

The Intersection of Storytelling and Prose in Two Works of Francophone African Literature

Introduction

Gongoloma-Sooké is the god of opposites. He is impervious to all elements; neither the water nor the sun can affect him and he is never cold or hot. Neither the day nor the night trust him, so he creates mischief in the darkness of eclipses. His body does not resemble that of any human or animal. He walks turned away from his destination. Periodically he yells for all who might hear that he is present, that those who come to him will be served. Young Wangrin, merely a schoolboy, hears this cry and chooses him for his patron god, knowing that Gongoloma-Sooké will guide him, inspire him, and bring him success if he maintains a connection with him. Throughout the rest of his story, which follows Wangrin through his life and his various administrative positions in the French colonies, he all but becomes Gongoloma-Sooké. Traces of this collection of coexisting opposites and the mischievousness that comes along with it are evident in every decision Wangrin makes, every witty argument in which he engages, and every narrow escape he makes from tricky situations. The end of his life, quiet and hazy, only comes about when the stone that represents his alliance with this god is taken away.

This story is told in Malian author Amadou Hampâté Bâ's *L'Étrange Destin de Wangrin*, a novel that encompasses many genres, from ethnography to biography. This work serves as an example of the way mythology interacts with realism in a work of francophone African literature. This idea that a world of gods and ancestors just beyond this one but interconnected with it as well, a world of spirits and of those who came before, is a rich element of Bâ's writing. In this example, not only is the god an engaging character, but his connection with Wangrin also

crafts the trajectory of the novel. Bâ gives this theme great importance in his work, using it in different ways in almost all of the events in the story. Alessane NDaw describes the significance of such ancestral myths on a cultural level in his work *La Pensée Africaine*. He writes, “Pour la tradition ancestrale, le mythe est la vérité même[...]/Le mythe est la structure de connaissance englobant la totalité du savoir que l’homme peut avoir sur lui-même et sur son environnement” (NDaw 95). NDaw argues that myth is a form of understanding, which suggests one possible reason why authors like Bâ, raised in such tradition,¹ use it in their literature. Yet, in this work, the myth’s presence amounts to much more than that: it shapes stories, marks transitions in plot, and contributes to characterization. Bâ’s engagement with tradition also manifests itself in his prose, which mimics the form of oral storytelling. He often breaks into verse so that lyricism is present at crucial moments throughout the novel’s plot. His prose is rhythmic and features words that are not translated from the Bambara and Peul languages into French. His narration is full of dialogue so that all of the characters have clear and established voices. Much like the mythological theme of an ancestral, godly realm, the use of prose that reflects oral storytelling plays an important role in this text by marking plot transitions and highlighting the importance of communication. It even calls into question the nature of truth in stories by creating a narrator who insists he’s simply transcribing the story, but who is present throughout, interacting with readers and imploring them to trust him.

Author Bernard Dadié also engages with mythological ancestral tradition and orality in his writing, using the two elements in similar ways to communicate his stories and ideas. An Ivorian poet and novelist, Dadié experiments with these textual components in his work *Le*

¹ Hélène Heckmann’s biography of Bâ details his upbringing in Mali and the ways in which his connection with Tierno Bokar, a mystic, led to his loyalty to tradition throughout his life (2-3).

² D’Almeida, “L’Univers Poétique de Bernard Dadié” (167), Ugochukwu, “La poésie, chanson

Pagne Noir, a collection of traditional oral stories from the Ivory Coast. His stories cover many subjects, from the misadventures of the trickster spider Kacou Ananzè, a character that appears in works of many different cultures and authors, to stories that teach lessons. In three of the *contes* from this collection, “Le Pagne noir,” “Le Chasseur et le boa,” et “La Dot,” the theme of a world of ancestors and prose reminiscent of oral storytelling are incorporated in ways ranging from his prose itself to the plots of the stories, giving a look at the richness tradition can provide when incorporated in such works. Gods are present in many different ways in these stories, sometimes off in their own realms and sometimes directly involving themselves with the events of the stories. Characters sing and their verse is incorporated in the prose. Dadié even directly addresses readers as he goes along, showing a clear link between his craft and that of storytelling. These elements of his writing both enrich the story and ultimately help paint a picture of his worldview, something that scholars describe as both awareness of society’s problems and hope for the future.²

These elements give the works of Bâ and Dadié a liveliness that is reminiscent of storytelling even though they are communicated in printed form. Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the art of storytelling alludes to the existence of an intersection between oral literature and printed books. In the essay “The Storyteller,” this 20th-century critical theorist’s primary argument is that ultimately, storytelling and written novels represent diametrically opposed social practices of literature. Benjamin laments this death of storytelling in an age of marketed print, arguing that oral stories foster a degree of connectedness between teller and listener that is unattainable in the isolated act of reading of a novel (Benjamin 100). Most important, the story is dynamic, as each person that tells the story leaves a mark on it much like a potter leaves

² D’Almeida, “L’Univers Poétique de Bernard Dadié” (167), Ugochukwu, “La poésie, chanson des temps futurs ou la force de l’avenir chez Dadié” (155)

handprints on the objects he creates (Benjamin 92). In this way, oral stories boast countless transparent layers, remnants of all who have told the stories in the past (Benjamin 93). Though these layers are not noticeable to listeners, they are present in the story, creating a living work.

Novels, on the other hand, come from only one author and generally focus on one character or event (Benjamin 87). They are a product of bourgeois culture, the oppression of laborers visible not only in content but also in the physical object of the book, printed and bound by underpaid workers to be bought and passively consumed. The information they spread and the portraits of life they show strengthen the oppressive system by changing readers' thoughts to be more in line with the system that produced them. Novels are limited by the fact that they are in print, meaning that the story ends when it ends rather than leaving room for imagination (Benjamin 100). He argues that because of the conditions under which the novel came into popularity, storytelling and prose cannot coexist, as capitalism continues to oppress workers and as events such as World War I leave people with experiences so traumatic that they are impossible to communicate orally (84). He praises Leskov, a Russian writer, for the qualities of his work that resemble those of an oral story, his ability to create character and communicate effectively with readers (Benjamin 89). In this way, he hints at the idea of an intersection between writing and storytelling. Still, his essay leaves readers with a sense that this intersection is rare.

Benjamin's critique of the commodification of literary culture in an age of print is developed from a post-colonial perspective by Graham Huggan, in his work *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. Much like Benjamin, he addresses the role that the market plays in literatures, particularly in the context of globalization. Huggan studies the implications of postcolonial literatures that are marketed primarily to the West, to the cultures that colonized

them in the first place. He argues that such works operate through the idea of exoticism, which, “in this context, might be described as a kind of semiotic circuit that oscillates between the opposite poles of strangeness and familiarity” (Huggan 13). These works communicate ideas of culture that are both foreign and different from those of the Western reader but just comfortable and familiar enough that they will not push such readers away. Huggan comments on the pressure and constraints on African authors because of the markets they want to reach, saying:

The anthropological exotic, like other contemporary forms of exoticist discourse, describes a mode of both perception and consumption; it invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text and, by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself. Thus, the perceptual framework of the anthropological exotic allows for a reading of African literature as the more or less transparent window onto a richly detailed and culturally specific, but still somehow homogenous – and of course readily marketable – African world (37).

Thus, similarly to Benjamin, Huggan asserts that these literatures are inseparable from the market for which they are made, the cultures to which they are sold. Though he does not speak of storytellers, he paints a picture of the novel as a consumable object controlled by its market, so that the intersection between tradition and writing is artificial, crafted to fit a Western reader’s idea of the exotic.

The literary works of Bâ and Dadié go beyond these theorists’ wary evaluations of novels, even solving the problems that they pose. Despite the spread of capitalism and the ever-changing nature of human experience, these works seamlessly incorporate themes of mythological ancestors and the style of orality so to incorporate the imprint of other storytellers. Thus, they serve as an intersection between storytelling and written prose, similar to Leskov in a way that Benjamin predicted would be rendered impossible by society’s trajectory. Further, although these works were likely crafted in the midst of vying for the attention of Western

publishers and readers, their incorporation of tradition enables them to subvert the problem of a market with certain interests and limited knowledge, forcing readers to engage with, rather than merely consume, the texts and cultures they portray. The interplay of orality and myth has five clear functions in the texts of Bâ and Dadié: it puts emphasis on a theme of communication and connectedness, shapes the plot's trajectory and marks its transitions, defines character, illustrates settings, and generates social commentary. I will address each of these effects and how they are manifest in these works to show how these authors redefine the tricky relationship between oral stories and written literature. Mythical and oral components of the texts evoke storytelling traditions in a way that jolts modern readers of novels out of a passive mode of consumption, into a more dynamic and engaged relation with the text and the culture it depicts. In this way, they reconcile the disconnect between tradition and capitalist publishing practices and, at least partially, allow their authors to evade the commodifying, exoticizing forces of the publishing market.

I. Myth, Orality, and Themes of Connectedness

The nature of Bâ's story and Wangrin's journey hints at connectedness, a theme that is apparent from the book's prologue, where Bâ explains the story's source. He writes that *L'Étrange Destin de Wangrin* was written as a promise to a friend who had many stories to tell and knew that Bâ would be able to do the job for him (Bâ 8). Bâ insists that he has written almost word-for-word what he has been told, changing only names and places to protect the anonymity of Wangrin, his friend. He writes, "*Qu'on ne cherche donc pas, dans les pages qui vont suivre, la moindre thèse, de quelque ordre que ce soit – politique, religieuse ou autre. Il s'agit simplement,*

ici, du récit de la vie d'un homme” (Bâ 9). He argues that his work is an honest account and that he has not manipulated it to be about his own ideas. It is simply the story of Wangrin as it was told. His direct address to the readers is an example of an element of the text that is reminiscent of oral storytelling. It highlights the notion of communication, a theme that can be seen throughout this work. It establishes the direct communication between Bâ and his readers, as well as the implied exchange of story between Wangrin and Bâ. This forces the reader to consider the notion of truth in storytelling as the author assures them that his story is both true and accurately recounted. « *J'ai donc fidèlement rapporté tout ce qui m'a été dit de part et d'autre dans les termes mêmes qui furent employés,* » Bâ insists, establishing his honesty (9). Further, he asserts Wangrin's own honesty as well: « 'La parole de Wangrin est de l'or, et sa promesse de l'airain' » (10). This explanation of the context through which the life and adventures of Wangrin were shared with him is important for such a tale that often seems to skirt the edge of reality.

This is one of countless ways in which the inclusion of oral elements, in addition to the myth of a world of ancestors, functions in these works to address a theme of connectedness. The intersection of oral elements and mythological themes in the works of Bâ and Dadié each highlight three different kinds of communication – that between the author and the reader, that between beings and spirits, and that between the story and the world today. This effect illustrates one way in which these works allow readers a better understanding of the connection between oral and print culture. Benjamin spoke of the connection between the soul, eye, and hand of the storyteller, as he becomes a craftsman of life and experience, a teacher that communicates counsel to his readers (108). *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin* and the stories of *Le Pagne noir* investigate notions of connectedness in a way that creates a unique, dynamic reading experience

that contrasts with Benjamin's insistence on the isolated nature of the act of taking in novels and that allows the authors to remain vividly present in their works.

Although it is Bâ's direct address to readers in his prologue that establishes the theme of connection between readers and the storyteller, Dadié's establishment of this form of connectedness is embedded in the text. In "La Dot," Dadié uses prose that makes it feel as though he speaks directly to readers. He starts the story with exclamations: « Vraiment ! Vraiment, comme il passe souvent de drôles d'idées dans la tête d'un dieu ! » (Dadié 133). Readers can hear Dadié's narrative voice in these sentences. They convey a tone of disbelief and surprise that allows an understanding of what the author might sound like were he speaking the story rather than writing it. To similar ends, he concludes *Le Chasseur et le Boa* with a question. The main character, who was given all he riches he could want after freeing a boa that he trapped, was given the choice of dying or of losing all of his wealth. When it comes time for his predicted death, rather than show readers what the hunter chose, Dadié poses the question, « Vous à sa place, quelle décision prendriez-vous ? » (106). Thus, he leaves the conclusion of the story to the readers. Though Benjamin asserts that novels strive to exhaust their own subjects and leave little room for imagination, the experience of this book requires readers to engage in the text, to decide how the story ends without the help of the author. Scholar Louis-Marie Ongoum expertly compares Dadié to a traditional storyteller in analyzing his use of humor, saying, « En faisant passer le conte de l'oral à l'écrit, Bernard Binlin Dadié se comporte comme le conteur traditionnel: il met tout son apport personnel dans le style... » (72). He argues that the personal touches Dadié puts in his prose, from these gestures of orality to his sense of humor, link him with traditional storytellers by allowing a sort of engagement with his audience. Like such artists,

he is able to connect with his audience in spite of his medium, one that requires minimal engagement between author and reader.

Though Bâ's prologue is the most straightforward example of his engagement with the theme of communication, he also embeds the theme throughout the rest of Wangrin's story. In other examples, he goes further than the idea of exchange between storyteller and audience to address the theme of connection between people and spirits. Wangrin's life is full of both insurmountable conflicts and the prayers and connections that help him meet the challenges and overcome them. For example, his connection with Tierno Siddi, spiritual advisor of sorts, allows him first to defeat Racoutié and then to become the new interpreter of the town. This connection becomes even more important later, in the midst of Wangrin's scheme to illegally sell cows at the onset of World War I, a time when they are to be given to the French government (Bâ 62). Wangrin is caught, and despite his careful and often successful attempts at deflecting suspicion from himself, he is brought to trial (Bâ 90). Tierno Siddi advises him to sacrifice a chicken (Bâ 88), following specific instructions, and what feels nothing short of miraculous happens: Wangrin wins the case against Villermoz, a white Frenchman in a much more powerful position (Bâ 94). This use of the mythological theme of a spiritual world highlights connection between people and spirits, between people and the world beyond. Highlighting the important aspects of Bâ's life that led him to be able to embrace this theme of connectedness in his writing, scholar Pierre N'Da says, « Il est plutôt un grand initié de la tradition orale, qui a écrit, comme d'instinct, un récit romanesque en s'inspirant des techniques narratives des conteurs et des griots des villages et sans doute aussi des romans qu'il a pu lire et qui l'ont marqué » (192). Bâ's upbringing involved both traditional storytelling and an education that exposed him to Western novels, a fact that is clear in his skillful demonstration of the theme of exchange between people

and spirits.³ Though N'Da does not address specific beliefs or traditions that might have influenced Bâ's writing, his analysis of the dialogue between different cultures that is visible in his writing makes it clear why he might have chosen to emphasize a theme of connectedness.

Dadié shows the connection between people and spirits in his stories as well. The best example of this is "La Dot," where God is a physical character who has decided it is time for his daughter to be married. He creates a challenge for her suitors, saying that she can marry the man who brings him a sample of everything that creatures eat on earth. Kacou Ananzè decides to trick God by stealing food from others who attempt to complete the same challenge. After the last of his tricks that is described in detail, Ananzè brags, « Et je partis, pressé de devenir le gendre de dieu. Ainsi, je rencontraï un grimpeur de palmier, un pêcheur, un cultivateur, un singe noir, un singe rouge, un lion, un perroquet, un chasseur, des arbres fruitiers, des génies, des fantômes » (Dadié 141). Communication between earthly beings and god is visible first in the fact that god is close enough to those on earth that it is possible to join his lineage simply by marrying his daughter. He is also imperfect, evident in the fact that he can be tricked, that he was unable to anticipate the means by which Ananzè would attempt to complete his challenge. Further, the fact that Ananzè's tricks reached supernatural beings such as genies and ghosts makes literal the exchange between humans and spirits. Françoise Ugochukwu notably describes this universe, writing, « C'est que *Le Pagne Noir* entraîne ses lecteurs dans le cosmos des contes, celui de l'Afrique traditionnelle, qui ne se limite pas – loin de là – à l'ici-bas : il est un vaste univers qu'humains, animaux et Esprits se partagent, chaque monde étant séparé des autres » (4).

Ugochukwu shows that this connectedness reflects not only Dadié's choices and beliefs but also

³ See Hélène Heckmann's biography of Bâ – he attended a colonial school and worked for the French government but also maintained his close relationship with a spiritual advisor and storyteller, Tierno Bokar, who brought him into the storytelling tradition (3-4).

the tradition of storytelling, which shows that the universe is shared by all sorts of beings in ways that are beyond readers' full understanding. Through his use of a nearly-human god and interactions between earthly beings and spirits, Dadié highlights this sharing of the universe as well as the theme of exchange between beings that do not necessarily exist in the same realm.

The third and final way in which communication is treated in these works of literature shows the connections between the present, the past, and the future. Bâ's work features this in many ways as he grounds his writing both in the events of Wangrin's life and the longstanding tradition that surrounds it. Often it is song that harks this tradition, and Coulibaly M'Bamakan Soucko shows how this plays into communication between different sorts of temporality, writing, « Une guerre, un événement important de la vie, une amitié, un différend avec quelqu'un sont des occasions de chanter. C'est grâce au chant que les générations suivantes peuvent connaître ces faits » (214). Oral elements of Bâ's prose are thus connected to the past but they also facilitate exchange between the past and the present. Soucko did not acknowledge this in her argument, but it seems that these elements just as strongly engage with readers of the future by giving it qualities of oral storytelling so that, as Benjamin argues, it lends itself to being retold, to being perpetually reinvigorated by new storytellers. Mythological elements of the text create a similar effect. Wangrin, for example, is compared in dialogue to legendary soldiers from the past. Koutena praises Wangrin in what eventually leads to the investigation of his trickery, saying, « En vérité, Wangrin, tu as l'audace de Samba Gueladio Yegui, la témérité de Silamaka Ardo, la fougue de Poullori. Tu as le cran de Tata fils d'Ali, enseveli sous les décombres de Woytala la guerrière du pays de Segou, tombeau des Toucouleurs » (Bâ 69). In his notes at the end of the book, Bâ clarifies that these names identify peul warriors from legends. Though these descriptors seem to teeter on the edge of praise and criticism, identifying qualities such as

recklessness and audacity, they connect Wangrin to mythological figures of the past. They ground him in an existence that stretches beyond the present, showing his qualities as legendary, like those of the figures to whom he is compared.

Dadié also manages to express this timelessness in his *contes* by describing the settings in ways that are reminiscent of orality. Nature is the constant throughout all of his stories and their different characters and plotlines. In each work, he personifies nature so that the world around his characters is teeming with life and even personality. In describing the situation of the poor hunter and his faulty traps in “Le Chasseur et le boa,” Dadié writes, « Les oiseaux, par escadrilles, venaient dans les arbres environnants, percher sur le bois recourbé des pièges pour donner leur concert. Et les pièges restaient là, à écouter la musique des oiseaux. Et les pièges avaient tellement écouté de musique, qu’ils ne voulaient plus rien prendre. Aussi restaient-ils tout le temps courbés » (97). Even in birds and manmade traps, Dadié creates a sense of character and music. These elements of the text are reminiscent of storytelling, of its engaging personification and grounding in rhythm and music. Further, by highlighting this sort of exchange in the midst of a natural world that proves to be timeless throughout his many stories, Dadié grounds the communication in the past and present, even referencing the future with this notion of constancy. He makes clear that certain things last in statements that hint at the future, saying, « C’est la joie qui est permanente, c’est l’harmonie, le bonheur qu’on sent un peu partout » (Dadié 105). He insists that some parts of life never change, thus opening dialogue between all dimensions of time in a way that enriches the story for readers. In a statement that offers explanation for the importance of this theme of connectedness, Ugochukwu argues that « Le conte, d’ailleurs, est fait pour être transmis...Et la responsabilité de sa transmission incombe maintenant, non plus à l’Occidental mais à l’Africain » (2). The theme of connectedness

in Dadié's *contes* stems from the nature of the genre itself. Ugochukwu does not go into detail about the dynamic of the shift in responsibility for the passing on of stories from western writers to those who are part of the cultures from which the stories came, but his gesture at the generation-to-generation movement of stories shows yet another important aspect of the connectedness of different times in Dadié's work.

Benjamin laments the lack of communication and connectedness in the novel. The exchange between skilled storyteller and audience is severed; the reader is entirely disconnected from the author as the story relies wholly on the printed word (Benjamin 87). Tradition is no longer appreciated as bourgeois society separates itself from pain and death, as "it has been observable for a number of centuries how in the general consciousness the thought of death as declined in omnipresence and vividness" (Benjamin 93). Exchange between the past, present, and future, a major part of Benjamin's analysis, is not possible when the text lacks the subtle touches of all the storytellers who came before. Yet, the interplay of notions of orality and of the mythological spirit world in the texts of Dadié and Bâ shows that all of these connections are possible in written works. Though their styles of writing and communication differ, Bâ and Dadié both incorporate themes of connectedness between storyteller and audience, between people and spirits, and between beings from all expanses of time. It is evident that these texts take on life beyond the written word as they use these themes of connection to engage the readers' senses and thought throughout their stories. Irène Assiba D'Ameida writes of Dadié's poetry in a way that holds true for both of these authors. She says, « Une fois de plus, l'Afrique et les Africains constituent le thème central mais Dadié nous fait aussi partager ses réflexions sur le sens de la vie, le sens de la mort. Il chante l'amour et réaffirme sa croyance en l'universalité de l'homme » (163). Though his poetry is not part of this study, it is important to know of

Dadié's preoccupation with shared experience among people. Even in giving his own ideas of the themes and events about which he writes, he draws on the idea of universality and connections among people. It is through these connections that these authors resist the "aura of incommensurability" that Huggan identifies as the sign of the "postcolonial exotic" and figure the reader as an active listener rather than passive consumer and anthropological spectator of the story (Huggan 26).

II. Myth and Orality as Drivers of Plot

At Wangrin's birth, a midwife uses a chant to encourage the laboring mother. The chant is said to come from the goddess of maternity, Nyakuruba, and it begins: « Wooy wooy o ! Nyakuruba, presse fort !/L'enfantement est laborieux, Nyakuruba./L'enfantement d'un garçon est laborieux » (Bâ 14). The chant continues with much repetition, describing similarly the birth of a girl and the birth of twins, both creating a rhythmic break in Bâ's prose and encouraging Wangrin's mother through the pain of delivery. Spiritual entities are equally engaged in the birth. At first, Bâ's narrative voice addresses this as a question – « Nyakuruba, la déesse aux gros yeux blancs comme deux gros cauris lavés, entendit-elle les doux appels au secours lancés par la vieille chenu ? » (15). He suggests that it is possible that this goddess hears the mother's pain, that she might intervene in the situation. Yet, with more certainty, he speaks of the creator god's involvement: « Maa-Ngala, dieu créateur, disjoignit les os du bassin de la parturiente. La tête du bébé...s'engagea la première et ce qui restait du corps la suivit » (Bâ 15). He speaks of this god in a way that shows that he performs the actions that mark the final moments of Wangrin's birth. At the beginning of the story, readers are introduced to the idea that gods are directly involved

with even the most basic earthly events. They also experience the importance of verse and rhythm in the story as it marks the birth of the picaresque protagonist without whom this story would not exist.

The birth of Wangrin is a strong example of the ways in which oral elements of prose and an often-referenced ancestral world contribute to the plot of Bâ's work. References to oral storytelling such as verse and rhythmic textual elements punctuate important points of the plot in the book. Further, gods and ancestors, in their world that is distinct from this one even as the two interact, can be considered to be the movers and shakers of the story, the catalysts for development and action. Though one could argue that they become less important as the plot becomes more focused on Wangrin's sly ruses, the fact that Bâ writes the story with connections between spirits and most major plot points shows the importance of this recurring, mythological theme. Similar occurrences are apparent in the works of Dadié, as well. There are two ways in which dimensions of orality and the spiritual realm work together to influence the plots of these works, both evidenced in the scene of Wangrin's birth: they mark transitional periods and turning points in the works or they directly trigger events. In his concept of storytelling, Benjamin references the fact that the dynamic nature of the art meant that the plots of stories form a web that connects all stories to form a sort of universe (98). He also speaks of the experience that goes into stories, not only that which inspires their plots but also that which is possessed by each storyteller who hears the plot and passes it on (Benjamin 90). In featuring verse that connects readers to the storytelling experience and to a presence of gods and ancestors that creates connections between characters, these works boast this web and this experience. It establishes a web of interconnectedness between different gods and the ways in which humans engage with them, showing that such elements are possible in the written word as well.

Verse punctuates Bâ's novel far beyond its presence at Wangrin's birth. It marks plot points along the way, all leading to the end of the novel and its portrayal of Wangrin's death. After the great events of his life, all of the cunning that allowed him to gain wealth and power, Wangrin died humbly as an alcoholic. As the end of his life approaches, Bâ breaks into the verses of a traditional drinking song, featuring stanzas such as: « Qui me dira ce qu'est la liqueur,/cette chose buvable et haïssable ?/Elle donne au sujet de l'audace/et le fait s'exprimer comme un roi./Elle fait vadrouiller l'étranger/et lance son logeur à sa recherche,/ce qui lui coûte et lui gâche son travail » (344). The lighthearted, lyric format contrasts with the lyrics that Wangrin sings, the idea that drinking gives people too much audacity and that it can lead people to waste time and money. The more serious content of these lyrics foreshadows the end of Wangrin's life, which comes in the midst of an episode of drunken wandering in the rain. The verse format itself is important as well, because as with Wangrin's birth, his experiences as interpreter early in the book in Diagaramba (Bâ 24), his conflicts with Diofo when he must decide what promises he must break (Bâ 170), and many other moments, it shows that a plot transition approaches. N'Da says it well, that «les chants-poèmes et autres textes poétiques des griots sont des éléments capitaux de la prose romanesque d'Hampâté Bâ. Ils ponctuent le récit, renforcent et entretiennent l'émotion, le dramatique d'une situation qui se vit » (203). The element of verse, derived from oral storytelling, thus holds important functions in the plot of Bâ's work. It not only breaks up the plot, but it is also conducive to emotion and intensity in important scenes, creating a sense of drama for the reader.

Dadié applies verse to similar ends in his *contes*. B. Kotchy-N'Guessan does not acknowledge the emotional importance of chants in this work, but she explains their importance in driving the plot, saying, "Après le récit d'exposition se dégagent des dialogues rythmés,

ponctués de chants-refrains qui marquent le changement d'actions et de personnages secondaires...Les chants indiquent en quelque sorte les différentes scènes ou tableaux" (29).

Much like Bâ, Dadié uses poetry in the midst of his prose to drive the plot and indicate where there will be transitions. Verse allows for the changing of scene without losing the vividness or confusing readers. This can be seen in his story collection's namesake, "Le Pagne noir," in the songs of Aïwa. Young Aïwa's mother died shortly after childbirth and Aïwa's life from that point is dictated by a mean stepmother who cannot stand to see her happy and ultimately sends her away to complete an impossible task, to wash black linens until they turn white. She stops at many bodies of water to scrub the garments until her fingers bleed, but the fabric refuses even to be saturated with water, much less to change color. She remains hopeful, and each time she fails at her task, she sings, « *Ma mère, si tu me voyais sur la route,/Aïwa-ô ! Aïwa !/Sur la route qui mène au fleuve/Aïwa-ô ! Aïwa !/Le pagne noir doit devenir blanc/Et le ruisseau refuse de le mouiller/Aïwa-ô ! Aïwa !* » (Dadié 20). This chant, communicated with slightly different lyrics twice more, punctuates the plot of this story, eventually leading to the appearance of her deceased mother's spirit. Verse is also featured in "La Dot," but its tone is different, as Ananzè chants it each time he tricks another person and steals their food to complete his challenge. In the first instance, he offers to share a crab leg with an old lady, but he becomes furious when she eats it, saying that he only wanted her to taste it. Once she tires of arguing, he hurries out, taking one of her chickens on the way. He chants, « *Voleur ! Voleur ! Tu sais bien que tu as mangé mon crabe./Le crabe vient de l'océan./L'océan appartient à dieu qui se veut un gendre./Et c'est dieu qui m'a mis au monde./Je m'en vais ! Je m'en vais !* » (136). Ananzè therefore references a sort of chain of events that he argues justifies his anger and his stealing of her chicken as he seeks to marry god's daughter and thus become part of his lineage. Each subsequent version of this verse

builds on the previous, adding the different types of food he has stolen. This oral aspect of the work not only adds rhythmic verse to accompany the prose, but also gives the story itself rhythm as it breaks its plot into parts.

Beyond elements of orality in these texts, the theme of an ancestral and spiritual world molds the plots of these works, as well. As with the scene of Wangrin's birth, gods are often portrayed as being intimately involved in the important turning points of Wangrin's life in Bâ's novel. Shortly after Wangrin's birth, a spiritual leader called Komo, associated with a god, accurately predicts the trajectory of Wangrin's life. Bâ writes, « Le Komo annonça au père que son fils se singulariserait et brillerait dans la vie, mais qu'il n'avait point vu sa tombe au cimetière de ses ancêtres. Cette prédiction laissait entendre que Wangrin mourrait à l'étranger, loin du pays natal » (17). Though the Komo has not arranged Wangrin's life himself, the fact that he predicts it so accurately implies that deities unknown have in fact planned it. Further, these deities must have communicated their plans with Komo for him to understand. Madi Fily Camara astutely argues, « Il ressort de cette réflexion le constat que la tradition est partout présente dans *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin*. Elle constitue même la structure du roman » (48). Since the theme of a spirit world stems from the tradition she references, Camara's remarks show that readers can understand the intervention of spirits as an integral part of the book's structure. This is apparent throughout the novel, even at the end, when the stone symbolic of Wangrin's connection to his patron god, Gongoloma-Sooké, is mistakenly thrown away. Wangrin's shock upon finding this out is tangible, he stumbles and falls, crying out jumbled phrases such as, « O mes grands ancêtres! Venez à mon secours » et « C'est mon soleil qui se couche » et « C'est la lune de mon malheur qui monte à l'horizon de ma destinée » (Bâ 335). Wangrin is aware that the loss of his connection to this god who has shaped his being and his life will lead to the end of his

days, and he is entirely correct. The rupture of the physical manifestation of his link to this god causes his life, and the plot of the novel, to come to a close. Whether or not a divine presence directly led to the end of his life, this establishes the intensity of their connection and allows the plot to take a shape that readers can understand both in itself but in the web of gods that the book has established.

Dadié also writes of direct intervention from the spiritual realm in his stories. The best example of this is in “Le Pagne Noir” after Aïwa’s many attempts at completing her task at washing the blackness out of the linens, after traveling for days and nights without sleeping. She finally finds water that will wet the fabric, and she spends two nights washing it, her hands covered in blisters. She sings one more song, imploring her mother to come help her. This time, her mother appears, handing her white linens in exchange for the black ones. The stepmother is aghast when she sees Aïwa and the fabric she carries which, Dadié reveals, was the fabric that was used to bury Aïwa’s mother. In this case, an ancestor’s spirit interfered directly in the story, leaving behind a physical object. The appearance of the mother resolves the story’s problem and brings it to a close. Thus this manifestation of a mythological other world marked the climax of the story and allowed its trajectory to change. Ugochukwu makes an important observation about godly intervention in Dadié’s *contes*, saying, « la rencontre avec les Esprits, dans *Le Pagne noir*, résout tous les problèmes...elle satisfait également le désir de l’endeuillé de communiquer avec ses disparus. Mais elle n’offre, curieusement, que des solutions individuelles » (107). This comment stems from the many stories that feature famine or war, where the spiritual realm offers respite for one character but not for the larger problem plaguing society. It is interesting to consider the fact that deities cannot interfere on a larger scale, but equally important to know that

they interact with individuals in a way that is conducive to making quick, engaging plots for the stories.

Both the oral elements that punctuate the plots of these works and the mythical elements that direct the movement and outcome of their stories show the artful ways in which Bâ and Dadié incorporated traditional elements in these works of literature. Though Benjamin argued that novels made connections between stories impossible, forcing stories into isolated universes, the use of a spiritual world that so closely influences all of these works indicates a bigger web of stories that Benjamin didn't consider possible. Mamadou Bani Diallo writes of how these works were important for the preservation of traditional stories, and although I would argue that there are many more dimensions to these texts than such cultural preservation, his observations are important. Diallo says, « Il apparaît, toutefois, que la réalisation d'une œuvre aussi importante passe nécessairement par la cohabitation entre l'oral et l'écrit » (18). Diallo acknowledges that as far as cultural purposes are concerned, the intersection between oral and written literature is necessary. Huggan describes attempts at such incorporation of cultural elements in African literatures as “a series of pointedly exaggerated, at times caricatural, cultural (mis)readings aimed at a Western model reader confronted with the limits of his/her cultural knowledge” (43). However, Diallo's argument shows that perhaps this does not have to be the case, that an intersection between written literature and oral storytelling can allow for effective communication of ideas and culture that are not incorrect or tailored. Further, these authors make it possible in the ways that they write. As Huggan argues, these authors do sometimes exaggerate, examples of which include Bâ's frequent use of the divine and Dadié's exclamatory storytelling tactics. It is through this exaggeration, though, that they are able to draw Western readers in, that they are able to communicate information and details without compromising the

stories they seek to tell for the sake of attracting a bigger audience. In spite of limited knowledge and firmly engrained misconceptions on the part of readers, Bâ and Dadié force readers to engage with their writing. Though they are in print form, they are rooted in the people, grounded in stories told before, showing even more clearly how they are a counterexample to Benjamin's idea of the complete and immanent death of storytelling.

III. Myth, Orality, and Character

Though the clearest and earliest connection that defines Wangrin's character is his connection to Gongoloma-Sooké, there are many elements of the plot that illustrate his character just as strongly. These often reference oral storytelling in the way that they are written. For example, shortly after Wangrin has moved to Diagamamba, interpreter Racoutié goes on a long and arrogant tirade near the cola tree, a location for socializing. His words are so out of place that the guitarists that accompany singers around the tree stop playing, and all eyes search the scene for what will happen. Racoutié sings of his position of power, not only as it pertains to the French government but also as it pertains to Diagamamba's residents. He sings, "Griots, cordonniers, forgerons, captifs de case ici présents, je vous donne à partager cent mille cauris. Chantez mes louanges. Je vous dirai un jour celui que vous devrez insulter pour mon plaisir » (Bâ 45). Reminiscent of the way stories might be orally recounted in its dramatic language and association with music, this speech allows readers to get to know Racoutié's conceit and his position. More importantly, though, they learn about Wangrin. Since Wangrin later takes the position of interpreter, hearing about Racoutié's connections gives readers information that they can later use to understand Wangrin's power. Further, Wangrin's reaction to this incident is

telling – he confronts Racoutié and the two begin to fight. Racoutié’s arrogance makes witnesses willing to testify that Racoutié started the fight, not Wangrin. The next morning, Wangrin is promoted to take the position of interpreter. Wangrin’s slyness comes into play, as well as his strong sense of honor. Through this theatrical scene, Wangrin’s character comes into focus.

This occurs at other occasions during the life of Wangrin as well. As the success of Wangrin’s cow-smuggling endeavor peaked, Kountena, a man who worked with Wangrin to carry out his plot and took in some of the riches earned, gave a speech at a large dinner party. He lauded Wangrin and his power, riches, and intelligence, starting with a tale about animals and launching into pages of praises, all dramatically stated much like the words of Racoutié. His words tell readers how much power Wangrin has managed to earn and how influential he is to those around him. It communicates his power so well, in fact, that the speech makes members of the French government uneasy and ultimately leads to the discovery of Wangrin’s scheme. On the subject of similar parts of the text, N’Da notably addresses the illuminating nature of these scenes of dialogue: « Ces énoncées proverbiaux accompagnent, illustrent ou éclairent la pensée de ceux qui les utilisent ; ils permettent de faire des remarques ou de faire réfléchir ceux à qui ils sont adressés » (N’Da 203). The spoken word in Bâ’s text is important because it provokes reflection on the characters, those who speak and those at whom speech is directed. Notions of orality and the mythological realm of gods and ancestors contribute to character development in Dadié’s writings as well, and the short nature of his *contes* makes such powerful characterization crucial to the success of his writing. Benjamin argued that another element that sets storytelling apart from novels is its establishment of characters with little explanation or detail so that listeners can imagine them for themselves (89). The art of storytelling establishes necessary qualities of characters without explaining them too much so that “the more natural the process by

which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading/[...]/the more completely it is integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it” (Benjamin 91). Establishing character without too much information makes them easier to absorb, thus allowing listeners to pass the story on. These written works of literature clearly boast this mastery. They establish character using writing with oral qualities and references to myth in place of explanatory details.

Dadié’s stories use methods similar to those of Bâ to establish character. Like Racoutié’s and Koutena’s dialogue, Aïwa’s songs illustrate her character for readers. While Dadié had already illustrated her optimism through her smile and her calm reactions to her stepmother’s evil actions, it is through the chants that mark her often-failed attempts that her character comes into clarity. She chants about the impossibility of her task, but she also remarks on the beauty of her surroundings: “*L’eau glisse comme le jour/L’eau glisse comme le bonheur/O ma mère, si tu me voyais sur la route, Aïwa-ô ! Aïwa !*” Readers learn that in spite of an impossible task that carries her far from home, she reminds herself of all that is good. Rather than simply describing her character, her goodness is clear in the words she chants. Further, in “Le Chasseur et le boa,” dialogue amongst dogs characterizes the *chasseur* in his new life of great wealth and sets the stage for the dilemma he faces. One of the dogs says, “La vie est si douce... Regarde ces fleurs, écoute ces chansons, respire ces parfums... Est-ce qu’on peut quitter comme cela la vie?... Regarde-le tourner autour de ses richesses. Le pauvre » (Dadié 106). Through his words, reminiscent of storytelling in the way it encourages readers to ponder the dilemma, the dialogue illustrates the character of the hunter who, no matter the beauty of life, knows what it is like to be poor and hungry. Ongoum highlights the important elements of characterization in traditional *contes*, writing, “En effet, les portraits physiques se réduisent aux lignes essentielles, à des esquisses faites moins pour elles-mêmes et dans une intention esthétique que pour ne souligner

que les seules aspects qui jouent un rôle dans le procès” (70). In his loyalty to the *conte*, Dadié must intentionally choose the words that describe the characters so that the descriptions are short and poignant. By using oral elements such as chants and dialogues in his writing, he creates strong characterization without wasting words on smaller, clarifying details.

Of course, Bâ characterizes using the realm of ancestors as well, as evidenced by the close spiritual connection between Gongoloma-Sooké and Wangrin. During his speech, Koutena highlights Wangrin’s honor and strength by comparing him to legendary Peul soldiers who had come before. Koutena says, “En vérité, Wangrin, tu as l’audace de Samba Gueladio Yegui, la témérité de Silamaka Ardo, la fougue de Pullori...” (Bâ 69). Wangrin’s character is established through the ways in which he resembles famous ancestors. Wangrin’s connection to religion, even when shown less directly than in this proclamation or in his relationship with gods, can also be telling of his character. Throughout the book, Wangrin uses religion mainly when he needs it. He is able to use it as a tool to get out of sticky situations, but whether he truly believes in it is ambiguous. Camara highlights the nature of his on-and-off faith, saying “Selon ses besoins du moment, il recourra aux services des géomanciens et « soma », tout comme à ceux des marabouts dans un syncrétisme caractéristique de ce qu’on convient d’appeler l’islam noir” (118). Camara illustrates Wangrin’s unsteady relationship with different sorts of religions and practices, most of which he only approaches when he needs them. Yet, Camara eloquently acknowledges, “Ainsi, dans toute chose, tout événement, il existe deux faces : une face visible et une face invisible, une face diurne et une face nocturne, une face apparente et une face cachée” (124). The presence and influence of the world of gods and ancestors is apparent in this work, such that all moments in the plot seem to have a side that can be attributed to the mythological. Bâ’s presentation of Wangrin’s weak belief in the midst of all of this shows his confidence in his

own cleverness as well as his ability to use religion in a way that provides him with the help he needs, demonstrating his cunning both clearly and in ways that are crucial to his development as a character. His ability to use religion, from local beliefs to those of Catholic missionaries, shows readers his cleverness so that despite his often morally questionable actions, it is difficult not to hope that his ruses will work, that he will be able to escape the situations in which he lands.

In Dadié's "La Dot," the presence of a god provides the perfect opportunity to elaborate on Kacou Ananzè's trickery. Though the character of Ananzè is a well-known character in different African literatures and folklore, Dadié is able to put his own spin on him, to further emphasize his sly ways. Ananzè's desire to be in the lineage of god, and his willingness to do anything to get to that point, gives readers an entertaining and direct look at his character. He muses, « En homme très riche, mais fort économe, je ne voulais pas me lancer comme cela dans la compétition... Mais l'envie d'être le gendre de dieu finalement l'emportant, je me dis : 'Tu dois concourir'... Le quatrième jour au matin, décidé à tromper dieu et à avoir sa fille aînée par la ruse » (Dadié 134). His thought process reveals his determination to gain power and his easy willingness to cheat in order to achieve it. By showing how enticing godly status is to Ananzè, Dadié illustrates his version of this character so that readers understand it early in the story. Ugochukwu shows how this relates to traditional beliefs that Dadié knew well, saying, "la présence du monde des Esprits dans douze des seize contes du *Pagne noir* témoigne de la profonde croyance traditionnelle dans l'au-delà, un au-delà qui peut sembler parfois lointain mais qui reste accessible et s'avère si proche du monde des hommes qu'il lui ressemble..." (8). Not only does his use of a mythological world of gods hint at a deeper cultural belief, but the spiritual world itself is important in analysis of his work. This world is so closely intertwined with the human world – as evidenced by the contest to marry God's daughter in "La Dot" – that

the two are strikingly similar. This mix between the spiritual and the concrete allows for stronger understanding of characters as they navigate the often-unclear divide between the two.

Benjamin insists that strong storytelling connects with readers through vague characters that are easy to learn and recreate (91). The written novel, however, is generated by what Benjamin refers to as a fully-developed, European capitalist regime not for the purpose of connecting to people but in order to strengthen control over them (Benjamin 88). Further, as Huggan suggested, they are generated to interact with Western readers' lack of cultural knowledge in a way that might enforce misconceptions for the sake of marketing (37). The works of Bâ and Dadié, in spite of being in print, embody the characteristics of stories. Through the use of textual elements that reference oral stories and the inclusion of a theme of gods and ancestors, these authors have created characters that are archetypal enough that readers from all cultures and backgrounds can connect with them. Even Wangrin, a character of contradictions much like those of his patron God, is easy to grasp in his sly ways so that his story integrates itself in people's memory. Readers can thus connect to Wangrin and Aïwa, the hunter and Ananzè in ways that Benjamin did not seem to imagine in printed works. Much like Benjamin's storyteller, Bâ and Dadié add their own unique touches to the stories they tell though they both originate from other sources, Bâ's from the biography of a friend and Dadié's from stories that have been orally passed along. Bâ and Dadié's use of oral features in their writing and mythology throughout their stories shows that they are closer to Benjamin's storyteller than to his novelist.

IV. Myth, Orality, and Setting

In the town of Diagamamba, where Wangrin first takes his position as interpreter, there is a custom in which locals participate each day. After breakfast, men meet around the Cola tree to buy enough cola nuts for their families. They sit and eat what they've purchased and Kullel, a storyteller, sings. Bâ includes his verse in the text: "Viens à Diagamamba,/assiste à la cola matinale d'Eldika/et aux manifestations nocturnes de Telerké,/retourne dans ton pays et meurs" (24). The verse, reminiscent of storytelling not only in itself but also in the fact that it is sung by the town's storyteller, shows the way this tradition is engrained in the local culture of this town. It establishes setting, not only the local culture but also the physical setting, the presence of this tree around which everyone gathers daily. Camara studied this scene as well, showing how it contributes to the presence of tradition in the novel. "Les lieux et les moments de sociabilité sont une des facettes du mode traditionnel de vie dans le livre. On songe aux fameuses deux places jumelles de Diagamamba...où les hommes se retrouvaient le matin pour deviser tranquillement, un morceau de cola dans la bouche, chacun dans sa catégorie sociale" (119). Social interactions offer insight into the ways that tradition works in Bâ's writing as well as into the nature of social interaction throughout his story, as social divisions and stratification come into play around the Cola tree. Camara alludes to the ways in which it illuminates other ways of understanding the work too in showing that even in this daily ritual, people are divided into their own groups.

Bâ uses oral elements in his writing to establish setting in countless instances throughout his book. For one, he chooses to include words in the Bambara and Peul languages in his text, thus establishing an important facet of the cultures in which Wangrin finds himself over the course of his life. Further, he uses dialogue to establish place and culture as well. One character that appears early in the text is a poor soldier who welcomes him in Diagamamba. He speaks in broken French: "Bonjour, Moussé Lekkol ! Toi faire bon voyager ?" et "Moussé Lekkol, poser

ici, attendre commandant peler toi....Cé comme ça avec grand chef” (29). The name “Moussé Lekkol” is a way of trying to pronounce “monsieur l’école” or “maître d’école,” and this soldier’s grammar is stunted in a way that demonstrates the difficulty of the imposition of French on Diagamamba by colonial government. In this way, dialogue contributes to Bâ’s establishing of the place to which Wangrin has moved, telling us in short lines what its political situation is like. He also includes his own musings, in true storyteller form, occasionally breaking away from the story to comment on culture. For example, in the midst of the downfall of Wangrin’s cow-selling scheme, Bâ says, « En effet, c’est l’un des paradoxes de l’Afrique que bonheur et malheur, joie et peine se fêtent pareillement » (100). In statements such as this, Bâ comments simply and straightforwardly on his own culture. Huggan’s idea of the exotic, crafted for the eyes of Western readers, involves more exaggeration and allusions to grander cultural rituals. Yet, in using storyteller-like qualities, Bâ is able to introduce cultural commentary different from the auto-ethnographic descriptions analyzed by Huggan. Benjamin emphasizes the keen observational skills of storytellers, the way they carefully observe their surroundings and incorporate them seamlessly in their stories with a perfect connection between their eye and their craft (108). Whether storytellers are local or from far away, they communicate details of place with precision. In the works of Bâ and Dadié, this keen ability is intact and evident despite the fact that their words are written. Much of the establishment of physical and cultural settings in their works comes from their use of oral elements in the text and of themes of an ancestral world, creating descriptions that subvert the challenges Benjamin and Huggan predicted for such authors.

The oral elements in Dadié’s “Le Chasseur et le boa” richly illustrate the setting of the beginning of the *conte*, a forest that is teeming with life. Just as he personified the animals that

were discussed in the first chapter of this study, he also describes the nonliving parts of the forest using methods that hint at storytelling. He describes, “L’eau en remuant des milliers de brindilles sur la rive, contait ses aventures à la terre attentive, captivée par les nouvelles attrayantes que lui disait l’Eau indiscreète toujours bavarde qui écoutait le dialogue du Chasseur et du Boa pour aller le conter plus loin” (Dadié 99). Dadié personifies the water and the earth by hinting that they communicate with each other, that the water tells stories. In this way, he further describes the setting, the body of water that runs through the forest and the twigs that float in it. Further, giving all of these elements a sort of voice emphasizes the forest’s delicate symbiosis, the balance of life in the book’s setting. Using engaging language reminiscent of storytelling, he allows readers to better visualize the forest. Ugochukwu argues, “Une première lecture de l’ouvrage fait pénétrer le lecteur dans un monde de forêts et de savanes, de champs et de cases, de villages et de sentiers ombragés ou ensoleillés. Une bonne partie des récits décrit l’Afrique à l’étranger...” (103). Dadié’s strong descriptions of place, often involving personification that hints at the story’s origins in oral *contes*, illustrate places that he has been for readers who have never seen them. Huggan also describes postcolonial works as being a “window into African cultures,” saying that geographical and anthropological description contributes to postcolonial literatures’ status as exotic objects (Huggan 37). Although this kind of exoticization might be at play in Dadié’s evocation of landscape, the animation of the landscape and the emphasis on the interconnection of its various elements draws the reader into a lively engagement with the space.

Bâ also uses the mythical theme of a world of gods and ancestors to establish setting in his work. As Camara argues, there are two sides to many aspects of his novel, and the settings are no exception. Wangrin’s birthplace, Noubigou, has an ancient and mysterious history that Bâ describes before he even writes of Wangrin’s birth. It involves a story of many gods, as the land

of Noubigou was a sort of center for the activity of spirits. Driven by the actions of several particularly influential deities, guardian spirits began to shape the town in which Wangrin was born. Bâ writes, « Yooyayo...était le patron de cette partie sud du pays qui s'articule en chaînes de monts, collines, et coteaux avant d'aller se souder à la dorsale guinéenne. Sous la conduite de Yooyayo, les esprits gardiens du massif sud malien se rendaient dans la plaine où s'élevait la hutte de Sano, siège de leurs palabres occultes annuelles » (12). In this way, Bâ uses the supernatural to describe the setting of Wangrin's birth. He describes the vast chains of mountains and hills that make up the landscape while explaining the spiritual origins of the area. All of this is an important backdrop for Wangrin's life and his own, personal connections with spirits. In addition to establishing physical settings, this establishes culture. Camara writes, « Ainsi on y voit se dérouler à travers les aventures de Wangrin les étapes qui jalonnent la vie d'un homme en milieu bambara. Cela commence tout naturellement par la naissance entourée de circonstances magico-religieuses... » (118). Bâ thus makes Bambara cultural practices accessible for readers through his establishment of cultural setting throughout his book.

Dadié also refers to the theme of a spiritual realm to describe the settings of his stories. In "Le Chasseur et le Boa," Dadié uses this mythological concept to establish not only the world around the characters but to establish the story's world as a whole. He writes, « Ils partirent dans la forêt des boas, la forêt des génies, car il y a d'autres forêts qui ne sont pas la forêt des hommes, et dans ces forêts, des montagnes, des fleuves, des essences tout différents de ceux qu'on trouve dans les forêts des hommes. Et dans ces régions régnait une paix jamais troublée » (Dadié 100). He explains the world of this story and how it consists of many forests that belong to different species, notably including one for supernatural beings. He introduces physical landscapes in this new organization of the world. Even more importantly, this allows him to

comment on human nature as he shows how there's peace in all forests except that which belongs to humans. In a work that explores the importance of the *conte* in African societies, Kotchy-N'Guessan writes, « Comme nous pouvons le constater, *le conte n'est pas un art autonome. Il est à la fois récit, poésie, musique, théâtre, philosophie. C'est un art dynamique et ainsi il est le reflet de la vie, de la société qui s'exprime en terme de mouvement* » (30). His analysis is essential because it acknowledges how the traditional *conte* and thus Dadié's writing embrace many different art forms in their theatricality. This is visible in this part of "Le Chasseur et le boa" and the way in which myth plays into it, the way it uses tradition to cast readers into a vivid world. This shows that Dadié's craft involves both keen observation and skillful incorporation of many different art forms in his storytelling-like writing.

Bâ also boasts clever observation in his work, which N'Da considers in his article: « Ainsi, *L'Étrange destin de Wangrin* contient une mine intéressante d'informations sur les pratiques coutumières, les traditions, les cérémonies rituelles, les cultes, les croyances, les interdits, les ancêtres mythiques des peuples, les divinités, l'importance des marabouts et géomanciens...etc. » (N'Da 195). Bâ's writing, so reminiscent of storytelling, and his incorporation of traditional myth establish a complex backdrop for his writing so that readers can easily see and imagine it. This vivid quality of both Bâ and Dadié's evocations of place, created through imitations of storytelling, succeed in inscribing these worlds into the readers' memory and imagination. The mythical quality of the landscapes moves these representations beyond the realm of "information" or anthropological description. As such, the storytelling strategies at least partially subvert the demand for "authentic" ethnographic representations of postcolonial cultures exhibited in more realistic novels (Huggan 37). While these stories may ultimately

reproduce, in part, a Western fantasy of African settings, their rhetorical form foregrounds the reader's participation in the fabrication of that imaginative landscape.

V. Myth, Orality, and Social Commentary

In the midst of his clever incorporation of physical and cultural setting, Bâ establishes political culture in *L'Étrange Destin de Wangrin* so that even basic descriptive sentences are thought-provoking. The struggle between French culture and traditional regional cultures is evident in this work. Religious references vary from addressing Islam to Christianity to the worship of gods such as Gongoloma-Sooké. The relationship between French government officials and locals is always tense; Wangrin's winning case in court against Frenchman Villermoz is so shocking to everyone that the power of the French becomes clear to the reader. Further, periodically, Bâ slips in lines that, with few words, show precisely what is wrong with the government. At one point, as World War I is declared and Wangrin decides to start his smuggling ring, Bâ writes, « la déclaration de guerre et le décret de mobilisation générale furent publiés à sons de clairon et de tam-tam et par de grandes affiches collées aux murs – que seules une dizaine de personnes étaient capables de lire » (61). Bâ sets up the scene of the beginning of the war with drama created through references to sounds of trumpets and drums, elements of the story that gesture at oral storytelling. Yet, in the midst of this, he drops a subtle line about language politics. Interestingly, he does not specify the language of the posters. The imposition of French meant that few had grown up speaking it, but the fact that many native African languages were written down only relatively recently meant that either one would be impossible for most citizens to read. This hints at problems that postcolonial authors face, the challenge of

deciding between writing in the languages of colonizers to garner larger audiences for their works and writing in local languages that few can read. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o addresses these issues and takes them further, asking if writing in European languages doesn't feed into the oppression of imposed cultures, if it contributes to African literary traditions or simply to European ones (125). Such questions were surely present in Bâ's mind as he wrote, and as he made this comment about the problems with languages in the midst of French colonization. He still chose to write in French, a choice that makes sense for his goal of making public the story of his friend in a way that many can read it, but he managed to use this choice and the language to criticize the system that forced the language upon his home in the first place.

In this way, Bâ uses notions of orality to a fifth and final end: to generate social commentary. The announcements that the government posted were all but entirely useless to the people of Diagamamba. Colonialism created difficult language barriers and little was done to break these barriers. Wangrin's small description of the situation shows not only that this sort of miscommunication was commonplace, but it also shows the absurdity of the situation. This is shown in other ways, as well. For example, Wangrin also navigates the tricky mixture of cultures with cunning ease, not hesitating, for example, to contact a Catholic priest to get him out of prison when he knows that that will be the most effective way of freeing himself (Bâ 213). Dadié uses his text to create social commentary, as well. His "Le Chasseur et le Boa" treats all kinds of themes that gesture at humanity's flaws. He highlights the fact that excessive violence is unique to humans in passing the other forests and he shows how people's obsession with wealth can interfere with their appreciation of the world around them. It shows the stark contrast between the harmony of nature and the grips of famine and hunger, which nearly brought the hunter to eat the boa rather than to give him a chance to show him the new world of abundance that he had

promised. Though his references are less clearly connected to colonial politics than those of Bâ, they create equally important commentary on the selfish nature of man.

Many scholars have weighed in on the social commentary of each of these authors in the works on which this study has focused, and their studies have made it clear that their calling into question different elements of the colonial system is much more deeply embedded in their texts than can be seen at first glance. For example, N'Da shows that this criticism can be seen even in the format of *L'Étrange Destin de Wangrin*. The book is representative of a huge number of genres – it boasts elements of a novel, of an epic, of an ethnography, of both biography and autobiography, as well as elements of oral storytelling. It features myths and legends, songs and poetry, proverbs, and a mix of French and the languages of the book's *tirailleurs*, sometimes even in the same phrases. This multitude of different genres that can be found in this book can be seen as a way of taking values and literatures that have been imposed on Bâ's society and surpassing them, of writing in the language of the colonizer while staying true to culture, a task that Thiongo considered to be nearly impossible. N'Dâ writes, « La fécondation de l'écriture par l'oralité amène l'auteur à rejeter le conformisme du canon du roman occidental : il affiche par là sa volonté de traduire et/ou de transcrire littéralement le récit traditionnel oral dans un texte romanesque ou encore de participer, à tout le moins, aux deux cultures » (N'Da 196). Bâ's rejection of traditional Occidental literary forms shows the importance he gives to tradition; he uses both cultures of literary tradition at once. His work shows the importance and validity of oral culture; integrating it seamlessly in Occidental literary forms hints at the absurdity and the problem of colonialism's rejection of cultures native to the areas that were colonized.

Further, Dadié's stories represent a social vision that involves solving the problems that colonization caused for his country, the Ivory Coast. He is optimistic that progress is possible,

clear in his use of a motif of ascension in his works. In “Le Chasseur et le boa,” the hunter’s voyage to the boa’s promised land of prosperity is a sort of ascension, as is Aïwa’s gradual movement towards finding her mother’s spirit along her path. Many other stories in Dadié’s collection involve such movement as well – young people forced to complete tasks to reach wealth, power, and comfort and demonstrating their goodness along the way, tricksters who never quite win or finish the journeys on which they have embarked. D’Almeida writes, « Dadié rêve d’une société plus équitable, où seraient bannis la misère, la guerre, les préjugés, et où les êtres humains pourraient vivre en frères[...]une exaltation du sentiment national en même temps qu’une grande compassion pour les Ivoiriens qui[...] mènent une lutte de survie » (167). Dadié’s hopeful vision of the future corrects the problems that colonialism has caused, including even the simple act of respecting the peoples and cultures of the Ivory Coast. Through the trajectory of his *contes*, boasting mythological themes and prose reminiscent of orality, Dadié criticizes the state of his country in relation to colonialism and shares with readers his dreams for the future.

However, Huggan rightfully acknowledges that the tendency to see postcolonial literature as saturated with political commentary and allegory for cultural struggle is problematic and overlooks other political elements that can be gleaned from the writing (2). He argues, “The trouble with postcolonialism, when seen as a broad-based critical method, is that it risks being collapsed into a catch-all ‘metaphor for cultural embattlement’ (Suleri 1992)” (Huggan 2). Rather than seeking out allegories of cultural struggle in reading these works, readers must understand that as authors of such literatures reach for recognition, they are entangled in the system that oppressed them and that did, and still does, impose its beliefs on these artists (Huggan 24). Authors are often aware of this and create commentaries on it in their works (Huggan 26). Inklings of this can be seen in the humor with which Bâ creates commentary, the

ways in which he carries descriptions of gods to the extreme, and in the way that Dadié's storyteller voice can at times seem even exaggerated. This system of representation of cultures for readers of other cultures gestures at what Huggan refers to as untranslatability, the fact that practices and beliefs cannot be accurately communicated to readers who do not have basic understandings of them. On one hand, ethnographic dimensions of these works are purposeful misunderstandings of culture for unaware readers with limited knowledge. At the same time, these texts' engagement with the expectations of readers helps bring to light the problems of such expectations, helps criticize them. I would argue that while Bâ and Dadié's writing was likely influenced by the Western readers to whom their works would be marketed, it engages in important interaction with the misconceptions that Western readers have. Bâ's novel's inclusion of many genres and Dadié's portrayal of written oral tradition hint at layers of engagement in social commentary and critique, creating a level of truthfulness that serves as a solution for Huggan's exotic, perhaps catering to readers but still honestly criticizing social climates. I would argue that Bâ and Dadié are well aware of the politics and exoticism involved in the market of books from their cultures, and by using mythological and oral elements in their writing they are able to engage readers without entirely catering to them. They are able to strategically use the market's exoticism to communicate social commentary.

These authors' abilities to work around the demands of the market introduces one final way in which these works are solutions to Benjamin's idea of the death of storytelling. The problem with written novels, he argues, is that they are designed to hold social structures firmly in place (Benjamin 87). They allow oppressive capitalism to continue to subjugate workers and better the lives of the wealthy few. However, the works of Bâ and Dadié seem to engage differently with the social structures in place. Using traditional ancestral myths and gestures at

orality in their writing, these authors generate social commentary that calls into question even the nature of their own writing. They highlight the oppression that they have experienced with hopes of changing it, of seeking peace and understanding so that cultures might coexist without friction. These works occupy different zones than Benjamin's idea of a novel. It is possible to argue, of course, that these works do not serve as exceptions because oral storytelling and text are fundamentally different. On some level, oral literature and written works exist in separate ways, which makes comparison difficult. However, I would argue that the two intersect in these works. The mythological elements and the writing that echoes oral stories bring the effects of these works to be close to those of *contes*. These stories could not exist without the creation of this middle ground between oral storytelling and the written novel. Though these works seem to move past Benjamin's theory, his musings help highlight how these texts redefine genres and use writing that engages readers. These authors used mythological themes of ancestors and gods as well as writing styles that echoed the voices of storytellers to emphasize ideas of connectedness, to drive their plots, to define characters, to illustrate settings, and to gesture at social critique.

At the end of *L'Étrange destin*, Wangrin's body is found after the thunderstorm. It turns out that the only person alive from his hometown to claim his body is his longstanding enemy, Romo. Unexpectedly, Romo is powerfully moved by the death of Wangrin and the fact that the same will happen to him one day. He buries Wangrin respectfully and mourns, encouraging others to do the same. For as much as Wangrin reflected the stubbornness and cunning of his patron god – as able as he was to manipulate those in power for his own personal gain and to have no qualms about those he hurt along the way – he met the same fate as all others. Although Wangrin is the novel's protagonist, it is clear that he oversteps boundaries and rather unjustly takes what he wants with little regard for others, and Romo was a victim of that. However, he

follows through with traditional burial rites, conducting the necessary prayers and actions. He says, “Wangrin est mort sans avoir cessé d’être un Etalon humain d’une espèce rare... Pour lui, fortune et infortune n’étaient que des états transitoires qui ne doivent en aucune manière altérer les qualités fondamentales de l’homme qui sont la bonté, la courage et la sincérité” (357). In these words, he both grasps and misses parts of Wangrin’s character – while Wangrin calmly dealt with fortune and misfortune as they came, he also certainly did not put much emphasis on goodness and sincerity at all points of his life. Regardless, the nature of Romo’s remarks are powerful, and the fact that he acknowledges Wangrin’s humanity after a lifetime of rivalry shows the ways in which humans are connected in spite of their differences, offering perhaps one last inkling of social critique, one last gesture that shows the absurdity of colonial oppression. After a lifetime of conflict, Romo treated Wangrin with the respect and ceremony all people deserve. Bâ’s decision to offer this last bit of social wisdom further highlights the storyteller he is, bringing the end of Wangrin’s life to a close as richly illustrated as its beginning.

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