

# Imaginary Spaces of Power in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Films



# Imaginary Spaces of Power in Sub-Saharan Literatures and Films

Edited by

Alix Mazuet

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P U B L I S H I N G

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## PREFACE

### DU POUVOIR ET DE SA MISE EN SCÈNE DANS LES ÉCRITURES AFRICAINES

ALEXIE TCHEUYAP

Un autre ouvrage sur l’imaginaire du pouvoir en Afrique? La question mérite-t-elle encore la moindre attention? Le champ n’est-il pas éculé? De telles interrogations pourraient sembler légitimes—et même pertinentes—si l’actualité la plus brutale ne cessait de nous crever les yeux. Après avoir sombré dans un épisode de folies meurtrières, la Côte d’Ivoire essaie de se refaire une société dont les blessures restent profondes. Un pays comme le Cameroun reste un miracle permanent: en dépit des violences et tensions urbaines ou ethniques qui surgissent de temps en temps à cause d’une misère absolue ou des manipulations de politiciens peu créatifs, ce petit pays d’Afrique centrale réussit à garder aux yeux du monde une image de stabilité civile. La République centrafricaine, le Tchad ou le Niger restent investis par des bandes rebelles qui veulent s’imposer comme interlocuteurs ou alternatives à des pouvoirs imbéciles et fatalement corrompus. Faut-il mentionner le Congo “démocratique”, avec ses hordes de groupes armés par le Rwanda ou les multinationales pour sécuriser les ressources minières de ce pays dont la richesse en a fait un scandale et une malédiction géologique? On ne parlera pas du Rwanda ou du Burundi dont on n’est pas certain que le cycle de massacres se soit jamais arrêté.

En plus des secousses précédentes, il convient de relever que, depuis au moins les réflexions de Bertrand de Jouvenel dans son ouvrage *Du pouvoir* (1972), en passant par ceux de Michel Foucault dans *Surveiller et Punir* (1975) ou même, plus récemment, celles d’Achille Mbembe dans *De la postcolonie* (2000), on sait que le discours sur les pratiques et métaphysiques du pouvoir ne peut faire l’économie d’aucun aspect politique, économique et culturel de la vie humaine. De Jouvenel nous le montre, la militarisation complète des sociétés a fait de divers peuples de gigantesques instruments militaires pour divers pouvoirs dont les leviers, pour le cas de l’Afrique, restent obscurs, irrationnels et peu soucieux de l’intérêt collectifs. Foucault quant à lui, de manière systématique, énonce les stratégies et modes de fonctionnements mis en œuvre pour s’assurer que le citoyen

reste “discipliné”, c’est-à-dire en fait, presque servile, et adapte son être aux pratiques socialement et juridiquement acceptables qui assurent de manière infinie la reproductibilité des mécaniques du pouvoir. Mbembe porte sa réflexion sur le cas spécifique de l’Afrique en se servant abondamment des travaux de Fabien Eboussi Boulaba, de Jean Marc Ela et de Foucault. L’un des aspects les plus importants de la réflexion de Mbembe, et qui justifie la pertinence d’un ouvrage comme celui-ci, réside justement dans les nouvelles pratiques culturelles qui ont enlevé au pouvoir le monopole de sa propre représentation. Autrement dit, après les décennies au cours desquelles le pouvoir postcolonial a tenté de saturer l’imagination populaire en infestant divers réseaux publics par des images de leaders ubuesques, les années 1990 ont permis, avec l’avènement d’une presse plus audacieuse que véritablement libre, de mettre en scène et de dénuder des pouvoirs en pleine déliquescence.

Mais, ce travail de déconstruction du pouvoir postcolonial, ainsi repris en main par les médias sur une plus grande échelle sociale, n’est que le prolongement d’une démarche adoptée par les écrivains africains depuis de nombreuses décennies. En fait, se souvenant avec Bertrand de Jouvenel que le pouvoir est partout, on pourrait même soutenir que les dynamiques de cette institution ont constitué et continuent de constituer l’ossature principale des écritures africaines. C’est connu, la fin nominale de la colonisation a donné naissance à une série de pouvoirs anthropophages dont l’incurie amène Fama dans *Les Soleils des indépendances* à se demander quand finira précisément cette indépendance. Les récits de Mongo Beti, Sembène Ousmane, Sony Labou Tansi, Pius Ngandu Nkashama, Williams Sassine, Ahmadou Kourouma, Emmanuel Dongala, pour ne citer que quelques uns, sont à plusieurs égards des réflexions sur la nature fondamentalement destructrice que semble afficher le pouvoir postcolonial en Afrique. Lorsqu’on y ajoute les films aussi percutants que *Guelwaar* de Sembène Ousmane ou *Afrique, je te plumerai* de Jean-Marie Teno, en passant par d’extraordinaires productions comme *Quartier Mozart* (1992) et *Les Saignantes* de Jean-Pierre Bekolo ou, encore, des films prémonitoires comme *Finyè* (1982) *Yeelen* (1987), il devient encore plus évident que les écritures africaines restent ancrées dans les discours de la mécanique du pouvoir.

Dans un tel contexte, on comprend encore mieux les enjeux que soulève un ouvrage comme celui. Michel Cornaton avait déjà timidement esquissé, de manière fort superficielle, la question dans *Pouvoir et sexualité dans le roman africain* (1991) où il était évident qu’une démarche anthropologique problématique s’attaquait peu efficacement et avec peu de persuasion à quelques textes littéraires. Parmi les ouvrages les plus utiles sur la question du pouvoir, de ses institutions et de ses dynamiques tant internes qu’externes ainsi que de sa mise en fiction, on avait certes déjà des livres autorisés com-



me *Écritures et discours littéraires, Théâtres et scènes de spectacle, Ruptures et écritures de violence* de Pius Ngandu Nkashama (1979, 1993 et 1997), *La malédiction francophone* d'Ambroise Kom (1999).

Mais l'ouvrage que vous lisez a plusieurs mérites. Le premier tient non seulement de la facture des textes à venir, mais aussi de la diversité des analyses ici présentes. On savait par exemple que le vêtement reste un attribut essentiel dans les pratiques culturelles quotidiennes dans divers espaces. Mais l'étude de Benjamin Ngong nous rappelle qu'il est devenu un attribut essentiel du pouvoir. Il ne s'agit pas ici des choix précis de matières ou de couleurs de cravates telles que les recommanderaient les spécialistes de la communication ou des relations publiques. En postcolonie, la rythmique et la stylistique du pouvoir postcolonial s'effectuent à travers une théâtralisation et un exhibitionnisme vestimentaires par lesquels quelques dirigeants déments étalent la vulgarité de leur pouvoir. Parlant du panoptisme, Foucault relevait la visibilité et l'invérifiabilité du pouvoir. Les uniformes militaires, les uniformes « du parti » dont on encombre parfois les espaces publics sont en réalité de simples parements ostentatoires qui nous rappellent que les corps sont de simples objets soumis aux hasards des contingences et délires politiques. Le vêtement devient ainsi plus qu'un signifiant. Il est surtout le vecteur d'un pouvoir obsédé par sa reproduction, et les textes d'Ahmadou Kourouma, comme les costumes colorés de Mobutu Sese Seko Wazabanga nous le prouvent.

Comme Benjamin Ngong, Etienne-Marie Lassi montre encore que loin d'être un prétexte thématique, le pouvoir postcolonial s'installe au cœur du dispositif narratif et discursif sous le mode du tragique. S'il se sert principalement des romans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* et *Allah n'est pas obligé*, les hypothèses émises, mais surtout les conclusions qui en découlent nous rappellent bien que l'imaginaire du pouvoir en Afrique se déploie sous des modes précis. La fiction sur le politique en postcolonie se révèle à travers réalisme cru, violence épique, angoisse existentielle et tragique. Mais le plus important c'est surtout les langages mis en jeu et dont les vêtements relevés plus haut en constituaient un signe. Lassi nous le montre, proverbes, prémonition ou prophéties d'oracles, théâtralisations de la narration, rétrospectives narratives, inclusions de mythes sont des modalités essentielles d'une écriture du tragique postcolonial qui reste ancré dans une mimesis de l'histoire.

On le relevait plus haut en rapport avec Bertrand de Jouvenel, le pouvoir est partout, et ne saurait se réduire à la seule gestion de la cité. On l'identifie aussi dans la conjugalité où les dynamiques relationnelles entre l'homme et la femme nous montrent bien que le réflexe de domination conjugale est une métonymie des structures répressives de la cité. A la rencontre avec l'occupant, les discours sur les insuffisances supposées des pratiques socia-

les et culturelles en Afrique étaient libellées sous les termes fort marqués de « tradition et modernité » dont s'est gargarisé le discours colonial. Alix Mazuet opère un important réexamen de ces concepts en revisitant les outils les plus essentiels du postmodernisme et du poststructuralisme. Le point sans doute le plus important qu'elle note est de nous révéler ce qui nous a souvent beaucoup échappé: les deux termes ne s'excluent pas mutuellement. La binarité perçue dans les deux notions est encore la preuve, et nous le savions depuis Foucault, que le pouvoir réside aussi dans celui de *classer*. Du coup, la lecture qu'opère Mazuet de *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, roman emblématique de Ken Bugul met en difficulté toute possibilité de normativité discursive. Son analyse de la spatialité et de la temporalité, comme son intelligente analyse des émotions, des intolérances et des enthousiasmes sur la polygamie nous montrent bien que le « centre » et la « périphérie » ne sont pas mutuellement exclusifs, et qu'une femme africaine « moderne » peut décider de « retourner » vers un destin qu'elle juge opportun, celui d'espace polygame, supposément « traditionnel ». On se rend ainsi compte, avec le roman de Ken Bugul, qu'il est possible de créer un « entre deux » qui réconcilie des espaces (discursifs) en mal de domination.

L'une des formes les plus effrayantes d'exercice du pouvoir, l'une des pires conséquences de sa mise en œuvre s'est souvent révélé, depuis le début du siècle, à travers la capacité d'horreur et de destruction dont fait montre le genre humain. On relevait déjà plus haut la prégnance du tragique dans les formes esthétiques. Avec *La Nuit de la vérité* de Régina Fanta Nacro (2004) qu'analyse Catherine Webster, on revient à la pénible conviction qu'il sommeille en l'homme un aspect monstrueux récessif qui explose à la première occasion. L'absurde du génocide rwandais, que la récit filmique restitue (et resitue) par la fable de deux Républiques fantomatiques, est l'occasion non seulement de déterminer les modes esthétiques à travers lesquels un pouvoir postcolonial en déliquescence est mis en scène selon des modalités proches de la tragédie aristotélicienne, mais aussi l'occasion d'une réflexion inévitable sur l'altérité, sur la vie et donc sur la mort. Au-delà de la parfaite illustration ici offerte entre les formes tragiques « classiques » et le film de Nacro, l'étude nous invite surtout à envisager les formes, les possibilités et même l'urgence du *vivre ensemble, de l'être au monde et du soi*. Plus qu'une réflexion sur les délires de présidents assassins, Webster, comme Nacro, nous invite à réfléchir sur la paix, devenue une véritable urgence, car le tragique ne saurait *se reproduire indéfiniment*. La leçon de cette analyse, comme du film qui l'inspire, c'est que la paix, finalement, est plus difficile à entretenir que la guerre qu'il vaut mieux ne jamais commencer, car les séquelles que celle-ci provoque—et même entretient—font de la guerre une possibilité permanente.

Un terme à cette réflexion sur le pouvoir est-il possible? Comment est-ce

d'ailleurs envisageable? Comment va-t-on désormais théoriser l'imaginaire du pouvoir après des images aussi tragiques que pathétiques d'un Laurent Gbagbo, autrefois président de la Côte d'Ivoire, traîné et humilié par ses tombeurs comme un vulgaire criminel? Que dire des images de Mouammar Kadhafi, le « guide » libyen dont le corps profané, meurtri, traînant sans sépulture dans une chambre froide encombre tous les sites web du monde après avoir permis à ses compatriotes de se « venger » contre un mort dont on voulait s'assurer véritablement de la « fin »? Les images d'un Hosni Moubarak, increvable raïs jusqu'à il y a quelques mois, traînant sur une civière avec des habits de prisonnier rappelant fort un linceul, crèvent encore les yeux: la mystique et les délires du pouvoir sont en train d'être bousculés en Afrique. En se réfugiant en Arabie Saoudite, Ben Ali de Tunisie a certainement eu un meilleur destin que ses voisins, ou même Mobutu Sese Seko.

Ces basculements récents dans le politique postcolonial imposent de se rendre compte qu'en postcolonie, la fin reste *une énigme*. Avis aux tyranneaux en poste qui, face à *la fin* de leurs congénères cités plus haut, doivent vivre des froideurs et des cauchemars auprès desquels ceux du Guide Providentiel dans *La vie et demie* de Sony Labou Tansi ne feront office que d'épiphénomènes. Ils doivent appréhender avec frayeur l'ère des Anges Exterminateurs qui mettent fin à l'apocalypse et au brigandage politique dans *Le Pacte de Sang* de Pius Ngandu Nkashama. L'ère des « fous », tels ceux de *L'Anté-Peuple* de Sony Labou Tansi ou *L'Histoire du fou* de Mongo Beti est proche, doivent-ils se dire. Il ne reste plus aux Africains réduits à la misère absolue qu'à aiguiser leurs appétits morbides et jouir de la vue d'autres corps de présidents de pacotilles en proie aux mouches et en pleine décomposition. Ces images d'effroi, on est en droit de penser que les écritures africaines vont continuer à les documenter sous des langages qui sont les leurs. Contrairement à ce que Michel Foucault envisageait, l'éclat du supplice arrêtera d'être un contre exemple et servira de matière sur laquelle germera d'autres fictions du pouvoir lorsque d'autres peuples se rendront compte que le véritable salut est parfois la mort. Mais en attendant ces autres imaginaires du pouvoir à venir, découvrez ceux qui existent dans les analyses qui suivent.



## INTRODUCTION

ALIX MAZUET AND LIFONGO VETINDE

### **Cultural Homogeneity in the West and in Africa**

In the opening scene of *Xala*, Sembène Ousmane's third feature film (1975), we witness the inauguration of the first Senegalese President of the Dakar Chamber of Commerce now under the stewardship of the national elite. The withdrawal of European colonial administrators from their territories and their replacement with an indigenous African elite in this putative transfer of power was considered a milestone in the peoples' struggle for self-determination throughout the continent. In his inaugural address, heard in voiceover in the film, the newly elected President declares:

We must take what is ours, what is rightly ours. We must control our industry, commerce and culture, in a word take our destiny into our own hands. We must show our people that we are as capable as people in other parts of the world. We will take over every company and every bank. There is no going back. *Our struggle for independence is over.* (emphasis ours)

Similar speeches could be heard across the continent as colonial flags were lowered and national ones hoisted in their place. In his representation of the unfolding of this Senegalese political drama, Sembène draws the viewer's attention to the embedment of culture in the discourse of national liberation. Seven men dressed in traditional Senegalese garb walk into the Chamber of Commerce, pick up the bust of Marianne (the French national symbol), and place it at the steps of the building, where the white men ordered out of the Chamber pick it up and walk away. This symbolic gesture is followed by loud Senegalese music with frenzied dancing, as if to celebrate the replacement of French cultural artifacts for Senegalese ones, a dramatization of the rise of the "suns of the Independence," to borrow from the title of Ahmadou Kourouma's seminal novel. Unfortunately the lofty dreams of independence have not been realized since the vast majority of the African leaders who had ardently fought to oust the colonial powers morphed into autocrats whose primary goal has been to cling to power. To achieve this

goal and ensure its sustainability, these African leaders put in place an efficient apparatus of surveillance that permeates every segment of society. This apparatus of control relies on strategic practices implemented by the state within the various institutions it controls: education, hospitals, agriculture, finance, the judicial system, the military, religion, arts, architecture, the mass media and other modes of cultural production. This calls to mind the argumentation Michel Foucault develops in his early works on power in modern societies.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Foucault posits that power is a force that inheres not in the individuals who enable institutions to function but rather in the institutions themselves. He pertinently adds that modern order and control “disindividualize” power, which, eventually, accounts for its ubiquity.

In her compelling study of cultural production in South Africa, Joyti Mistry observes that cultural products generally issue out of marginal spaces which are terrains of contestation of power: “Marginal spaces emerge in reaction to hegemonic ideology, they are responses to a situation; socio-political, cultural, historical. Such spaces by virtue of their nature to challenge and protest, erupt are taken, usurped, seized.”<sup>2</sup> To contain these counter narratives that emanate from the margins, the mode of disseminating hegemonic discourses of assimilation to a homogenous one is transformed. If one of the power wielders’ fundamental goals continues to be the silencing of dissenting marginal voices, it is no longer by means of proscription, that is, by excluding them from the norm. Due to the way these strategic practices are conceived, the rewriting of existing cultural production may not be immediately apparent to the collective body. Indeed, since discourses that clearly emphasize exclusion or marginalization of the Other make such rewriting visible, if only in part, rather than exclusion, hegemonic discourses of assimilation to a unified culture seek to incorporate the margin within the norm. In fact, following Foucault, an increasing number of scholars from various fields argue that the hegemonic master narrative of a given Western nation relies on strategic practices implemented by the state within the institutions it controls or has influence upon: the environment, yearly secular and religious celebrations, government sponsored public fairs, to add to the institutional apparatus mentioned above. In so doing, the transfer from preceding and subsequent cultural production is much more diffused and less likely to be identified as such.

This phenomenon, which has been widely discussed, can be approached

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete reading on this argumentation, see Foucault, *Folie et déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961), *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (1963), *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (1975).

<sup>2</sup> Joyti Mistry, “Conditions of Cultural Production in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Extraordinary Times* 11, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences (2001): 7.

from a number of angles. First, it can be explained from an anthropological perspective that takes into account the effects of globalization and the rapid development of technological innovations. As Akhil Gupta explains:

Mass culture no longer stands for diversity of practices; for rootedness in space, place, and tradition; for the local. It defies the equation of cultural integrity and geographical finitude. ... Our mobility, rationality, markets, differentiation, and multiplicity of options make our culture invisible.<sup>3</sup>

The process of transforming cultural and ideological production can also be explained from a theoretical perspective on power that examines the ability of contemporary capitalist organizations to be fluid, resilient and nomadic, so as to adapt themselves to discourses of difference. As Michael Hardt and Alberto Negri note, those organizations integrate such discourses within the very structure of the corporate ideology:

The great transnational corporations that straddle national boundaries and link the global system are themselves internally much more diverse and fluid culturally than the parochial modern corporations of previous years. The contemporary gurus of corporate culture who are employed by management as consultants and strategy planners preach the efficiency and profitability of diversity and multiculturalism within corporations. ... The corporations seek to include difference within their realm and thus aim to maximize creativity, free play, and diversity in the corporate workplace. ... The task of the boss, subsequently, is to organize these energies and differences in the interests of profit. This project is aptly called "diversity management."<sup>4</sup>

The internal mixing of dominant and marginal discourses by which the latter are not only integrated but also framed, contained and thus constricted by the former is important for it shows that, in order to weaken marginality, today's corporate culture traverses the frontiers which, in older forms of modern and post-modern capitalist production, used to separate discourses of domination from discourses of resistance:

In fact, the old modernist forms of racist and sexist theory are the explicit enemies of this new corporate culture. ... People of all different races, genders,

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<sup>3</sup> Akhil Gupta, "Seeing Bifocally," *Culture, Power, Place. Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta & James Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardt and Alberto Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 153.

and sexual orientations should potentially be included in the corporation. ... In this light, the corporations appear not only “progressive” but also “post-modernist,” as leaders in a very real politics of difference.<sup>5</sup>

It is not so much that culture is instrumental to legitimizing imperialistic hegemony. Rather, this amalgamation of discourses obfuscates the strategic practices employed to rewrite existing cultural productions and to control the shaping of novel ideas. This opacity also makes it difficult to grasp how the passage from an older form of imperial order to a newer or reconstructed one is operated.

We may well ask whether this movement of inclusion of the margin into the norm in recently developed imperialistic discourses disseminated in the West can also be observed in African forms of post-modern authoritarianism. Looking more closely at the African dictator, what appears to be one of his most prominent characteristics is the use of political practices of a populist kind. This should not come as a surprise, because, throughout the continent, most civil societies are composed of numerous ethnic groups whose religion, values, and social order differ (sometimes greatly) from one another, and at the time when African countries were moving toward independence, a charismatic figure was thus needed to rally these groups to the struggle for freedom from colonial rule. In addition, alongside Pan-Africanism and nationalism to counter Western imperialism in Africa, populism was well suited to feed resentment toward the white minorities in power. Finally, and this is what most interests us here, populism helps to sustain the co-existence between cultural constructs and dictatorship.

It is widely acknowledged that the populist dictator relies on a rhetoric of social change that emphasizes anti-elitism, racial consciousness and patriotism. This rhetoric actively engages “the people” in creating a national identity and in the process serves demagogical discourses of assimilation to a homogeneous culture. In constructing such a culture, the African dictator does not significantly differ from his counterparts worldwide—Mao Tse-Tung in the People’s Republic of China, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Juan Peron in Argentina come to mind. Perhaps more than elsewhere, however, populism in Africa is often born of a military *coup d’état*. As Alex Thomson explains:

On the African continent, populism is often associated with military governments. Officers instigate a *coup d’état*, removing the previous dictatorial and corrupt regime. The military government then attempts to consolidate its legitimacy by reconstructing or building new public institutions that close

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



the gap between the state and civil society.<sup>6</sup>

This was undoubtedly the case with Idi Amin Dada in Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Jean-Bedel Bokassa in the Central African Republic, Gnassingbe Eyadema in Togo, and many others. The point we are trying to make here is that any sudden overthrow of government hardly passes unnoticed. In most cases, the clash that occurs with the installation of dictatorship and the ensuing disintegration of the existing power structures that this dictatorship erases or redefines makes the change from one mode of thought, value system and ideology to another outright apparent. One can plausibly argue that this phenomenon is particularly observable in sub-Saharan politics, for it seems evident to us that populist practices and cultural constructs in this region work hand in hand at legitimizing recycled or newly created institutions as well as shaping the new cultural order and national identity unequivocally.

For instance, on the music scene of the mid-1970s, while the Western youth was listening to discourses of resistance circulated by various artists (Dylan's "Hurricane" or Donovan's "The Universal Soldier") and the rule of law was one of the fundamental principles attached to the democratic order that stood in direct opposition to the juridical system instituted by dictatorship and totalitarianism in the ex-colonial world, Mobutu was launching his program of "Zaïrianization"; in all provinces of the ex-Belgian colony, people were singing the "prowess" of the "Guide" and "Président-Fondateur," while Papa Wemba and Koffi Olomidé were writing "revolutionary" songs that glorified "l'homme du 24 novembre 1965." In Guinea, Sekou Toure's official band, the Bembeya Jazz National, was performing at national events with a repertoire that included numerous songs praising the head of state and its party. We can also note the participation of architecture in the discourse of power. Mark Lewis has drawn attention to its implication in this domain. According to him, monuments are etched into the fabric of social and political power structures. As he puts it,

a public monument which like architecture is to some extent the image of social order, guarantees, and even imposes that order. Far from expressing the soul of society, monuments then, to paraphrase Denis Hollier, smother society, stop it from breathing.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alex Thomson, *An Introduction to African Politics*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 43.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Lewis, "What is to be done?" *Ideology and Power in the Age of Lenin in Ruins*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 6.

The importance of architecture in the exercise of power is certainly not lost on African leaders. For example, soon after his coronation as “Emperor” of the Central African Republic in 1977, Jean-Bedel Bokassa began the construction of his “Imperial Avenue” leading to his new Presidential Palace, a monumental edifice. Unlike other symbolic attributes that testify to Bokassa’s strong desire to emulate Napoleon—his crown and six-foot scepter both incrusting with diamonds, his throne shaped as a golden eagle, his coronation robes, to name only a few—one of the main purposes of building this palace may be compared to that of building Versailles: Louis XIV’s architectural achievement was meant to symbolize not only domination of France over other European nations, but also power invested in the king himself; similarly, the immense work Bokassa undertook was designed to impress the emperor’s guests, notably the international ones. In short, Bokassa’s architectural work was not meant to symbolize the country’s power but rather his own. As for Gnassingbe Eyadema, President of Togo until his death in 2005, his populist practices included bronze statues carved in his image, inexpensive wristwatches with his portrait appearing and disappearing every few seconds, a comic book in which he was depicted as a superhero, and a yearly national event called “the Feast of Victory Over Forces of Evil” that celebrated the anniversary of a failed plot to assassinate him.<sup>8</sup>

Looking at these various expressions of the shaping of a new cultural order and national identity, it seems clear that Western imperialistic techniques used to communicate discourses of domination differ from those used in African forms of dictatorship, not so much because of the former’s dedication to the rule of law—which, as we know, is a subject of great controversy—but because of imperialism’s ability to perform an internal inclusion of discourses of resistance to subordination into its own discourses of domination and to constantly redefine domestic cultural dynamics so that they can correspond to the supranational legal system of the corporate order. If, then, it becomes difficult to clearly identify the strategic practices employed by the forces of imperialism to rewrite existing cultural productions and control the formulation of ideas, it is first and foremost because power has the ability to penetrate a single event from a variety of entry points and to recuperate marginal discourses, redirect them toward the very centers of the spaces in which discourses of domination operate. It is in this sense that we understand Akhil Gupta’s and James Ferguson’s analysis of the multidimensional interrelations between power and resistance:

One cannot decide whether something is or is not resistance in absolute

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on this issue, see F. Jeffress and Dr. Ramsay, *Africa*, coll. Global Studies, 7th ed. (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1997), 63.

terms; resistance can exist only in relation to a “strategy of power,” and such strategies are shifting, mobile, and multiple. ... Practices that are resistant to a particular strategy of power are thus never innocent of or outside power, for they are always capable of being tactically appropriated and redeployed within another strategy of power, always at risk of slipping from resistance against one strategy of power into complicity with another. It is a theoretical necessity, then, and not only an unfortunate empirical tendency, that resistance should time and again be linked with processes of co-optation, complicity, and the ironic recycling of former points of resistance within new strategies of power.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, it would be hard to ignore the fact that, like imperialistic discourses originating from the West, African discourses of assimilation to a homogeneous culture rest upon structures of power that depend to a great extent upon the ability to control cultural constructs and practices. Hence the use of ideological instruments of power of a populist kind: military parades with colorful flags and marching bands performing the dictator’s emblematic songs and tunes; supporters’ clothing echoing military and militia uniforms designed to embody the dictator’s persona; television, radio, music, arts and architecture instrumental to propaganda so as to encourage public support of the one-party rule. Paradoxically, in this regard, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that, contrary to the concealment effect that accompanies Western imperialist discourse, one of the most significant characteristics of sub-Saharan forms of authoritarian power is that it is very manifest. And one of the main reasons why this particular figure of power can work without disguise in this region’s socio-cultural spaces is not so much its obvious connections to totalitarian practices but more importantly, its ability to infiltrate cultural events at various entry points. In this way, power is both visible and diffused; it is this paradoxical ability that presents the most perplexing challenge in any attempt to understand how power works within sub-Saharan cultures.

## Approaches to Sub-Saharan Cultural Constructs

Sub-Saharan Africa is composed of a great number of peoples whose cultures, religions, languages and social orders differ from one another but

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<sup>9</sup> Gupa and Ferguson, “Culture, Power, Place: Ethnography at the end of an Era,” *Culture, Power, Place*, 18-9.

who nonetheless developed strong ties with one another. Consider, for instance, that long before colonialism, the Bantu now mostly settled in Cameroon and Nigeria and the descendants of the great medieval empires—the Ghana, Mali, Songhai and Kanem Empires—had economic ties through trade in gold, salt, food and slaves along the Niger River. They were also connected religiously and culturally because of the trans-Saharan caravans that helped disseminate Islamic beliefs, values and laws. Since the colonial era, sub-Saharan peoples share to a greater or lesser extent linguistic ties, notably with French and English; they also continue to share a non-endemic form of knowledge through colonial and post-colonial modes of education, as well as religious beliefs and value systems, which can be of a Muslim kind or hybrids that mix animistic beliefs prevalent in the pre-colonial era with Christianity inherited from colonization.

These countries have recently undergone the socio-economic and political impacts of globalization. On an economic level, however, and in spite of the colonial mapping, contemporary sub-Sahara is a geopolitical hybrid space with a mingling of local, national, and international socio-cultural realities. Consider, for instance, the Karakoro basin located in the pre-Sahelian area and covering close to 3,000 square miles (7,000 km<sup>2</sup>) between Mali and Mauritania. This basin is the site of livestock breeding and grazing which is commonly seen as one of the most developed cross-border practices between both countries.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the Sahara itself covers a great part of the Maghreb, as well as vast regions of Libya, Sudan, Chad, Niger and Mali. As Ogunsola John Igue explains, this specific area of the African continent is far from being an empty and desolate desert with no apparent movement:

L'exemple le plus significatif de ces espaces mouvants et des frontières à géométrie variable se situe sur les pourtours du désert du Sahara. ... Tout comme ce fut le cas au cours du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle, plusieurs couloirs (commerciaux, religieux, guerriers) et routes relient, aujourd'hui, les deux rives du désert. Au sein de ces couloirs, l'on a affaire à des formations métissées et hybrides. Celles-ci se trouvent au point de rencontre entre les mondes arabo-berbères et les mondes négro-africains. Dans ces mondes mouvants et fluides, les frontières réelles ne sont guère des points fixes. Elles sont, en réalité, des corridors fractionnés en réseaux de clans, confréries et tribus

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of this subject, see Mama Gueye and Enda Diapol, "Programme d'aménagement concerté du bassin du Karakoro. Coopération transfrontalière Mali-Mauritanie" (March 2007). (05/19/2011). [http://www.afriquefrontieres.org/images/pdf/Terrain/Karakoro/etude\\_grdr\\_ecolocale.pdf](http://www.afriquefrontieres.org/images/pdf/Terrain/Karakoro/etude_grdr_ecolocale.pdf).

reliés entre eux par des cycles d'alliances et de conflits.<sup>11</sup>

In Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Gambia, the production of the anacardium (a group of plants that includes the cashew tree) greatly increased. As Enda Diapol explains in his report, "Les dynamiques transfrontalières en Afrique de l'Ouest," which focuses on regional interaction in Western Africa:

L'anacarde circule surtout entre les trois pays, défiant les politiques nationales des États. Les opérateurs ont su intégrer cette filière au-delà des frontières, et utilisent les distorsions sous-régionales pour maximiser leurs marges. Ainsi, moins coûteux et plus rapide, le port de Banjul a permis d'exporter vers le marché international 75% de la production sénégalaise en 2000. Cette production illustre parfaitement la perméabilité des frontières régionales et l'adaptabilité des producteurs à la demande internationale.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in Ivory Coast, commercial networks are composed of two sectors (formal and informal) with a variety of local, national, multi-national and international types of exchange between both. Christian Bouquet's analysis of the agricultural economy after the *coup d'état* of September 2002 well illustrates the part the Ivorian informal sector plays in economic neo-liberalism on a global scale:

Comment le coton du pays sénoufo et celui qui descendait traditionnellement du Mali et du Burkina avaient-ils pu être acheminés vers un port, depuis que la Côte d'Ivoire était coupée en deux et que le chemin de fer était interrompu? Et, dans ces mêmes conditions, comment les hydrocarbures, dont le Nord, le Mali et le Burkina avaient besoin, avaient-ils pu être transportés? Les réponses à ces questions et à bien d'autres sont à rechercher dans l'adaptabilité des circuits et des réseaux de l'informel. On sait que plus de 70 000 tonnes de café de la campagne 2003 ont été exportées frauduleusement en transitant par des pays limitrophes. On sait aussi que les transporteurs maliens et burkinabè ont massivement renouvelé leurs parcs de camions pour assurer des voyages plus longs et plus nombreux. On sait enfin que le port ghanéen de Tema et le port togolais de Lomé ont efficacement relayé

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<sup>11</sup> Ogunsola John Igue, "Pour une meilleure approche régionale du développement en Afrique de l'Ouest," *Actes de la réunion spéciale du Club du Sahel et de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Accra (Ghana), 20-21 mai 2002*, ed. Ogunsola John Igue and Sunhilt Schumacher (Paris: OECD, 2003), 41.

<sup>12</sup> Enda Diapol, *Les dynamiques transfrontalières en Afrique de l'Ouest* (Ottawa/Dakar: CRDI and Enda Diapol, 2007), 86.

Abidjan. En d'autres termes, les puissances multinationales semblent avoir eu recours aux innombrables micro-moyens souterrains que l'on range dans la catégorie "informelle", sans bien mesurer qu'il s'agit là du véritable poumon économique de toute l'Afrique sub-saharienne.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, then, and in spite of the European colonial remapping of the continent<sup>14</sup>, cross-border movement in the sub-Sahara remains quite active, and this region is directly involved in the global market economy as multinational enterprises use its local, national and border networks to conduct business worldwide.

In light of the above, an analysis of the relationships between culture and power in the sub-Sahara requires that we take into account the interplay of economic, socio-political and religious forces at play in this region, for they are far from being purely local or even global. In this regard, this book is an attempt at breaching the barriers that scholars tend to erect among themselves: it reexamines issues raised from a "multidisciplinary" ("cross-disciplinary" or "interdisciplinary") perspective, thus pointing to how we conceive our own research in the context of today's global world. Moreover, specialization does not necessarily mean compartmentalization, nor do multidisciplinary approaches signal the end of specialization. Which is to say, criticism does not have to rely on an "either/or" mutually exclusive methodology. In fact, most of the research conducted by today's leading scholars, especially in African studies, resists clearly defined disciplinary boundaries. For instance, James Ferguson in anthropology, Gayatri Spivak in theory, Abiola Irele in literary criticism, to name only a few, combine several approaches in their works. It is hard and even impractical to conduct research in African studies from a non-comprehensive perspective; colonial, postcolonial, diasporic, trans-national discourses as well as a wide range of

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<sup>13</sup> Christian Bouquet, *Géopolitique de la Côte d'Ivoire* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), 254-5.

<sup>14</sup> On a geopolitical level, recognizing the importance of this remapping is crucial to understanding how deceptive the borders of nation-states in this region are. It is well known that they were created for the most part by the French and the British during the colonial era for economic and political reasons that did not take into consideration historical, cultural, linguistic and religious diversities that had been grouping peoples as far in time as the age of the great African empires. To be more precise, before colonization, the population belts were horizontal, because they paralleled the flow of the Senegal and Niger rivers. Understandably, this was also the direction of the old trade routes, which used both rivers to facilitate transport and have access to drinkable water and food. The borders erected by the European colonialists run vertically, thus countering not only the region's topography and cultural diversities, but also its peoples' social and economic ties.

interrelated historical, geopolitical, anthropological, economic and socio-cultural issues should necessarily be taken into consideration. Evidently, we are not suggesting that scholars far and wide should master more than one discipline but simply this: since African studies is inherently a hybrid discipline, it should be conceived from a multidisciplinary perspective. This approach, we suggest, is useful in an analysis of sub-Saharan imaginaries of power as they relate to cultural constructs.

Like other agents of cultural production, African writers and filmmakers are preoccupied with the exercise of power in the continent. Amadou Kourouma, Mongo Beti, Sony Labou Tansi, Ken Bugul, Gaston Kabore, Bassek Ba Khobio and Fanta Régina Nacro shed light on abuse of power, bungling incompetence and massive corruption, as they articulate how culture is inextricably linked to socio-political discourse. This collection of essays examines the nexus between power and various modes of cultural production in sub-Saharan Francophone Africa. Embracing interdisciplinary theoretical approaches, the authors concentrate on novel writing and cinema, exploring contemporary dynamics of power as they relate to the visions of life and social values characteristic of certain societies in the region. As a whole, the book challenges a number of Western assumptions, preconceived ideas and stereotypes about Africa and its peoples: power dynamics within gender roles, dress codes and unwritten rules of clothing, polygamous unions, religious beliefs and practices, to name only a few. The book also shows that the interplay of sub-Saharan cultures and power is rooted not only in the longstanding historical, religious and cultural ties that have existed between large numbers of African peoples, but also the socio-economic and political impacts of globalization. The authors thus explore sub-Saharan literatures and films of French expression in their broad cultural context, taking into account the mixture—past and present—of regional, national, cross-border and international attitudes, values, aspirations and practices. The underlying suggestion throughout the book is the emergence of an additional third space where no choice between the “either/or” needs to be made categorically and permanently, a space where hybrid and non-hybrid cultures can coexist, in short, the book argues for an additional third space that may become a place of *dépassement* in the field of African studies.

Alix Mazuet brings together various perspectives on the concept of binary opposition as it relates to African traditions and modernities. She starts out by underlining some of the fundamental characteristics of this concept from a structuralist point of view, establishing at the same time lines of continuity and points of shifting in the theoretical development of structuralism. She suggests that broad-brush accounts of binary oppositions, particularly in literary criticism, pay too little attention to a concept that has always

been part of structuralism: the “third term.” Mazuet then turns to literary criticism, taking Ken Bugul’s *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* as her primary object of study. One of the key points of her argument is that this particular novel reflects African and Western realities and imaginaries of power in which traditional and modern cultural practices and values clash and mix in such a way that center and margin can no longer be seen as mutually exclusive. Focusing on the issue of African polygamy, she demonstrates that Bugul shatters Western preconceived ideas about this marital model and challenges Western arguments that aim at condemning it. Furthermore, Mazuet suggests that the Western anti-polygamy discourse performs a therapeutic function: the condemnation of polygamy in the name of gender equality and freedom of choice is symptomatic of the West’s attempt to “heal” Africa from her ills and to “help” African people board the train of progress. She observes that in this apparent philanthropic gesture the West enacts remedial interventions in response to its own historic trauma of colonization. In conclusion, she argues that, by presenting the reader with an ambiguous reality, the novel itself becomes the third term in a system of paradigmatic series, notably modernity and tradition, normative and marginal discourses, local and global cultural spaces.

In his article, Étienne-Marie Lassi explores how references to African history in Ahmadou Kourouma’s novels transcend the actions and individual flaws of renowned political actors, so as to challenge various aspects of African political mentality. The article explores the aesthetic choices through which Kourouma depicts power as it alters the morality and identity of the African subject. Lassi is particularly interested in the relations between art and reality in parallel to those between fiction writing and historiography. Concentrating primarily on *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* and *Allah n’est pas obligé*, he argues that Kourouma resorts to paradigms of the tragic in order to maximize the existential anguish that postcolonial subjects, confronted with authorities and power, suffer in the face of an impossible choice between life and a renunciation of values, which, paradoxically, provides meaning in life.

Catherine Webster explores the tragic elements of Fanta Régina Nacro’s film, *La Nuit de la vérité*, highlighting the multiplicity of sources in which the Burkina Faso director took inspiration, notably the accounts of ethnic cleansing and acts of gender-based violence committed against women in Yugoslavia of the 1990s. Webster takes special issue with a comparison between classical unities in Aristotelian tragedy and the film, which Nacro chose to locate in an imaginary African country. In addition to her methodological analysis of the film’s dramatic tensions and ironies, Webster examines gender roles, emphasizing the part African women play in power structures that appear on the surface to be generated, controlled and main-



tained solely by men. She argues that a multifold discussion on Aristotelian unities and *La Nuit de la vérité* is one possible way in which the critic can uncover the irony behind the paradoxical nature of power as it is portrayed in the film and also, it is a way in which Nacro's choice of a female chorus stands as a referent for a plot that takes a classical sequence of events to a post-colonial setting.

Benjamin Ngong focuses on African clothing and dress codes. The imaginary he presents echoes certain elements of the imaginary Alexie Tcheuyap develops in his analysis on clothing as an important social marker in political discourses of domination. Ngong shows that both the written and unwritten rules of clothing play a significant part in the formation of African post-colonial sovereignty of a non-democratic nature. Focusing on the interrelations between power and cultural constructs, he explores how dress codes and articles of clothing make the individual who wears them visible in specific ways by underlining certain historical, social, ethnic and religious characteristics. Particularly with the sub-Saharan dictator, this visibility is the means by which a discourse of power finds its expression and develops into the symbolic representation of a given political order. Working with Ahmadou Kourouma's novel, *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* (1998), and Thierry Michel's documentary, *Mobutu, roi du Zaïre* (1999), Ngong argues that the dictator's suit undergoes a semantic shift that supersedes the commonly accepted notion that the primary function of clothing is to protect and cover the body. He clearly demonstrates that in certain cultural, social and political settings, clothing can become a compelling instrument of manipulation and domination. And what the sub-Saharan dictator does is precisely use this instrument as a means to legitimize his own power and maintain control over the social body.

In the final essay, Alix Mazuet momentarily steps away from the space of sub-Saharan literary and film criticism to explore the power dynamics in academic cultures. In so doing, she echoes the voices of an increasing number of scholars who have shown that the notion of "institutional might" is far from irrelevant to the how(s) and the why(s) professionalization in academia can color the critic's creative landscape. By turning her attention to different models of institutionalized education, then, Mazuet places her analysis slightly off the central theme of this book without entirely departing from it since her discussion here is still at bottom about dynamics of power. She suggests that sub-Saharan literatures of French expression taught and researched in French and American Universities are at once interrelated and distinct disciplines. She calls attention to the overlapping of *les études africaines* that follow the French model of higher-education and postcolonial studies commonly found in American institutions and more importantly, the tendency on both sides to resist exchanging ideas, mixing or engaging

in collaborative research. Mazuet argues that discourses of resistance to a global scholarly exchange can be analyzed in terms of antagonistic relations of power that permeate academic cultures. And this resistance can be examined from two perspectives that are intimately linked to one another: 1) the history of the crisis in the Humanities and 2) the differences and similarities between Francophone and postcolonial studies. What comes out of her reflection is the idea that sub-Saharan literary criticism is situated in the midst of a disciplinary competitiveness that no longer hides ideological and nationalistic conflicts between academic departments and colleges on the one hand and France and the United States on the other. Ironically, it is also a disciplinary conflict that strangely resembles a neocolonial gesture: to take hold of the Other's cultural sovereignty in order to better disseminate one's own. In the end, Mazuet suggests a move toward thinking the very concept of "academic department" as a less conflictual environment that does not operate on politics and economics of domination.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# TRADITION, MODERNITY AND THE THIRD TERM OF BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN KEN BUGUL'S *RIWAN OU*

### *LE CHEMIN DE SABLE*

ALIX MAZUET

Slightly irritated by the idea that African modernities and traditions could be thought of as two distinct and uniform events, Senegalese writer Ken Bugul punctuates her reply with a plea: “Qu’on arrête de nous faire des oppositions binaires entre tradition et modernité.”<sup>1</sup> The roles and meanings of “modernity” and “tradition” in Africa have been the subject of widespread public interest and academic debate for many years. They both gradually gained momentum with the formation of the nineteenth-century European colonial empires, the many African migration movements of the twentieth century that began after World War II, the changes in world security in the post-Cold War era, and the independence movements of the 1960s. More recently, international political and moral interventionism alongside worldwide neoliberal practices have created a context for the latest forms in which this academic debate manifests itself. And what relentlessly returns in this debate is whether African modernity and tradition are reconcilable with one another. In turn, this questioning is inscribed within a broader concern of the validity of a binary logic applied to African issues, which conceptualizes events in terms of uniform and singular polarities temporally and spatially opposed to one another.

Many voices coming from diverse horizons over the past fifty years have nonetheless suggested non-dichotomous modes of thought in an attempt to subvert binary thinking as a whole. As a result, an increasing number of scholarly works that concentrate on African cultural, political, social

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<sup>1</sup> “Stop making binary oppositions between tradition and modernity.” My translation. Ken Bugul, interview by Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, *Désir d’Afrique*, coll. *Continents noirs* (Mayence: Gallimard, 2002), 113.

and economic issues explore these alternatives, arguing in favor of what have now become key concepts: in-between, multiple, interstice, hybridity, rhizomes, contact zones, circuits, networks, and the like. For a scholar analyzing the abundance of literary criticism of sub-Saharan fictional works that explore themes related to African and diasporic traditions and modernities—exile and identity immediately come to mind—Bugul's wish can perhaps be understood as one expression among others of a paradox: while tradition and modernity are increasingly thought to be multifaceted and interrelated events, their conceptualization as two mutually exclusive events has not yet left us.

I do not intend to call into question perspectives that assume a critical attitude toward the concept of binary opposition itself. Nor do I believe that such a stance would necessarily result in a full eclipsing of binary thinking. This is really the point of departure of my analysis, which is situated within the context of African criticism and theory: to me, Bugul's irritation does not indicate rejection per se of binarism; it calls instead for less castigation of this mode of thought. Put another way, exasperation stands as a subtext whose primary purpose is to challenge discussions that hold to the premise that African modernity and tradition are two hybrid events but that nonetheless fall back into a stance where they are mutually exclusive. At the point of departure, then, is the idea that the unremitting condemnation of binary oppositions should be listened to with critical ears, for it tends to drive the critic to overlook the aforementioned paradox underlined above. More importantly perhaps, and although the idea is more often than not to rectify imbalance in distribution of power and bring to light discourses of domination, what this condemnation does is to yet another hierarchical order: between binary and hybrid thinking. And among other forms of unexhausted literary illustrations, I am particularly interested in analyzing Ken Bugul's *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, for it seems to me that this work is representative of a broader political and cultural move toward thinking of the interrelationships between African modernities and traditions, and of their unstable interplay with one another, without jettisoning binary thinking altogether.

Perhaps, my approach is best described as a small attempt to bring together various perspectives on the concept of binary opposition as it relates to African traditions and modernities. To begin with, I underline certain of its characteristics from a structuralist standpoint: Claude Lévi-Strauss for classical structuralism, and Roland Barthes for one of the forms through which it has been creatively transformed. Part of the reasoning for this is quite simply that both thinkers, in a somewhat antithetical manner, are commonly thought to have set the grounds for the discussions concerning binary opposition that have been ongoing since the 1960s. And then again, what used to be a complex, heterogeneous attitude, namely, structuralism, with

its considerably varied critical intentions that found diverse similar and at times contradictory expressions in a wide range of disciplines, this structuralist activity, then, that studied binary oppositions in systems of transformations has been in many respects replaced by the notion of a single entity, a uniform unit that supersedes the fundamental multi-faceted quality of structuralism. As a result, broad-brush accounts of binary oppositions in literary criticism pay too little attention to a concept that has always been part of structuralism: the “third term.” While my critique calls for a more thorough reading of the historical development of structuralism, I will attempt to show that the concept of an ambiguous third term drifting inside systems that rely on binary oppositions has always played an important role in the structuralist activity. In my view, it is an ambiguous third term that the reader can also find in Bugul’s *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*, a point illustrating how African criticism and theory could profit from a more complex exploration of binary opposition. At the heart of the matter, it seems clear to me that one of the fundamental characteristics of *Riwan*’s narrative is that it reflects realities and imaginaries in which traditional and modern practices and values clash and mix in recurrent, simultaneous or successive ways.

## Binary Oppositions and the Third Term

As a preamble to this section let me briefly recall the main criticisms against structuralism: it is universalizing and ahistorical, its methodology anti-humanist because it posits that the structure and not the subject generates meaning. While these criticisms have seemed convincing to scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, the configurations of their argumentation have not changed significantly overtime. More recently, however, a shift seems to have occurred in the way the new generation of scholars conceive their theoretical practice, that is, not so much as heirs to rather localized postmodern European schools of thought, but more to a broader spectrum of worldwide thinkers, such as Said, Bhabha, Spivak and Jameson. This being said, my purpose here is not to engage with the diverse lines of thought that have constituted these criticisms. I prefer instead to reflect upon one of the projections that have extended beyond them: structuralism’s binary logic makes us see the world in terms of mutually exclusive polarities that engage in a power struggle with one another. In spite of the significant disciplinary investment in this projection, I would like to draw attention to an important element in structuralist theory, which, I think, is often marginalized: the concept of an ambiguous third term that hovers over binary oppositions,