated friend (p. 74). Of course, the damning portrayal of Xoliswa as an arrogant, mean-spirited and self-serving Americophile, is completed when she voices her support for the development project that will build holiday resorts like those found in America. The mere mention of the village's link to Nongqawuse prompts her to ask why people cannot 'let that part of our shame rest in peace' (p. 75).

While Camagu's attraction to Xoliswa is justified by her beauty (pp. 70-71), the villagers believe the two are perfect for each other because of their similar education (pp. 110-111). Although some villagers admire Camagu's respect for his totem snake, Xoliswa asks him, 'Don't you think you are reinforcing barbarism in this village?' (p. 172). It seems incongruous that a character presented in such a way should also send frantic messages to Camagu, begging him to visit her (p. 256). It is also telling that when Xoliswa perfectly reasonably tells her parents that she is planning to move to the city – the implication being that Camagu's rejection of her has made her bitter – she must also add that, 'Many of my former schoolmates are high up in the ruling party. They will lobby for me' (p. 260).

Xoliswa is ready to take advantage of the cronyism Mda condemns. This, and her constantly expressed disdain for tradition, marks her as Qukezwa and Camagu's antithesis. Ultimately, Xoliswa is ridiculed and punished for her views, when 'she wakes up one day and finds that the scars of history have erupted on her body' (p. 301). 'Heathen scars' of flagellation have appeared, a 'burden that a first child of Twin-Twins line has to carry' (pp. 301-302). Just as Camagu's messianism is a consequence of the arcadian Qukezwa's influence, it is also uncomfortably dependent on his opposition to the ridiculous Xoliswa.

Camagu's initial policy of avoiding Qukezwa, despite his attraction for her, is because she is 'not the type of woman he should be associating with' (p. 170). Camagu wonders what they could possibly talk about after intercourse (p. 140). When Xoliswa nags and harangues Camagu, he considers Qukezwa to be the best 'antidote' to her (p. 195). During an argument with Xoliswa, Camagu explicitly compares her to Qukezwa, exclaiming, 'Where you see darkness, witchcraft, heathens and barbarians, she sees song and dance and laughter and beauty' (p. 219). Of course, Camagu marries Qukezwa eventually, revealing that the worthiest woman won the man after all, and Camagu's initial judgement of the polarised

women is reversed. But Mda has laboured the difference between Xoliswa and Qukezwa so thoroughly, and caricatured Xoliswa's hatred of tradition so often, that the reader is inclined to judge the educated and successful woman as inferior to the shop cleaner well before the marriage. Qukezwa's homeliness, lack of education, and plumpness (p. 10) are far more appealing to men than Xoliswa's ambition and 'icy beauty' (p. 175). Despite criticising the language men use to talk about women's bodies, as if they are 'talking about a piece of meat' (p. 10), Mda's description of Qukezwa strutting about in her underwear like a 'fat model' is rather crass (p. 113).

Other women in the novel are criticised for their propensity to waste time gossiping instead of working, and Camagu has to ask them to work at home so that they are more productive (p. 252). The contemporary John Dalton's wife is a sneering caricature who condemns Qukezwa and admires Xoliswa, despite pronouncing her name 'Koliswa Kimiya' (p. 256). John Dalton himself, who argues with Camagu about the water project he arranged and whether his cultural village denies the dynamism of Xhosa culture, is stereotypically paternalistic and exploitative, despite ostensibly only being 'white outside' and having an 'umXhosa heart' (pp. 7; 75; 207-208; 285-286). After stating that the Believers were foolish to believe Nongqawuse's prophecies, Dalton is surprised by Camagu's objections: 'It is fine to humour these people sometimes, to go along with their foibles before putting them on the right path. But this Camagu seems to believe what he is saying' (p. 283). The implication seems to be that, despite his upbringing, Dalton is innately paternalistic because he is white. While Mda seems to embrace diverse beliefs, he is clearly reluctant to acknowledge the impact of Christian teachings on Nongqawuse's prophecies, and his presentation of the women in the novel, and the only white man, are negative clichés. Thus, although Camagu's ability to bridge destructive polarisations has been praised by critics and is apparently

representative of Mda's vision, Mda is in fact unlike his protagonist in this respect. Both men seem unsuitable for the saviour role they have assigned themselves.

### **Heitsi: saviour and prophet**

I have already detailed the way in which Mda's ideology is reflected in his portrayal of Camagu, presenting a questionable prophetic and salvific vision, placing Camagu in a messiah role. I have also explored the Christianised element of Heitsi Eibib, which strengthens his portrayal as a selfless hero, and the way in which Mda neglects Heitsi Eibib's trickster elements in order to offer an unambiguous redeemer. Camagu's son Heitsi has been identified by critics a symbol of unity and his role as a potential saviour is bound up with Mda's contention that Heitsi Eibib lived and died for all the Khoekhoe. The reader can trace the twentieth century Heitsi's ancestry back to the first Heitsi and his mother Quxu, whose description of Heitsi Eibib is reverential and portrays him as Christ-like: thus the contemporary Heitsi's function is reflected in Mda's reconstructed Heitsi Eibib. The twentieth century Heitsi appears to function as a prophet and saviour, because he embodies Mda's vision for the future of South Africa: his namesake, therefore, cannot be associated with behaviour such as deception and incest, particularly as incest is part of the witchcraft condemned by Nongqawuse. Mda's Heitsi Eibib is portrayed as heroic and willing to sacrifice his own survival for altruistic or noble motives, reflected in Camagu's refusal to be sycophantic or corrupt, in order for Camagu's son Heitsi to symbolise a challenge to corruption. Mda underscores this link towards the end of the novel. As Camagu is looking forward to living with Qukezwa and Heitsi, he thinks about his son's name:

Heitsi. He who is named after Heitsi Eibib, the earliest prophet of the Khoikhoi. Heitsi. The son of Tsiqwa. Tsiqwa. He who tells his stories in heaven. Heitsi. The one who parted the waters of the Great River so that his people could cross when the enemy was chasing them. When his people had crossed, and the enemy was trying to pass through the opening, the Great River closed upon the enemy. And the enemy all died (pp. 287-288).



At Zim's funeral, orators say that 'Heitsi's generation will carry forward the work left by those who came before' (p. 309). Heitsi is therefore an extension of Camagu and his opposition to the Aristocrats of the Revolution's elitism and nepotism, bringing salvation. In this sense, Heitsi contributes to the 'revolutionising' aspect of the 1998 narrative in *Redness*. And in some ways, Mda *has* revolutionised the nineteenth century narrative, despite his claims – writing out Heitsi Eibib's dual nature enables Mda to present an unambiguous saviour in Heitsi, one that alludes to the uncomplicated heroism of autochthonous peoples' oral literature and embodies a moral compass for post-apartheid South Africa. The reader is thus more inclined to accept Mda's solutions to political and social problems.

Those who have interpreted Heitsi as a saviour figure are justified in some ways. When Qukezwa bears Camagu's son Heitsi, she is giving birth to a child that symbolises both her knowledge of the natural environment, and Camagu's Western education and pragmatic solutions to the problems faced by Qolorha-by-Sea. Heitsi embodies the synthesis and solution. Heitsi, whose significance is emphasised when he appears as the last character in the novel, is also a symbol of Khoekhoe and Xhosa unity. Bell concludes that Mda 'questions a static concept of an African past and instead suggests a flexible African culture that absorbs, adapts and converts other beliefs into its own practices in a steady process of synthesis.'<sup>114</sup> Closing the novel with a figure that represents the union of apparently irreconcilable binaries, therefore, reinforces Mda's attempt to reconcile people who view themselves as different: an important message in the new Rainbow Nation. For a successful and prosperous future, difference must be celebrated rather than feared. Mda does, however, appear to privilege autochthony early in the novel: while Twin-Twin discusses civilisation

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<sup>114</sup> Bell, 'Intimate Presence', p. 105.

with *The Man Who Named Ten Rivers* (villainous Sir George Grey), Twin dreams of transforming himself into a new Heitsi Eibib who could save the Xhosa (pp. 146-147).

Yet Mda also seems to undermine the suggestion that Heitsi is a potential saviour. When Qukezwa tries to pull Heitsi into the sea at the end of the novel, his reluctance prompts her to question, 'How will he carry out the business of saving his people?' (p. 319). Heitsi protests that he 'belongs in the man village!' (p. 320). Considering Heitsi Eibib and Camagu's roles as saviours, how is the reader to interpret Heitsi's refusal to participate in the propagation of the saviour tradition? When he commented that Heitsi Eibib had virtually disappeared from the magico-religious system, Carstens also explained that the only connotations the words 'Heitsi Eibib' had, in 1975, were 'in reference to a precocious child, i.e. a child who knows too much for his age.'<sup>115</sup> This association is logical considering that the name is 'derived from *Heisi*, to tell or to know, and *Eibe*, early, beforehand, previously.'<sup>116</sup> If Mda was aware of the connotations Carstens describes – if they were perpetuated within the culture in which he was raised – his decision to close the novel with Heitsi refusing to enter the sea to fulfil his namesake's role is indeed significant.

Mda does appear to reject the notion of saviours in the final paragraph of the novel. This rejection seems to indicate Mda's belief that the key to South Africa's future lies not in relying upon saviours, but in the community working together. When Mda mocks the 'Aristocrats of the Revolution', criticising nepotism and elitism, he undermines the legitimacy of the saviour notion: a notion that celebrates the endeavours and achievements of a small elite at the cost of neglecting ordinary people. Thus Heitsi's reluctance to perform

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<sup>115</sup> Carstens, 'Some Implications', p. 94.

<sup>116</sup> Carstens, 'Some Implications', p. 94.

the saviour role reflects Mda's criticism of the ANC, whose failures – as Mda sees them – were all the more disappointing considering their revolutionary origins. Mda claims that during Mandela's presidency, the South African ruling party apparatchiks' wealth accumulated, and inequality was reinforced.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, he explains that, 'While cadres of the party gained positions of power and wealth, both in the public and private sectors, the rest of the black population remained poor and unemployed.'<sup>118</sup> Mda's criticism of Mandela, compounded by the bitterness he felt at the behaviour of ANC members he thought would be natural allies, prevents him from presenting Heitsi as a willing, unambiguous saviour.

This, I believe, goes some way to resolving the apparent contradiction that Mda presents Heitsi Eibib, Camagu, Heitsi, and himself as saviours, yet closes the novel with Heitsi refusing to accept this role. Heitsi Eibib was, traditionally, a saviour and a scoundrel. Similarly, Heitsi is offered up as a saviour – but one who is undermined and not able or, more pertinently, not willing, to fulfil his prescribed duties. Instead, he insists that he belongs in the village, as part of the community, not segregated from and elevated above it. Thus Mda 'revolutionises' in *Redness* not just by proposing a local, sustainable alternative to global capitalism and the policies of the 'Aristocrats of the Revolution', but also through undermining the very saviour notion that originally gave the aristocrats so much power. Indeed, Mda undermines the saviour notion that has been a recurring feature throughout the novel, as he emphasises the necessity for self-help, and the danger of relying on the fulfilment of promises made by those with power. The South African banks refuse a loan to assist Camagu's business plan, and Camagu reflects that history is repeating itself: 'So much

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<sup>117</sup> Mda, 'Nelson Mandela'.

<sup>118</sup> Mda, 'Nelson Mandela'; see also Mda's letter to Mandela in *Void*, pp. 426-432.

for black empowerment!’ (pp. 206-207). Camagu continues to lecture Dalton on the importance of people helping themselves, claiming:

The government talks of delivery and of upliftment. Now people expect things to be delivered to them without any effort on their part. ... The notions of delivery and upliftment have turned our people into passive recipients of programmes conceived by so-called experts who know nothing about the lives of rural communities. People are denied the right to shape their own destiny. Things are done for them. The world owes them a living. A dependency mentality is reinforced in their minds (pp. 207-208).

The difficulty, however, is that Mda seems to consider himself a saviour: he prescribes an approach that must be adopted. This is one of the ideological contradictions revealed through the novel. An exploration of Heitsi Eibib and Heitsi as trickster figures will illuminate the way in which this ideological contradiction is symptomatic of novels in which the postcolonial trickster is found.

### **Heitsi Eibib and Heitsi as trickster figures**

Heitsi’s ambiguous function at the end of the novel could be rationalised thus: while Mda emphasises Heitsi Eibib’s salvific function to create a cultural parallel with Christ and Nongqawuse, and to provide hope to Twin during the Cattle-Killing Movement – just as the anti-apartheid struggle required high-profile, inspirational revolutionaries – he denies that a saviour is needed for post-1994 South Africa. Instead, Heitsi’s function as a *prophet* is prioritised, although Mda pays little attention to this aspect of Heitsi Eibib. Klopper considers Heitsi’s name to be ironic because he cannot assume a variety of forms, as Heitsi Eibib does.<sup>119</sup> At the very least, however, Heitsi Eibib died and was resurrected many times, perhaps as the nineteenth century and twentieth century Heitsis. But there are significant functions of Heitsi that correspond to Heitsi Eibib the trickster, too.

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<sup>119</sup> Klopper, ‘Between Nature and Culture’, pp. 103-104.

Heitsi clearly possesses several characteristics Lynn attributes to the postcolonial trickster. First, Heitsi's name connects him explicitly with his Khoekhoe and Xhosa ancestors, as well as Nongqawuse, and the structure of the novel also blends the lives of the two Heitsis together; as a child of two people who have worked together to create a sustainable development project, Heitsi represents the future. As such, he 'plays a role in reclaiming and validating the cultural past while mediating a vision for the future.'<sup>120</sup> Secondly, Heitsi corresponds with Lynn's explanation that tricksters mediate past, present and future because their 'dispositions and behaviours are partly drawn from the realm of myth and cultural tradition, making them appropriate foils to destructive aspects of colonization and modernity', yet 'they also embody the desire for a new reality in which concepts of tradition and progress are reconciled.'<sup>121</sup> Thirdly, the trickster figure is associated with revolution because his outrageous behaviour challenges social norms and the expectations of the dominant group, and Heitsi's prophet function is clearly inextricable from Mda's revolutionary stance. In particular, Heitsi's refusal to fulfil his saviour role hints at his trickster nature, considering the expectation placed on him. Fourthly, Lynn concludes that the trickster's resistance to finalisation 'brings a note of optimism to a wide range of postcolonial works that dramatize the injustice, exploitation, and corruption that have attended the colonial past and the neo-colonial present.'<sup>122</sup> This optimism is a consequence of Mda's community-centred vision, despite the criticisms he makes of South Africa under the leadership of the ANC. David Attwell interprets Heitsi's refusal to enter the water as a privileging of 'people over prophecy, and the future over the past', thus emphasising 'open-

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<sup>120</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 9.

<sup>121</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 11.

<sup>122</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 183.

endedness.’<sup>123</sup> For Heitsi, his liberation from the saviour role enables him to affirm change ‘by envisioning and enacting new social and political possibilities and disrupting old ones.’<sup>124</sup>

To begin with, then, Heitsi refuses to be a saviour because Mda does not believe that a saviour is needed: communities working together will be more productive and effective than the formerly revolutionary elite. Heitsi’s primary trickster function is to encourage change: not just in the way that South Africa is governed, but also in the way that people think about how change can be accomplished. Thus the postcolonial trickster ‘acts as a catalyst for not only fundamental questioning but transformation of established rules and power structures.’<sup>125</sup> Yet, as I have shown, Mda presents his ideas, and therefore himself, as salvific. Ultimately, Mda cannot escape the implications of his and Camagu’s similarities: his anti-saviour stance is undermined by them, and the established saviour role is revalidated rather than refuted. When Lynn considers why the trickster figure is so appropriate for postcolonial literature, he concludes that the trickster’s ‘multiple guises and paradoxical traits accord well with the pressures to participate in overlapping cultural constructs that are characteristic of postcolonial communities and their literatures.’<sup>126</sup> The trickster figure’s hybridity – its ‘merging of distinct characteristics from distinct cultures into new entities’ – is not only suggested through Heitsi’s Xhosa and Khoekhoe ancestry, it is also reinforced by his challenge to binaries and polarisations, and his inherent contradictory nature or ‘paradoxical patterns.’<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in black South African literary history* (Scottsville: University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Press, 2005), p. 201.

<sup>124</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 9.

<sup>125</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 10.

<sup>126</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 1.

Cultural influences are reflected in the portrayal of the trickster figure, and in *Redness* the trickster's most contradictory elements are a consequence of Mda's. Consider, on the one hand, Mda's presentation of Heitsi Eibib myths and the appropriation of Christ's self-sacrificing nature as a recognition of the hope this belief could provide to marginalised people and, on the other, Mda's irreverent assessment of white people as murderers of their own god's son. Furthermore, although Mda's presentation of Heitsi Eibib as a self-sacrificing figure transforms him into a paragon for Believers such as Twin, Heitsi Eibib's association with personal fortune and good luck perhaps renders him a more appropriate hero figure for the Unbelievers, who are more concerned with individual capital. Heitsi Eibib can, then, be interpreted as a figure more likely to embody the interests of South Africa's wealthy elite. Rita Barnard concludes her study of South African literature with the suggestion that interest in Mda's novel is generated by its 'undecidable and contradictory ideological stance', and through my discussion of Heitsi, I hope to have shown one reason why this might be the case.<sup>128</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus far I have shown that the child Heitsi could be interpreted as a trickster figure in a myriad of ways. He represents Mda's community-centred vision for South Africa, therefore challenging the ideology and behaviour of the dominant group, who favour capitalism. For Mda, the dominant group is the ANC and their neoliberal policies. Yet Heitsi is also associated with individual prosperity. He symbolises the union of tradition and modernity, revealing how the former can facilitate progress. Heitsi is the product of two people from ostensibly opposite traditions: Western education and rural Xhosa tradition. Polarisation and

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<sup>128</sup> Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 174.

binaries are undermined by Heitsi's father, and Heitsi's hybrid identity thus symbolises the perpetuation of this practice. I have also explored the way in which Heitsi's identity as a reincarnation of a Christianised Heitsi Eibib is inseparable from Mda's ideological contradictions concerning Christianity and the legitimacy of saviours. This perhaps illustrates a potential hazard of reinventing and romanticising the past. Heitsi is both a saviour-prophet and not a saviour-prophet: this is an appropriate contradiction and conclusion not only for a novel which challenges divisions and absolutes, but also for a character whose namesake, traditionally, defied categorisation.

Heitsi's role as a trickster figure is yet more complex. Oral literature evolves, and no two people will relate identical stories about the same figure, even at the same historical moment and within the same community. Similarly, Mda's reimagining of Heitsi Eibib apparently departs from all other accounts by establishing him as a Christ-like Khoekhoe saviour-prophet, and a potential correction to Nongqawuse: a sort of 'sanitised' Heitsi Eibib. When Heitsi refuses to enter the water and save his people at the end of the novel, Mda perhaps reimposes the traditional trickster ambiguity of Heitsi Eibib into the character of Heitsi, incest notwithstanding. And just as storytellers and authors can recreate a trickster narrative to suit their context, so too can a reader arrive at their own interpretation of a narrative. For some, Heitsi represents unity and/or a challenge to binary thinking; for others, Heitsi is a saviour. Evidently, much as Mda convincingly dismisses the validity of saviours, he cannot necessarily rely upon the reader to do the same.

Perhaps the most that can be said about Heitsi with any certainty is that he represents hope. While Mda might envision him as a son who will maintain and develop the community-focused projects initiated by his father Camagu, Heitsi's solutions might not be the same as



his father's at all: recall the notable differences between Mda's path and the path of his father. There is no guarantee that a patrilineal tradition will continue, despite frequent didactic lectures. Heitsi Eibib and Heitsi, invested as they are with telling departures from Mda's source material of oral tradition and historical fact, reveal some inescapable and insidious contradictions in Mda's ideology: this manifestation of insurrection is the trickster's true revolutionary purpose.

## Chapter 6

### André Brink's *Praying Mantis* (2005): the trickster in the service of post-apartheid reconciliation?

#### Introduction

In *Praying Mantis*, Brink explores the interaction between Christianity and traditional Khoekhoe beliefs and folklore, through the story of a nineteenth century Khoekhoe Christian convert named Cupido Cockroach – a character based on the historical figure Cupido Kakkerlak.<sup>1</sup> The specific identification of Cupido with the Khoekhoe trickster and forefather Heitsi-Eibib is evident throughout the novel, and superficial characteristics widely attributed to the trickster figure are also apparent in Brink's portrayal, yet this aspect of Cupido's nature has received little critical attention. I intend to address this omission through an exploration of Cupido's trickster figure role as it relates to beliefs about Heitsi-Eibib, and the ways in which an interpretation of this nature can contribute to debates about historical literature in post-apartheid South Africa.

I begin with Brink's early life, career and influences, with particular focus on Brink's ideas concerning historical fiction and apartheid. In the next section, I provide an overview of Brink's historical sources: the lives of Kakkerlak and the missionaries with whom he worked. In this section I also summarise the path of Christianity between Kakkerlak's life and the publication of *Praying Mantis*, in order to demonstrate how Cupido mirrors Heitsi-Eibib's prophet role. Next, I provide a brief overview of critical responses to *Praying Mantis*, highlighting the relative lack of attention to the central role of the trickster figure in shaping the novel. In the next section, I consider the presentation of Heitsi-Eibib in Brink's primary

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to Brink's character Cupido Cockroach as 'Cupido' throughout my discussion, whereas the historical figure Cupido Kakkerlak will be referred to as 'Kakkerlak.' I recognise that alternative spellings were used in documents such as missionary correspondence. Proper nouns such as Heitsi-Eibib and Tsui-Goab are also spelt according to Brink's orthography, although there are many variant spellings of these names throughout several centuries' worth of literature on the Khoekhoe people and their beliefs.

source for Khoekhoe belief, Isaac Schapera's *The Khoisan Peoples of Southern Africa* (1930), and examine the reliability of this source. The next section of the chapter explores Cupido as a prophet, one whose late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century interactions with Christianity reveal a pattern which would be repeated over the next two centuries. In the penultimate section, I consider Cupido as a trickster, a role that is inseparable from his prophetic nature. My conclusion offers an alternative reading of *Praying Mantis*, scrutinising the very principles on which Brink's ideas concerning historical fiction are based.

### **Brink's early life, career, and influences**

Brink was born in 1935 to a magistrate father and a schoolteacher mother, both supporters of the National Party. Brink was one of the *Sestigers* (Writers of the Sixties) who, influenced by European society and literature, sought to challenge apartheid through writing in Afrikaans.

Of this movement, Brink says:

The establishment saw in us the embodiment of all the destructive forces of Satan and the Antichrist. Sunday after Sunday we were attacked from the pulpits of the Dutch Reformed Church. There were clamorous debates in parliament about our work. Our books were burned in autos-da-fé on the church squares of East London and several other towns.<sup>2</sup>

Brink describes his novel *Kennis van die aand* (1973) as marking 'the beginning of [his] writing overtly in opposition to apartheid', and the novel became the first by an Afrikaaner to be banned by the National Party.<sup>3</sup>

Like Mda, Brink expresses his disappointment in ANC rule in his memoir. In addition to numerous novels, Brink published collections of his essays. In one, *Reinventing a Continent*, Brink explains that during the apartheid era, South African fiction was 'intimately tied up

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<sup>2</sup> André Brink, *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> Brink, *Fork in the Road*, p. 219. The novel was published in English as *Looking on Darkness* (1974).

with the need to record, to witness, to represent ... At a time when the media were prevented from fulfilling their basic function of reportage, fiction writers had to assume this burden.’<sup>4</sup> Much post-apartheid fiction, however, seeks to ‘address the silences of past’ through historical novels, thereby reinventing or reimagining the past.<sup>5</sup> In 1992, with the composition of *Praying Mantis* already in progress, Brink outlined his criticism of historiography: he compares it to a game in which a message is whispered along a chain of people and, when the last person repeats aloud the message he or she has received, the words bear little similarity to the original message. Brink asks:

Is that not the way in which official history, too, comes into being? [...] And yet, if it is repeated often enough, and with enough emphasis, it is accepted as a canon of received wisdom. And whole societies base their way of life on these ‘messages’ transmitted by official history.<sup>6</sup>

While history is associated with ‘the official, hegemonic interpretation of the world’ endorsing and maintaining the power of the élite over the ‘nameless’, historical fiction offers an alternative version of the past, one which is not subjected to the stringent censorship or falsifying of the apartheid era, and ‘has to be evaluated against the whole spectrum or palimpsest of available texts’ which are strung together by silences.<sup>7</sup> The historical novel, then, seeks to fill these silences by giving a voice to the marginalised people whose stories were never recorded, or never recorded impartially.

Brink explains that reinventing the continent through historical fiction – primarily novels such as his – can benefit the present-day South African community:

[L]earning to inhabit the continent of our invention may well be one of the most rewarding challenges facing South Africans – readers and writers alike – in this time of change, knowing that neither its history nor its moral

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<sup>4</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 231.

<sup>6</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, pp. 142-144; 246.

boundaries are fixed and final, but remain constantly to be reinvented and, in the process, revalorised.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, post-apartheid literature continues to address the injustice and oppression of the pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial, neo-colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid experience. One instance of this in Brink's writing is his portrayal of T'kama, a Khoi man, in *Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor* (1993).<sup>9</sup> T'kama is a reimagining of Adamastor from Luis Vaz de Camoens's *The Lusiads* (1572), an epic poem exploring the founding and expansion of the Portuguese empire.<sup>10</sup> T'kama worships Heitsi-Eibib, which introduces a theme that will be crucial to *Praying Mantis*: the conflict and perceived incompatibility of traditional Khoekhoe belief and Christianity.

Brink claims that his deconstruction of Adamastor reveals that neither T'kama-Adamastor nor Da Gama-European explorers are wholly good or wholly evil. 'Breaking out of the mould of binaries' could have a significant impact on the future of South Africa:

Day and night, black and white, man and woman, light and dark, yesterday and tomorrow, Good and Evil, Africa and Europe, lose their status as immutable opposites and separates, opening the way for a more comprehensive – and comprehending – adventure of the mind. And by returning to the construction of a myth of origin, hopefully a more holistic approach may become possible in the future. Not just in philosophical or literary terms, but even on the level of practical politics.<sup>11</sup>

*Cape of Storms*, then, resists colonial perspectives by reimagining one particular myth of power. *Praying Mantis* also contributes to the postcolonial discourse in this way, offering another reimagining of significant historical events from the perspective of an indigenous person. Brink first started working on *Praying Mantis* in 1984, during the last decade of

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<sup>8</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 246.

<sup>9</sup> André Brink, *Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor* (Illinois: Sourcebooks Landmark, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Luis Vaz de Camoens, *The Lusiads*, trans. by William C. Atkinson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 128-130.

<sup>11</sup> André Brink, 'A Myth of Origin', in *T'kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*, ed. by Ivan Vladislavić (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand Press, 2000), p. 47.

apartheid. The novel clearly reflects some key issues within the debate about equality for all ethnic groups. But Brink also returned to *Praying Mantis* in 1992, and again in 2004. It is pertinent, then, to also consider the religious and political climate in South Africa in the intervening years. I summarise now the historical events Brink has sought to reimagine, before turning to the trickster as an aspect of the historical past that Brink has suggested needs to be recovered in historical fiction. For historical events and Khoekhoe belief, Brink draws on potentially unreliable sources. This, and Brink's additions and omissions, are crucial to Cupido's role as a trickster.

### **Historical sources**

In *Praying Mantis*, Brink sets out to reimagine Kakkerlak's (c. 1760 – after 1823), drawing on the historian V. C. Malherbe's 'The Life and Times of Cupido Kakkerlak' for biographical information.<sup>12</sup> Kakkerlak, a Khoi, was born in the Great Karroo and was brought up on a white-owned farm; he was thus able to speak Dutch fluently. After various movements, he settled in Graaff-Reinet. A labour contract between Kakkerlak and Landdrost Bresler was signed in 1799 and the high wages accorded Kakkerlak shows that he was proficient in his trade as a sawyer. In May 1801, Kakkerlak heard London Missionary Society (LMS) representative A. A. van der Lingen preaching; by December of that same year, Kakkerlak and his four children had been baptised. Kakkerlak had earlier married a San woman, Anna Vigilant, and she was baptised in 1803. In February 1802, Kakkerlak and his family set out for Algoa Bay with LMS representatives James Read and Johannes Theodorus van der Kemp, settling with them at Botha's Place. Kakkerlak began to assist the missionaries with the religious services and, after relocating to a farm van der Kemp named 'Bethelsdorp', he

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<sup>12</sup> V. C. Malherbe, 'The Life and Times of Cupido Kakkerlak', *The Journal of African History*, 20:3 (1979), 365-378.

eventually became an assistant missionary in 1814. In 1815, Kakkerlak journeyed to Griquatown to take up LMS missionary Lammert Jansen's position after his death, working there with William Anderson. This arrangement was not successful, however, and Read decided it would be prudent for Kakkerlak to remove to 'Malapeetze' to evangelise among the Kora. Anna had died in 1811, and Kakkerlak remarried while in Griquatown; he took his second wife and child with him to his new station. At some point the family moved to Nokaneng. The new station was isolated and presented a challenge to Kakkerlak: the Kora people often moved from one place to another. Furthermore, it seems that Kakkerlak had little financial assistance from the LMS, and was not able to speak the Kora language sufficiently to deliver effective sermons. Eventually, in 1823, LMS representative Robert Moffat dismissed Kakkerlak from the LMS's employ. The last recorded information concerning Kakkerlak is an encounter between him and Moffat on the banks of the Mathwaring in June 1823. Kakkerlak and his wife were in the company of a fugitive slave named Joseph Arend. Kakkerlak's fate, and that of his wife and children, is not recorded. Brink acknowledges in the 'Note' that he has changed some of this information 'for novelistic reasons.'<sup>13</sup>

Kakkerlak's life has been constructed by Malherbe through references to him in missionary correspondence and journals, as well as registers and contracts. Because of this, Malherbe's summary of Kakkerlak's life reflects clearly the way that the LMS's position and ideology changed between its founding in 1795, and the year that Kakkerlak was dismissed from its service. Malherbe cites several examples of LMS transactions that probably exaggerated the debauched behaviour of Kakkerlak before his conversion, in order to garner support in

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<sup>13</sup> André Brink, *Praying Mantis* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 279. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

Britain for the missionary enterprise.<sup>14</sup> Robert Ross's exploration of representation offers an explanation for accounts of behaviour such as Cupido's. Drawings, drama, and later other forms of literature presented the Khoekhoe and ex-slaves as 'drunken, lazy, dangerous good-for-nothings', a presentation which 'worked to maintain boundaries, to prevent elision of categories':

The respectable saw the drunken as helpless victims of their race or as targets of redemption. Historians ... have tended to do the same. We have written of degradation, and have tried to find explanations for that degradation, believing that it needs an excuse. It does not. For the men and women concerned, it was a defiant rejection of the values which those who saw themselves as their betters attempted to foist upon them.<sup>15</sup>

Given his presence at Bethelsdorp and his role as missionary to the Kora, Kakkerlak's history exemplifies, according to Malherbe, 'certain stages in the great missionary project.'<sup>16</sup> Read, Kakkerlak's most fervent supporter, pursued justice and freedom for the Khoisan while posted at Bethelsdorp. Kakkerlak's promotion to missionary status was not only a pragmatic illustration of Read's faith in his ability: it was also in keeping with LMS ideology of the time. Converting the Khoisan and sending them – as missionaries – to preach to others, was considered the most effective way of taking the gospel to the 'heathen.'<sup>17</sup> Read, like van der Kemp, challenged the Calvinist belief held by many white settlers that they had a special covenant with God. Richard Elphick, in his study of Christianity and equality in South Africa, explains the way in which – for the white settlers – religion was inextricably linked with identity, and why they feared the consequences of missions to Khoisan:

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<sup>14</sup> Malherbe, 'Cupido Kakkerlak', pp. 367-368.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750-1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 126-127.

<sup>16</sup> Malherbe, 'Cupido Kakkerlak', p. 374.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 16; Elizabeth Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), p. 17; Martin Chatfield Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana and the Missionaries, 1780-1840* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010), pp. 94-95.



The term “Christian” designated their white race and European origin as much as their religion. And when, in the 1790s, missionaries began intensive evangelization among people of color, many “Christians” feared, though wrongly, that baptism would bestow on slaves the legal right to freedom.<sup>18</sup>

Read and other missionaries were therefore reproached by the settlers for trying to Christianise the Khoisan: the farmers depended for their subsistence upon a servile class. Martin Legassick summarises the conflict between van der Kemp and Read and the colonial authorities: they ‘had a philosophy ill-adapted to a society of white settlement’, and their marriages to a Khoisan woman and a freed slave respectively, ‘demonstrated their belief in practicing as well as preaching the equality of men under God.’<sup>19</sup> These were, then, Kakkerlak’s mentors.

Eventually, Read was dismissed from the LMS at the 1817 Cape Town synod. Elizabeth Elbourne, who considers Read’s life in southern Africa (1799 - 1853) to be a suitable frame for exploring the interaction between missionaries and the Khoekhoe, summarises the fall of Bethelsdorp radicalism at the hands of the synod:

In the end, it was an internal missionary lobby, egged on by a colonial elite that no longer shared the old British disdain for the farmers of the interior, which brought down Read and with him the more egalitarian approach to Khoekhoe culture of Bethelsdorp in its early days.<sup>20</sup>

Another LMS missionary, John Philip, raised awareness of the unjust treatment of the Khoekhoe in a British colony in his publication *Researches in South Africa* (1828), shocking readers in Britain.<sup>21</sup> Philip argued that freedom for the Khoisan would be beneficial to the Empire because it would reduce the cost of labour, and settled Khoisan labourers would

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<sup>18</sup> Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, p. 1. See also Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 102; 111-114.

<sup>19</sup> Legassick, *Politics of a South African Frontier*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 229; for Bethelsdorp radicalism, see pp. 197-232.

<sup>21</sup> John Philip, *Researches in Southern Africa: Illustrating the Civil, Moral and Religious Condition of the Native Tribes* (London: James Duncan, 1828).

adopt the ‘civilised’ aspects of Western culture.<sup>22</sup> By the time Moffat dismissed Kakkerlak from the LMS in 1823, the LMS leaders’ ideology resembled more the beliefs of the governing elite.<sup>23</sup>

Although Philip’s arrival in South Africa fell within the time frame covered by *Praying Mantis*, Brink excludes Philip from the narrative completely. Philip had arrived in South Africa with John Campbell in 1819, charged with addressing the problems caused by LMS scandals, including that of Read. Although Read’s dismissal is relayed to Cupido (pp. 238-239), there is no mention of Philip’s growing role in the LMS. However, Brink relied upon Elbourne’s *Blood Ground* as a historical source, and must therefore have been well aware of Philip’s actions, and their consequences, in the years immediately preceding Kakkerlak’s dismissal, and the following few decades. Brink excludes Philip from his narrative because of the man’s complexity: he cannot be championed like van der Kemp, or vilified like Moffat. As noted by Andrew Bank in his study of the ‘John Philip Myth’, influential historian and proposed inventor of the Philip myth, G. M. Theal, adapted his assessment of Philip as a ‘shining philanthropist’ in 1877 to – only fourteen years later – a ‘villain’ responsible for the race relations problems in the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Bank attributes Theal’s reversal to *inter alia*: the rise of Afrikaner nationalism; his close political and personal affiliations with members of the Afrikaner Bond; a shift from consulting the writings of liberal travellers and missionaries, to the writings of Dutch-Afrikaner ideologues, and the rise of Social Darwinism, resulting in Theal’s belief that racial differences were ‘immutable facts of biology.’<sup>25</sup> Later historians would present Philip as a Machiavellian

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<sup>22</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 247.

<sup>23</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 234.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Bank, ‘The Politics of Mythology: The Genealogy of the Philip Myth’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25:3 (Sept., 1999), 461-477 (pp. 465-467).

<sup>25</sup> Bank, ‘Philip Myth’, pp. 468-469.

outsider who disrupted relationships between ethnic groups through his insistence on equality and assimilation; in the 1930s and 1940s, he was a point of comparison for the derision of anti-segregationists.<sup>26</sup>

It was this portrait of Philip that would become ‘absorbed into the popular mythology of apartheid from the 1950s onwards’, propounded from ‘the podiums of prime ministers to the blackboards of school classrooms’, with Bank noting that the myth was maintained right through to the 1980s by ‘even the more liberal stream within Afrikaner nationalist historiography.’<sup>27</sup> Given the later tensions between the apartheid regime and some Christian organisations in South Africa, the image of Philip as a ‘meddling outsider’ with considerable influence over political mechanisms was a potent one.<sup>28</sup> Considering this is the climate in which Brink began writing novels, his exclusion of Philip from *Praying Mantis* is all the more surprising. Brink’s insistence on the unreliability of ‘history’ is exemplified so remarkably by the diverse representations of Philip that it seems perverse for Brink to write him out of Kakkerlak’s story entirely; Theal’s attempt to justify the shift in his perception of Philip provides convincing support for Brink’s claims about historical sources.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the legacy of Philip’s vilification remained powerful beyond the 1980s. Philip’s beliefs were pertinent to the apartheid era in other ways, too: whereas van der Kemp had ‘laboured under a misapprehension’ that ‘the oppressions of the Hottentots originated wholly with Major Cuyler’, Philip recognised that such oppression had become ‘part of the colonial system.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bank, ‘Philip Myth’, pp. 472-474.

<sup>27</sup> Bank, ‘Philip Myth’, p. 474.

<sup>28</sup> Bank, ‘Philip Myth’, p. 477.

<sup>29</sup> Bank, ‘Philip Myth’, p. 468.

<sup>30</sup> Philip, *Researches*, 1:130.

Philip and his peers do, I believe, embody some significant elements of the way in which Christianity was politicised in the following centuries. Several historians delineate the links between the LMS missionaries, black political nationalism and resistance to racial segregation in the twentieth century, such as Ross concluding *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony* with the observation that there is ‘a direct historical line from Van der Kemp and James Read to the ANC from 1912 onwards, although of course this was only one strand in its ancestry.’<sup>31</sup> Ross also remarks, in a footnote, that ‘one would have given much to hear Van der Kemp’s denunciation of the National Party’s failure to live up to the Christian ideals it propagated. It would have been more uninhibited than that of any of the party’s actual critics.’<sup>32</sup> With these comments, Ross reinforces the ideological links between those early missionaries and those activists who would later oppose apartheid. It is this ‘direct historical line’ that I now consider.

Some mission churches sought to improve the position of indigenous peoples through education, health care and lobbying the government. The African clergy were dissatisfied with the white missionaries’ reluctance to give up control of the churches, and often disagreed with the missionaries regarding salaries and segregation. Consequently, AICs were established. Ethiopianism was ‘a direct expression of resistance against the missionaries, white settlers, and the colonial government,’ and John de Gruchy links black theology – which would later play a significant role in the struggle against apartheid – to ‘the revolt of black Christians at the turn of the century ... which found its institutional expression’ in the AICs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Status and Respectability*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>32</sup> Ross, *Status and Respectability*, p. 176.

<sup>33</sup> John W. de Gruchy and Steve de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 150.

Ironically, early independent churches would introduce a justification for racial segregation: unionists argued that segregating churches would be accepting the racial prejudices prevalent at the time, whereas segregationists claimed the separation of churches was practical because of language and cultural differences.<sup>34</sup> In 1829, only six years after the last recorded sighting of Kakkerlak, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK – Dutch Reformed Church, the official church of the Cape) synod maintained its position that Holy Communion would be administered to all members, regardless of ethnicity.<sup>35</sup> Yet by 1857, the NGK synod – under social pressure – concluded that although segregation was not desirable or scriptural, it was necessary in some circumstances in order to spread the Gospel more effectively and minister to both white and black or ‘Coloured.’<sup>36</sup> De Gruchy names van der Kemp as the first English missionary to become ‘the bane of Afrikaner farmers’, the conflict arising because the English missionaries were ‘not serving the apparent needs of the white settlers and farmers, but striving to be relevant to the conditions and struggles of the Coloureds and Africans.’<sup>37</sup> For the NGK, this conflict could be avoided by the implementation of separate services dependent on ethnicity; it was also a policy that would increase mission work, and consequently the number of converts.<sup>38</sup>

I turn now to the twentieth century. After the Nationalist Party won the general election in 1948, it was the DRCs that ‘set out to articulate an idealized version of segregation that, in theory, would lead to the elimination of white domination: a biblically defensible apartheid.’<sup>39</sup> Indeed, apartheid was often justified with reference to the Bible: Elizabeth

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<sup>34</sup> Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> Malherbe, ‘Cupido Kakkerlak’, p. 374; de Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> de Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>37</sup> de Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> de Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Walshe, *Prophetic Christianity and the Liberation Movement in South Africa*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995), p. 21.

Isichei cites Deuteronomy 32:8, Acts 17:26 and Genesis 11.<sup>40</sup> Peter Walshe explains that in the 1970s, the Church viewed its own role as one of ensuring that, within the apartheid structures, co-existence of all ethnic groups took place ‘justly, with love of neighbour.’<sup>41</sup> It was in this climate that Brink would begin to participate in the anti-apartheid struggle. At this time too, Pastor Allan Boesak also campaigned against apartheid. While Brink’s novels and criticism explored the themes of discrimination and social injustice in the past and present, Boesak’s publications, theological tracts, and sermons addressed these issues and suggested solutions to them, all framed with reference to his Christian belief. Brink describes Boesak as ‘a beacon of light in the struggle against oppression’, a man he admired for his ‘unwavering dedication and his energy.’<sup>42</sup> In fact, Brink first met Mandela at Boesak’s home. Boesak defines black theology as a theology of liberation, contending that the God of the Bible is a God of liberation rather than oppression, and that black theology ‘refuses to believe that the gospel is the narrow, racist ideology white Christians have made of it.’<sup>43</sup>

Boesak refers to the prophetic Christianity of Read, van der Kemp, Moffat and Philip that recognised the inhumanity of slavery and the racist society. He identifies a pattern ‘that would emerge again and again in South Africa’s history’ of ‘the church as a *prophetic minority*’, which would ‘challenge society in terms of the radical claims of the gospel.’<sup>44</sup>

Boesak explores further the impact of the missionaries, such as their increased conservatism as a result of losing sight of the gospel in favour of conforming to white society. When

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 306; 404. See also Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>41</sup> Walshe, *Prophetic Christianity*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>42</sup> Brink, *Fork in the Road*, p. 416.

<sup>43</sup> Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Orbis Books, 1977), pp. 9-10. Boesak traces the term ‘black theology’ to its roots – the Committee on Theological Perspectives of the NCBC in the USA – in 1966, and the ideas of James Cone, adding that the term might be ‘new’, but the idea is not: ‘it is as old as the attempts of white Christians to bring the gospel to blacks.’ See Boesak, *Farewell*, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Allan Boesak, *The Tenderness of Conscience: African Renaissance and the Spirituality of Politics* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2005), p. 134.

Boesak considers the silence of the English-speaking churches during the twentieth century, and the disparity between their words and their actions, he maintains that their interest lay in retaining white power: thus the pattern noted earlier is repeated.<sup>45</sup> As Elphick notes, Philip and his peers ‘offered little challenge to white domination in church and state’, instead seeking to ‘defend blacks from the injustices of colonial rule, not to question colonial rule itself.’<sup>46</sup>

Boesak cites late eighteenth century Khoekhoe preachers’ assertions that God was on the side of the oppressed as evidence for the origin and longevity of black theology in South Africa.<sup>47</sup>

Pertinent to the discussion of Cupido as a prophet-trickster is the link that Boesak makes between black theology and prophetic Christianity:

An authentic contextual theology is a prophetic one; it is not merely an exhumation of the corpses of tradition as African theology was sometimes understood to be, but attempts to make critical use of those traditions from the past which can play a humanizing and revolutionizing role in contemporary society.<sup>48</sup>

The etymology of the word ‘prophet’ is important here. In addition to being interpreted as ‘one who sees beforehand’, its translation from Greek is an interpreter, or spokesman – particularly for the gods: prophets were ‘inspired deliverers of God’s message not only about the future but also declaring His will to their contemporaries.’<sup>49</sup> One more illustration of black theology’s concerns must be provided. Boesak contributed an essay to a publication titled *Censorship* (1983), in which he claims that black theology deals with questions:

What does it mean to be black in South Africa? What does it mean to live in a world controlled by white racists? What if one believes in Jesus Christ as

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<sup>45</sup> Boesak, *Tenderness*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>46</sup> Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, p. 64.

<sup>47</sup> Allan A. Boesak, ‘Theodicy: "De Lawd knewed how it was." Black theology and black suffering’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. by Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 156-168 (p. 158).

<sup>48</sup> Boesak, *Farewell*, p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> See E. A. Livingstone, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 459.

Lord and these other people call themselves Christians also? What if they say they believe in the same bible, even deriving from it the arguments that they used for the destruction of your humanity?<sup>50</sup>

These questions are similar to those explored by Brink through his reimagining of Kakkerlak's life. Brink also contributed an essay to *Censorship*, and it is with the knowledge that Brink was familiar with Boesak's work – and the understanding that both men were responding to the same situation, and seeking the same ends via very different means – that I proceed. Boesak perhaps provided some inspiration for Cupido: he campaigned for social justice from 1976 until the present day, throughout the time that Brink wrote *Praying Mantis* but, more pertinently, his approach both recalls the endeavours of some missionaries and critiques them. In *Praying Mantis*, Cupido does the same.

In September 1985, the *Kairos Document* was published, with the first chapter stating:

Both oppressor and oppressed claim loyalty to the same Church. [...] There we sit in the same Church while outside Christian policemen and soldiers are beating up and killing Christian children or torturing Christian prisoners to death while yet other Christians stand by and weakly plead for peace.<sup>51</sup>

The document goes on to explore the way that a 'State Theology' has been created by the South African apartheid State, whose god 'is not merely an idol or false god, it is the devil disguised as Almighty God – the antichrist.'<sup>52</sup> This document, more than any other, inflamed the debate concerning the role of Christians in the apartheid state. The *Kairos Document* is an exemplary exposition of the ways in which Christianity was manipulated and misinterpreted during the apartheid era, and the ways in which apartheid was considered heretical. It is clear also that the authors of the *Kairos Document* were able to counter the

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<sup>50</sup> Allan Boesak, 'To Guard the Faith...', in *Censorship: A study of censorship in South Africa by five distinguished authors*, ed. by Theo Coggin (Johannesburg: SA Institute of Race Relations, 1983), pp. 55-62 (pp. 57-58).

<sup>51</sup> Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*, Second revised edition (1986), p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Kairos Theologians, *Kairos Document*, p. 8.



biblical justification of apartheid with their own interpretation of the Bible as a liberatory text. A prophetic theology is proposed – one which will provide hope.<sup>53</sup> The document called for ‘direct Christian participation in the struggle, including acts of civil disobedience in resistance to government tyranny.’<sup>54</sup> Boesak’s anti-apartheid activism reflected the sentiments of the *Kairos Document*.

The *Kairos Document* and Boesak’s theological approach was not without criticism, and these criticisms are echoed in the problematic nature of historical fiction. While acknowledging the contributions made by black theologians such as Boesak, Itumeleng Mosala identifies a crucial and foundational problem with the biblical hermeneutics of black theology. Mosala explains that black theologians fail to recognise or engage with the context in which the Bible was produced: biblical scholarship has illuminated the Bible as a product of complex and problematical histories and societies. There are contradictions within the Bible precisely because the texts represent the political and social interests of different classes, comprised of ‘a multiplicity of varying and often contradictory traditions.’<sup>55</sup> The Bible is vulnerable to multiple interpretations because it is ‘the product, the record, the site, and the weapon of class, cultural, gender and racial struggle.’<sup>56</sup> Mosala insists on the necessity of a biblical hermeneutics that begins with context, seeking to discover the questions for which the biblical texts were offered as answers.<sup>57</sup> Mosala’s concerns will be crucial to an understanding of Brink’s *Praying Mantis*, particularly the efficacy of Cupido re-imagined as a prophet, and Brink’s use of historical and anthropological sources.

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<sup>53</sup> Kairos Theologians, *Kairos Document*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>54</sup> de Gruchy, *Church Struggle*, p. 197.

<sup>55</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 193.

<sup>57</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 192.

After initially starting *Praying Mantis* in 1984, Brink's decision to return to the novel in 1992 and 2004 may be revealing. The events of the intervening years are likely to have had an impact on Brink's construction of the novel. The first decade of ANC governance was disappointing for many: the gap between the rich and the poor remained as large as ever, ethnic tensions continued, and the number of unemployed people was still substantial.<sup>58</sup> Writing in 2000, Brink remained optimistic, but also acknowledged numerous problems: 'the lofty ideals of transparency, accountability and yes democracy once so proudly proclaimed by the ANC have become jeopardised by the actions of many of its own power elite: minority rights are threatened by the tyranny of the majority.'<sup>59</sup> In the early transition years, prominent Christian figures and the churches adopted an ethical direction that focused on 'special preference for the poor', and affirmative action in support of marginalised peoples, whether marginalised by gender or ethnicity.<sup>60</sup> In a meeting with religious leaders in 1997, Mandela insisted that religious institutions needed to work with the State to address morality and 'spiritual malaise.'<sup>61</sup> In this appeal for participation in the State's endeavours, Barbara Bompani sees the churches' role, as required by the ANC, as 'a tool for strengthening the control and power of the state under the ANC and not as a means of creating a challenging, independent force in opposition.'<sup>62</sup> Brink may have returned to *Praying Mantis* influenced by the debate concerning to what extent the Church should continue to influence the precarious situation in South Africa.

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<sup>58</sup> See Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, *Class, Race, and Inequality in South Africa* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 300-339.

<sup>59</sup> André Brink, 'Free thoughts; It is a decade since Nelson Mandela finally walked to freedom. But has the new republic of South Africa lived up to the vision he nurtured within these walls?', *Observer*, 13 February 2000, *Life Pages*, p. 22.

<sup>60</sup> Walshe, *Prophetic Christianity*, p. 138.

<sup>61</sup> Janine Rauch, *Crime Prevention and Morality: The Campaign for Moral Regeneration in South Africa* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2005), p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Bompani, "'Mandela Mania': Mainline Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Third World Quarterly*, 27:6 (2006), 1137-1149 (p. 1147).

I suggest that there are some essential similarities between, for example, the endeavours of van der Kemp, Read, and Philip, on the one hand, and the ANC on the other. Certainly there is an ideological connection, as well as a linguistic congruence that Boesak recognises.<sup>63</sup> I do not wish to suggest that the ANC and the LMS faced identical problems, or were even in similar situations – indeed, the LMS was obviously not a democratically elected body imbued with the responsibility of addressing poverty and inequality issues, even if some LMS representatives thought that this was their remit. Yet these missionaries did have some influence on colonial officials and, in Philip’s case, British parliament – whether they had the right to that power or not. What I am suggesting is that both the LMS representatives and the ANC party intended to make life better for marginalised people, whatever legal changes this might have required, and whatever challenges or failings they may have experienced. In their significantly different contexts, both groups offered indigenous, marginalised people the promise of equality: a promise that, ultimately, they would not be able to deliver. In this sense, the reader can discern an allegory for post-apartheid South Africa in *Praying Mantis*.

### **Critical responses to *Praying Mantis***

Brink follows Malherbe’s record of Kakkerlak’s life consistently in the chronology of Cupido’s life in *Praying Mantis*. Embellishments, additions and omissions generally relate to characterisation rather than plot. In his exploration of Brink’s prose oeuvre, Godfrey Meintjes explains the ways in which Brink’s novels ‘undermine and deconstruct the colonial discourse.’<sup>64</sup> For Meintjes, Brink suggests that in the future ‘postcolonial Afrikaans literature will reflect a recognition of the Self in the Other and that in doing so a greater sense of South Africanness will emerge as a result of fading barriers between Self and Other.’<sup>65</sup> *Praying*

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<sup>63</sup> Boesak, *Tenderness*, p. 159.

<sup>64</sup> Meintjes, ‘Prose Oeuvre’, p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> Meintjes, ‘Prose Oeuvre’, p. 72.

*Mantis* is conceivably a manifestation of this new type of literature. Ute Kauer explains that Brink's historical novels foster the acceptance of diversity required for national identity:

A sense of national identity depends on the historical imagination of a nation. In a multicultural society like South Africa's, this means that identity has to rest on diversity, not on a homogenous version of the past. Totalising narratives of the past, which exclude certain groups from collective memory, fail to provide the basis for such an identity.<sup>66</sup>

Brink's post-apartheid literature is 'not only an expression of coming to terms with the burden of the past and present violence and oppression, but also a crucial step in the redefinition of a nation.'<sup>67</sup>

The reception of Brink's novels has not been entirely positive. Criticisms of *Cape of Storms* are also pertinent to *Praying Mantis*: while Susan Wright criticises Brink's style in *Cape of Storms* as veering 'dangerously toward tired trendiness, towards the clichés of magic realism', Gurnah notes that its 'folkloric quaintness' can 'lock it into another stereotype.'<sup>68</sup> Of Brink's style in *Praying Mantis*, Hedley Twidle comments that, 'a poetics premised on a virtually unlimited imaginative space' is at risk of becoming 'a compulsive recourse to a pre-colonial African world, inevitably constructed as a site of wish fulfilment for the contemporary writer.'<sup>69</sup> Although some critics have considered Brink's use of magical realism, the presentation of the mythic Heitsi-Eibib trickster has not yet been explored in depth. I turn now to Heitsi-Eibib in Khoekhoe belief, paying particular attention to the anthropological source on which Brink relied.

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<sup>66</sup> Ute Kauer, "'The Need to Storify': Reinventing the Past in André Brink's Novels', in *Contrary*, ed. by Burger and Szczurek, pp. 299-311 (p. 309).

<sup>67</sup> Kauer, "'The Need to Storify'", p. 309.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Wright, Review of *The First Life of Adamastor*, *Wasifiri*, 9:19 (1994), 72-73 (p. 73); Abdulrazak Gurnah, 'Prospero's nightmare', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 February 1993, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Hedley Twidle, 'First Lives, first words: Camoes, magical realism and the limits of invention', *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa*, 17:1 (2012), 28-48 (p. 42).

## Heitsi-Eibib

For information on Khoisan culture and beliefs, Brink explains that he consulted several historical and anthropological texts when writing *Praying Mantis*: of these, all but one (Schapera's survey of Khoisan groups and their cultures) focus entirely on the San rather than the Khoekhoe, and – although published more recently – are based on Bleek and Lucy Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911). Although it may seem as if Brink consulted a range of sources to lend his depiction of Cupido and his beliefs some authenticity, it is worth bearing in mind the criticisms of Bleek and Lloyd's work. Hermann Wittenberg cautions the reader that Bleek's Victorian sensibilities, and his desire to identify similarities in European and Khoisan folklore, influenced him to 'sanitise' the narratives, reducing the Khoisan imagination's narrative range to 'the generic limits of the naïve European children's folktale.'<sup>70</sup> Stephen Watson's *Return of the Moon* (1991), a poetic rendering of narratives from the Bleek and Lloyd collection, was also a source used by Brink, but again, this work is criticised by Wittenberg for focusing on the transcendental and mythic qualities of the narrative.<sup>71</sup> Thus the validity of Brink's sources as accurate representations of Khoekhoe and San beliefs in the early nineteenth century is questionable: the very nature of the climate in which missionaries, historians, anthropologists, ethnographers and even linguists such as Bleek worked, rendered a faithful account of indigenous belief systems impossible. If nothing else, the Bleek and Lloyd collection was compiled at a time when there was much to be gained from othering and infantilising the /Xam.

Schapera's survey appears to be the primary source of Brink's portrayal of Heitsi-Eibib in *Praying Mantis*: Brink states in his 'Note' that for information on the Khoi and San peoples,

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<sup>70</sup> Hermann Wittenberg, 'Wilhelm Bleek and the Khoisan Imagination: A Study of Censorship, Genocide and Colonial Science', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 38:3 (2012), 667-679 (p. 678).

<sup>71</sup> Wittenberg, 'Khoisan Imagination', p. 676.

he ‘made ample use’ of Schapera’s anthropological study (p. 278).<sup>72</sup> Although Schapera’s volume was exceptional for its time in its scope and methodology, Barnard’s more recent *Hunters and Herders* was published partly to update Schapera’s work.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, when Barnard lists the sources available to Schapera in the 1920s, it is striking just how much he relied upon even then dated – and undoubtedly inaccurate – materials: travelogues, Bleek and Lloyd’s work, historical compilations, and ethnographies such as Hahn’s.<sup>74</sup> Here, it seems, is a paradigm of Brink’s chain of whispers. The distinction that Barnard makes between his own work and Schapera’s is crucial: whereas Schapera categorised the Khoisan clearly into two groups – ‘Bushmen’ and ‘Hottentots’ – Barnard acknowledges that this distinction can no-longer be made.<sup>75</sup> It is perhaps significant that Brink chose to consult Schapera rather than Barnard. It may be that timing – Barnard’s book was published in 1992, the year in which Brink returned to *Praying Mantis* after an eight-year hiatus – played some part in this decision.

The word ‘mantis’ is Ancient Greek (μάντις) for ‘prophet’; the insect’s folded fore-limbs make it appear as if it is praying. Schapera, like Hahn, interprets ‘Heitsi-Eibib’ as constructed from *heisi* meaning ‘prophet’ or ‘foreteller’, and *eibe* meaning ‘beforehand’ or ‘previously.’<sup>76</sup> Despite the similarities between Schapera and Hahn’s anthropological studies, it is important to consider the nuances of Schapera’s, as Brink draws on Schapera for Khoisan belief and mythology: Heitsi-Eibib is described by Schapera as ‘a great and

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<sup>72</sup> I. Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa: Bushmen and Hottentots* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930). Brink has, however, referred to Heitsi-Eibib in previous texts; it is likely that he did not rely solely on Schapera.

<sup>73</sup> Barnard, *Hunters and Herders*, p. xvi.

<sup>74</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*. It is interesting to note Schapera’s reliance on Hahn, particularly as Hahn in turn draws on Peter Kolben’s *The Present State of the Cape of Good-Hope: or, A Particular Account of the Several Nations of the Hottentots: Their Religion, Government, Laws, Customs, Ceremonies, and Opinions; Their Art of War, Professions, Language, Genius, &c.*, trans. by Guido Medley, 2 vols. (London: W. Innys, 1731).

<sup>75</sup> Barnard, *Hunters and Herders*, p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 383. Schapera acknowledges Hahn’s alternative interpretation of Heitsi-Eibib’s name: ‘the One who has the appearance of a tree.’

celebrated magician among the Hottentots in prehistoric times.<sup>77</sup> He was rich and conquered his enemies; he was also said to be clever and wise. Schapera explains that Heitsi-Eibib ‘conquered great lions, and put enmity between the lion’s seed and mankind. He could change himself into many different forms.’ The Khoekhoe appeal to Heitsi-Eibib for safe journeys and success in the hunt, and he also shows them how to kill lions. Heitsi-Eibib is also associated with the moon.<sup>78</sup> In *Praying Mantis*, Heitsi-Eibib performs many of these functions (pp. 25-27; 67; 228). In his 2009 memoir, *A Fork in the Road*, Brink describes the cairns of the ‘hunter-god Heitsi-Eibib whose many deaths had been followed by as many resurrections, incomparably more wondrous, I secretly thought, than the biblical rebirth of Jesus.’<sup>79</sup>

Brink uses the praying mantis insect as a manifestation of Heitsi-Eibib – whether the Khoekhoe made this identification themselves is unclear. Schapera compares Heitsi-Eibib’s trickster characteristics to the San trickster Mantis, but does not explicitly state that the Khoekhoe identified Heitsi-Eibib with the mantis insect.<sup>80</sup> In his 1731 account of the Khoekhoe culture, Peter Kolben also claims that they adored ‘as a benign Deity, a certain insect’ clearly resembling a mantis.<sup>81</sup> This insect is considered a harbinger of good fortune, and Kolben explains that the Khoekhoe ‘look upon themselves as made, by the Presence of this Deity, a new People; and resolve to walk in Newness of Life; a Work in which they trust they shall then have this Deity’s Assistance in a very extraordinary manner.’<sup>82</sup> If the insect lands upon a man or woman, he or she is looked upon as a saint and a holy person, and every

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<sup>77</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 384.

<sup>78</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, pp. 384-385.

<sup>79</sup> Brink, *Fork in the Road*, p. 35.

<sup>80</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 385.

<sup>81</sup> Kolben, *The Present State of the Cape*, p. 98.

<sup>82</sup> Kolben, *The Present State of the Cape*, p. 99.

precaution is taken to ensure the safety of the insect wherever it appears.<sup>83</sup> Heitsi-Eibib is not discussed. Hahn recounts an explanation given by a Swedish traveller regarding cairns and possible mantis and Heitsi-Eibib worship: ‘Of a certain kind of greyish grasshopper (mantis fausta) the people here believe that the Hottentots offer prayer to it.’<sup>84</sup> The mantis fausta is, according to Hahn, called ‘//Gaunab.’<sup>85</sup> //Gaunab is also the evil-doer who battles with Tsui-//Goab, referred to in *Praying Mantis* as the evil god Gaunab (see p. 7).<sup>86</sup> Heitsi-Eibib and //Gaunab are ostensibly two separate beings. Although Hahn claims that Heitsi-Eibib and Tsui-//Goab are the same, he recognises the trickster nature of Heitsi-Eibib.<sup>87</sup> Barnard contends that /Kaggen the trickster, and Mantis the /Xam God, are the same: his name can designate either trickster or God depending on the context. Schapera describes /Kaggen the Mantis as mischievous and able to tell the ultimate future. He also returns to life after he has been killed.<sup>88</sup> These qualities are also found in Heitsi-Eibib. /Kaggen and Heitsi-Eibib have both been described by Schapera as trickster figures with god-like traits.

### **Cupido as prophet**

Brink’s appropriation of Kakkerlak’s story appears to have two purposes: first, it offers an untold story, giving a voice to one marginalised historical figure; second, it imagines an acceptance of diversity essential for South Africa’s future. *Praying Mantis* explores Cupido’s changing beliefs: those of his people, the Khoekhoe, an acceptance of the San beliefs of his wife Anna, the Christianity presented to him by the missionaries and, eventually, a synthesis of all three. Cupido’s ability to embrace such varied ideologies contributes to his role as a positive symbol of diversity and complex identity. I add a third

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<sup>83</sup> Kolben, *The Present State of the Cape*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>84</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 45. Hahn apologises for the incomplete references: see p. vii.

<sup>85</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 42; 92.

<sup>86</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, p. 92.

<sup>87</sup> Hahn, *Tsuni-//Goam*, pp. 134-137.

<sup>88</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 178.



function, which relates to Cupido's identification with Heitsi-Eibib the prophet-trickster: Cupido's story prophesies the repetitious twists of Christianity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

First, it is worth noting that in addition to reimagining the life of a Khoekhoe man, Brink also reimagines the missionaries – van der Kemp, Moffat and Read. In his 'Note' at the end of *Praying Mantis*, Brink acknowledges his debt to Elbourne's *Blood Ground*; he refers to Read as 'disgracefully neglected by South African historiography' and claims that *Blood Ground* was one of two publications that redressed that neglect (pp. 277-278). Although Brink perhaps felt that Read's 'neglect' would be further remedied through his portrayal in *Praying Mantis*, another silence filled, it is important to note that Read and van der Kemp, and indeed Moffat, are constructed by Brink from the same historical sources used to forge his portrayal of Kakkerlak.<sup>89</sup> The middle section of *Praying Mantis* is narrated by Read, and framed by a third person narration of Cupido's life before his conversion, and later his time in Nokaneng. Cupido's letters to God are incorporated within Read's section, and the reader is shown Read's bemused or concerned responses to them. In this way, Brink emphasises that the Khoekhoe of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had little representation – political or other – and that, for the most part, their lives and customs had only been recorded by missionaries. Cupido's letters to God may be muddled and incoherent in places, but they are his words, as imagined by Brink, nevertheless – not an *interpretation* of his words. The narrative structure also reveals, however, that Read's story is incomplete without an understanding of Cupido's life before and after his encounter with Read. Often baffled by Cupido's behaviour, Read is not privy to events that have profoundly affected Cupido.

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<sup>89</sup> Sarah Gertrude Millin's novels *The King of the Bastards* (1949) and *The Burning Man* (1952) feature van der Kemp and Read.

Rather than framing Cupido's life in the words of a missionary, as in the LMS journals and letters, in *Praying Mantis* it is Read's life that is framed by Cupido. Their stories complement and inform each other. In this way, Brink's novel attempts to fill the silences in Read's story and offer one possible account of Cupido's life: on a wider scale, Brink emphasises the importance of recognising that there is a fuller history than that offered in missionaries' letters and journals, or – more generally – records kept by whites. However, Brink's reimagining of this particular moment in history achieves more than just 'filling in the silences.'

The second function – to celebrate diversity and challenge the notion that identity and beliefs are immutable – is explored through Cupido's changing faith. Brink's portrayal of Anna's beliefs reflects the equivalence of Mantis the /Xam God and //Kaggen the trickster made by some anthropologists. Anna tells Cupido stories about 'the god of her people, the one they call Tkaggen, and whom the white people call Devil.' She agrees that Tkaggen is like Heitsi-Eibib (p. 76). Anna is reluctant to convert to Christianity, as she feels she is not able to turn her back on Tkaggen (p. 106; 108; 178). In Cupido's remonstrative letter to God following Anna's death, he mentions her dedication to the 'holy mantis' (p. 179). It is possible that Brink's mantis and Heitsi-Eibib conflation is an inaccurate imitation of the much-debated mantis and /Kaggen conflation, or perhaps a confusion between Gaunab, possibly represented by a mantis, and Heitsi-Eibib. In any case, even if there was no conflation of Heitsi-Eibib and the mantis by the Khoekhoe of Kakkerlak's time, Brink seems to conflate the two in the spirit of reimagining the past. Barnard, however, explains that San culture in general is able to assimilate ideas and stories more easily than in Khoekhoe society, where religion is 'less

flexible and perhaps less adaptive.<sup>90</sup> When Cupido embraces Christianity, he abandons his earlier beliefs to the extent that he destroys Heitsi-Eibib's cairns (p. 122).

The conflation of the mantis and Heitsi-Eibib is useful for Brink's purposes: it provides a neat symbol. When Cupido first meets Heitsi-Eibib, he sees him as 'a huge mantis' (p. 24). Heitsi-Eibib is associated with traveling: Cupido tells his mother that 'Life must be like Heitsi-Eibib. Here today, tomorrow somewhere else, always in a different place, always a different body' (p. 17). The mantis that appears on Cupido's corpse when he is a baby is believed by Cupido's mother to be an omen that Cupido will 'go on a long walk through this world' (p. 9). When Cupido later sees a praying mantis, its 'front legs folded in devotion', perched on Servaas Ziervogel's wagon, he interprets it as a sign that he should travel with Ziervogel. Disturbed by seeing a mantis in the thatch of the church at Klaarwater (Griquatown), Cupido is reluctant to take up the post there (p. 203; 208). He explains to Read that his mother told him it was good luck to see a mantis in the veld, and that 'it was Heitsi-Eibib himself.' However, it is bad luck to see a mantis inside. When Arend arrives at Nokaneng at the close of the novel, Cupido is distracted by the mantis seated next to him on the wagon (p. 273). The mantis has gone by the time Cupido and Arend leave the mission station together, but Brink explains that 'they do not need him any more' (p. 275). Cupido's travels and destiny are thus associated with both the mantis and Heitsi-Eibib.

Furthermore, Cupido himself is identified with the mantis, and Heitsi-Eibib, throughout the novel. Cupido's corpse appears to be brought back to life by a mantis, and the narrator tells us that, for the Khoekhoe, 'the mantis is revered as the harbinger of good fortune; its Afrikaans name, *hotnotsgot*, even means "Hottentot god"' (p. 8). The mantis perches on the

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<sup>90</sup> Barnard, *Hunters and Herders*, p. 261.

dead body of baby Cupido, foretelling his role as a saint or holy man. Cupido's mother suggests that Heitsi-Eibib might be Cupido's father (p. 12; 91). When Cupido and Anna have intercourse for the first time, he 'releases a whole handful of fireflies between their thighs' (p. 69), an event that elsewhere Brink links to Heitsi-Eibib.<sup>91</sup> At Graaff-Reinet, van der Kemp goes to confront agitated farmers, stopping mid-way to pick up a mantis from his path. He gives the mantis to Cupido, concerned that it could be trampled if the situation becomes violent (p. 98). Cupido feels that 'something of ineffable importance' has happened (p. 99). The encounter prompts him to later approach van der Kemp, who tells him that he could become a reverend if he wanted to (p. 100). This episode illustrates the affinity Cupido feels with the mantis, and the faith he has in van der Kemp as his saviour. This is certainly Read's interpretation of the incident, although he doubts Cupido realised the significance of it at the time (p. 115). Van der Kemp's concern for the mantis perhaps also reflects the traditional Khoekhoe concern for its safety, indicative of van der Kemp's respect for, and ability to assimilate, Khoekhoe culture.<sup>92</sup> After encountering further violence at Bethelsdorp, Cupido begins to feel angry with God for not intervening; as he walks away from a discussion with Read, Read describes the retreating Cupido as the silhouette of an insect, perhaps a mantis (pp. 156-157). Cupido is referred to as an insect elsewhere (p. 44; 188; 215). Cupido is therefore reimagined as a mantis prophet-trickster figure.

Cupido initially rejects the Khoekhoe and San beliefs when he is converted to Christianity. Cupido's behaviour changes too. In *Praying Mantis*, Brink incorporates the licentiousness, promiscuity and aggression ascribed to Kakkerlak by the missionaries, describing Cupido's intercourse with animals and holes in the ground, his frequent fights, and the murder of a

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<sup>91</sup> André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand* (London: Minerva, 1997), p. 179.

<sup>92</sup> Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, p. 16; Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, pp. 213-214.

lover's husband (pp. 60-64; 85-86). Interestingly, Brink attributes Cupido's behaviour to the influence of Ziervogel (p. 60). Nevertheless, he shows that only conversion had the power to subdue unruly behaviour: marriage and children do not tame Cupido (pp. 96-106). Cupido identifies with van der Kemp's earlier debauchery (p. 96); this, and the promise of wine which encouraged him to enter the church for the first time (pp. 91-92), partially leads to his conversion. It seems here that Brink has accepted the standard pattern of conversion narratives described by Elbourne: 'the sinner underwent a passage from evil to good via acquisition of self-knowledge through God's intervention.' In this, Elbourne identifies a paradox. Evangelical salvation 'creates a climate of shame while offering an immediate way out.'<sup>93</sup> Not only does Brink offer this as Cupido's motivation, he also offers a second – and rather simplistic – reason for Cupido's conversion. When Ziervogel suggests that Cupido could become a preacher, Cupido is embarrassed and reminds him that he is a 'Hottentot' (p. 58). Cupido is later heartened by van der Kemp's statement that he does not need to be white in order to become a reverend; Cupido later tells Anna, 'Tomorrow I am taking you to that reverend man's church. When we come out of that place we'll be white' (pp. 100-101). Cupido, then, has been moulded by Brink to suit the terms of LMS propaganda, emphasising the degeneracy of the Other before conversion. He has here something in common with the trickster, shaped to suit Western scholars' interpretations. Although Doueihy is referring to oral narratives, Brink appears to exemplify her criticism of Western scholars in his literary representation of a trickster figure from the oral tradition: he recreates and embellishes the claims about Kakkerlak's degeneracy in his portrayal of Cupido so that, in *Praying Mantis*, it seems as if the missionary enterprise – so often an arm of colonial domination – is justified by Cupido's remarkable transformation.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, pp. 193-194.

<sup>94</sup> Doueihy, 'Inhabiting the Space', p. 195.

Yet at the same time, he offers us an unfinished narrative open to interpretation: the true power of the trickster narrative, according to Doueihi, and the approach she recommends. The paradox of Brink's novel – that it conforms to a particular conservative reading of history, but also offers an alternative reading of the past – is not surprising given its content. Cupido abandons his traditional beliefs when he discovers the spiritual and material power of Christianity, destroying Heitsi-Eibib's cairns (pp. 122-123); when he becomes disillusioned with Christianity, he returns to Heitsi-Eibib, rebuilding the cairn before he leaves his mission post (p. 275). Cupido's partial rejection of Christianity lies in the contradictory interpretations of its tenets. Frustrated and scared by the surrounding violence, Cupido asks Read where the Kingdom of God is. Unimpressed by Read's response that it is in their hearts, Cupido exclaims:

We need it everywhere. And we need it now. Every day I preach to our people to tell them about God and how He will provide for us and protect us. But I see nothing of it. If they are hungry, where is God to give them food? (p. 155).

Read again tries to placate Cupido by reminding him that the reward will be given in heaven, but to no avail. The experience with a farmer refusing to recognise Cupido's land pass (p. 154) undermines van der Kemp's earlier reassurance that in God's eyes there are no distinctions between white or Khoisan men (p. 100).

Biblical texts are themselves open to interpretation, and these interpretations have ranged from oppressive to liberating. The missionaries' actions are also ambiguous: they have been hailed as heroic for their attempts to achieve freedom for the Khoisan, or vilified for their paternalism and endorsement of the colonial order. This contrast is illustrated through Read when he laments what the Europeans have done in southern Africa:

...trampling underfoot not only the generations of the past but all their spirits and ghosts and revenants and gods; and not only their gods, but *our* God, our Father insulted and dishonoured and abused by our crude possession of the creation that had once been His. [...] Oh my God, my God, what have we done? (pp. 190-191).

The ambiguities inherent within the missionary endeavour – and Christianity – permeate *Praying Mantis*. As Elbourne comments, the white colonists were able to ‘entrench the economic dispossession of the Khoekhoe, in the name of the very Christianity Read espoused.’ Thus, in *Blood Ground*, Elbourne explores the way in which ‘Christianity twisted like a snake in the hands of those who sought to use it.’<sup>95</sup> This idea forms the essence of Brink’s novel and his depiction of the relationship between Read and Cupido, the wider community of missionaries, settlers and Khoisan. With the conceptual focus of *Praying Mantis* being such a contradictory and paradoxical ‘snake’, it is no surprise that the novel’s approach to Cupido the trickster’s life story reflects this. Indeed, the two centuries of Christianity in South Africa provide another such reflection.

Following Doueihy’s recommendation, I would like to propose one reading of this particular trickster story, drawing together Christianity and the prophetic nature of Heitsi-Eibib – the third function of the novel. Heitsi-Eibib’s role as a prophet enables Cupido to mediate the past, present and future, a characteristic of the post-colonial trickster as described by Lynn.<sup>96</sup> Cupido anticipates (because he precedes) and reflects (because his story is re-told in 2005) the path of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but he also prophesies the present – as it was for Brink at the time of the novel’s composition – and offers a direction for the future of South Africa. Elbourne’s contention that Christianity twisted like a snake in the hands of those who tried to use it could, I think, be rephrased. The snake was, rather,

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<sup>95</sup> Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 11.

twisted by those who were able to interpret Christian doctrine to their advantage. Cupido's life in *Praying Mantis* foreshadows these many twists.

Indeed, Cupido shows an astute capacity to manipulate Christianity when necessary. He justifies his possession of Stuurman's musket by maintaining that God gave it to him because He didn't want him to be unarmed in the face of enemies, and he cannot go against the word of God (p. 151). He also takes advantage of his interpreter role to threaten Stuurman's men, claiming that God had 'personally intervened to project the ball and smite the heathen' and that if they attacked again, 'God would return to pursue them to the ends of the earth' (p. 150). Cupido clearly recognises that concepts of God, such as his vengeful nature, can be put to good use. Hans van Deventer describes the significance of this act: it indicates that Cupido 'has internalized what is viewed as a superior culture', using its religious book 'as a weapon to scare the very people with whom he shares a common culture.'<sup>97</sup> The farmers claim a biblical basis for their superiority to the Khoisan: they protested that the Khoisan were 'the offspring of Canaan, son of Ham, [and] they had been cursed with perpetual servitude to the whites elected by God' (p. 152). When Cupido's mother attempts to escape from bondage, the farmer ensured that she was duly punished according to the Word of God (p. 5). Similarly, the actions of Ziervogel, self-proclaimed 'servant of the Lord of Hosts', illustrate the hypocrisy of some Christians. He uses his respectable position to seduce lonely women, and cites a call from God as his reason for abandoning them (pp. 40-59). Brink thus demonstrates that servitude to God and – more broadly – Christianity, was a useful tool artfully employed by many for their own benefit.

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<sup>97</sup> H. J. M. van Deventer, 'God in Africa, Lost and Found, Lost Again, and Found Anew: The Bible in André Brink's *Praying Mantis*', in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* ed. by Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), pp. 133-153 (p. 145).



Although Malherbe claims that there was no evidence of Kakkerlak backsliding, Brink's interpretation imagines otherwise.<sup>98</sup> Cupido begins to question God's benevolence, reflecting Isichei's claim that African people, who were hearing Biblical narratives for the first time, 'often perceived moral difficulties to which missionaries had been oblivious.'<sup>99</sup> Cupido's questions indeed cause Read to question his calling and success as a missionary (p. 156). Through letters to God, Cupido expresses his disappointment and disillusionment, reprimanding God thus: 'Revrend [sic] God we depend on You to help us if You can not help us were [sic] do You think we can go to how can we go on trusting You'; in a later letter he appeals to God to deliver rain, as 'Tsuigoab used to send Heitsi-Eibib to bring us rain so now it is Your duty if You care about us at all' (p. 160). On this occasion, Cupido's faith in God was restored when heavy rain ensued. After his wife's death, Cupido admonishes God again. Yet this time his letter is threatening: he wants to ask Gaunab to take God and put him in his black heaven (p. 180). When Cupido fetches Campbell from Cape Town, he breaks up Heitsi-Eibib's cairns along the way. In another letter to God, he explains that he does this 'to show that I am now on the side of God even if it make [sic] my heart a little bit sore because of evything [sic] My Mother told me.' At the close of the letter, Cupido asks God to give Tsui-Goab, who must live nearby, his greetings and that he is doing his best for the both of them (p. 193). Although Read admires the sincerity of Cupido's faith and believes the world would be a better place if more people were like Cupido (p. 199), the reader can trace Cupido's failing faith in his letters to God.

Increasingly disillusioned by Christianity, Cupido gradually turns his attention back to his earlier beliefs. Reprimanded by Read for his superstition, Cupido is still terrified of the *sarês*

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<sup>98</sup> Malherbe, 'Cupido Kakkerlak', p. 375.

<sup>99</sup> Isichei, *History of Christianity in Africa*, p. 123.

(p. 204): a manifestation of Gaunab which brings sickness and death.<sup>100</sup> By the time Cupido is posted at his own mission station, he has begun to feel that ‘perhaps it does not matter so much if Tsui-Goab says one thing and Tkaggen another, the Lord God something else’ (p. 222). Despite the LMS’s promises, Cupido and his family are destitute. Cupido’s disagreement with Katryn echoes his conversations with Anna: Cupido believes God sees no difference between black and white, but Anna tells him that the white man’s god would never be on their side (p. 178). Cupido argues less adamantly against this assertion than before (p. 227). Like Anna, Katryn emphasises convincingly Christianity’s failure to deliver its promises. Cupido dismantles Heitsi-Eibib’s mounds with less vigour (p. 233), and he finds the Word less comforting when he and his family are hungry (p. 237). Cupido’s faith is briefly restored when he receives a letter from heaven, but a *sarê*s – a child of the Devil – whisks it away (p. 240). The fervent preaching Cupido continues to deliver is, he admits, only an attempt to convince himself: he no longer berates Katryn for singing songs to the moon/Tsui-Goab (pp. 248-249). Cupido feels that the Word is not enough anymore (p. 251). During Moffat’s deferred visit, Cupido refreshes himself physically and spiritually, eating and drinking: ‘This is my flesh, this is the blood of my son Heitsi-Eibib. With what is left of his voice he sings to the sky: *Praise ye the Lord*’ (p. 267). When Cupido sees Moffat as a goat, a personification of the Devil, he thanks God for revealing this to him (p. 268). He sets fire to the ox-cart and watches it disappear with the devil Gaunab, presumably Moffat, seated among the flames (p. 269). The manner in which Cupido opens his final letter to God, with its references *inter alia* to the Red Sky and the fight with Gaunab, seems more apt for addressing Tsui-Goab: thus the synthesis of traditional Khoekhoe and Christian beliefs is complete (p. 270).

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<sup>100</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 388.

Brink reveals through this progression that Cupido fuses traditional and Christian beliefs in order to find a meaningful way in which to interpret the world around him. His initial zeal for Christianity dissipates when tested by hardships. It is not only God that Cupido questions, it is Moffat too. Cupido defends himself against Moffat's criticisms by insisting that the LMS have not provided the support they promised: he asks 'Was it promised to me behind God's back, where he couldn't hear?' (p. 261). It is the hypocrisy of the missionaries that Cupido challenges, and the failure of conversion to deliver equality that he laments. Katryn explains to Cupido that the Christian God is white, and that the LMS have withheld support because Cupido is not white:

I tell you, if you were white he'd have been here long ago. If you were white they would have looked after us [...] Even the Kora don't respect you. They only believe a white man. You're too much like them (p. 242).

Cupido is adamant that he is equal to the white missionaries, reminding Katryn that he was baptised in the Sunday's River and called by God (p. 242). Thus Brink does not portray Cupido's backsliding as a complete process. Although Cupido converts to Christianity because he recognises the spiritual and material benefits of doing so, it is also an act that Lynn might attribute to the trickster's desire to make contact with, and participate in, the prevailing or official culture.<sup>101</sup> Cupido's desire to read, fostered by his experience of delivering letters, is one example of this. He tells his mother, 'This is strong magic. There is life in this thing they call writing, and it can run further and faster than you ever did' (p. 22; see also pp. 20-22; 60-61; 141).

Moffat dismisses Cupido because he is no longer conforming to the LMS's prescribed ideals concerning missionary conduct: Cupido's ordination is considered to be 'another of the overzealous and intemperate Brother Read's unconscionable ideas' (p. 258). Brink echoes a

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<sup>101</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 18.

passage from Moffat's journal for 24<sup>th</sup> May 1821: 'The appearance of Cupido's house and family seems strongly to dictate that he does not intend to rise one hair breadth in civilization above them whom he pretends to instruct.'<sup>102</sup> Two years later, Moffat would write that he recommended Cupido leave the LMS as he was a burden to himself and the missionaries, and that Cupido and his wife were 'in the highest degree detrimental to the cause.'<sup>103</sup> In *Praying Mantis*, Moffat claims that Cupido has 'sunk lower' than he ever was, and that 'one might just as well try to tame a wild animal' (p. 261). Moffat also criticises him for not showing the expected amount of deference due to a white man, accusing him of ingratitude (pp. 259-260). Cupido has, in fact, maintained his faith in God despite the LMS's negligent treatment.

The consequence is, however, that Cupido's faith in Heitsi-Eibib and Tsui-Goab is renewed. Of course, this renewal is not part of Malherbe's account. Brink must reimagine Cupido as struggling inwardly to find a balance, a compromise, between both cultures because of the changing nature of the situation in which the Khoisan found themselves: Lynn explains that the trickster's 'habitual non-conformity' often symbolises resistance, and his 'paradoxical traits accord well with the pressures to participate in overlapping cultural constructs that are characteristic of postcolonial communities and their literatures.'<sup>104</sup> The anti-normative and liberating aspect of the trickster's character, rather than the conservative, is emphasised in postcolonial literature, and Brink's portrayal does just this.<sup>105</sup> Through underscoring the disparity between Christian beliefs and the behaviour of Christians – or God, even – and through accepting both traditional Khoekhoe and Christian cultures, Cupido becomes a trickster figure who, following in his folkloric ancestors' footsteps, 'acts as a catalyst for not

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<sup>102</sup> I. Schapera, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman: Being the Journals and Letters of Robert and Mary Moffat* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Schapera, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, p. 79.

<sup>104</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 9.

only fundamental questioning but transformation of established rules and power structures.<sup>106</sup> Cupido's folkloric ancestors are, of course, Heitsi-Eibib and the mantis.

Cupido's story also reflects the changing nature of the LMS. His dismissal signalled a shift from encouraging indigenous converts to spread the Gospel, to an attempt to regain control of Christianity. Cupido is able to 'Africanise' Christianity by integrating the traditional Khoekhoe belief system. In some ways, Cupido's willingness to leave the LMS and his final reconciliation of the two belief systems foreshadow other complex themes in Christianity's struggle to stay relevant to the people of South Africa, such as the founding of AICs.

Cupido's encounter with Moffat bears some comparison with the founding of AICs later in the nineteenth century, when African clergy seceded from mission churches after a renewed interest in ordaining indigenous Christians. Just as Cupido seems at his most disillusioned, nothing can stop him from preaching (p. 248). Even when there is only one man left of Cupido's congregation, he preaches to him, rock, tree and bone (p. 251). Cupido tells Moffat that it is not necessary for him to try and open up some space for God in southern Africa, as He has been there for long before Moffat arrived (p. 266). Thus it is clear that Cupido does not abandon his faith in God, or lose his desire to spread the Gospel: like the later ordained Africans, he simply wanted to escape the hypocrisy and failed promises of the church. Brink incorporates Cupido's confusion regarding the missionaries' hypocrisy, manifested in his questions about how a benevolent God can allow people to suffer and why the LMS withheld the financial support they had promised him. The consequence of Cupido registering this hypocrisy is that he turns to a more traditional and fulfilling belief system.

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<sup>106</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 10.

Brink first shows that Khoekhoe traditional belief is beneficial to Cupido's spiritual well-being and, even in the early days of his conversion, he is eager to accept the existence of multiple supreme beings. He asks Anna, 'Don't you think there is enough space around for Tsui-Goab and Heitsi-Eibib and Tkaggen together with [van der Kemp's] Lord-God?' (p. 106). This tolerance, however, does not last long (pp. 122-123). When Brink reveals the way in which Cupido synthesises his earlier beliefs with Christianity, such as the conflation of God and Tsui-Goab in Cupido's final letter, or when he hears 'the voice of God – unless it is Tsui-Goab's – speaking through every tree and stone' (p. 249), the common ground between the two supreme beings is affirmed. The identification of *sarê's* (Gaunab) and the Christian Devil had been made by Cupido much earlier (p. 205). When Moffat criticises Cupido's lack of congregants and dismisses him, he fails to understand Cupido's contention that he has a reason to continue preaching. Cupido says, 'We have enough stones here' (p. 265), referring to the belief that Tsui-Goab 'in the beginning of time made all the rocks and stones from which people were later hatched' (p. 25) or that 'Heitsi-Eibib had made them, following the decree of Tsui-Goab' (p. 13).<sup>107</sup> Although Cupido's reply baffles Moffat, he chooses not to ask for an explanation: traditional religion is of little interest to him. In the exchange between Cupido and Moffat, it is evident that only Cupido accepts the Christian God as synonymous with the god of his traditional belief, Tsui-Goab. It is clear that Brink presents Cupido's ability to harmonise both belief systems as crucial to his soul and his future. Although I do not argue that Cupido founded an AIC, I have illuminated some commonalities, and suggest instead that he reflects some of the issues which prompted the formation of AICs.

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<sup>107</sup> Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*, p. 377.

The 1857 synodical resolution, which laid the foundation for apartheid, was anticipated by an event in 1801 which Brink chooses to incorporate into his narrative, just as Cupido begins to develop an interest in conversion. The Dutch colonists in Graaff-Reinet protest against the Khoisan using their church:

They have sent a message that they've had enough of Hottentots desecrating their church in Graaff-Reinet, and unless it is stopped immediately they are going to burn the whole place down. They demand that all the pews be washed, that the paving around the church be dug up and a fence be erected around the church to keep out that bunch of heathens, and that the pulpit be covered with a black cloth as a sign of mourning because they have no minister of their own (p. 97).<sup>108</sup>

By reimagining the farmers' demands for a separate church, Brink reminds the reader of this prophetic incident in Christian history. Van der Kemp's reaction to the demands of the farmers is also important:

For his part the missionary agrees to withdraw his Hottentot congregation from the church to restore peace: in future they will gather in his vicarage. Any whites who wish to attend the services will be welcomed. But as far as he is concerned he will never again set foot in a church from which a congregation of native people have been expelled (p. 97).

Again, this event represents accurately what is known of van der Kemp's response, and van der Kemp's biographer describes it as 'a clear declaration of anti-apartheid *avant la lettre*.'<sup>109</sup> In *Praying Mantis*, Brink emphasises the affinity van der Kemp felt for the Khoisan he worked with. Following the confrontation between the farmers and the mission described above, there is yet another; on the way to resolve it, van der Kemp stops to rescue the mantis which could be crushed in the fray, handing it to Cupido. This act is, by virtue of Cupido's association with the mantis, all the more significant for immediately following an incident in which van der Kemp clearly indicates his commitment to advocating the Khoekhoe's equal

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<sup>108</sup> See Elbourne, *Blood Ground*, p. 133, and Elphick, *Equality of Believers*, p. 26.

<sup>109</sup> Ido H. Enklaar, *Life and Work of Dr. J. Th. Van der Kemp, 1747-1811: Missionary Pioneer and Protagonist of Racial Equality in South Africa* (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1988), p. 113. See also Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier 1760-1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 227-228.

access to the Christian message. If this act is read as a symbol of van der Kemp rescuing Cupido from the uncertainty and volatility of the Khoisan's position in the early nineteenth century, Brink perhaps illustrates the eventual futility of this gesture when the Christian message van der Kemp preached was later so clearly undermined. In *Praying Mantis*, van der Kemp reiterates the inseparability of religion and politics. Surrounded by the threat of violence whilst at Algoa Bay, van der Kemp tells Read that they must prevent exploitation by assuring the Khoekhoe their freedom. When Read comments that this is 'a political act, not a religious one', van der Kemp replies that, 'In a place like this there can be no distinction between the two' (pp. 138-139).

The prophetic theology described by figures such as Boesak and publications such as the *Kairos Document* is, I believe, borne out by Cupido's final actions. With the first of Boesak's anti-apartheid publications appearing in 1976, just eight years before Brink began work on *Praying Mantis*, and continuing beyond the novel's publication, the public profile of Boesak would undoubtedly have made Brink aware of the theological objections to the apartheid regime. Similarly, the *Kairos Document's* emergence in 1985 would have coincided with the early stages of *Praying Mantis's* composition. Cupido's conversion to Christianity is motivated by his desire to improve his social position: although Christianity doesn't make him 'white', it enables him to develop an affinity with white men who are more powerful than him, according him some protection from the myriad threats surrounding him. Christian teachings are ignored or flouted by the actions of those professing to be Christians: Brink illustrates that, even to an initially illiterate and recent convert, the disparity between action and belief is unashamedly transparent. Far more articulately, Boesak outlines the hypocrisy of Christians that accept apartheid, and offers a theologically justified explanation of the way in which apartheid constitutes heresy. Cupido's defiance of Moffat at the close of



the novel illustrates to the reader a microcosmic resistance to the hegemony. Despite his destitution, Cupido does not lose his faith, and eventually unites with another marginalised man. Themes of oppression, resistance, unity and faith permeate Brink's novel, with reminders throughout that the core tenets of Christianity can be exploited by all: clearly, Boesak's tracts and publications such as the *Kairos Document* also utilise unwavering faith as the most powerful weapon to attack the basic principles of apartheid.

The disillusionment of the first decade of ANC rule is perhaps reflected in Cupido's response to both the increasingly conservative stance of the LMS and the disparity between what is promised and what is delivered, embodied in Moffat. By choosing to vilify Moffat, and by writing out his earlier visits to Cupido's station (p. 280), Brink emphasises the newly more conservative stance of the LMS and its implications. In terms of the composition of *Praying Mantis*, Moffat is perhaps a synecdoche for the ANC Boesak describes – or a representation of Thabo Mbeki specifically, too eager to abandon commitments and promises. In these ways, Cupido's story foreshadows the future of South Africa as it lay before him, revealing the repetitious nature of humankind's struggles, interactions and resolutions. In some ways, then, Brink does not need to reimagine the past. He shows that, by virtue of its repetition, people are already living it. Cupido's role in this is one of subversion: he recognises the insincerity of his peers, challenges it and, at the end of the novel, chooses a new path. This portrayal reinforces Cupido's role as a postcolonial trickster figure: he is, like Heitsi-Eibib, prophetic. He anticipates the future and delivers God's truth to his peers. Thus far I have discussed the future as it lay ahead of Cupido: the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cupido, through his prophetic capacity, is perhaps also intended to propose a direction for the future. I turn now to the future of South Africa from Brink's perspective: the twenty-first century. I intend to address the following question: how could appropriating the trickster

figure to reimagine Cupido's story reveal Brink's social vision for a united South Africa after 2004?

### **Cupido as trickster**

In the traditional sense of the word, Cupido is a prophet because he acts as a witness to the failings of Christianity: the contradictory nature of the missionaries' conduct and the Christian colonial authorities on the one hand, and the teachings of the gospel on the other. Cupido's narrative is perhaps a tribute to what united resistance has already achieved in South Africa's difficult past, acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of not only some renowned missionaries, but crucially the indigenous preachers too. Although it is possible to interpret *Praying Mantis* as merely an allegory for resistance to oppression and apartheid in the twentieth century, it clearly lacks a definite conclusion. Indeed, the coda of Brink's novel appears auspicious: in a sense, Cupido's oppressor has been defeated by Cupido's faith, and a hopeful alliance is made. Yet the reader understands that this is the beginning of another journey, one that will be undoubtedly difficult and dangerous. Brink forces the reader to look forward, to ask questions about Cupido and Arend's fate, to consider how this story will truly end. The lack of closure in Cupido's story emphasises that there are more challenges ahead, reflecting the struggles faced by the post-apartheid government. John Saul's assessment of post-apartheid South Africa concludes with the suggestion that a stronger alliance between the dispossessed is necessary to reinvigorate the left and create 'a movement of resistance to the strategic direction that postapartheid South Africa has taken'; indeed, he says the alliance has already started to form.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, Ashwin Desai believes that there is 'fertile ground for a linkup between community movements and the organized

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<sup>110</sup> John S. Saul, 'Cry for the Beloved Country: The Post-Apartheid Denouement', *Review of African Political Economy*, 28:89 (Sep., 2001), 429-460 (pp. 451-453).

working class.’<sup>111</sup> When Cupido leaves his station with Arend – an escaped slave – a coalition of this sort is formed.

In this final act, Cupido reminds the reader of the importance of rebellion and subversion. Arend reveals his scars, reminding Cupido that there are still injustices to be addressed (p. 274). When Cupido asks where Arend will hide, Arend makes it clear that he does not intend to: that their future is open, and will not be overshadowed by the current inequalities. In uniting with a rebel, Cupido refuses to accept his present position as his destiny. Indeed, he has been expecting Arend throughout the novel, ever since his mother told him the eagle that dropped him as an infant would return for him (pp. 17-18). Eventually, Cupido synthesises his mother’s promise with passages from the Bible, and explains to Katryn that the eagle will take him ‘into the whole wide world to convert the heathen to the greater glory of God’ (pp. 224-225). Through joining with Arend, Cupido takes up a more pragmatic and defiant path. In response to Saul’s lamentations, Jeremy Cronin of the South African Communist Party – using language which recalls the spirit of the trickster figure – warned against a ‘tragic reading’ of a still ‘relatively open-ended, complex, and highly contested reality.’<sup>112</sup> This open-endedness can be found in Brink’s decision to reimagine Cupido’s life from birth, while refusing to conclude the narrative with his death. Considering the situation in South Africa in 2000, Brink admits that the country is not where it hoped it would be – the criticism of the ANC and their betrayal of the working class is, as we have seen, well-founded – but, as Brink comments, ‘at least we are no longer ‘there’ any more. Most importantly, we seem to be on our way ‘somewhere’.’<sup>113</sup> Thus the beginning of Cupido and Arend’s journey symbolises the

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<sup>111</sup> Ashwin Desai, ‘Neoliberalism and Resistance in South Africa’, *Monthly Review*, 54:8 (January 2003), 16-28 (p. 24).

<sup>112</sup> Jeremy Cronin, ‘Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Reply to John Saul’, *Monthly Review*, 54:7 (December 2002), 28-42 (pp. 31-32).

<sup>113</sup> Brink, ‘Free thoughts’, p. 22.

beginning of the twenty-first century, in which people must continue to address and redress the injustices of South Africa's past. The apartheid regime may have been supplanted, but there is still much to do. The lack of closure at the end of *Praying Mantis* invites the reader to imagine the next chapter and, although Cupido is still destitute and is certain to face oppression and injustice again, there is hope. The future that Brink urges through Cupido is undecided: all we know of the new unity's direction is, 'That way. That way' (p. 275). The resolution Brink offers the reader is the beginning of a new, challenging, but potentially rewarding, endeavour.

That Brink should choose Cupido as the protagonist for this apparently heuristic novel is important. The first Khoisan conference took place in 1991, shortly before Brink returned to *Praying Mantis*. Furthermore, that Brink should associate Cupido so thoroughly with the Khoekhoe trickster figure, Heitsi-Eibib, is also crucial, due to Heitsi-Eibib's prophetic nature. Lynn claims that postcolonial tricksters maintain the subversive element through their 'politically engaged functional idiom' which reveals that they 'are not subversive for the mere sake of subversion, but have a role in postcolonial and ethnic literature's progressive social visions.'<sup>114</sup> If historical literature's function is to tell us something about the present and the future, perhaps this is it. Cupido reminds the reader of a future duty. Whether Brink intended, by appropriating the Khoekhoe trickster-prophet figure Heitsi-Eibib, to indicate this interpretation is irrelevant: such is the nature of participating in the trickster discourse. As we have seen, trickster figure narratives are open to multiple meanings and resist finalisation. Doueih's argument against viewing the trickster figure as merely a character in a story is pertinent here: the trickster is more than just the protagonist of a story illustrating the religious or cultural history and origin of a people progressing from 'primitivity' to

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<sup>114</sup> Lynn, 'Resistance', p. 33.

‘civilisation.’<sup>115</sup> By considering trickster stories as part of a wider discourse, it is possible to discern a ‘plurality of meanings.’<sup>116</sup> Lynn’s flexible definition of the postcolonial trickster as ‘typically an agent of memory’, with a hybrid identity that merges aspects of distinct cultures into one new entity, and his role as ‘the postcolonial author’s device for expanding vision in a changing cultural context’ is pertinent to Brink’s portrayal of Cupido.<sup>117</sup> Lynn’s definition, although formed with reference to West African tricksters, seems to correspond appropriately with the potential Brink sees in historical fiction, revealing the suitability of the trickster figure as a protagonist for it. The trickster can dramatise the ‘injustice, exploitation, and corruption that have attended the colonial past and the neo-colonial present.’<sup>118</sup> But, as we have seen with *Praying Mantis*’s open ending, he can also play out the possibilities for the future.

## Conclusion

In the spirit of Doueihi, however, I would like to offer an alternative reading of the conclusion of Brink’s novel. In many ways, Brink’s novel invites the interpretation of trickster narratives Doueihi cautions against. As Brink tells Kakkerlak’s story from his own perspective instead of the LMS’s – including, for example, the harmony of what is considered ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’ by Christians – the trickster narrative here is located outside the ideological framework of Western scholars. However, Cupido’s ‘primitivity’ is concerning and, while Brink attempts to humanise Kakkerlak, he also exaggerates his degeneracy. Brink’s reimagining of Kakkerlak stops short of discarding the missionaries’ hyperbolic descriptions of conversion’s achievements: he has chosen to ignore Malherbe’s concluding

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<sup>115</sup> Doueihi, ‘Inhabiting the Space’, p. 194.

<sup>116</sup> Doueihi, ‘Inhabiting the Space’, p. 199.

<sup>117</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 9; 5-6.

<sup>118</sup> Lynn, ‘Resistance’, p. 183.

comment that as Kakkerlak's life story was told by others, 'at the outset, Cupido was the archetype of the poor heathen, ignorant and sunk in vice, but miraculously transformed by his conversion.'<sup>119</sup> Reviewing the impact of contextual factors on post-apartheid literature, and claiming that little has changed in society since the end of apartheid, Shaun Irlam comments that 'these sobering realities perennially need to temper easy assumptions that South Africa's dark past no longer casts shadows across the future.'<sup>120</sup> Ultimately, Irlam concludes that post-apartheid literature has taken an introspective turn, 'in which communities once submerged in their common resistance to apartheid now finally exercise the liberty to explore their own histories and assert their own agendas.'<sup>121</sup> Brink perhaps attempts to contribute to this, in a way, by choosing to explore the life of a historical Khoekhoe figure – although some might argue that this is not his prerogative.

*Praying Mantis* makes for unsettling reading, considering the irony of Brink's response to reading documentation of the trial concerning the small 1825 slave uprising led by Galant:

Behind the ponderous nineteenth-century Dutch one could hear the vernacular, the fear and anger and outrage, the authentic suffering, of those – masters and slaves alike – who had all become the victims of what even then was recognisable as an evil system of exploitation and oppression. I shall never forget those voices addressing me, across a divide of 150 years: the men and women expressing, perhaps for the first time in their lives, the full horror of what it meant to be alive as a slave.<sup>122</sup>

In his explanation of the fiction writer's role in apartheid South Africa, Brink links the 'massive cultural movement that mobilised the masses into resistance by writing the history of their time in the form of fiction' to the oppression of free press.<sup>123</sup> Connecting these writers to the 'silences' in official records of the slave revolt, Brink celebrates their

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<sup>119</sup> Malherbe, 'Cupido Kakkerlak', p. 374.

<sup>120</sup> Shaun Irlam, 'Unraveling the Rainbow: The Remission of Nation in Post-Apartheid Literature', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103:4 (2004), 695-718 (pp. 696-697).

<sup>121</sup> Irlam, 'Unraveling the Rainbow', p. 698.

<sup>122</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 136.

<sup>123</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 138.

authenticity: ‘as in the case of the slave rebels, they were speaking in their own voices. Even if officialdom, or aesthetic tradition or whatever, tried to anaesthetise or distort their communication, the real timbre of their voices broke through.’<sup>124</sup> As he wrote these words, Brink had already appropriated Kakkerlak’s story; he had perhaps already adapted the missionaries’ accounts of Kakkerlak’s degeneracy into a detailed description of Cupido having regular sexual intercourse with animals. Cupido’s voice is not authentic, not Kakkerlak’s.

Brink’s reimagining of Kakkerlak’s story appears to contribute to the agenda of the dominant group in 2005. Barnard suggests that the Khoisan peoples are appropriated for South Africa’s new Coat of Arms and motto because they are a ‘safe’ option: they evoke images of ‘antiquity without the stigma of the primeval, and of autochtony [sic] without the practical problem of large-scale land restitution.’<sup>125</sup> The Coat of Arms and motto are thus symbolic in contradictory ways. Despite the election campaign promises, the label ‘Rainbow Nation’, and the motto that ‘Diverse People Unite’, the Khoisan, like other groups who suffered under apartheid, have not in practice been awarded the equality they were promised. For the Khoisan, this is primarily a land issue.<sup>126</sup> By appropriating Kakkerlak’s story, Brink appears to be complicit in the endeavour to use a ‘safe’ icon to signify a direction for the future of South Africa. By relying on ethnographies such as Schapera’s and historical documents produced by the white hegemony, Brink betrays his own ambition to offer an alternative interpretation of history. As Brink observes, the available historical texts of the colonial era present an unreliable account of history; in addition to their biased nature, archival materials

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<sup>124</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 138.

<sup>125</sup> Barnard, ‘Coat of Arms’, p. 19.

<sup>126</sup> Barnard, ‘Coat of Arms’, pp. 17-18.

are ‘strung together from *silences*’ imposed by the power structures of the time.<sup>127</sup> But, rather than questioning the content of the material produced at the time, and reinventing it, Brink repeats and embellishes it: not with subversion and dignity, but with conventionality and condescension.

More significantly, Brink perpetuates the offensive and undoubtedly inaccurate representation of the Khoisan as degenerate wretches saved from degradation only by the intervention of a white man and his Western religion. Before conversion, Cupido is both infantilised by Brink and conversely presented as a sexual deviant. For quite some time after conversion, his behaviour continues to shock the otherwise broad-minded Read: he beats up other Khoekhoe who refuse to convert (p. 118), and does not repent this violence (p. 119). Until the end of the novel, Cupido retains a child-like simplicity and a mythic connection to the traditional beliefs of the Khoisan, including an affinity with Heitsi-Eibib. Brink’s conflation of Khoekhoe and San religion and folklore reflects a refusal to recognise nuances in cultural identity in the colonial years, and is evidence of Brink’s indiscriminating appropriation of material he views as authoritative representations of autochthonous peoples.

I have discussed the ways in which Cupido expresses a mediated version of black theology. While AICs offered a spiritual respite for indigenous peoples and have been criticised for their lack of political focus, black theology challenged white domination and oppression through different interpretations of scripture. Mosala concludes *Biblical Hermeneutics* by summarising the consequences of methodologies such as Boesak’s: the ‘theoretical strategy in South Africa has been that black theologians, in opposing the theology of the dominant white groups, have appealed to the same hermeneutical framework in order to demonstrate a

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<sup>127</sup> Brink, *Reinventing*, p. 241.



contrary truth.’<sup>128</sup> In *Farewell*, Boesak reiterates that it is not only the oppressed that need liberating, it is also the gospel, which has been ‘abused and exploited.’<sup>129</sup> On the relevance of black theology to white South Africans, Boesak specifies that ‘blacks know only too well the terrible estrangement of white people; they know only too well how sorely whites need to be liberated – even if whites themselves don’t!’<sup>130</sup> Cupido’s religious syncretism and his decision to join with an escaped slave, should function as a symbol of hope. But, like black theology, Brink’s reliance on compromised historical documents and ethnographies prevent the fulfilment of this endeavour.

*Praying Mantis* does not seem to me a novel that inspires a direction for the new South Africa, something that Brink’s coda would seem to suggest was his intention. It is the story of a Romanticised, infantilised figure, who remains within and reinforces the white hegemony. Cupido’s simplicity and naivety – his letters to God, his *threats* against God – render him a ridiculous caricature. Christianity – not Khoekhoe belief, Tsui-//Goab, or Heitsi-Eibib – *saves* Cupido in terms of ‘civilisation’: he settles down and he works. Moffat is a villain – as historians and anthropologists have insisted – but Read’s realisation of the West’s abuse of Africa, and his faith in Cupido, exonerate him from villainy; van der Kemp is virtually a saint. What Brink seems to have crafted is precisely that which Doueihy condemns: a trickster narrative which contributes to ‘a discourse that analyzes the conquered civilization in terms of the conquerors,’ which is also ‘a discourse *of* conquest, a discourse that continues to express and accept an ideology sanctioning the domination of one culture over another.’<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 192.

<sup>129</sup> Boesak, *Farewell*, p. 11.

<sup>130</sup> Boesak, *Farewell*, p. 16.

<sup>131</sup> Doueihy, ‘Inhabiting the Space’, p. 195.

Through tracing the twists of Christianity's appropriation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries I have shown that, contrary to Boesak's claim, Scripture does not resist manipulation.<sup>132</sup> If read as a literary whole, in which themes of oppression and struggle are prominent, it can indeed be not just *misinterpreted* – unwittingly misunderstood – but wilfully distorted, interpreted in a way to specifically support a particular ideology that others may want to challenge, creating a powerful weapon in an ideological battle. Like the Bible, trickster narratives are open to interpretation: *Praying Mantis* can be interpreted and scrutinised from more than one perspective. If, as Mosala advocates, Brink had read *behind* the texts he used as sources for historical, cultural and religious information, perhaps his novel would have been less ambiguous in its attempt to offer an *alternative* reading of the past, more convincing in its acceptance of diversity, and more suitable as a vision for the future.

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<sup>132</sup> Boesak, *Tenderness*, p. 143.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to explore the role trickster figures play in post-colonial Anglophone African written literature, and the extent to which encounters with Christianity, often fused with aspects of pre-colonial belief, have influenced the presentation of the trickster. Many functions have been attributed to trickster narratives, but there is one purpose consistently cited: the trickster is a symbol of subversion, one whose contradictory nature and challenge to existing power structures reveals that change is possible. It is clear that in oral literature, the trickster figure's role is dependent upon context: the position of the narrator and the adaptations he/she makes to a familiar narrative, the community to whom the story is related, the location, social structure, attitudes towards storytelling, and so on, will all contribute to the ways in which a narrative can be interpreted. Attention to the contexts of written literary texts is equally important, thus each trickster in this study has been located and explored within its specific context.

Each of the six chapters explores the trickster in a particular text and context, the first two in West Africa, the second two in East Africa, and the final two in South Africa. In Chapter One, Soyinka's play *The Trials of Brother Jero* is the focus. Written and produced on the brink of Nigeria's independence, the play presents its audience with a manifestation of the Yoruba trickster-deity Esu in the guise of an Aladura prophet. Jero's cunning and exploitative behaviour represents the opportunism of Nigeria's new ruling elite who, although replacing the colonisers, are also alienated from ordinary people. The representative of pre-colonial belief, Esu, assumes the role of Christian representative, in turn descended from the missionaries responsible for the destruction of Yoruba culture and belief. In this sense, Soyinka parallels the opportunistic new rulers with Esu. *Trials* appears to satirise the gullible and self-serving nature of ordinary people, but it is possible to read the play as a criticism of

the conditions which created people like Jero. By drawing attention to hypocrisy, corruption and hidden agendas, Soyinka uses the trickster figure in the play to challenge the audience to reconsider at a significant crossroad the world in which they live. In this sense, the play mirrors the Ifa divination ritual overseen by Esu.

Chapter Two focused on Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, a play workshopped in the years immediately following Ghana's independence. *Marriage* adapts a familiar oral narrative for the stage, scripting audience response to recreate the illusion of a traditional *anansesem* performance. Ananse retains the trickster elements of his oral literature antecedent, spinning a literal and metaphorical web of lies. Initially a symbol of national unity and traditional culture, Ananse was employed by Sutherland to play a role in Nkrumah's cultural revival. The complex position in which Sutherland worked – partially funded by Nkrumah and driven by his agenda on the one hand, and partially funded by a CIA front on the other – is reflected in the dual nature of Ananse. Although in oral literature he breaks taboos and challenges the status quo, Ananse's subversive spirit is lost when he is commodified and domesticated. Sutherland's final, published script of *Marriage* lacked engagement with topical political affairs, decontextualising and ultimately depoliticising *anansesem*. Now virtually owned by the State, Ananse has become a lucrative state asset – a consequence of Sutherland's *anasegoro*.

Chapter Three considered Nazareth's *The General Is Up*, written in response to Amin's expulsion of Ugandans with Asian heritage. Unlike Soyinka and Sutherland, Nazareth did not adapt a trickster figure of pre-colonial culture to a postcolonial context. Nazareth's assertion that a novel can perform the trickster function has been the focus of his comments regarding his own work. Drawing attention to a range of details in *The General*, Nazareth

alludes to the ‘trick’ his novel plays on the reader: through parroting the Western media’s portrayal of Amin as an erratic buffoon, the unreliable narrative voice, and the structure of the novel, Nazareth intends to lead his reader to a realisation that the British were responsible for Amin’s power and his atrocities. Yet by mimicking presentations of Amin that emphasised his stupidity and madness, the novel absolves the General and therefore Amin. Nazareth’s attempt to use the novel itself as a trickster is compromised by Ronald’s unreliable narration and his banal presentation of the General, constituting an innocuous criticism of Amin and the contextual circumstances which created him.

In the fourth chapter, Ngũgĩ’s *Matigari* is explored, a slim novel responding to neocolonialism in 1980s Kenya. The protagonist, Matigari, has been compared to the Gikuyu trickster figure Hare, to whom Ngũgĩ refers in his memoirs and interviews. Among other similarities, both figures challenge authority through often violent means. Matigari also bears considerable similarity to Moses, who has been identified as one of several biblical tricksters. At times, Matigari’s words and behaviour echo Christ, and key events in the novel mirror events in the New Testament. Both Testaments had a profound effect on Ngũgĩ during his childhood: although recognising the Church as an arm of the colonisers, Ngũgĩ employs Christian symbolism and rhetoric familiar to Christian Gikuyu to express his belief in the Mau Mau cause, and the importance of ridding Kenya of neocolonialism. The fourth strand of Ngũgĩ’s influence, Marxism, is also reflected in Matigari’s words. While in many ways Matigari is an inspiring figure, he also appears authoritarian and patronising. The ordinary people in the novel are presented with contempt, particularly the women. The incompatibility of Ngũgĩ’s various frames of reference result in a trickster figure whose moral ambiguity compromises Ngũgĩ’s message.

Both post-apartheid novels by South African authors Brink and Mda appropriate the trickster-prophet-forefather-saviour figure of the Khoekhoe people, Heitsi Eibib. Mda elides the immoral behaviour of Heitsi Eibib evident in a range of narratives, instead emphasising his role as a saviour. Disillusioned with the post-apartheid ANC, Mda appears to reject the notion of saviours while promoting a community-focused vision of progress and development. Camagu and his son Heitsi, however, have been interpreted as saviours, symbols of unity and diversity, and representative of a reconciliation between modernity and tradition. The historical narrative of *The Heart of Redness* draws primarily on one historical and one ethnographical source, but Mda's omissions and additions constitute both a denunciation of Christianity, and a lack of attention to cultural nuance. Ultimately, despite Mda's contention that a saviour is not the answer to South Africa's inequalities, the reader is presented with a sanitised, Christ-like Heitsi Eibib, and the principled saviour-figure Camagu. *Redness* in fact lacks a trickster figure, despite the presence of Heitsi Eibib, with Mda reinforcing binaries rather than challenging them.

Brink's Heitsi Eibib is embodied by the protagonist of *Praying Mantis*, Cupido Cockroach. While Brink links Heitsi Eibib clearly to the divine, it is Cupido's behaviour that mirrors Heitsi Eibib most: for example, Cupido's sexual appetite is emphasised, recalling more convincingly the narratives in which Heitsi Eibib commits incest. Moral ambiguity retained, Cupido seems much more like a trickster. Yet it is also his role as a prophet that aligns him with Heitsi Eibib. The conflicts Cupido witnesses within the LMS, and between the LMS and the white settlers, recurred for the next two centuries until – and perhaps beyond – the end of apartheid. Brink's claim that historical literature can give a voice to the marginalised and silenced people of the past explains his effort to reimagine Kakkerlak's life from the perspective of Kakkerlak as Cupido. Like Mda, Brink draws upon historical and

ethnographic sources that are undoubtedly tainted by the prejudices and agendas of those who composed them. Neglecting to read behind his sources, Brink consequently creates in Cupido the stereotype of the degenerate native saved by conversion.

As to how Christianity influenced the representations of trickster figures, two distinct conclusions can be drawn. In the first place, the ambiguities of the trickster figures are compounded by the ambiguities of Christian discourse in African colonial and postcolonial contexts. Although the treatment of Christianity in Sutherland's *Marriage* is brief, it illuminates the ways in which behaving piously could elevate one's social status. Ananse – hypocritical and materialistic – is desperate to demonstrate his wealth to his fellow congregants by making substantial donations to the church. Although Sutherland's Christian beliefs are well-documented, she nevertheless acknowledges the extent to which Christianity could increase social standing, while encouraging consumerism and vainglory. Similarly, Nazareth's novel emphasises the piety of the General, demonstrating clearly that Amin's special relationship with God was part of his perceived madness. In all respects, the General's piety is incompatible with his actions, revealing again the hypocrisy of those who claim to be serving God. Aladura prophet Jero's shameless exploitation of his followers' fervent Christian beliefs demonstrates paradigmatically the parallel between the ambiguities of Christian discourse and tricksters.

In part, the ideological conflicts that have been explored are a consequence of the multivocal nature of biblical texts. Just as interpretation is dependent upon context, so too was composition. That biblical narratives were transcribed after decades or centuries of oral transmission is widely accepted, but Dundes argues that the Bible as a whole should be viewed as 'codified folklore', explaining the presence of inconsistencies within individual

narratives and the Bible as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Yet with so many believers interpreting the Bible's 'truth' in multiple ways, and the consequences that those differing interpretations occasion, it is no surprise that the trickster figure is present when Christianity is explored in postcolonial fiction. When the oral trickster narratives that have inspired Sutherland, Ngũgĩ, Mda and Brink are incorporated into a novel or a script, they too present the reader with the kinds of inconsistencies and contradictions biblical scholars identify. As oral literature – folklore – trickster narratives can be spontaneously adapted to suit context and thus retain their subversive spirit, but when fixed in writing their ability to fulfil this trickster function is reduced or lost entirely.

Secondly, the postcolonial literary texts grapple in different ways with anthropological sources, all of which are marked by Christian missionary rhetoric. For Mda and Brink, the use of potentially unreliable and compromised collections of oral narratives, such as those by Hahn, Bleek and Lloyd, and Schapera, further complicates the role of the trickster figure. These collections, and the mission documents relied upon by Malherbe to reconstruct the life of Kakkerlak, reinforce the very prejudices and binaries Mda and Brink hoped to challenge. In this sense, it seems that while Mda and Brink have missed an opportunity to question the credibility of the information contained within the documents, they have seized the opportunity to capitalise on the romantic conception of the Khoisan.

By comparing and contrasting the trickster figures in these six novels, a preliminary taxonomy of tricksters can be ventured. In some texts, the trickster figure presents as a saviour. Reducing the moral ambiguity of Heitsi Eibib, both Mda and Brink retain the kind of hero/villain dichotomy characteristic of anti-apartheid fiction. While Camagu and his son

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<sup>1</sup> Dundes, *Holy Writ*, p. 12.



Heitsi symbolise potential saviours, Mda gives the reader the villainous white Christians of the nineteenth century. Similarly, Brink's infantile Cupido, mentored by saintly van der Kemp, can be read as a hero who recognises and challenges the hypocrisy of the vilified Moffat. Cupido's promiscuity and violence, although more consistent with the trickster figure, are almost entirely eradicated upon his conversion. Although the subversive nature of the trickster figure can be identified in both Camagu's son Heitsi and Cupido, the trickster figures from which they derive are sanitised to the extent that Heitsi and Cupido appear as saviours rather than tricksters.

The second type is the trickster as an opportunistic anti-hero who remains a convincing trickster because his cunning and conspiratorial nature suggests he is a villain, yet he is also likeable and entertaining. With Jero as an antihero, and all the other characters his dupes, *Trials* dramatises power struggles between relatively ordinary people. The success of *Trials* is a consequence of Soyinka's redeployment of an ambiguous figure, and his retention of that figure's trickster nature. In a markedly less overt manner, Soyinka draws the audience's attention to the kind of hypocrisy, gullibility, exploitation and opportunism that they can easily observe in the world around them. As a symbol of Nigeria's new ruling elite, Soyinka's Jero reflects the same disillusion explored by Mda – but if Camagu and Heitsi are read as saviour figures analogous to Heitsi Eibib as he is presented in the novel, Mda's ideological inconsistencies become unavoidable. In contrast, the indisputable trickster nature of Jero eliminates any possibility of accusing Soyinka of an inconsistent ideology.

Sutherland's Ananse, also an opportunistic anti-hero, retains his trickster nature in *Marriage* but, unlike Jero, his role is not to draw attention to contemporary injustices or challenge the status quo. Although he subverts authority figures when he tricks the chiefs, Ananse does not destabilise the existing social order, and in fact reinforces the patriarchy. Ananse, when used

to serve the state's agenda, is depoliticised and as devoid of the true trickster spirit of subversion as Mda's Heitsi Eibib.

The third type is the trickster as an anti-colonial or anti-neocolonial political insurgent. Matigari, though not necessarily Hare personified, manifests as a trickster not only through his subversive nature, but also as an embodiment of contradictory and conflicting ideologies. Although clearly intended to be a heroic figure challenging the unjust behaviour of the villainous neocolonialists, Matigari is nevertheless unconvincing.

As the trickster figures are characterised by a mix of qualities, so too are the literary texts, as they strive to achieve a variety of social, cultural, or political ends. Unsurprisingly, in most texts the coloniser, neo-colonisers, or post-independence rulers are criticised either explicitly or with some measure of subtlety, and in each case become the antagonists. When the novel or play is conspicuously didactic and delineates a clear agenda, the trickster surfaces to subvert it. One identifiable function of the texts considered is an attempt to recover the past. Brink aims to 'fill silences' and contribute to an effort to reimagine South Africa's past, in line with the agenda to unite the diverse peoples of post-apartheid South Africa – yet his method is to mobilise a damaging stereotype of autochthonous people drawn from the very documents whose reliability he questions.

A second function can be identified in *The General*. Nazareth claims his novel's function is to bring about social change through forcing the reader to reevaluate their perceptions.

Doueihl explores this concept in her work, asserting that the trickster's characteristics, such as contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness and trickery, are 'the features of the story

itself.<sup>2</sup> Instead of reducing the trickster and his stories to one meaning, Doueihi suggests that the sacredness and the power of the trickster lies in the ‘reversals and breaks in the narrative perspective [which] produce openings in the story that allow a number of meanings to be read into it.’<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *The General* shares a functional affinity with the trickster tales of oral tradition. For example Esu, whose hermeneutic function is to reveal that there are many possibilities, in Soyinka’s words ‘exists to teach humanity [that] there is always more than one side to every issue, more than one face to any reality, teaches you beware of appearances.’<sup>4</sup> This function has been attributed to Ananse too: in traditional *anansesem*, the audience are asked if they are ready to be ‘hoaxed’, revealing an expectation that they will reinterpret what they hear – perhaps recognising the story as an allegory about their local community.<sup>5</sup> However, Nazareth’s General is a comedy villain with little complexity: aside from acknowledging that the reproduction of media portrayals of Amin render the General’s presentation unreliable, what can the reader conclude? Even recognising that Nazareth’s General is a puppet to the nefarious British does not constitute a trick-inspired epiphany. Again the author’s message is patent – not least because Nazareth guides his reader to a single interpretation. Finally, Nazareth portrays the injustice and horror of the Asian expulsion from Uganda by emphasising the General’s cruelty, violence and irrationality – enabled by the British and sensationalised in their press. By giving the reader the Amin they already know, an illiterate buffoon the object of ridicule and an agent of the British, Nazareth misses the opportunity to demythologise a figure who was dangerously underestimated at the time.

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<sup>2</sup> Doueihi, ‘Inhabiting the Space’, p. 200.

<sup>3</sup> Doueihi, ‘Inhabiting the Space’, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Wole Soyinka, ‘Of Africa’, *Book TV*, online video recording, C-SPAN, 26 November 2012, <<https://www.c-span.org/video/?309612-1/of-africa>> [accessed 19 August 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Donkor, *Spiders*, pp. 81-82.

A third function of the trickster is to comment on postcolonial corruptions and betrayals. Ngũgĩ's *Matigari*, embodying the spirit of Mau Mau adapted to a neocolonial context, offers the most unmitigated challenge to unjust rulers and powerful call to ordinary people to take action. *Matigari*'s antagonists symbolise the new ruling elite and their complicity with neocolonialism, but *Matigari*'s protests against injustice are undermined by so much of his behaviour and so many of his words, that questions concerning the consistency in Ngũgĩ's ideology are unavoidable. Soyinka's *Trials* also draws attention to the corruption of Nigeria's new ruling elite, a disappointment lamented by Soyinka in his memoirs and elsewhere. In contrast to the binaries of postcolonial fiction outlined by Abdul JanMohamed in *Manichean Aesthetics* (1983), the presence of the trickster can symbolise the recognition of a 'grey area', in which formerly admirable advocates of independence develop the characteristics of the previous colonial rulers.

Yet another function of the trickster is the role he can play in nation-building. Mda endeavours to unify groups historically separated by challenging binary thinking – black/white, tradition/modernity, belief/unbelief – and the tendency to rely upon saviours. However, Mda creates uncomfortable binaries such as inspirational saviours and indisputable villains, who either advocate or condemn his vision of community development respectively. Sutherland's *anasegoro* contribution to Nkrumah's cultural nationalism sought to reinvigorate and honour traditional *anasesem*, but diminished Anase's satirical potency: instead of being spontaneously adapted to social and political context, he is reimagined as a symbol of national unity and forced into a unifying role, rather than a subversive one.

These tricksters, when static, reveal the contradictions inherent within their texts. Jero has been identified as the most potent trickster; this is understandable considering that his

antecedent, Esu, is credited with revealing conflict in, and offering multiple interpretations of, the real world. By embodying ambiguity and creating conflict within the text, Jero can illuminate discord outside it – a first step to bringing about significant change. In the other five works, the trickster figure (or, in Nazareth's case, the novel-as-trickster) subverts not the corrupt rulers condemned in the texts, but the author's agenda, whether it is to offer a saviour or a symbol of unity. Because tricksters elude fixed meanings and, for their role as subversives, must remain open to multiple interpretations, perhaps the trickster figure of oral literature cannot be reconstructed in the written form without compromising the author's integrity. As such, the novel or script is the perfect place for them to continue the subversion for which they are known.

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