



Witchcraft in Burkinabe Anglophone Literature: A Post-Colonial Approach

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Abstract - The objective of this paper is to highlight and analyse the descriptions of the phenomenon of witchcraft in Burkinabe post-colonial literary works in the English language. The works under consideration include Malidoma Patrice Somé's *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (1994), Noélie Yaogo's *The Odds are against Cycling* (2012), Mamadou Koussé's *Reap what you Sow and 28 poems* (2012), Michel Tinguiri's *The Tribulations of a Sahelian Traveler* (2014), Emmanuel Zoungrana's *The Ace of Spades in Disarray* (2014), and Bali Nebié's *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017). The last two are translations from original French versions. With the theory of post-colonial criticism, this paper posits that these writers show concern for witchcraft because they are not satisfied with how it has so far been handled by colonial white people who dismissed its existence and so decide to give proofs of the reality of its existence even though the efficiency of its mystical powers remains debatable.

Key words: Witchcraft, sorcery, Burkinabe traditions, literature, post-colonialism, modernism.

Résumé - L'objectif de cet article est de mettre en exergue et analyser les descriptions du phénomène de la sorcellerie dans les œuvres littéraires burkinabè de la période postcoloniale produites en anglais. Il s'agit de *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (1994) de Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Odds are against Cycling* (2012) de Noélie Yaogo, *Reap what you Sow and 28 poems* (2012) de Mamadou Koussé, *The Tribulations of a Sahelian Traveler* (2014) de Michel Tinguiri, *The Ace of Spades in Disarray* (2014) d'Emmanuel Zoungrana, and *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017) de Bali Nebié. Les deux dernières sont des traductions de versions originales françaises. Avec la théorie critique postcoloniale, cet article soutient que ces écrivains se soucient de la sorcellerie parce qu'ils ne sont pas satisfaits de la manière avec laquelle celle-ci a été traitée par les colons blancs qui niaient son existence et donc ont décidé de donner les preuves de la réalité même s'ils ne sont pas tous unanimes quant à l'efficacité de ses puissances mystiques.

Mots clés : Sorcellerie, traditions burkinabè, littérature, post-colonialité, modernisme.

1. Introduction

Colonial officials did not believe in witchcraft; they considered it as a manifestation and tangible proof of the backwardness of the African continent and of European intellectual, technological and moral superiority over Africans (Vasconi 2017, p. 83). They see it as a fear-instilling superstition. As Vasconi explains, "With bizarre beliefs and alleged abhorrent and awful practices, witchcraft provided the opportunity to confirm the European vision of Africans as primitive people dominated by superstition and fear of evil." (p. 83).

Africans, on the other hand, believe in witchcraft. In the prologue to the *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017), Bali Nebié says that one of the things African intellectuals have in common is the "belief in witchcraft." (p. 6). And unsurprisingly, the theme of witchcraft and sorcery abound in Burkinabe

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fictions written in English. For example, in his poem “Axaxagabazuehi the Greatest Witch of the Forest”, Mamadou Kousse synthetises the “powers of the darkness, called witchcraft.” (2012, p. 36). In *The Odds are against Cycling* (2012), Noélie Yaogo also expresses her convictions in witchcraft by mentioning witches among the exceptions of people who do not give her applause when she is on her bike (p. 11). As to Michel Tinguiri, in his novel *The Tribulations of a Sahelian Traveler* (2014), he has N’Djilékou, his main character, recall a story about the belief in witchcraft (pp. 45-46). Likewise, Emmanuel Zoungrana, in *The Ace of Spades in Disarray* (2014), tells the story of an old lady, Lorane, who is a witch because, after saving a baby when executioners came to kidnap his parents, she later sacrificed it to personal objectives (p. 83). Bali Nebié’s novel on the whole shows the fraud involved in witchcraft and sorcery while Malidoma Patrice Somé, in his fictional autobiography, *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994) the African shaman, has a different look at such supernatural things. Why so much concern for such a retrograde theme in an ever-modernised world? A probable hypothesis is that these writers are not satisfied with how this theme has so far been handled by foreign anthropologists (Somé, 1994, p. 12) and want to voice their own views and convictions on witchcraft. In this regard, it is convenient to resort to postcolonial approach in the examination of their works, as this criticism has as a subject matter the analysis of which is “literature produced by cultures that developed in response to colonial domination.” (Tyson 1999, p. 365).

Post-colonial criticism draws attention to issues of cultural difference in literary texts and so contributes “to further undermine the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics” (Barry, 2009, p. 185) based on a single supposedly universal standard, regardless of social, cultural, and regional differences. In fact, one of the characteristics of postcolonial criticism is the awareness of representations of the non-European— witchcraft in this case— as exotic or immoral ‘other’. By using this theory, I intend to show that postcolonial Burkinabe writers, namely Bali Nebié and Malidoma Patrice Somé, recreate, in their fictions, their own perceptions of witchcraft and want these to be considered worldwide. This theory will also help me to point out the description of African witchcraft that these writers offer from the inside, and also to lay stress on their identity as doubled, nay tripled (Burkinabe, French, and English), or on ‘cross-cultural’ interactions, which are aspects of postcolonial criticism.

Of the different Burkinabe fictions written in English, Nebié’s *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017) and Somé’s *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994) and some of Koussé’s poems deal mainly with the theme of witchcraft in the domain of religion and ritual. The other works mention this theme sparsely. My analysis will be focused on these main works and the others will be referred to whenever



appropriate. In the analytical interpretation, I shall highlight three aspects: first, how Burkinabe postcolonial writers show the various operations involved in witchcraft; second, how they describe African witchcraft as the opposite of Western or modern values; and finally, their opinions on it as fraud or reality.

2. Description of Witchcraft in the Selected Works.

Some of the methods used by sorcerers and fortune tellers, as spelled out mainly in the *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017, pp. 13-16), include using mice, cowries, calabash, potion and corpse. Sometimes, the fortune teller is referred to as the “man with the mice”. He has a bag containing a mixture of sand and dirt. When somebody goes to consult him, he empties his bag on the floor and uses that person’s finger to spread it out smoothly. Then both of them go out and shut the door to allow the mice to come and express themselves in the sand and so help discern the concerns brought by the guest. After some time, both fortune teller and guest open the door and enter the hut to verify the predictions of the magical mice through the “footprints” they left behind. The fortune teller then deciphers the coded literature in footprints of the enigmatic and erudite mice to his illiterate guest.

Other fortune tellers use cowries. They have a bag of cowries. When a guest comes in to consult them, after listening to the person, they take their cowries and throw them on the floor. Then, they interpret the positions of the cowries and read the message to the guest. For example, tired of waiting for the fulfilment of the predictions of the mice, Gnama, the protagonist in the Nebié’s novel, went to consult a witchdoctor who uses cowries; but after six months of no fulfilment of the expectations, he concluded that this fortune teller was a fraud and decided to look for another one (Nebié, 2017, pp. 17-20).

Later on, as a sorcerer, Gnama himself was using a calabash. “Leaning over his calabash, Gnama was interpreting the vision being sent to him by a fluid.” (Nebié, 2017, p. 37). He used to balance the calabash mystically several times and then consulted it and translated the message to his guest.

In addition, Gnama also used the truth potion, usually for settling disputes not satisfactorily resolved in the law courts. The technique involves placing a small calabash on the floor and inviting the plaintiffs to come forward and openly swear the following oath: “if I am guilty, let the fetish point me out. And if I deny my guilt, then let it put an end to my life!” (Nebié, 2017, pp. 51-52). The priest, after performing some rites and guided by his fetish, points out the culprit. If this one denies his guilt, then he is submitted to drinking the truth potion. After drinking it, the culprit enters into trance and admits he is guilty. The potion can lead him into a deep coma or to death.



Finally, there is the use of the corpse of the person whose death people want to inquire about the cause. In villages, every death is believed to have a mystical cause. Therefore, a brutal death needs explanation. The corpse of the deceased is used to find out the culprit. "The corpse [is] tied to a special stretcher. Two people then [carry] the stretcher, and driven by the force of the spirit of the victim, they [point] out the killer." (Nebié, 2017, p. 101).

Once the problem is identified through any of these methods, that is, once a culprit who causes the nuisance is designated, the witch or fortune teller shows how to get rid of that person so that the guest can prosper; for, in addition to explaining the causes of some deaths and predicting one's future, witchcraft is resorted to for advancement in social life (particularly with people with huge ambitions), for protection and for passing exams. It is a money-earning business for witches and sorcerers. In Nebié's novel, Claude, a character, offers Gnama, the sorcerer, five hundred thousand Francs for promising to make him be an MP (Nebié, 2017, p. 43). It is also said that the sorcerer has power to watch people's academic career (Nebié, 2017, pp. 47-48). Malidoma Patrice Somé, the author of *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994) says he owes the success of his academic career to the power of the talisman he received at the end of his initiation and that it still continues to help him as a shaman "to speak in big assembly halls" (p. 5). He describes his talisman as "an oval-shaped pouch stuffed with a stone from the underworld and some other secret objects collected in the wild" (Somé, 1994, p. 4). In Nebié's novel, the main character Gnama has been given, at his initiation, three talismans, "pouches made of white cotton cloth" (Nebié, 2017, p. 167). One of them contains the seven cowries he gave for his initiation, a tuft of his wife Atia's hair and her finger nails; it represents the two lives he sacrificed for his initiation. Another one contains small pieces of plant and animal organs. The third one contains a yellowish powder that is poison. He is instructed to use these talismans in the service of good or evil. It is, therefore, relevant to recall here Somé's assertion, talking about the talismans as dangerous powerful objects, that "depending on the actions of its bearer, such objects have the power to help, but also to hurt" (Somé, 1994, p. 4). Gnama is warned that if ever the fraud in his practice is discovered, he has to take the poison to kill himself to avoid dishonour (Nebié, 2017, p. 168).

Other talismans are used as charms to harm individuals or to call mishaps upon them, or to brighten one's own future. In her novel *The Odds are against Cycling* (2012), Noélie Yaogo refers to such practices as "making 'douah'". She tells the story of a red-veiled man advising a lady who fails to get a husband to "just make 'douah' composed of a white cock, a red cloth, and a black hen; with four notes. Leave them all to an old man... And you'll be relieved." (Yaogo, 2012, p. 138). In this way, she is going to get a husband mysteriously. In the *Secrets of the Sorcerer*, Gnama follows a similar piece of advice unsuccessfully



when desperately looking for a job in Abidjan (Nebié, 2017, pp. 17-21). But when he becomes a sorcerer, he does not hesitate to use charms to fight against his guests' enemies. For example, he tries to frighten Robert, his guest Claude's rival, first by throwing a dead cat into his compound, then by placing a charm composed of the tail of an animal with black, white and red ropes around it in front of his office for him to tread on; and finally, by putting a charm, *lambwa*, made with cowries stuck on it, on the body of a dead pup inside a circle surrounded by ashes inside his house in the village (Nebié, 2017, p. 57). All these are meant to bring him bad omens. But as Robert does not believe in witchcraft such things do not have effect on him.

Through these descriptions of the workings of witchcraft, these writers try to affirm and re-establish the reality of the phenomenon of witchcraft which has been played down by foreign anthropologists (Go, 2014, p. 15). They assert its existence both in the colonial past as well as in the present day. They present it as part of Burkinabe culture, nay African culture. They further highlight it as properly Burkinabe or African by drawing a parallelism and contrast to Western or modern values for a better understanding of it.

3. African Witchcraft as the Opposite of Western or Modern Values

In most Burkinabe fiction written in or translated into English, African witchcraft and the Western world are presented as antinomies, incompatible entities. In the *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2017), Gnama the sorcerer says that "the only item made by the Nasara that he was 'obliged' to accept, was the telephone." (Nebié, 2017, p. 30). Gnama prefers, for example, sleeping in a traditional hut to a modern breeze-block house, and sleeping on the bare floor to using a bed, because these things connote the Nasara and his legacy. Interestingly, one of the characters in the same novel, Robert, who opposes Gnama's authority, is nicknamed "the Nasara, meaning the White Man" (Nebié, 2017, p. 58) because he does not believe in witchcraft which he actually calls "village stories". So, witchcraft and the modern world are laid out in contrast as two worlds apart.

Witchcraft is also presented as being at the cross-road of antinomies or as being the opposite of modern values. For example, witchcraft appears, in Somé's and Nebié's descriptions of it, strongly associated with darkness, dirt, village, tradition, blind faith, and decadence, as opposed respectively to light, cleanness, city, modernity, reason, and progress. Witchcraft is thus presented as going against the values of modernity or the West.

Most Burkinabe fictions in English testify that witchcraft goes hand in hand with darkness. Witchcraft operates well at night and in the bush. Such an atmosphere and scenery install fear to people. One likely environment appears



in N'Djilékou's account on belief in witchcraft in Michel Tinguiri's *The Tribulations of a Sahelian Traveler* (2014):

It was said that the night is full of mysteries; that sacred trees moved and went to chat with their friends. Spirits wandered and played during the night. Stones, insects, everything spoke... His ancestors used to say that when you violate Mother Nature's laws, the gods and spirits react in a harsh way.... When asked why, the answer was always, 'it's tradition, it's n'yé-yiranè,' meaning that they 'were born and found it.' (pp. 45-46).

People believe that "at night, bad spirits roamed the country and they were likely to harm night time party-goers." (Tinguiri, 2014, p. 62). Witchcraft works in darkness; hence, Kousse (2012, p. 36) calls it the powers of darkness and explains how it works in these lines:

Old am I, with wrinkled body; you see
But pity, am the prettiest in the darkness.
I have fried human heads
And chewed children's bones.
In the darkness, I perform wonders
In the deep darkness, I control souls
Am Axaxagabazuehi
The greatest witch of the forest."

The repetition of the word "darkness" and the use of antinomies 'wrinkled' and 'pretty', odious activities and 'wonders' powerfully convey and lay emphasis on the deep obscurity in which witchcraft operates. The poet further says that Axaxagabazuehi has a pot of human blood in her kitchen and at night invokes her forces in order to invisibly float in the air to capture any human soul to satisfy her desires.

In the *Secrets of the Sorcerer* (2014), Gnama, the main character, tells that initiation into the Djadjo witchcraft requires the sacrifice of one's beloved person in order to acquire powers. At Gnama's initiation, Old San said to him: "The Djadjo demands the life of your wife and that of your child that she is carrying, as condition for your initiation!" (Nebié, 2017, p. 117). He also said that at his own initiation he had to sacrifice his first son (Nebié, 2017, p. 137). Axaxagabazuehi too killed all her children to become famous (Kousse, 2012, p. 37). Gnama submitted to this ritual also. Disguised as a man-lion, Gnama actually killed his pregnant beloved wife Atia at night and removed her liver and heart following the odious and ignominious rite of initiation. At the ritual meal, he "the newly initiated member had the heart all to himself, and the liver was shared amongst the others... they ate the flesh raw." (Nebié, 2017, p. 133). These are works of darkness.

Anybody that is able to do such ignominies for any other purpose is then called a witch. It is the case of an old lady, Lorane, in *the Ace of Spades in Disarray* (2014), who is called a witch, because after saving a baby when executioners came to kidnap his parents, she later sacrificed it for personal objectives. Likewise, in *The Odds are against Cycling*, Noélie Yaogo calls witches



excisors (female genitals mutilators) and the like who do not give her applause when she is on her bike (Yaogo, 2012, p. 11). A witch is then synonymous to a bloody wrong-doer, a killer.

In the world of light and reason, such practices, namely of the kind described by Gnoma, are nothing but manslaughter, cannibalism and Satanism. It is no wonder witches and sorcerers are reluctant to light lest their activities be revealed and brought to an end.

Burkinabe Anglophone writers' portrayal of witchcraft also links it to dirt, ugliness and primitiveness. For example, it is said in Nebié's novel that the Old man in charge of initiating people into witchcraft "wore only a cache-sexe, a traditional G-string" (p. 98) and that "Gnoma almost never took a bath because the spirits of the Djadjo required him not to. He was filthy and stank." (p. 29). Nakedness is the state required for candidates going for initiation in Somé's fictional autobiography. The candidates have to take off the shirts and shorts, even Malidoma Patrice Somé himself. Somé sees nakedness as appropriate, being the "expression of one's relationship with the spirit of nature. To be naked is to be open-hearted." (Somé, 1994, p. 193).

It follows that as there is hardly a place for such primitiveness in the modern world, it cannot be a commonplace practice in modern cities and towns. It is then understandable that witchcraft be usually seen by its unbelievers as "mere village stories" (Nebié, 2017, p. 61), because it is mainly in villages and bushes that it is practised. Interestingly, Rouzgani, one of the Old Man's children, though familiar with the fetish of the Djadjo because born and bred in that village, says that once he "discovered the city, these village stories no longer interest [him]" (Nebié, 2017, p. 82). Witchcraft is being mainly circumscribed to villages, bushes, and forests. Believers in it who are city dwellers have to travel to villages to practise it if they want. That's why on Fridays, the day of Djadjo, long convoys of public transport buses full of government officials, politicians, traders, students arrive in Layou, looking for miraculous solutions to their various problems (Nebié, 2017, p. 27). Gnoma was believed to be endowed with supernatural powers that enabled him to find solutions to life issues. Yet, he could not find a solution to his own predicament when his fraudulent machinations were revealed in day light.

4. Witchcraft as Fraud or Reality in the Selected Works

The question of whether witchcraft holds true or false divide the Burkinabe Anglophone writers under study. As if to mimic the colonizers' thoughts, some writers point to the fraudulent nature of witchcraft while others show it as mere reality. But at this stage it is relevant to make a distinction between the existence of the phenomenon and its effectiveness. The descriptions of the



macabre practices in the initiation into witchcraft in all works under study are alike and can be expressions of reality of the existence of witchcraft because anything is possible with sinful human beings, even horrible things such as human sacrifice. As witchcraft is characterised by secrecy, its members having pledged to commit suicide to protect it if need be, it is difficult to know it from inside out. Even people who, like Somé Malidoma Patrice, say they experience it refuse to reveal its secrets. Therefore, the efficiency of the powers involved in witchcraft is a matter of debate in the works under study.

Secrecy surrounds witchcraft in both Nebié's and Somé's works. In Nebié's novel, *Tagadougou*, the place where the initiation into witchcraft or sorcery operates, is insulated from foreign nations, like the village of Ilunjinle in Soyinka's *Lion and the Jewel* (1962). Foreign religions failed to settle down there. It is said that a Christian that the white man established there by force had been chased away by the inhabitants and had to flee the village to save his life. As a result, there is "neither chapel nor mosque in Tagadougou" (Nebié, 2017, p. 101). Initiatives undertaken by members of foreign religious groups to settle down in Tagadougou met a stony wall in the laws of the community that require that "any foreigner wishing to settle down in the community must be sponsored by an indigene. None ever got a sponsor." (Nebié, 2017, p. 101). Foreigners and their religions are thus feared because they can destroy witchcraft by revealing its fraudulent nature. A glaring example is the victory of the colonisers against the native witches and sorcerers, thus showing that the so-called witches' "powers of invulnerability in war, supposedly untouchable by gun shot and capable of making [themselves] invisible to the eyes of the enemy," were nothing but illusions, a pure scam (Nebié, 2017, p. 157). Learning from that, it is better to avoid any other warfare of that kind by keeping foreigners away. Hence, in Gnama's village and Tagadougou alike, the customary authorities do not welcome foreign religions (Nebié, 2017, p. 160).

A similar secrecy and insulation from the Western or modern world surrounds the traditional initiation of the Dagara people as narrated by Malidoma Patrice Somé in *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994). Talking about his first night at the initiation camp, he confides that "the council of initiation is very secretive." (Somé, 1994, p. 192). This secrecy finds an echo in the *Secrets of the Sorcerer* where the old man in charge of Gnama's initiation, Old San, teaches him that "every human organisation must have a secret nucleus of leaders," that "every community [is] led by secret societies called by different names." (Nebié, 2017, p. 138). Somé's Dagara society and the society of men-lions in Tagadougou are all but different names of the secret societies. It is no wonder that, like Somé who refuses to reveal the secrets of the initiation, Gnama finds himself, at the end of the novel, "unable to break the fundamental law of the



brotherhood of the men-lions concerning the secret of their existence.” (Nebié, 2017, p. 185).

Besides, Somé’s experience prior to his initiation is very like Gnama’s. “That night,” he writes, “I could not sleep. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw ghosts all over the place. I lived the whole night in the country of ghosts.” (Somé, 1994, p. 192). Likewise, Gnama laid down but stayed awake all night during his initiation process (Nebié, 2017, p. 120). The description of the grotto and the “narrow alley that had the shape of the letter Z” that leads to “a clearing of about 10 square metres, lit by two torches” (Nebié, 2017, p. 127) is also closely similar to Somé’s narration of his journey into the Underworld in chapter 23 and his descriptions of the Portal, the Light Hole and the Pool from chapters 19 to 21.

In addition, both Gnama and Somé try to convince their adherents or readership of the truth of their narrative or practice. The narrator unveils Gnama’s practice as fraud and so does a close analysis of Somé’s work. In fact, Somé’s narrative, though it is catalogued as a biography in the Library of Congress, is more fiction than an autobiography. My personal investigations reveal that Jesuits never ran a seminary in Burkina Faso and the seminary he actually attended is a diocesan seminary run by mostly local diocesan priests. His alleged being kidnapped at the age of four is hardly believable. As the Kirkus review of the book reveals, there is no evidence that Somé has really lived the harsh village life that he praises, nor does he “address the crucial question of whether and how traditional ways can flourish in anything but the tribal context” (“Of Water and the Spirit: Kirkus review,” 2017). Somé’s alleged biography rather shows him to be more of a foreigner than a native because in his narrative he says that he remembers very little of his first four years of his life in his home village. It is only during the brief time of his initiation that he was in real contact with the Dagara culture. Yet, he had no knowledge of the Dagara language to talk with his family members. Because of the language impediment, he could not even understand the initiation. So what he describes is rather his own coinage based on the little he understood of the initiation and so holds no truth value. Initiation in the Dagara tribe is not ‘shamanism’; it involves making boys know their roles as men within the tribe. It does not turn boys into ceremonial leaders. These reasons reveal a fraud that Somé the first person narrator, like Gnama in Nebié’s novel, claims to be the truth.

Another similarity lies in the fact that the two characters from both works are being called “strangers” by the people in whose group they want to enter through initiation. Maawa, one of Gnama’s wives, always calls him “stranger”. Alienated from the culture, Gnama asks her why she calls him “stranger” instead of using his first name. She then explains that she calls him that way as he comes from another village, otherwise, traditionally speaking, he would



have been called “friend of my brother” (Nébié, 2017, p. 106). Patrice Somé too is called “Malidoma”, roughly meaning “Be friends with the stranger/enemy” (Somé, 1994, p. 1). Contrary to Somé’s explanation, this name actually means his exclusion from the Dagara community: how can a friend of one’s enemy be a friend? By giving this name to Somé, the elders cautiously and politely keep him away, maintain him at the margins of their society. He then tries to give a positive interpretation of the name in a way that suits him. He thus makes the most of the marginal position in which the Dagara elders put him by interpreting their decision as a mission to constitute himself into a bridge with other societies. Both Gnoma and the first person narrator Malidoma Patrice Somé are hybrid men, alienated from the communities they want to be initiated in.

These similarities between the two books lead to the conclusion that their authors try to describe witchcraft and related practices that are alien to the Western or modern world in their own ways. Yet they look at witchcraft from different perspectives, though both received modern education: Bali Nébié, as a modern intellectual, dismisses the efficiency of the mystical powers attributed to witchcraft and denounces it as fraud, whereas Somé who is a shaman, shares his elders’ conviction that the “West is as endangered as the indigenous cultures it has decimated in the name of colonialism” (p. 1) and that the duty is his, as “a man of two worlds, trying to be at home in both of them” (p. 3), to save the West by serving as a bridge that strikes some kind of balance. He is adamantly trying to show the importance of what “territorial colonialism”, then “neo-colonialism” (pp. 4-5) tried to suppress. He is aware of European representations of his Dagara initiation as exotic or immoral ‘other’ and so wants to rehabilitate it by presenting it in his own way, conscious himself of his own identity as hybrid.

If the practices involved in witchcraft and described by these writers hold the truth, as to the reality of the powers of witchcraft, it is a matter of debate. Somé tries to convince anybody of its truth while the whole novel of Nébié is built to present it as a fraud.

In Nébié’s novel, all the characters, except two, do not believe in witchcraft. It is Robert and Jo-the-Lefty or Jo-the-Expeditious. Robert is nicknamed the Nasara, that is, the white man because he behaves and believes like white people. Unlike his wife, he does not believe in witchcraft (Nébié, 2017, p. 58). As for Jo-the-Lefty, son of a commander in Toum, he is a gendarme who grew up in Layou. He disbelieves such stories, considering charlatans and other fetish-priests as simply criminal disguised swindlers. “He scoffed at his colleagues who, nearly all, wore black rings on their fingers that they believed protected them against bullets and other evil spells.” (Nébié, 2017, p. 176). At the end of the novel, the combination of Robert and Jo’s actions brings witchcraft in Layou



to a sudden and unexpected deadly end with the arrest and trial of Gnama and his associates and their confessing that “the Djadjo was nothing but deceit” (Nebié, 2017, p. 184). Yet, they did not break the secret of the existence of their society, which is already made manifest to the reader through the narration.

The narrator in Nebié’s novel highlights the paradoxical attitude of some characters, namely those who are educated and yet still believe in what is unreasonable. Claude for example is a trained computer engineer. The narrator says that “even the most ardent believers in superstition wondered how [Claude] was able to combine ... the rational par excellence with the irrational” (Nebié, 2017, p. 33). Claude himself says that he is a white man when he is on a computer but becomes an African again once out of his administrative office (Nebié, 2017, p. 33-34). So witchcraft is looked at from the point of view of Africans who now share foreign ideas. For Gnama, the uneducated sorcerer, receiving the white man’s education goes against believing in witchcraft. The narrator lets the reader know Gnama’s inner thoughts, through an interior monologue, after receiving money from Claude, a highly educated man:

How can educated people, people who went to school for about twenty years, people who have travelled, even to the country of the Nasara, how can they allow themselves to be manipulated by a person like me who have never been to school? They believe all the nonsense that I tell them. How strange this life! ... I really do wonder what they teach them for so many years in the Nasara’s school, yet they want us to believe the Nasara is a super wizard. (Nebié, 2017, p. 55-56).

Gnama simply bemoans African elites’ naivety. He also sees modern technology as another kind of witchcraft which was believed to be superior.

This syncretism of beliefs also points to African people’s hybrid identity. A possible motivation behind it is fear exerted by witches upon individuals or by one’s family members who strongly believe in it. Gnama in Nebié’s novel came to learn from his experience that sorcerers endowed with powers to fly or to metamorphose into human being or tree is nothing but “pure fiction aimed at conditioning the people” (p. 138), keeping them in a state of fear. It means that sorcery exists but the mystical powers given to it are subject to debates. Gnama shows that witches and spirits that haunt villagers at night are but men in disguise. One has to be strong enough like Robert to go against the popular flow and his own family’s pressure. Somé and Koussé, on the other hand, show that witchcraft is endowed with true mystical powers.

Another motivation that can explain this hybridity is the realization that moral standards in the modern world are in decadence. It is specifically the case of Malidoma Patrice Somé whose book, *Of Water and Spirit*, is synthetically “the story of [his] initiation into two different and highly contradictory cultures.” (Somé, 1994, p. 2). He is completely hybrid. His initiation into the African



tradition comes second. He undertook this additional initiation when he realized that a looming crisis awaits Western culture. He writes:

At this time in history, Western civilization is suffering from a great sickness of the soul. The West's progressive turning away from functioning spiritual values; its total disregard for the environment and the protection of natural resources; the violence of inner cities with their problems of poverty, drugs, and crime; ... and growing intolerance toward people of colour and the values of other cultures – all of these trends, if unchecked, will eventually bring about a terrible self-destruction. (p. 1).

The instability of Western culture and probable future chaos, with the overwhelming homosexual agenda vehemently criticised by Africans, lead Somé to revisit and reconsider his ancestral tradition whose moral standards have so far remained healthy and sound, especially when viewed from inside. He is in the West to tell people there about his people and in this way help them avoid self-destruction. He decides to tell the story himself because he regrets that so far such stories have been told by foreign anthropologists or native anthropologists who have been 'foreignized,' ethnographers, and sociologists (Somé, 1994, p. 12). He wants to offer an authentic and genuine account of Dagara tradition to the reader. One assumes from this saying that he does not consider himself as a 'foreignized' native writer, but he offers no arguments why he is not one. Having been initiated first in the white man's culture through schooling, then later living and working in the West, he is at least a "been-to", or to use Adichie's concept, an "Americanah" (Kaboré, 2016, p. 13), a twice 'foreignized' native Burkinabe English writer. He is twice alienated because he was first acquainted with the French culture before embracing the English world order even though his initiation into his native Dagara tradition happens in-between the two foreign ones. Yet he starts writing his account after completing all three initiations, which makes his narrative far removed from reality than that of a simple 'foreignized' native anthropologist.

5. Conclusion

Though a postcolonial approach is used in an attempt to obtain a unique and authentic Burkinabe description of witchcraft (in the selected works) that differ from colonial ones, a final analysis shows that it is difficult to get to the gist of the phenomenon of witchcraft fundamentally, first, because of the hybridity of the authors or narrators who describe it. The post-colonial writers who try to give an authentic description of it, namely, Somé, Tinguiri, Koussé, Yaogo, and Nebié, are hybrid and would be considered by witches and sorcerers and their adherents as 'foreignized', people who are taken by the white man's cause and manipulated by him to perpetuate his colonial criticism,



because they have been educated into the white man's system. Yet, if this allegation were true, such criticism would still remain relevant to our debate because it is part of what postcolonial criticism calls "mimicry", that is, "the always slightly alien and distorted way in which the colonized, either out of choice or under duress, will repeat the colonizer's ways and discourse." (Bertens, 2014, p. 182). This mimicry constitutes a mirror that slightly but effectively distorts the colonizer's image and identity when he sees himself in this mirror (Bertens, 2014, p. 182) and so plays an important role in the colonized people's fight against the colonizer in an attempt to free themselves. Second, another difficulty pertains to the secret nature of the phenomenon. The nature of witchcraft is to remain unknown to uninitiated. The initiated have to keep secret what they have received for fear of being killed by their peers. Yet the different descriptions of the gruesome aspects involved in its initiation process coalesce to show it as another version of Satanism which also feeds on evil and is well known in Western history.

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