Embodiment and Enspiritment: Exploring Spirit-Body Relations in Contemporary Francophone West African Literature and Film

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ABSTRACT

The persistent presence of spirits in African literature and film reflects the belief held by nearly 3,000 African nations that the human principle comprises both material and immaterial selves. This philosophical and religious conviction inspires creatives from sub-Saharan Africa, leading to (performance) art, film, and literary narratives that depict various interpretations of the spiritual principle. Despite the ubiquitous presence of the immaterial self in African narratives, literary scholars largely undertheorise the invisible, immaterial component of the human principle (spirits). Historians, anthropologists, and religious scholars have made critical interventions that place spirits in various forms, according to diverse African cosmologies, at the centre of discourse on cultural and political identity and power. *Embodiment and Enspiritment: Exploring Spirit-Body Relations in Contemporary Francophone West African Literature and Film* builds from these disciplines by staging an interdisciplinary conversation between these African fields and contemporary African literature and film to theorise a range of possible relationships between spirits and bodies. It engages francophone African literature and film written and produced in the twenty-first century, such as Mati Diop's film *Atlantique* (2019), Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre* (2013), Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), Calixthe Beyala's *Les arbres en parlent encore* (2002), and Joseph Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001), to argue that understanding Africa's spiritual world is essential for unpacking the sexuality, identity, power dynamics, and gender of characters in African narratives.

Drawing on historical and anthropological evidence as well as religious and philosophical beliefs, *Embodiment and Enspiritment* theorises two predominant spirit-body dynamics within the narratives under discussion—enspiritment and embodiment. Through these two distinct ontologies, this project posits that access to the spiritual world

via mysticism allows subaltern characters to subvert power dynamics within the postcolonial. Spirits within the dynamic of enspiritment and embodiment function as empowering beings whose presence within hosting bodies poses an interventionist agenda that troubles the oppressive postcolony. *Embodiment and Enspiritment* cautions against positing bodies via-à-vis spirits as victims because this positioning flattens the ontological possibilities that the spiritual world offers. Rather, it argues that oppressive, subaltern conditions in the physical world catalyse spiritual intervention in private and public spheres.

By highlighting precolonial spiritual epistemologies within postcolonial oppressive strictures, this project interrogates how the persistent presence of the workings of the spiritual world disrupts the constructed societal order of the postcolony. Additionally, it questions how Africa's spiritual realities complicate dominant discourses on identity, sexuality and gender. Emphasising world-sense paradigms that shift attention away from the material, this project proposes that the return of colonial-era banished spiritual epistemes forges a resistance campaign that reintroduces the precolony into the postcolony. *Embodiment and Enspiritment* makes visible the invisible, dismissed epistemologies of precolonial Africa and argues that these contemporary depictions bespeak the literary and filmic spaces as sites of political, class and economic resistance.

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This project is not a solitary achievement. I have been privileged to be surrounded by a village of helpers who kept me grounded through conversations, seminars, critical feedback, warm meals, kindness, generosity and necessary distractions. I am grateful to my parents, Uche and Kasie, and my siblings, Ihuoma and Oguguo, for being a part of this process. My beloved sister, Nmesoma (Choo)'s much-needed distractions ensured I stayed whole through this process. Thank you, Choo, for all the hair and make-up tips, the numerous videos and photos we exchanged, and for making sure that I know the names and works of actors and musicians. My chosen family, Jim and Anne Newman and Ruth Igunbor, have followed me every step of the way, prayed with me, fed me and sustained me through all the challenges of graduate school. I am grateful to my friends Julie Wilson, Quinci Jones, Chibuike and Chinaka Ofoh for your timely check-ins. My roommates-turned-siblings, Mihika Rao and Amina Diop kept me sane and safe, filling our household with continuous laughter as we navigated graduate school together. I will never forget opening my eyes after surgery to see you both, waiting, watching, worried with Akin Morrison, my friend. Thank you!

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Merci bien!

DEDICATION

For Felicia Nkeiru, Nnekasie (Kasie's Mother), the "uneducated" fishmonger who diligently exemplified business genius in the Onitsha market, sponsored Kasie's undergraduate and master's education in India, and began a new family legacy.

For Kasie, Nna m, my dad, who did the least he could—pass on a legacy.

Nodunu na ndokwa! Rest in peace!

For Uche, ezigbo nne m, my beloved mother, whose unfulfilled ambitions fuel and guarantee mine.

And God Almighty, who makes all things beautiful in His time.

Unu emela! Thank You!

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INTRODUCTION:

The Saameel as Exemplar of African Postcolonial Engagements

Dans les années 1971-1972, j'ai reçu une lettre du Président, Léopold Sédar Senghor, recommandant une chercheuse américaine d'origine péruvienne. J'oublie son nom.[1] Elle faisait de la recherche sur la culture Seereer et comme elle avait le soutien du Président, elle avait accès à tout—même les aspects de la culture inaccessibles aux étrangers et aux femmes. Elle entrait partout. Elle avait une position privilégiée à cause du soutien de Senghor. Elle passait la nuit chez les *saltigis* seereers. Elle portait un symbole de grigri Seereer. (*Il fait un geste de la main vers sa taille*) Elle avait adopté un nom Seereer. Tout lui était disponible, sauf les *Saameels*. J'ai donc reçu la lettre de Senghor me demandant de l'aider.

J'étais dans une position difficile à cause de la lettre du Président qui me mettait sous pression. Je suis passé voir l'ami de mon père, ils avaient fait l'initiation ensemble, donc ils étaient des frères. Je lui ai raconté ma situation, je lui ai dit que j'ai reçu une lettre du Président me demandant d'aider la chercheuse. Il m'a entendu parler et après il a répondu « tout ce qui [sic] vous avez besoin, vous l'aurez ici. » J'étais bien touché par sa générosité car ce que je lui demandais n'était pas évident.

Le jour de la manifestation, on était ensemble avec la dame. J'oublie toujours son nom. Tu sais, avec l'âge la mémoire n'est plus la même. Elle est arrivée avec tout—magnétophone, deux appareils photos avec un autre caméraman, elle avait tout. Nous étions ensemble dans la même charrette et quand on approchait la maison du défunt, l'ami de mon père, qui est lui-même le chef des Saameels m'a dit « ici on se sépare. » J'ai quitté la charrette pour permettre aux *Saameels* de se préparer, de s'habiller selon les exigences du rite. Chez le défunt, il y avait déjà des griots en place pour la cérémonie. Dès qu'ils voient les *Saameels* s'approcher, ils ont abandonné leurs tam-tams sur la place et ils ont fui dans la foule qui, elle-même, s'est dispersée.

La cérémonie a commencé. C'était vraiment incroyable de voir et d'y assister. La chercheuse, bien équipée faisait des vidéos et des audios avec son équipe, elle prenait des photos. Après la cérémonie, elle était bien contente et reconnaissante. Elle avait finalement ce qu'elle cherchait. Elle m'appréciait beaucoup. Elle disait que j'étais très important dans sa vie. Elle m'a ramené en sa voiture jusqu'à Dakar et j'ai passé la nuit chez elle avant de continuer sur St Louis, où j'avais un poste d'enseignant.

Le lendemain, elle m'a appelé tout en pleurant. Elle disait que ni les deux appareils photos, ni les vidéos qu'elle avait faites, ni les audios qu'elle avait enregistrés n'étaient là. Tout était vide. Elle pleurait et [se] lamentait. Moi, j'étais choqué. Je suis Seereer, mais je

[1] Il s'agissait de Maria Eugénia de Castillo Amstrong du Laboratoire d'Anthropologie de l'IFAN-CAD de Dakar. Amade Faye, Professeur titulaire des Universités de l'Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar a vérifié l'identité de la chercheuse. Je [Nnenna Onyima] lui ai montré cette histoire après avoir rendu visite à M. Diouf et il a vite reconnu la chercheuse car les *Saameels* lui ont raconté la même histoire quand il menait des recherches avec eux. Pour lire la version rédigé par Amade Faye, voir l'Appendix.

ne pouvais même pas me rappeler ce qu'on a dit pendant la cérémonie. Le chef des *Saameels*, le frère de mon papa, m'avait bien dit « tous ce qui [sic] vous avez besoin, vous l'aurez ici. » C'était sa manière d'accepter ma requête sans me la donner !

> Histoire racontée par Boucar Diouf, maire de Joal-Fadiouth (2014-2022), originaire du village nommé Senghor à Nnenna Onyima, doctorante dans le département de Français à l'Université de Virginie. Première narration : août 30 2024. Vérifiée et éditée par Boucar Diouf le 18 octobre 2024.

Between 1971-1972, I received a letter from President Léopold Sédar Senghor recommending an American researcher of Peruvian origin. I forget her name.[2] She was researching Seereer culture, and because she had the President's support, she had access to everything—even aspects of the culture inaccessible to foreigners and women. She got in everywhere. She had a privileged position because of Senghor's support. She spent the night with the Seereer *saltigis*; she even wore a Seereer *grigri* symbol on her waist. She adopted a Seereer name. Everything was available to her except the *Saameels*. Hence, I received a letter from Senghor asking me to help her access the *Saameel* traditions.

I was in a difficult position because the President's letter put me under pressure. I went to see my father's friend, the chief of the *Saameel*; they had been initiated together, so they were brothers. I told him about my situation and that I had received a letter from the President asking me to help the researcher. He heard me speak, and then he replied, "You will have all that you need here." I was very touched by his generosity because I was asking him what not easy.

On the day of the event, we were together with the lady. I still forget her name. You know, with age, memory is no longer the same. She arrived with everything—a tape recorder, two cameras with another cameraman; she had everything. We were together in the same cart, and when we approached the deceased's house, my father's friend, who is himself the chief of the *Saameels*, told me, "Here we separate." I left the cart to allow the Saameels to prepare to dress according to the requirements of the rite. At the deceased's house, there were already griots in place for the ceremony. As soon as they saw the Saameels approaching, they abandoned their drums on the spot and fled into the crowd, which itself dispersed.

The ceremony began. It was truly incredible to watch and witness. The researcher, well-equipped, made videos, recorded audios with her team, and took photos. After the ceremony, she was very happy and grateful. She finally had what she was looking for. She appreciated me very much and said I was very important in her life. She took me back in her car to Dakar, and I spent the night at her house before continuing to St. Louis, where I had a teaching position.

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[2] It is Maria Eugénia de Castillo Armstrong from the Anthropology Laboratory of IFAN-UCAD in Dakar. Amade Faye, a Professor at Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar, verified the researcher's identity. After visiting Mr. Diouf, I [Nnenna Onyima] showed him this story, and he quickly recognised the researcher because the *Saameels* told him the same story when he was conducting research with them. To read the version written by Amade Faye, see the Appendix.

The next day, she called me in tears. She said that neither the two cameras, nor the videos she had taken, nor the audio she had recorded were there. Everything was empty. She was crying and lamenting. I was shocked. I am Seereer, but I couldn't even remember what was said during the ceremony. The head of the *Saameels*, my father's brother, had told me, "You will have all that you need here." It was his way of accepting my request without giving it to me!

> Story narrated by Boucar Diouf, the mayor of Joal-Fadiouth (2014-2022), originally from the village called Senghor in Senegal to Nnenna Onyima, a doctoral candidate in the French department at the University of Virginia. First narration: August 30, 2024. Verified and edited by Boucar Diouf on October 18, 2024.[3]

Mr. Boucar Diouf, former mayor of Joal-Fadiouth, narrated this story to me while I was on a research trip to the tourist Island of Joal-Fadiouth in Senegal. His lived experience is evidently rich, offering engagement across diverse disciplines—memory studies, oral traditions, and more—but what I find most compelling in Boucar Diouf's true life story is that it exemplifies contentions between the spiritual world and the power dynamics in the postcolonial, physical world: a contention that scholars[4] in the fields of history, anthropology and religious studies consistently tackle and that literary scholarship needs to catch up on. During this meeting, Mr Diouf, before narrating his incredible story, thought it necessary to inform me, "Je n'ai pas étudié la culture Seereer. Je l'ai vecu" ("I did not study the Seereer culture. I lived it"). He then narrated the astounding story about postcolonial spiritual con/tensions in which he is himself a major character.[5]

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[3] Except otherwise stated, all translations in this project are mine.

[4] See the works of historian Nwando Achebe, anthropologists Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí and religion scholars Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ, Jacob Olupona, Amade Faye. Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World* is equally important.

[5] It is, in fact, because of Boucar Diouf's self-characterization in this true-life story that I choose to retain this very oral version of his story. The Appendix contains a sophisticated written rendition of the same story that Amade Faye, eminent Seereer Scholar at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noir (IFAN) at Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) expertly scripts.

Stories like Boucar Diouf's abound in postcolonial spaces and are primarily depicted through the imaginations of African creatives.[6] African characters live, relate to, and interpret life through the lens of their diverse cultures and belief systems. This calls for further engagement in literary scholarship regarding characters who, like Boucar Diouf, live their belief systems. In African narratives, characters apply mysticism and, through mystical practices, gain access to the spiritual world. While literary scholarship generally engages the cultures that produce literature, there is more to explore within African literary studies, not only regarding the cultures framing the narratives but crucially concerning the spiritual traditions in which the characters live. Some narratives, like Joseph Gaï Ramaka's film *Karmen Geï,* depict spiritual presence and influence more subtly. Therefore, the unknowing viewer or reader may not quickly grasp the narrative's spiritual undertones. However, many more African narratives, such as Philippe Lacôte's film *La nuit des rois* (2020) and Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), portray characters who explicitly mobilise access to mysticism to gain insight into the spiritual world.

African history, religion and anthropology maintain the preeminence of the spiritual world over the physical world. Although specific traditions conceptualise their worlds differently, there is a consistent conviction of the spiritual world's workings and realities in the physical. Nwando Achebe represents this consistency via a circle that portrays the demarcation between both worlds but also represents officials—priests,

[6] Nigerian-American author, Nnedi Okorafor describes herself in her 2019 blog entitled "Africanfuturism Defined" as a creative. She writes "I am not a scholar, I am a writer, a creative." I use this term, creative, to designate African writers, filmmakers, artists, and photographers since my primary sources span across genres. For more, see Nnedi's blog: https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html

priestesses, diviners, spirit mediums—people who dwell in the physical world but who, through the mystical potential, can access the spiritual world.

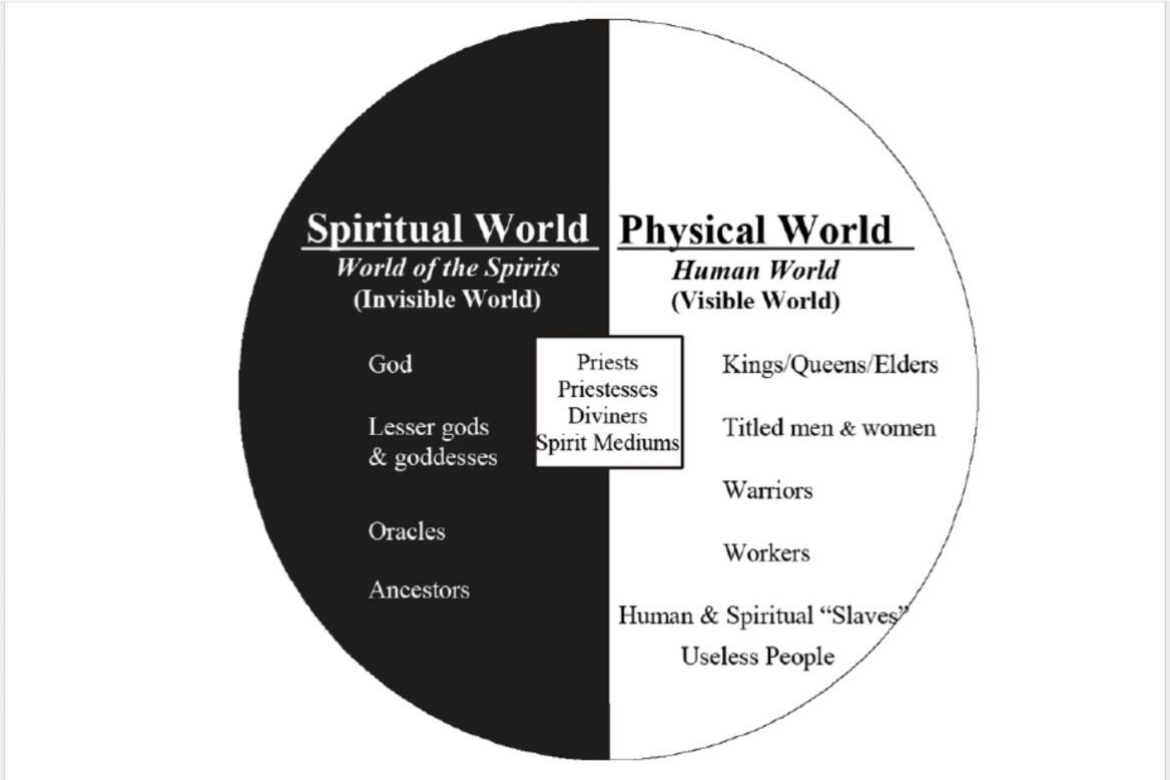

Figure 1.1. Representation of the African worlds by Nwando Achebe in *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa.* (2020)

Writing more specifically about the Seereer people of Senegal, Henry Gravrand notes the three worlds that constitute the universe according to Seereer cosmogony: 1) Le Monde invisible d'En-haut, 2) Le Monde Terrestre diurne, whose star the sun (soleil) is, and 3) Le Monde nocturne, whose star is the moon (lune).

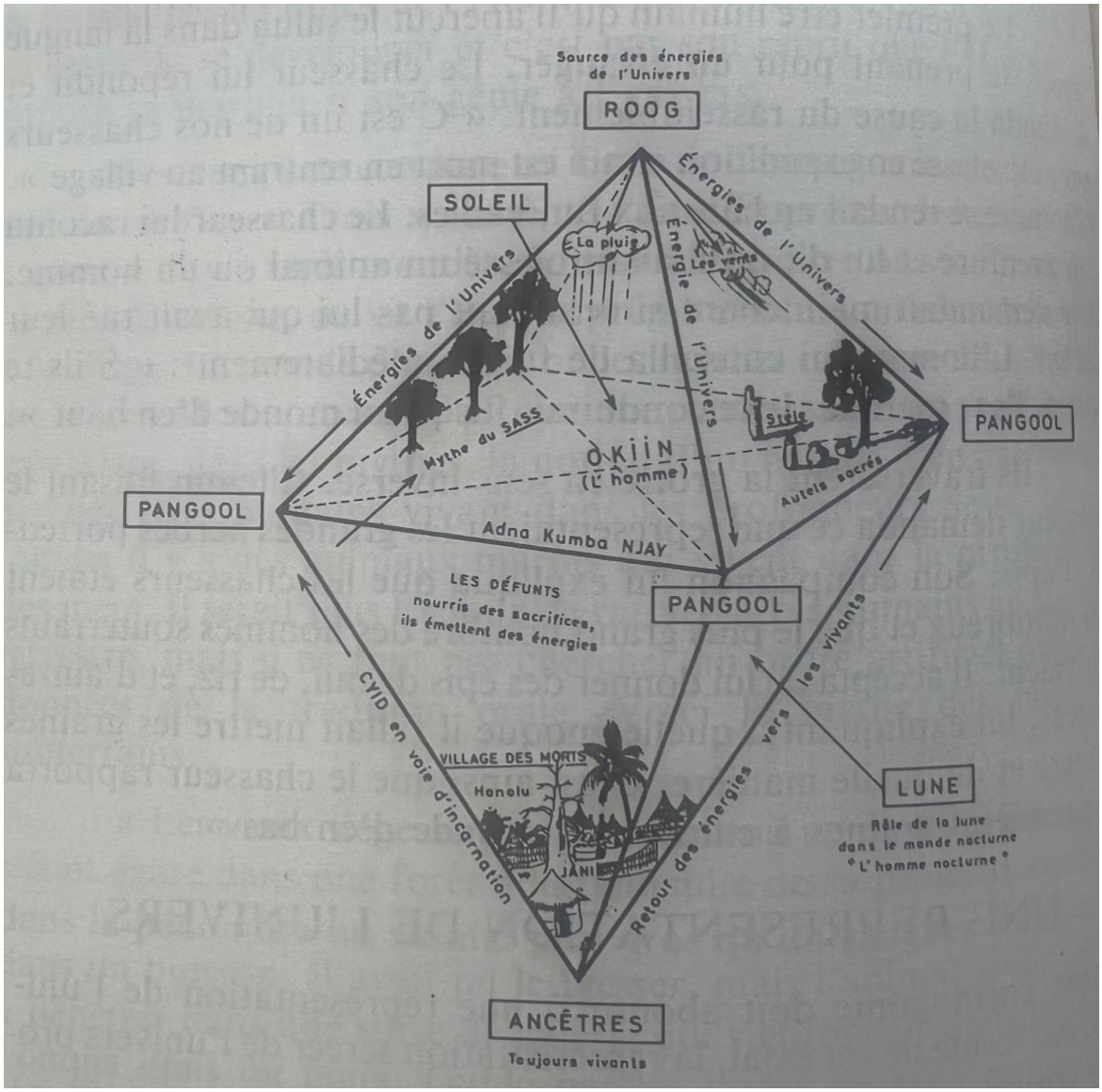

Figure 1.2. The three worlds, according to Seereer cosmogony, depicted by Henry Gravrand in *La civilisation sereer: Pangool, le génie religieux sereer.* (1990)

Roog, the Supreme Being and source of all energy, dwells in the invisible world above, humans live in the diurnal terrestrial world while the ancestors, the dead, primarily occupy the nocturnal world. From this diagram, we notice Pangool, ancestral spirits in the terrestrial and nocturnal worlds. This is because the Pangool, according to Seereer's beliefs, aid humans in the physical world. Humans with mystical potential can contact the Pangool for guidance and help. Like the priestess in Achebe's circle who contacts the

spiritual world for knowledge, different categories of persons could reach into the spiritual world and seek help. For the Seereer, the *Saameel* plays one of these official roles.

The *Saameels* are one of the five spiritual functions of power within the Seereer nation of Senegal. Unique to the Senghor community in Senegal—the homeland of Boucar Diouf, the narrator of this real-life tale—the Saameel are special griots whom ordinary griots fear due to their mystical knowledge. rr Diouf, in “Les cinq fonctions de pouvoir spirituel dans le monde sérère traditionnel," notes that the role of these particularly esoteric griots is to facilitate communication between the deceased and the living. When leaving this life for *Jaaniiw*,[7] the dead individual, who remains in the category of the living, endowed by Roog with this exceptional power, can assign the Saameel the task of conveying specific recommendations to his heirs regarding their funeral and their affairs. They also inform them of the offerings they must present to the *Saameel* for the mission entrusted to them. In essence, the *Saameel* receives the deceased's messages and relays them to the living for their benefit. Diouf does not elaborate on why this message could benefit the living; however, considering this Seereer conviction alongside John Mbiti's writings on East African philosophy and religions shows a shared conviction that traverses the southern Sahara.

In *African Philosophies and Religion*, John Mbiti describes people who have recently passed away as the living-dead, a designation that resonates with Madior Diouf’s observation that the dead still belong to the category of the living. Furthermore, Mbiti adds that these spirits, the living dead, are not always welcome and may linger among their

[7] Janniiw is the afterlife in Seereer philosophy. We can see this location under “village des morts” in figure 1.2 above.

families when angered. To appease them, the living members of their family perform a sacrifice to alleviate their anger, allowing them to return to the spirit world. This sacrificial offering, which benefits the living by granting them peace, significantly aligns with the role of the *Saameel* among the Seereer people of West Africa, whose primary responsibility is to communicate the wishes of the living dead to their living family members. When these desires are faithfully carried out, the satisfied living-dead may depart for *Jaaniiw*, while their families in the terrestrial world can live on in peace. Therefore, the *Saameel*'s role remains vital for maintaining a universal harmony in the Seereer worlds. While these African cultures differ substantially and deserve to be engaged with individually, there are overlaps within the diversity of African traditional religions. *Embodiment and Enspiritment* approaches African traditional beliefs in spirituality and corporeality universally—traversing sub-Saharan colonial boundaries to explore intersecting spirit-body relations—and, specifically, pursuing particular traditions' understanding of their cosmos.

Boucar Diouf's *Saameel* story sparks a conversation about this specific Seereer tradition while exemplifying, in general, African spiritual postcolonial engagements. It presents readers with a raw depiction of the workings of Africa's spiritual world and illustrates the power dynamics between the spiritual realm and the post/colonial physical world. Providing a true-life experience alongside the project's overall fictional examples, the in/actions of the *Saameel* brook no denial of spiritual resistance to imposed political power structures. The prompt disappearance of the ordinary griots upon the *Saameel*'s arrival indicates that the *Saameel*'s work must remain exclusive, initiatic knowledge. However, backed by the postcolonial nation-state, an uninitiated outsider seeks to intrude

upon the exclusivity of this space. Without failing in their duty to preserve the harmony of the Seereer universe, the *Saameel* actively fulfil their role to the family of the living-dead, and their chief honours his obligation to the son of his brother (through initiation) by rescuing him from the trap of the postcolonial power struggle. The mayor, a teacher at the time, could not oppose the president because he had carried out his directive. Nevertheless, the unforeseen empty recordings and their empirically unexplainable characteristics present a universal, somewhat inactive, Africanist exemplar that typifies spiritual resistance methodologies against imposed power dynamics of the physical world.

Embodiment and Enspiritment, in broad strokes, examines spirit-body relations in contemporary francophone African literature and film. It asserts that the preeminence of the spiritual world in African cosmology demands prioritising and incorporating spiritual relationalities and identities, contending with material-based interpretations of Africa's ways of being and knowing. Drawing on literature and film that span sub-Saharan francophone Africa and its diasporas, it explores the persistent presence of the spiritual principle in contemporary settings and argues that this continued presence in the postcolony functions as resistance against oppressive power structures and intervention for the oppressed subaltern. Established historically, anthropologically and in religious and philosophical studies as the preeminent world, the spiritual world transforms into a site for resistance, revival and restoration campaigns that recentre colonial-tabooed convictions of the precolonial world within Africa's postcolony. This project builds from these disciplines by staging an interdisciplinary conversation between African anthropology, history, religion and philosophy on one side and contemporary African literature and film on the other to theorise a range of possible relationships between spirits and bodies. It maintains

that analysing the human principle in African narratives remains incomplete without engaging the spirituality that animates the material. In fact, since the spiritual occupies a superior status vis-à-vis the physical, *Embodiment and Enspiritment* proposes commencing engagements with characters' humanity, identity, gender and sexuality spiritually.

The story of Boucar Diouf and the *Saameel* exemplifies the superiority of the immaterial over the material when the immaterial, spiritual world in/actively destabilises the postcolonial power play of the physical world. Inactive because there remains no visible, empirical explanation for the empty photographs and recordings, yet active because the said emptiness of these instruments bespeaks the reach of Africa's invisible realities. Equipped with cameras and a recorder, all critically Western instruments infamously established for othering and fetishising Africa, and further empowered by the postcolony, such overt technological invasion recalls the colonial ideology. By participating in a *Saameel* performance without permission from the *Saameel*, the American researcher relies on political and ideological power structures to invade this ancient oral space. This researcher's invasion technique transgresses Edouard Glissant's hopes for a mutual invasion of flavours and cultures, an idea Glissant reiterates in his book, *Poétique de la Relation*, and also in Manthia Diawara's 2010 film about him, *Edouard Glissant: One World in Relation.* There is no mutuality in the *Saameel* story: the researcher enters this uninvited space, and the *Saameel* does not initially infiltrate hers. The imbalanced power dynamic, therefore, invokes and justifies the spiritual intervention. Relying on their access to mysticism, the *Saameel* neutralise the effectiveness of the instruments that objectify and render their bodies, language and work exotic. Africa's

immaterial, invisible world craftily enacts a resistance that defends its epistemology against a foreign invasion.

This project foregrounds Africa's spiritual realities' relations to power in individual, intimate, and public spaces. It shows how dormant spiritualities are resuscitated and activated to intervene privately and publicly. Dormant, because in a narrative like Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre* (2013), characters' spiritualities are triggered by an oppressive traumatic incident. The kidnap for slavery that frames Miano's narrative becomes the catalyst of spiritual intervention, marking the historical beginning of oppressive power play within the precolonial-postcolonial temporality of this project. Following historical chronology, Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021) and Calixthe Beyala's *Les arbres en parlent encore* (2002) foreground their stories about literary and patriarchal resistance in colonisation, highlighting the colonial ideology that historically follows slavery. Both texts couch their stories of resistance to colonial power dynamics in indigenous mysticism. Joseph Gaï Ramaka's iconic film, *Karmen Geï* (2001), and Mati Diop's riveting film, *Atlantique* (2019), contribute the postcolony's oppressive systems to this repertoire of oppression by engaging the carceral structures and economic disparity that justify spiritual interventions, respectively. They enrich this project with the filmic genre's diversity, offering narrations framed within the lens of a camera. These interventionist practices, this project highlights publicly subvert the oppressive power dynamics, as in the *Saameel*'s story. In addition, this project nuances our understanding of the characters' identities, sexualities, and gender. Unsurprisingly, female characters dominate the conversations in this project since women

occupy positions of double oppression within extant oppressive spaces.[8] For this reason, this project highlights two anglophone narratives whose depiction of the female body's engagement with the immaterial remains critical—Akwaeke Emezi's novel, *Freshwater* (2018), and Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's *A Girl is a Body of Water* (2020). This infidelity to colonial language barriers allows for an expansive and extensive engagement with spirits, spirituality and the invisible across the south of the Sahara and dismantles the very physical, colonial mapping of the continent. Importantly, because *Embodiment and Enspiritment* theorises and explores indigenous African spirit-body relations, adding the literature of anglophone East and West Africa to predominantly francophone Central[9] and West African narratives breaks any French colonial hold and underlies the Africanity that this project advocates. Africa's physical world might be separated by constructed borders and forced languages, but in her spiritual world, spirits, ancestors, priestesses, etc., weave freely in and out of space and time.

Before concluding this section of this introduction, I return to the *Saameel* story to draw attention to its resistance methodology. While the *Saameel* are unique to the Senghor community, their resistance methodology reverberates consistently across the fictional and real-life stories this project probes. On the surface, there is no use of force to resist the uninvited presence of the researcher, especially when we consider the coercion that inheres in force. Still, a non-violent harnessing and application of supernatural force penetrates

[8] In the case of colonisation, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí has argued that women were subject to double colonisation that hierarchically located them beneath European men, European women, and African men. For more, see *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses.*

[9] Miano and Beyala's narratives are Cameroonian, a country colonially mapped as Central Africa. However, retaining "West African" in this project's title is an intentional choice that underscores Cameroon's cultural, geographic and spiritual proximity to West Africa.

the instruments and sabotages their forced capturing of the events. Does this imply that the realities of Africa's invisible world refuse to be accessed or revealed? Yes and no. From our story, it remains evident that the *Saameel* have access to the invisible and that they allow the researcher to witness their performance. What they resist and what concerns this project is the possible, continuous misrepresentation of the sacred performance perpetuated through the gaze of the Western mechanical eye. There is a lesson to be learned from the researcher's attempted foray. First, what empowers in one world (letter from the President, American citizenship, proximity to whiteness, access to resources and funding) probably disempowers in another world (foreign, uninitiated). Secondly, Africa's spiritual world is no respecter of social identities; it reveals itself when it chooses and to whom it deems fit. Consequently, this project's reliance on the imagination of creatives stays faithful to the field of literary studies but also respects the spiritual world's boundaries.

Mapping Spirit-Body Relations through Embodiment and Enspiritment

Senegalese photographer Ibrahima Thiam takes a series of photographs with imagined depictions of spirits of different islands and regions in Senegal. Thiam, who was born in the historical, former colonial Island of Saint Louis, a city haunted by the legacy of slavery and colonisation, assembles materials—fabrics, masks, leather, kola nuts, etc. —to create an imagined portrait of different spirits of Senegal. The belief in territorial spirits (usually of water) in Senegal can be traced back to the eighteenth century. Historian Jessica Johnson notes in her book *Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World* that "at precisely the same moment the Atlantic trade began to speed forward, a woman-identified, water-based deity *awoke*. Named Maam Kumba Bang at

Saint-Louis and Maam Kumba Castel at Gorée, these rab (or spirits) protected the coastal towns." (Johnson 27; emphasis mine) According to Johnson,

> Maam Kumba Bang and Maam Kumba Castel joined a coterie of spirits that came into existence at the crossroads of African and European interaction, in a moment when the protection of gris-gris, crosses, and salaams stopped being enough. It was no coincidence that these spirits of the Atlantic African zone were said to hold sway over the river and the ocean, the primary routes by which disruption and opportunity increasingly arrived at Saint-Louis and Gorée. (Johnson 28)

Johnson's historical observation of the awakening of this *rab* supports this project's claim that the spiritual world intervenes in oppressive spaces. I also emphasise Johnson's critical observation that this deity awoke. This designation, clearly articulated in a historical book, implies that the spirits did not begin to exist in the eighteenth century. It also reinforces this project's argument that dormant spiritualities are invoked in oppressive spaces. The horrors of slavery serve as the catalyst that triggers the spiritual awakening of Maam Kumba Bang and Maam Kumba Castel in these Islands. These Islands' haunting histories of slavery and colonisation inspire Ibrahima Thiam, born in Saint Louis but currently residing in Dakar where Gorée Island is located, to concretise this belief in spirits through photography.

In a 2024 photograph with the eponymous title, "Maam Coumba Castel,"[10] a figure dressed in red and black wears a head mask shaped like a bucket. The darkness that frames the photo, along with the slight blue to the sky, indicates that the photo was taken at dusk, recalling the established belief in Senegal that dusk is the time when spirits emerge.[11]

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[10] Thiam's spelling differs from Johnson's, but both are phonetically accurate.

[11] In the many conversations I had with the Senegalese about the implication of dusk, a time known as *Timis*, it came up that children are often cautioned to desist from playing or staying out at dusk. Interview with Amade Faye at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar Senegal. August 20, 2024. Also, see Awa Moctar Gueye's 2023 film, *Timis*.

Figure 1.3. Ibrahima Thiam's "Maam Coumba Castel." Photo taken by author in 2024, exhibited the same year as part of *La Biennale de Dakar.*

To the right of the figure, we see the large trunk of a tree; one can reasonably guess that it is a baobab tree, considering this tree's sacrality, significance and even official designation as the national symbol of Senegal. The figure's shadow rests on this tree; the limited light that hinders the rest of the image's visibility ironically renders this shadow visible. In another photo with the title "Maam Coumba Bang," taken in 2017, a masked figure with braided hair emerges from the Ocean; whitened hands hover over the sacrifice of kola nuts placed at its shore. The dark-skinned figure's hands are covered with traditional white chalk that heightens the sacrality of this creation. Since Maam Coumba Bang is the deity of Saint Louis, where Thiam was born, it is possible that the kola nuts at the Ocean's shores are a quotidian experience in his home city. Thiam's photos exemplify this project's concept of embodiment because they mimic the conceptualisation of human principles

according to different African cosmologies. The permanence that the photos sear into the viewer's minds and the materiality they lend to the immaterial beings resonate with this project's embodiment dynamic.

Figure 1.4. Ibrahima Thiam's "Maam Coumba Bang." Photo taken by the author in 2017, exhibited in 2022 at the Musée Theodore Monod.

African philosophy and religions generally hold that the human principle, or the human person, comprises both the material body and the spiritual principle. The number, description, and functionality of spiritual principles vary according to specific nations. For instance, the Seereer philosophy identifies three spiritual principles: *O Ñis*, *O Laaw,* and

A Ciif; these three merge with the material *Cer ke* to form a four-part person.[12] One of Africa's most widely discussed belief systems, the Akan philosophy, identifies two principles—the Okra and the Sunsum—which combine with the material body to form a person within its conceptual framework.[13] While religious and philosophical beliefs conceptualise these immaterial principles differently, there is a universal understanding that the immaterial and the material fuse at birth and separate permanently at death. Drawing from these universal African philosophical and religious beliefs, this project frames embodiment as the permanent fusion of material and immaterial. The immaterial animates the material body while the body hosts the immaterial selves, granting them a community and belonging within a society. Embodiment leans into the understanding of the significance of the invisible self and argues that foregrounding the relationships, transcendences, and functionalities between visible and invisible selves enriches and nuances our understanding of the human principle in African narratives. Since bodies host immaterial principles, engaging with bodies alone yields a one-sided understanding of African characters. In most contemporary narratives, spiritual principles are translated into spirits/esprits, soul/âme; their relationship with the body and functioning within society may also vary. Some spiritual principles are gendered and are hosted within either an oppositely gendered body or a similarly gendered body. Ergo, foregrounding spirituality

[12] Henry Gravrand translates these principles as cer ke: the body, O ñis: the essential breath, O Laaw: the soul, principle of a person's life while A Ciif is the person, the "deep self" in *La Civilisation Sereer*, *Pangool: Le génie Religieux Sereer* (220).

[13] Chike Jeffers's podcast on African philosophy of the person entitled "Behind the Mask: African Philosophy of the Person." Listen to the podcast for more examples and details of African personhood: https://historyofphilosophy.net/african-person. For more on Akan Philosophy, see Helaine K. Minkus's "Casual Theory in Akwapin Akan Philosophy" in *African Philosophy: An Introduction* Page 94-95.

enables a more comprehensive engagement with the identity, gender and even sexuality of characters.

Ibrahima Thiam's photography mimics embodiment by creating and capturing physical beings that carry, represent, and signify more than what we see. In the embodiment dynamic, the fusion of the material body with the immaterial spirit remains permanent for as long as the person lives. These visible, material images reflect the permanence of embodiment, as the image itself is unchanging and eternal. The photograph projects enduring imagery, inviting engagement with its material components while also provoking exploration of its spiritual undertones for a holistic interpretation. There is, of course, valid anxiety surrounding the camera's representation of invisible, indigenous realities. In an interview with Ibrahima, I questioned the risk of immanence associated with creating and capturing images of transcendent beings. Ibrahima responded by saying:

> Il faut une image pour la photographie. Avec un masque, on crée quelque chose masquée. On le voit mais on ne devait pas le voir."[14]
>
> "You need an image for photography. We create something masked with a mask. You see it, but you shouldn't have seen it."

When we consider that the Supreme Being in African conceptualisations of the spiritual world is the creator of the human being, it becomes evident that the photographer's work reflects the Supreme Being's creation method. The bodies in Thiam's photos embody invisible spirits just as the material body embodies the fullness of the human principle. By connecting his photography to the creation technique of the African Supreme Being, Thiam's images affirm that this camera is not wielded by an invasive Western hand.

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[14] Interview with Ibrahima Thiam at the West African Research Center (WARC), Dakar. August 14, 2024.

Spirits, like the ones Ibrahima's photos represent, can pour themselves into a body and infuse new beings and characteristics into the body. Jessica Johnson writes that these *rab* (Maam Kumba Bang and Maam Kumba Castel) could pour into their adherents otherworldly womanhood so potent that men could become women. While Johnson frames this otherworldly inpouring within the spirit as a possession dynamic, in this project, I theorise and develop a different spirit-body relationship that I term enspiritment. Enspiritment occurs when an external spirit temporarily takes over an embodied being and, through this fusion, achieves suprarational feats that the person may not recall. John Mbiti notes that this spiritual takeover, known stereotypically and pejoratively as spirit possession, suspends the identity of its host; the hosting body loses consciousness and functionality in the physical world when under the influence of the external spirit. Because spirit possession exists in cultures outside Africa,[15] and because my project advocates for an external spiritual indwelling that retains the host's agency, I propose enspiritment as an alternative third space for looking into spirit-body dynamics. Enspiritment differs from the permanent embodiment dynamic because of its temporality: the external spirit leaves the body once its aim has been achieved. It also differs from possession because rather than reduce the body to its victim; the enspirited body is empowered to subvert oppressive power structures. Importantly, this project argues that the enspirited body exercises agency before or after the spiritual takeover that serves as an invitation to the external spirits and therefore, justifies and legitimates the spiritual indwelling.

In "Government by Seduction: History and the Tropes of 'Mounting' in Oyo-Yoruba Religion," J. Lorand Matory notes what he describes as "the foremost term for

[15] See Boddy Janice's "Spirit possession revisited: beyond instrumentality" and Mary Keller's *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession.*

spirit possession." The term "mount" (gùn), he astutely observes, analogously elicits the relationships between husband and wife, god (Shango) and possession priests, and rider and horse. This project develops the concept of enspiritment through this indigenous African spirit-body relation that translates into "mount" in English. Critically shying away from possession, I theorise enspiritment from this foremost indigenous expression. Just as the Shango priests present their bodies for Shango, I argue that bodies in the postcolonial avail themselves for interventionist, spiritual takeover when conditions of life become unbearable. It is important to note that enspiritment transforms the identity and positionality of the body vis-à-vis power. Matory notes that the hierarchy of "mounting" positions the state of "mountedness" as feminine in apposition to the structurally male and alien power that "mounts" the priests. This implies that when a (female) spirit enspirits a male body, the male body becomes structurally female, an idea that agrees with Johnson's observation. The male-female hierarchy, Matory writes, is condensed in the symbolic wifely relationship possession priests have with their god: "In being called "brides" (ìyàwó) of god, the Shango possession priests share the symbolic nature of royal wives as well." (Matory 65) The temporality of this shifting identity complicates rigid ontological constructions, for the human principle's identity shifts during and after enspiritment. When we consider the agency that enspiritment proposes with the identity, gender and sexuality of the enspirited body, the agentic background and the temporal foreground formulate a partnership—enspiritment—that introduces new power structures in oppressive spaces.

I did not create the term enspiritment in isolation. In her 2015 article, "Enspirited Bodies and Embodied Spirits in Toni Morrison's Paradise," Deborah Mix uses the term enspirited to designate the Marian to construct a dichotomy that locates women in

opposition to the destructive, seductive Eve. The enspirited Mary denies self and worldly pleasures, submits to patriarchal authority and endures the pain inflicted on her female body because she exalts her spirit above her sinful body. The term, enspirited, is captivating because it designates persons that transcend the realms and expressions of materiality. However, for this project, I redefine an enspirited body as a being wherein an external, sometimes unknown spirit and a hosting body fuse to achieve an empowering harmony that does not submit to the patriarchy but rather challenges the patriarchy and the postcolony's inhibitions. I then theorise and develop enspiritment to designate the agentic takeover of bodies by external spirits. Enspirited characters in the narrative this project analyses transform from subservient subaltern subjects to resilient, resisting individuals that take the postcolony by storm.

The worldsense paradigm is a critical methodology enabling this project to engage with spirits within embodiment and an enspiritment dynamic. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí in "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects" suggests that the reason the body has so much presence in the West is that the Western world is "primarily perceived by sight" (Oyěwùmí, 2005; 4). She contrasts the Western perception, the "worldview," with the African perception, the "world-sense," and argues that "other cultures may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses" to conceptualise their worlds. Oyěwùmí's arguments aid my understanding and interpretation of characters whose identity transcends the body we see and incorporates the spirit we sense. This project privileges senses other than sight, such as sonic and affect, and advances an academic literary space where invisible realities are validated based on evidence drawn from the world-sense paradigm.

The Chapters:

Utilising close reading, interdisciplinary research, oral interviews, and direct interaction with relevant sites, some of which are referenced in the primary texts, I structure each chapter of the dissertation thematically around embodiment and enspiritment. In addition, this project explores space and time in the texts and films being discussed through these two concepts, thereby fostering an understanding of space that encompasses the spiritual through mysticism and the physical world's geopolitically borderised spaces. It also considers time that spans the spiritual continuum: what John Mbiti designates as the Sasa—when a person lives, dies and is remembered by the living and the Zamani—when a dead person is no longer remembered by the living and joins an ancestral collective. Time is also physical in this project as the films and texts portray characters that navigate the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. Each chapter engages the works of African creatives along with various theoretical and analytical perspectives spanning History, Anthropology, African and Black Studies, Religion and Philosophy, Postcolonial Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Possession Studies, etc. All three chapters explore the spiritual interventionist methodology and agenda in the physical world. However, the first two chapters examine these interventionist practices primarily within the embodiment dynamic, while the final chapter explores the spiritual world's revival campaign by theorising enspiritment. Each chapter is linked to the preceding one and further engages questions raised in the previous conversation. For example, Chapter One, whose embodiment narrative largely focuses on male characters, ends by highlighting the trauma of a female character named Mossane and, therefore, begs the question of unpacking the spirituality of the women left behind by forced migration. The

subsequent chapter highlights the notion of motherhood and the women left behind and addresses, more critically, the question of gender that Chapter One raises. The final chapter continues the conversation on gender studies by zooming into persons whose enspiritment complicates their identity, gender and sexuality.

The first chapter deconstructs the human principle, sketching how the mystic potential, through the phenomenon of bilocation, harnesses material and immaterial components to enact a universal harmony. It highlights how disembodiment—temporal separation of the material and immaterial that make up the human principle—might inform our understanding of the functioning of bodies in the physical world and spirits in the spiritual world. In this chapter, I read award-winning novelist Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's novel, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* and infamous feminist creative, Calixthe Beyala's narrative, *Les arbres en parlent encore* together. Beyala's colonial-set narrative situates the beginning and history of an African nation spiritually, while Sarr's transgenerational-set text traces entanglements and anxieties Africa's spiritual world encounters across time and space. This chapter argues that the realities of the invisible, spiritual world subvert multiple layers of power play across time (colonial, postcolonial era)—and space (intimate, literary, and geographic locations) to restore harmony where chaos previously reigned. I show how Sarr's novel reenacts triangular spirito-sexual relationships by redeeming failed family relations. Sarr's narrative, like Beyala's, positions spirits hierarchically above bodies. This hierarchisation affords spirits the legitimacy to reach private and public spaces, penetrating the borderised ideological boundaries of the West.

The second chapter examines how the immaterial component of the human principle within the embodiment dynamic offers suppressed bodies a means of escape from slavery and patriarchy in Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre*. A novel whose precolonial setting employs language that affirms explicit engagements with spirits, Miano sets up the spiritual world as an escape route from the horrors and dehumanisation of slavery. While mostly engaging with the embodiment dynamic, crucial events in this story foresee enspiritment, connecting this chapter to the final chapter. In this second chapter, I imagine spirits and bodies as co-agents in the dynamics of enspiritment and embodiment. It argues primarily against depicting spirits as hostile agents because this thinking flattens and limits bodies to the position of victims. Moreover, it causes reflections on spirit-body relations to focus on the subalternation of bodies by the spirits. Instead, this chapter suggests that an extant subalternation of bodies (slavery, conscripted womanhood) prompts the re/emergence of spirits who aid the bodies in achieving their subversive agenda. This chapter attends to the question of what a spirit is in African narratives, citing examples across the south of the Sahara. In this chapter, I begin with a film analysis of Joseph Gaï Ramaka's film *Karmen Geï,* which foreshadows the next chapter's interrogation of films. *Karmen Geï* iconically begins with women who, like the women in Miano's narrative, are secluded and isolated as a punitive measure. Spiritual intervention, therefore, subverts carceral and patriarchal structures, liberating women from physical and ideological conscriptions.

The concluding chapter addresses the question, "What is a woman?" by exploring the camera's relationship with Africa and female bodies. This chapter responds to the pathological demand to define and prescribe womanhood by shifting focus away from

pathologised bodies and toward invisible spirits. It frames the argument on gender by highlighting and theorising enspiritment. Critically departing from the stereotypical association of possession, this chapter contends that Mati Diop's film *Atlantique* returns the spirits of the living-dead to enspirit subaltern bodies and, through this partnership, introduces a new sexuo-political and economic order in postcolonial Senegal. However, to enact a fair assessment of all ontological possibilities, I interrogate the im/possibilities that arise when we include a male body's enspiritment into conversations about gender and identities. Using J. Lorand Matory's theory on "Mounting," in "Government by Seduction" as a point of reference, I imagine how a male body's enspiritment counterintuitively offers a feminist potential.

This project prioritises African epistemology and ontology and deliberately disregards dominant Western discourse within academia. For instance, parts of this project have been presented at conferences in gender studies panels, where a recurring term among specialists, including Africanists, is the term queer. While my project interrogates characters whose gender performance and expressions complicate corporeal expectations, categorising these nonconforming African characters with the same terminology used by Westerners is inherently colonial. I assert that non-conforming gender identities in the West are labelled queer because Western societies made them such. However, African spiritually situated identities draw validation and legitimacy from their own religious and philosophical beliefs. These characters *become* non-conforming due to colonial-era banishments. By tabooing traditional African religious practices, the colonisers banished the accompanying spiritual ontological possibilities. Thus, leveraging the power of neologism, this project initiates a restoration campaign by creating new terminologies for

identity, gender, and sexuality based on ancient, indigenous African concepts. When *Embodiment and Enspiritment* proposes spiritually situated gender identities, it rejects the missionary hand-downs from the West.

CHAPTER ONE:

The Spiritual as Locus for Interventionist Practices: Disembodied Encounters in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2019)

Daily Trust, 27 May 2014, Gwoza Nigeria

Some women in Gwoza town of Borno State are said to have arrested seven Boko Haram fighters who wreaked havoc in the town on Sunday. Shortly after their arrest [,] angry youth and vigilantes in the town rallied and lynched [the terrorists] . . . . Some residents who spoke to Daily Trust attributed the daring arrest by the women [to] mystical powers. Sources in Gwoza said many insurgents had earlier in the day intercepted a vehicle loaded with bread, slaughtered four of the occupants [,] and drove the vehicle towards Sambisa Forest. . . . A witness from Gwoza, who did not want his name mentioned, said, "After seizing the vehicle conveying the bread and other valuables in Gwoza . . . some of the insurgents moved towards the Sambisa (Forest) and met some women on the way [:] "The insurgents wanted to attack the women, but their guns did not work. They tried hitting them with the boot [sic] of their guns but mysteriously, all the hands of the insurgents hung until youth and vigilantes in the area mobilized and killed them." . . . Mohammed Gava, the chairman of local vigilantes in Borno State [,] confirmed the incident [:] "When the gunmen were moving out of Gwoza, most people fled to safety, but those women refused to flee. I think the insurgents were angry and wanted to attack them but met their waterloo."

*(*Nwando Achebe's *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa)*

Au commencement, était le monde,

Il n'y avait pas de blanc, il n'y avait pas de noir,

Juste quatre esprits aux quatre coins du monde

(Calixthe Beyala*, Les arbres en parlent encore,* 18)

In the beginning, was the world,

There was no white, there was no black,

Just four spirits in the four corners of the world[16]

[16] Except when otherwise indicated, all translations in this chapter are mine.

When Nwando Achebe writes the *Daily Trust* story about the Gwoza women of Borno State, Nigeria, who encountered and triumphed over oppressive, technologically armed Boko Haram fighters, she draws attention to ancient power dynamics resurfacing amidst the failed, terrorising space of a postcolonial nation-state. The women's triumph in this encounter is particularly intriguing when we empirically engage the two sides. On one side are men, armed, renowned terrorists whose activities draw international attention to the different African nations they terrorise. On the other side are women. The report says nothing about who they are, where they come from, or what they do—just women, "unarmed"[17]. Nonetheless, we are informed that their "mystical powers" enabled them to overpower armed male terrorists. For Achebe, the encounter illustrates "the belief in the ability of human beings to tap into this unseen world of spirits and channel their extraordinary powers to influence activity in the visible human world." (Achebe, 19) Achebe, whose book launches a historical foray into the female (spiritual) principle across Africa, centres on historical figures like Nefertiti of Egypt and Amina of Hausaland. Highlighting the 2014 story of Gwoza women of Northern Nigeria extends Achebe's archive of time and place beyond past historical examples and provides a contemporary engagement with Africa's spiritual realities.

This chapter examines a contemporary narrative's engagement with Africa's spiritual world. It focuses on Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* and questions how the realities of Africa's spiritual world sabotage power dynamics in various landscapes of the physical world. Achebe's work implicitly highlights

[17] Just as Naminata Diabate argues in her book *Naked Agency* that "unarmed" naked women protesters are armed by their nakedness; I opine that these women are armed by their spirits.

control over life and death. By deploying the power of the gun, the terrorists attempt to dictate the women's lifespans; however, the women resist this tactic by harnessing their mystical potential, reclaiming control over their lives and indirectly disrupting the terrorists' existence in the physical world. This strategic, implicit resistance to overt power structures in a contemporary postcolonial state resonates with the power play Mbougar Sarr stages in his narrative. Sarr's novel tells stories that span the colonial era of the Second World War to the postcolonial era of social media. Nevertheless, the spiritual world and its resources linger across these times and spaces, granting those with access transcendent capacities.

In this chapter, I question how the realities of the spiritual world disrupt the power dynamics of the physical world. To what extent does the functioning of the spiritual world as a site for intervention challenge postcolonial hegemonic methodologies? Although Sarr's novel overtly dramatises European dominance through literature, I explore how it more subtly suggests that sense-based knowledge systems offer an alternative pathway to a just literary space where African epistemes can thrive. This chapter also examines the healing methodologies possible through African traditions. Paying close attention to the ontology of individuals who embrace mysticism, I investigate how transcending the physical world might contribute to unpacking the wholeness of the human principle according to African beliefs. In the case of the Gwoza women, for instance, their triumph over armed male terrorists conveys ways of being that complicate the postcolony's expectations of womanhood, pointing readers to the workings and realities of the human principle's multiple selves within this African nation.

The Gwoza women's story presents us with subtle and salient contrasts. First, it rewrites dominant narratives on encounters between Boko Haram terrorists and women; then, the narrative exemplifies Africa's spiritual intervention practices. News coverage on confrontations between the Islamist extremists and women/girls of Northern Nigeria predominantly reports the latter as the victims of the former.[18] Indeed, few narratives exist where women emerge as the conquerors of such encounters.[19] This *Daily Trust* real-life story is one of the few stories that revise women's experiences under the Islamist terrorists, from kidnapped victims of forced marriages and sexual slavery to empowered conquerors. Another critical contrast occurs in the power play between the men and the women. The women neutralised the efficacy of the terrorists' guns and kept their hands hanging immobile until a vigilante group arrived. This observation is particularly noteworthy in this chapter and for the rest of this project because it typifies the power play of Africa's spiritual world. Because the terrorists had tried to harm the women with their physical weapons, they provoked a spiritual intervention. The spiritually influenced women would react to this provocation by taking life away from the specific bodies threatening theirs, hence the immobile hands. Traditional religions, we will see, recognise an immobile body(part) as indicative of the absence of an enabling force behind the hands and bodies'

[18] On April 14-15 night, about 276 girls were kidnapped from a boarding school in Chibok, Borno. Their kidnap sparked a global #BringBackOurGirls movement, drawing international attention. While Boko Haram terrorist activities have disrupted and impacted the lives of civilians in the region, women are reported to be their most vulnerable victims.

[19] In Marvel's 2018 *Black Panther* movie, the scene that introduces Nakia (played by the formidable Lupita Nyong'o) is set in Sambisa Forest of northern Nigeria. Nakia disguises herself as a weak kidnap victim of Boko Haram, but her cover is blown when the Wakanda delegates assist in dismantling and sabotaging terrorist activities. In this scene where Nakia frees the captives, both women and men, she cements into viewers the image of a conquering woman who destabilises terrorist activities with her skills and "nonnormative" powers.

full functioning. Therefore, the deployed mystical potential in Achebe's report offers a confirmed, contemporary suspension of the immaterial from the material, a cause-and-effect relationship that justifies spiritual interventions in an unjust, physical world. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to remark that the spiritual resource deployed by the women did not harm their physical bodies since they stayed immobile until vigilante groups arrived. This crucial interventionist practice demonstrates the controlled reach of the spiritual world into the affairs of the physical. This interventionist practice acknowledges the material's authority in the physical. It dignifies agents of the physical world by limiting the control of the spiritual, granting agency to the bodies involved in each encounter.

The encounter between the Gwoza women and the Boko Haram terrorists demonstrates further contrasts with regular newspaper reports in its unexplained vagueness. Far from the detailed explanation that characterises published media, this report chooses a mysterious path that dangerously risks the dismissal of spiritual potencies. There are no details about *how* the women sabotaged the men. Did they speak? If they did, what did they say? Was there a performance? How were they dressed, and what instruments might have been used to create such a crucial subversion? The narrative's refusal to clarify these details, information a non-knowing Western reader demands, arrogantly leaves the reader with more questions than answers. While further information might be requested to convince the non-knowing reader of the narrative's possibility, the people in the narrative undoubtedly confirm the incident as accurate without offering any clarification. By maintaining its veracity while staying vague, the report retains its opacity and demands validity within its epistemological paradigms.

Calixthe Beyala's novel, *Les arbres en parlent encore* (2013), narrates a creation story that strengthens the Gwoza report's validity within its epistemological paradigms. The narrative sets up the presence of spirits against the absence of (racialised) bodies. According to Beyala, the world begins with four spirits in the world's four corners. In the cosmological tradition from the excerpt above, spirits were before bodies became. This critical positioning of spirits vis-à-vis bodies demonstrates the preeminence of the spiritual world in African traditions. The hierarchical positioning places the spiritual, immaterial world above the material, physical world and any power structures constructed within the physical world. For instance, Beyala's narrative leans into this preeminence of the spiritual world to vitiate racialised power structures. The text crucially marks the presence of bodies with racial terms—black and white. But the marking of bodily presence is a reminder of their historical absence: "il n'y avait pas…", "there were not…" In this way, racialised bodies become historical constructs, even unexpected happenstance, whose presence lacks a coeval status with spirits. This creation narrative curates the history of the Eton people of modern-day Cameroon by retracing and rewriting their *histoire*[20] from dominant colonial narratives to a preexisting spiritual foundation, recalling the reader's attention to prehistory preceding colonial beginnings. Considering the historical, colonial plot of Beyala's narrative—German and French rules— and the racial and sexist hierarchy instituted during the era,[21] Beyala's racial intervention first places black and white bodies

[20] Choosing to employ the French word "histoire" maintains the French language's ambiguity. It is a poetic reminder that every history is a story constructed and retold consistently, persistently, and powerfully.

[21] In the context of the United States, Boris Bertolt describes this oppression as triple oppression, that is, oppression from the white man, the white woman, and the black man. His observation of the condition of African American women in the United States joins the discourse on African women in the colonies. Making a similar intervention, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues that the system of "double colonization" in Africa combines race and gender as oppressive factors and expands oppressive colonial categories from two to four:

equally: “Il n’y avait pas de blanc, il n’y avait pas de noir,” “there was no white, there was no black.” Then, it disrupts sex-based notions of superiority with spiritual superiority by alluding to the completeness of a world without race and gender. Finally, it locates corporeal existence as secondary to spiritual ontologies. Beyala thus militarises the spiritual, employing the invisible world’s preeminent convictions in Africa as a framework to launch a counternarrative against the physical world’s racist and sexist constructions.

Further highlighting African precolonial traditions, Beyala presents this creation *histoire* by employing oral traditional literature to underscore the novel’s interventionist agenda within the literary space. Narrated by a mbomo-mvet,[22] the creation story in Beyala’s 2013 novel brings precolonial orality into a contemporary setting. Additionally, this unique narration translates its style and elements from oral to written contemporary narrative. By transcribing oral traditional literature into a written text, Beyala aligns her work with precolonial storytelling traditions, separating the narrative from the legacy of colonisation. Thus, the text challenges the ideology linking the emergence of African literature to Western education through colonisation. Through this rendition, *Les arbres en parlent encore* emphasises and repositions the *histoire* of African literature to her pre-colonial ancestral spirits. The transfer of indigenous African literary themes and styles into the postcolonial context (by a novel set in the colonial era) serves as one of Beyala’s numerous acts of resistance against colonial erasures. In this way, like Achebe, Beyala’s

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European men, European women, native (this category refers exclusively to the African man) and Other. According to Oyěwùmí, “native women occupied the residual and unspecified category of the Other.” (122).

[22] The Mbomo-mvet or Mbomo-nvet is a variation of West African griots in central Africa. Like the griots, their musical performances are accompanied by a musical instrument called the mvet or nvet. The mvet is a stringed musical instrument that consists of a stick of palm raffia or bamboo with three calabash resonators.

literary work resonates with the connection between the spiritual and physical worlds. While Achebe's historical narration positions the spiritual as a locus of power reversal for subalterns, Beyala's literary rendition affirms the spiritual's superiority over the physical.

Following both writers' suggestive insights, this chapter explores how the preeminence of the spiritual world in African conviction might unveil deeper pathways into unpacking the interventionist possibilities in literary spaces. Foregrounding Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's 2021 novel, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, I examine the methodologies deployed to realign broken relationships within the physical world's borderised geographic and literary spaces.[23] Sarr's multilayered novel weaves a plethora of inhumane structures across the labyrinth of the physical world's temporal and spatial establishments yet consistently positions the spiritual as a stable locus for different levels of interventions—justice (where unjust practices prevail) and reconciliation (where failed relationships falter). The novel relies on the spiritual world's reach into the private and public sphere to reimagine a just literary world. Like Beyala, Sarr mobilises the immaterial's temporal transcendent capacities to retell African stories within African epistemological conventions. This chapter argues that the realities of the invisible, spiritual world subvert multiple layers of power play across time (colonial, postcolonial era)—and space (intimate, literary, and geographic locations) to restore harmony where chaos previously dominated in Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*. In this chapter, I show how Sarr's novel reenacts triangular spirito-sexual relationships by redeeming failed twinships. Sarr's narrative, like Beyala's, positions

[23] I discuss Achille Mbembe's theories on borderization in detail in the next section of this chapter.

spirits hierarchically above bodies. However, the spirits in Sarr's novel dwell within and animate bodies, a dynamic this project identifies as embodiment: the permanent fusion of spirits and bodies at birth and separation at death. Nonetheless, where required, Sarr's novel crucially portrays living characters that disembody (spirits split from bodies), an act that exposes but still links the action of spirits in the spiritual world with the inaction of bodies in the physical world by the power of the word.

In this chapter, I frame Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* within Achille Mbembe's theory of borderisation and Édouard Glissant's insights on borders and contamination. I also examine the tensions and conflicts between precolonial ways of knowing and postcolonial epistemes, which Sarr brilliantly illustrates through intimate family disagreements across space (home and abroad) and time (generational—father and daughter). Finally, I explore the impact of the spiritual world's interventionist agenda within a physical, literary realm where antisemitism, racism, and colonialism, among other forms of inhumane ideological practices, pervade, leading to false accusations and even murder. In Sarr's novel, Africa's spiritual world is the locus for critical, intimate, and judicial interventions for the subaltern African and Jewish characters forced out of the physical and literary worlds.

Critical Interventions: Contamination, "Borderisation" and *La plus secrète memoire des hommes*

Mohammed Mbougar Sarr published his award-winning novel in August 2021, winning the Goncourt Prize in November of the same year. Mbougar Sarr dedicates *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* to the Malian author of *Devoir de violence* (1968), Yambo Ouologuem, whose engrossing tragic story disrupted negritude writings that

created an image of a utopian Africa. Ouologuem's novel was well-received at first until allegations of plagiarism forced him out of the Western literary milieu, leading to a life of seclusion in Mali.[24] The dedication of *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* to Ouologuem is the first hint that directs readers to the novel's portrayal of the literary world as a microcosm of the physical world. Sarr's novel mirrors the ideological border politics of the physical world within the literary space, demonstrating how borderization, a concept developed by Achille Mbembe in his book *Necropolitics*, intentionally keeps African writers out of Western literary spaces. The narrative's complex development immerses the reader in a labyrinth of inhumanity, depicting characters navigating constructed boundaries and setting the stage for an unexpected spiritual intervention. Sarr's multilayered story follows a young Senegalese writer, Diégane Latyr Faye, searching for an elusive author, T.C. Elimane, who wrote the 1938 novel *Le labyrinthe de l'inhumain.* T.C. Elimane, like the real-life Ouologuem, disappears and remains nearly untraceable and inaccessible. Diégane Faye's quest takes him to France, where he encounters Siga D, T.C. Elimane's sister and a fictional adaptation of the Senegalese writer Ken Bugul.

The narrative's adaptation of real African authors indicates Sarr's intention to highlight the lived experiences of African writers in Europe, specifically France. Significantly, it considerably blurs the line between fact and fantasy, facilitating Sarr's re/creation of a literary world as a microcosm of the physical. In this sense, occurrences in

[24] In a recent English translation of Ouologuem's *Bound to Violence*, Chérif Keïta details his brief meeting with Ouologuem in an introduction entitled "Tracking the Trickster in Mali: My Encounter with Yambo Ouologuem." His very brief encounter with the secluded author portrays the continued effects of the writer's trauma. Ouologuem's distrust of everyone and everything Western explains his refusal to see anyone Western and even his limited meeting with an African Scholar with academic ties to the West. Although very short, Keïta's meeting with Ouologuem describes the writer's state of mind and draws attention to the lingering impact of bullying and racism on the victim.

literary spaces model the physical world's larger ideologies and invite an interventionist agenda from Africa's spiritual resources. In the narrative, Diégane Faye, functioning as Mbougar Sarr's double, traces Elimane across physical borders and continents—Africa, Europe, and South America. As the elusive writer unavails himself at will, so does his novel disappear from the Western literary world, moving only from one African hand to another across space and time. But the absence of the Senegalese writer, Elimane, like his real-life Malian counterpart, was scarcely by choice. After Elimane's book initially enjoyed temporary success upon publication,[25] a plagiarism accusation from the gatekeepers of the European literary space ensured the writer's ostracisation, pushing him beyond the borders of this protected space.

The forced withdrawal reifies Achille Mbembe's theory of borderisation developed in the fourth chapter of his book, *Necropolitics.* Within the context of migrants and refugees, borderisation designates the process by which world powers permanently transform specific spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations. Specifically, Mbembe argues that the politics of borderisation transforms borders into spaces erected to protect Europe from non-Europeans. When we examine T.C Elimane's experience against this idea of an ideological blockade, it becomes clear that the temporary success of the writer and his work threatened to break down the walls of a borderised European milieu; such dismantling, if successful, would allow Africa to invade Europe, a paramount hope that Edouard Glissant envisaged throughout his numerous array of works.

[25] Similarly, the Malian author Yambo Ouologuem's novel *Bound to Violence* enjoyed a short-lived positive reception and even won the Prix Renaudot, France's second-most prestigious literary award, in 1968. However, Sarr's parody presents a slight difference: T.C Elimane, a Senegalese writer, published his book in 1938, a temporal manipulation that allows Sarr to frame the storyline across two world wars, touching the inhumane themes of colonisation and the Shoah.

Glissant contributes consistently to the conversations on borders by arguing that borders should remain permeable. Speaking into the camera in the film *One World in Relation*, Glissant furthers his theories on Relation by positing that borders must enable mutual invasion:

> Mais aujourd'hui la notion de frontière a changé de sens. On peut dire aujourd'hui les communautés *s'envahissent mutuellement* et que les notions des frontières sont à la fois beaucoup plus terribles et beaucoup plus fragiles. Moi, je pense que contrairement à ce qu'on pourrait croire, il faut en finir avec l'idée de la frontière qui défend, qui empêche qui etc. Les frontières doivent être perméables. Elles ne doivent pas être des armes contre des processus d'émigration et d'immigration. Mais je pense ceci étant dit que la frontière est nécessaire pour permettre d'apprécier le passage de la saveur d'un pays à une autre saveur d'un autre pays. Moi, je trouve extrêmement plaisant de passer d'une atmosphère à une autre à travers une frontière. Et par conséquent, ce qu'il nous faut aujourd'hui, c'est non pas abolir les frontières mais donner aux frontières un autre sens. Le sens d'un passage, d'une communication, c'est-à-dire, d'une Relation.[26]
>
> --Edouard Glissant, *One World in Relation* (41:52-44:20)

Glissant's advocacy for permeable borders foreshadows a cultural stage of mutual respect and equality. He imagines a border functioning as a passage marker, a stage of appreciation and exchange of cultures. But Glissant's hopeful rhetoric requires that the cultures participating in this mutual exchange acknowledge, appreciate, and even consider themselves coeval. Because the fictional author of *Labyrinthe de l'inhumain,* T.C Elimane, created a narrative that juxtaposed African oral traditions with European canonical writings, it fulfils Glissant's cultural expectations and functions as a permeable border between African oral traditions and European literature. However, spurred by the

[26] But, today, the concept of the border has changed meaning. One could say that communities today are *mutually invading each other* [emphasis mine]. So, the notion of a border is at once increasingly terrible and increasingly fragile. I think that contrary to what others might believe, we need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and prevents, etc. Borders must be permeable; they must not be weapons against migration or immigration processes. But having said this, I think that borders are necessary to appreciate the passage from the flavour of one country to the flavour of another. I find it quite pleasant to pass from one atmosphere to another through crossing a border. Consequently, what we need today is not the abolition of borders, but to provide them with another meaning, that of a passage, a communication, a Relation.

imperialist ideology that sponsors borderisation and prevents Relation, two French professors of literature falsely accuse T.C. Elimane and the publishing house, Gemini, of plagiarism, causing Elimane's silence. The book disappears from the world of literature, and the writer vanishes from the physical world, leaving behind a vague trace that launches Diégane Faye into an uncanny maze. *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* begins with Diégane Faye's intriguing inquiry into Elimane; his search forges the novel's storyline, following his encounters, correspondences, and relations. Diégane Faye's quest for the borderised, absent writer concludes disappointingly, with Faye barely catching Elimane's tail in Senegal; while he finds evidence of the man's life, the profound writer he sought through the narrative disintegrates into a rambling, incoherent doodler.

Sarr's award-winning narrative has deservedly been the subject of much scholarship, with many scholars exploring French literary politics with renewed interest.[27] Oana Panaïté's article, "Sortir du labyrinthe de l'histoire littéraire (blanche)" examines the ambiguous identity of the "francophone" writer who is both a genius and a plagiarist. Their work is measured by their identity, origin, religion and skin and forced into the category of minority "par rapport aux valeurs et aux attitudes dominantes" (340) – "compared to dominant values and attitudes," a concept Panaïté describes as an ideological segregationism. Panaïté's observation underlies this chapter's argument on Europe's borderisation politics, showing how the African writer remains a "nègre d'exception" (Sarr 235) displayed as an entertaining phenomenon that reinforces an ideological battleground.

[27] The 2025 publication of the E-book, *Le Labyrinthe littéraire de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr* edited by Sarah Burnautzki, Abdoulaye Imorou, and Cornelia Ruhe features a selection of critical engagements with Sarr's narratives. The critics cited in this section have detailed analyses in the book's chapters. For further information, see the E-book.

Unpacking the author's narrative style, Burnautzki et al.'s article, "Écrire, ne pas écrire: Arthur Rimbaud, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr et la poétique de la Modernité" explores the multilayered, labyrinthine dimensions of the narrative, drawing attention to the reader's labyrinthine experience. The aesthetic and thematic composition of the text constitutes, according to them, a poetic labyrinth. Finally, exploring the novel's intertextual labyrinth, they highlight the texts Sarr's work recalls, responds to, and Relates.[28] Burnautzki et al.'s work again sustains Edouard Glissant's hopes for cultures that migrate and emigrate, allowing the passage of flavours.

On her part, Alicia Montoya's contribution[29] traces the false physical twinship between Assane and Ousseynou Koumakh, highlighting how the narrative replaces these failed physical relationships with spiritual twinships between Charles and Elimane, bolstered by the intentional naming of their publishing house—Gemini. Kathleen Gyssels agrees with Montoya's observation regarding the publishing house's name and emphasises the geopolitical triangle formed by the antisemitic and anti-black discrimination against Black and Jewish minorities fuelled by Europe's racism and fascism. Foregrounding Gombrowicz and Schwarz-Bart, her work links Charles and Elimane to other famous literary couples, illustrating how Sarr's geographic labyrinth extends to South America to form transatlantic literary triangles. Joining her colleagues' profound contributions to Sarr's work, Joanne Brueton, whose article is subtitled "le palimpseste de Mohamed

[28] I employ Édouard Glissant's definition of Relation with a capital R to mark the passage of cultures embedded in Sarr's novel's intertextuality.

[29] Her article is entitled " «Un écrivain africain aux prises avec la Shoah » Mémoires afro-juives dans La plus secrète Mémoire des hommes" while Kathleen Gyssels titles her article "'Goncourables' à tout prix : Mohamed Mbougar Sarr et la connexion polonaise. De quelques triangles transatlantiques."

Mbougar Sarr,"[30] maintains that through the palimpsest mechanism, "Sarr se lance à la poursuite d'une décolonisation du savoir littéraire et voit naître une relation poétique qui s'attaque à toute logique de domination."[31] (Brueton 310) Brueton's article, like this chapter, engages Édouard Glissant's hope for contemporary African literature to escape the symbolic violence of classism, order, and mastery that rigid epistemologies impose to suffocate postcolonial authors. (Brueton 310) Brueton correctly notes how Glissant regularly returns to the repressive meaning of the term "to understand," a word whose epistemological domination reduces all others to the model of its transparency. Glissant's interpretation of the term "transparency" crucially challenges Western demands to unpack, comprehend, and reduce other epistemologies to the frameworks of the Western mind. Unapologetically clamouring for the right to opacity for everyone in his book, *Poetics of Relation* (Glissant 194), Glissant associates transparency with Western hegemony:

> I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce. Accepting difference does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy. I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh. —But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction. (Glissant 190)

[30] The article's full title is "Courir' derrière l'immense littérature occidentale? Le palimpsest de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr." In choosing the subtitle, I draw attention to the palimpsest technique that inheres Relation, allowing mutual invasion of cultures via literature.

[31] Sarr sets out to pursue a decolonisation of literary knowledge and sees the birth of a poetic Relation that troubles any logic of domination. Following Glissantian tradition, I deliberately use capital R in my translation since Brueton cites and puts her work in conversation with Glissant.

For Glissant, interpreting diverse cultural aesthetics through Western thought means placing these cultural expressions on a scale established by Westerners for themselves. Transparency forces non-Western creatives to break down their productions into palatable, understandable Western epistemes. Given the untranslatability[32] of specific cultural concepts, such forced, false rendering of non-Western aesthetics to Western standards becomes a reduction. Elimane exemplifies Glissant's philosophy during a heated debate with Charles Ellenstein, his editor and spiritual twin. The latter had insisted on publishing *Le labyrinthe de l'inhumain* with a preface or a forward that explained the writer's motifs. Elimane resists, insisting that "rien n'était pire qu'une œuvre qui s'expliquait, avertissait, donnait des pistes pour qu'on la comprenne ou l'absolve d'être ce qu'elle était" (Sarr 233; "nothing was worse than a work that explained itself, warned, gave leads so that it could be understood or absolved of being what it was"). We notice Sarr's deliberate resurfacing of Relation between African and Western creative writings. Elimane resists the demand to be transparent; clamouring for his right to opacity, he publishes a narrative that allows a mutual invasion between the flavours of the coloniser and the colonised. Through a tactical mise en abyme technique, the Senegalese writer re/presents an author's contamination attempt through a novel that, itself, contaminates.[33] Contamination, counterintuitively and in Glissantian tradition, loses the negative connotation that infers inferiority. Undoing the violence of language, hence clamouring for the right to opacity for everyone, Glissant

[32] For more information, see Emily Apter's "Untranslatability and the Geopolitics of Reading." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 134, no. 1, 1 Jan. 2019, pp. 194 - 200.

[33] Considering that Sarr dedicates his narrative to Yambo Ouologuem and considering the resemblance the real author of *Devoir de violence* bears with T.C Elimane, nationality becomes one of the ways the fictional character differs from Ouologuem. It is possible that Sarr maintains Elimane as Senegalese to enact his mise en abyme technique effectively: write about a Senegalese author's attempt to bring African and Western stories into conversation in a Senegalese-authored novel that pairs African epistemes with Western epistemes.

again rewrites language when he states, “La Relation contamine, ensuave, comme principe, ou comme poudre de fleur” (Glissant 185; “Relation contaminates, sweetens, as a principle, or as flower dust”). By juxtaposing “contaminate” with “sweeten”, followed by the metaphor of a flower that creates beauty imagery, Glissant pushes back against the ideologies that fuel borderisation, “protect” Western culture, and prevent contamination. Sarr persistently re/produces contamination in his mise en abyme narrative, where authors Diégane Faye and Siga D’s metareferential reflections on the false accusations against Elimane invite readers to join the search for the missing writer. Curiously, when we closely examine the allegations from two French professors, we notice that Henri de Bobinal condemns Elimane’s work because, in his opinion, the narrative appropriates an African myth. Paul-Émile Vaillant, on his part, claims that Elimane plagiarises “great literary texts”, meaning European texts. Therefore, the professors’ ire against Elimane and *Le labyrinthe de l’inhumain* stems from the possibility that the black African writer contaminates Western literature by sweetening it with African oral traditions. By drawing from European texts and African traditions, Elimane’s novel creates something new, even better. *Le labyrinthe de l’inhumain* also equates African traditional oraliture with Europe’s established canons, granting both literary traditions coeval status. Ergo, for this audacity, he must be punished.

Elimane's silencing is tragic. The allegations force him beyond the borders of Europe's literary salons. As an outcast, the devastated writer could have published an article to defend his work, but defending his novel means explaining it, rendering it transparent to the Western eye. Heartbroken, he “répétait inlassablement qu’on ne l’avait pas compris et que c’était un crime” (Sarr 234-35; “tirelessly repeated that he had not been

understood and that it was a crime"). Understanding, in this context, does not mean measuring his work on a Western scale; instead, it requires accepting and acknowledging his opacity, reading him as an equal, and allowing him to mutually invade and contaminate classic Western literature. Consequently, Elimane's subsequent disappearance from the physical literary space serves doubly as an act of resistance to maintain his opacity and as retaliation against a world in the throes of Europe's hegemonic ideologies—the French literary world. Thérèse Jacob, his second editor and partner of Charles Ellenstein, says that before his disappearance, Elimane had declared his mission to intervene and rectify this injustice: "Je vais arrêter tout ça. Il le faut" (Sarr 236; "I will stop all this. It is necessary"). While we do not explicitly *see* how Elimane enacts his critical intervention, akin to the Gwoza women's case, a cause-and-effect relationship triggers the African writer's resistance to dominant powers. T.C. Elimane, the writer from Senegal, vanishes from the physical literary world, allowing Elimane Madag, the son of a prominent specialist in African traditions, to enact his interventionist agenda. If African spirituality promises an unborderised space and if the physical and literary worlds remain under European hegemony, the Western-educated writer, who is also initiated in African mystical practice, is left with one choice: to invade Europe and Europeans through African spiritual routes.

Intimate and Voyeuristic Interventions: Non/*Seeing* and Spiritual Triangles as Pathways to Finding Elimane

Celui qui ne voit pas, n'est pas forcément aveugle.[34] (Beyala 47)

[34] He who does not see is not necessarily blind.

Much scholarship on *La plus secrète memoire des hommes* has explored the writer's multilayered narrative styles and his intertextual references that allude to a vast span of works across borders. However, the narrative's esoteric dimensions remain heavily undertheorised. Alicia Montoya's work hints at the workings of the immaterial when she asserts that a failed twinship relationship between Assane and Ousseynou Koumakh is reimagined through a spiritual twinship between Elimane and Charles. Still, much is to be said about Sarr's characters' engagements with Africa's invisible realities. This project engages with the unseen world that hovers throughout Sarr's narrative, paying close attention to the characters with access to mysticism, how they navigate spaces, and the impact of their access on their relationships. I interrogate how access to African metaphysical traditions initiates an interventionist practice that touches private, intimate lives, such as twin relations, and the public, literary spheres, allowing its practitioners to penetrate and dismantle barriers that "protect" and prevent. In the private sphere, spiritual interventions restore a transgenerational rupture choreographed through triangular relationships and storytelling. The novel's plot follows Diégane Faye as he tracks the traces Elimane leaves behind. Elimane's dominating presence in the narrative, while maintaining a salient, silent absence, can be easily read as eerie. However, when we consider his determined decision to address the injustices he faced along with the mysterious deaths of his critics, it becomes clear that a different power dynamic enters the French literary milieu, one whose reach and locus defy the hegemonic agenda of literary imperialism. In other words, spiritual interventions transcend private lives and are deployed into the public sphere to address injustice. Nonetheless, to properly understand the writer, T.C. Elimane's unexplained disappearance from the public literary world, we must first unpack the

ontological trajectory of Elimane Madag, his lineage and the private spaces he occupied as a Senegalese initiate of Seereer[35] traditional religions.

Elimane is the product of a rivalry resulting in a botched love triangle involving his mother, Mossane, and twin brothers, Assane and Ousseynou Koumakh. Within the legitimate conventions of the physical, postcolonial world, Assane Koumakh, the Western-educated half of this toxic twinship and the legitimate husband of Mossane, is the father of Elimane. Yet, when we consider the spiritual convictions and practice of the precolonial Seereer nation of Senegal, Ousseynou Koumakh, the master initiate of this traditional religion, fathers his nephew. Sarr harnesses Seereer beliefs and convictions to effectively enact Elimane's ambiguous paternity, further enabled by the matrilineal structure of the Seereer nation of Senegal. Seereer Historian Sobel Dione writes of the Seereer nation's matrilineal structures:

> La femme est la source de l'autorité, mais ne l'exerce pas. Pour retrouver facilement un parent proche d'une personne de la communauté Sereer, il suffit de donner la dénomination sociale de sa lignée maternelle ou celle de la lignée maternelle de son père. Par exemple, une personne « est jegandum » comme sa mère, et « est fils de Sareen » par son père. Le nom de famille qui vient du père

[35] There are a variety of alternative spellings of the word. I choose this spelling of the word, Seereer, in respect to the distinguished scholar of Seereer traditions, Professor Amade Faye, who I met in Senegal and who insists that this spelling is the most decolonised graphed representation of his people, the Seereer. Birane Sène, a professor of English at the University of Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), who is also of Seereer origin, agrees with this spelling.

> (patronyme) est un indicateur de lien de parenté, mais n'est pas aussi significative et évidemment [sic] que la lignée.[36] (Dione 122)

Dione also writes that Islam and the colonial regime considerably weakened this nation's matrilineal family structures by enacting succession laws that disinherited nieces and nephews, resulting in "une processus d'atomisation de la famille qui prépara l'individualisme actuel" (Dione 123; "a process of destruction of the family that leads to the present individualism"). Hence, by locating this paramount character's identity as paternally ambiguous, Sarr dismantles the religious (Islamic) and political (French) colonial impositions into the Seereer nation. His dual identity, T.C. Elimane and Elimane Madag, complicates the colonial regime's succession laws since both identities locate him as a son and a nephew.[37] While the postcolony dislocates Elimane from his position as Ousseynou's legitimate heir, Sarr deploys precolonial, spiritual beliefs to relocate Elimane to his rightful place in two ways. First, based on the Seereer succession practice allowing a nephew to inherit from his uncle, Assane's marriage to Mossane makes her Ousseynou's

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[36] The woman is the source of authority but does not exercise it. To easily find a close relative of a person from the Seereer community, simply give the social name of their maternal lineage or that of their father's maternal lineage. For example, a person "is jegandum" like his mother and "is the son of Sareen" through his father. The family name that comes from the father (surname) indicates kinship but is not as significant and evident as the lineage.
I met with Sobel Dione during a research trip to Senegal, where he expounded further on Seereer beliefs. In addition to this profound interaction with Sobel Dione, I was privileged to meet several Seereer indigenous persons who reiterated the importance of their maternal lineage. Furthermore, these paramount interactions were deeply reinforced by a visit to an Island of shells in the Seereer region of Joal-Fadiouth. Considered the only Island covered in shells in the world, Joal-Fadiouth has a cemetery where the dead in the community are buried in shells. I found it even more fascinating that maternal lineages determine the direction of each tombstone. You could tell people who share the same maternal lineage by the direction their tombstones face.

[37] Dione states that Article 515 of the Family Code stipulates that succession, and inheritance would go to children and descendants of the deceased rather than the Seereer nation's practice of passing down inheritance to the deceased sister's children. (Dione 123) Because Assane legitimately marries Mossane, she becomes Ousseynou's sister through marriage and Elimane his legitimate nephew. Still, his identity is further complicated when Sarr deploys Mossane's insane ramblings to show that Ousseynou had slept with her before conception.

sister; her son becomes Ousseynou's nephew and legitimate heir. And if this pivotal re-identification does not suffice, Sarr, leaning further into Seereer convictions, craftily deploys the voice of an insane Mossane to narrate an incident where she acknowledges sleeping with the two brothers without their knowledge. In this crucial revelation, disguised in insane babbles, Mossane insists that she knows who Elimane's father is but will not disclose it to the reader because "c'était mon enfant, et son père n'avait pas d'importance, Assane ou Ousseynou, son père n'avait pas d'importance, ce qui était important était que je l'aime, et je l'ai aimé, comme si je l'avais conçu seule, et je l'ai bien conçu seule…"[38] (Sarr 200) Mossane intimates that she would only tell Elimane who his father is if he asks. Leaning into the Seereer nation's societal beliefs in matrilineal heritage, Mossane here reclaims her right to opacity, leaving her postcolonial, patriarchal and patrilineal-oriented audience desperately starving.

Mossane's sexual neutrality implicitly underscores the power play between the two brothers and the factions they represent. On one side is Assane Koumakh, the French-educated lover of France, charged with the task of going "vers le monde extérieur pour y chercher d'autres connaissances." (Sarr 147; "to the outside world to find other knowledge systems"). Representing the indigenous knowledge systems and traditions, Ousseynou Koumakh "protéger[a] les connaissances de notre monde" (Sarr 148; "will protect the epistemologies of our world"). The fact that their trio of parents[39] consented to expose

[38] he was my child, and his father didn't matter, Assane or Ousseynou, his father didn't matter, what was important was that I love him, and I loved him, as if I had conceived him alone, and I did indeed conceive him alone…"

[39] Interestingly, the twins' parents form another parenting, sexual triangle that, unlike their children's, remains harmonious. Their father, Waly, died while embarking on a dangerous fishing expedition alone. Their uncle, Tokô Ngor, took the mother, Mboyil, as his wife in a levirate marriage. Oncle Ngor shows love

them to different forms of education indicates that harmony was possible in this twinship despite the split ideologies. Notwithstanding their parents' example of love, the two men's hatred climaxes paradoxically with their love and pursuit of Mossane.

Ousseynou Koumakh, the narrator of this section, draws the reader's attention to Mossane's significance in the twin rivalry by employing different rhetorical strategies that suggest a continuous build-up of tension. First, he conveys that their rivalry began at birth, highlighting contentious mis/perceptions of their nine-minute birth difference. This initial contention shows elder power play. Next, Ousseynou explicitly states that while they were loved, he and his brother did not like each other and had nothing in common.

> Nous n'avions rien en commun. Physiquement, certes, nous étions de vrais jumeaux, semblables en presque tous points. Mais pour ce qui était du caractère, tout nous opposait, tout nous éloignait. Je n'ai jamais senti entre nous la relation forte et fusionnelle qu'on prête aux jumeaux.[40] (Sarr 145)

Given the ongoing mutual disdain surrounding the boys' birth and development, it becomes intriguing to hear Ousseynou repeatedly insist that "Tout commence avec Mossane." "It all begins with Mossane." Sarr amplifies an already heightened declaration in how he frames Ousseynou's insistence. Ousseynou Koumakh's story is in the second book of the three-part novel. This second book is further divided into two sections: *Le testament d'Ousseynou Koumakh,* in which Koumakh tells his story, and a biographème

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for his brother by leading an expedition that avenges his brother's death and gives him a proper burial. He raised the twins as princes and fulfilled his brother's wish for at least one of them to go to the French school.

[40] We had nothing in common. Physically, yes, we were identical twins, similar in almost every way. But as for character, everything opposed us, everything separated us. I never felt between us the strong and fusional relationship that is attributed to twins.

titled *Trois cris en plein tremblement*, where Mossane narrates her story, veiled in a mentally unstable ramble. The first chapter of the section, *Le testament d'Ousseynou Koumakh*, ends with the words, "Tout commence avec la grande aïeule. Tout commence avec Mossane." (Sarr 134). "It all starts with the great ancestor. It all starts with Mossane." Provocatively, the second chapter repeats this theatrical ending: "Tout commence avec Mossane. Tout commence avec son choix." (Sarr 135; "It all starts with Mossane. It all begins with her choice"). Unlike the previous generation's trio and the next generation's love triangle,[41] Assane and Ousseynou's seething hatred for each other discombobulates any possible harmonious relationship between the men, forcing the woman to make a choice. Mossane's decision to marry Assane leaves Ousseynou embittered; in his bitter testament, the unanswered question: "pourquoi lui?" repeats seven times.

Hence, Koumakh's declaration "tout commence avec Mossane," a statement Sarr intensifies through the narrative's structure, conveys that sexual discombobulation heightens the failure of the brotherhood. Sexual relation is hardly a means to prove successful brotherly relations. Still, because this family's heritage indicates that triangular relationships reflect healthy brotherhood, the statement "tout commence avec son choix" bespeaks this generation's dislocated communion—placing the woman in a difficult position. It is also important to highlight that in the excerpt above, Koumakh mentions that he and his brother looked alike physically. Therefore, their difference stems from their "caractère,"[42] invisible selves. Since the brothers are physically alike, it becomes clear that

[41] I am referring to the love triangle between Elimane, Charles Ellenstein and Thérèse Jacob.

[42] Léonora Miano uses the same word, *caractère*, to describe a female character who spiritually differs from other female characters. For more information, see Chapter II.

their difference transcends the material world. The totality of their dissonance is even highlighted in the statement, "Tout nous opposait, tout nous éloignait" --"Everything opposed us, everything separated us." The presence of a force pervades this statement, pointing readers to the workings of the spiritual world. Since both men remain spiritually separated, they cannot, like their parents, form a successful trio with Mossane.

Mossane becomes a victim of this spiritual discord. As both men vie for control over her body, her experience troublingly evokes the colonial tensions surrounding Africa's land and resources. Desperately, Mossane's chaotic ramblings reflect her distress and the heavy burden created by the spiritual disruption:

> "…lui Ousseynou, toutes ces années au village, je voulais lui dire que je ne voulais pas choisir entre l'un et l'autre, et que je voulais également l'un et l'autre car l'un et l'autre avait chacun quelque chose que je cherchais"[43] (Sarr 196)

When we consider Mossane's desire to have both men against the backdrop of spiritual contentions, we realise that hidden within this sexual desire is also a demand for both spiritual and ideological practices to coexist in harmony. The triangular relationships reinforce the possibility of different spiritual traditions existing together, even mutually influencing one another. Unfortunately, fuelled by an ideological land grab and manifesting in possessive sexual desires, Ousseynou and Assane's failure leaves Mossane traumatised. Distressed and yearning for her son, she finds refuge in madness. When ideological conflicts lead to the suspension of spiritual practices that sustain one part of the world according to African beliefs, the land dissolves into insanity.

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[43] Ousseynou—all these years in the village, I wanted to tell him that I did not want to choose one or the other and that I equally wanted one and the other because each one had something I was looking for.

Fortunately, Elimane's spiritual twinship with his editor, Charles Ellenstein, implies that while in France, the writer understood his parents' errors and maintained his grandparents' traditional practice. Physically, the African man scarcely resembles his Jewish editor, yet a spiritual twinship underpins what Kathleen Gyssels identifies as a geopolitical triangle formed due to antisemitic and antiblack discrimination. Adding to the recurring triangular themes that Gyssels's work evokes is the spiritual triangle that Elimane reproduces with his editors, Charles Ellenstein and Thérèse Jacob.

> – Charles et vous formiez donc un trio avec Elimane ?
>
> Thérèse Jacob est restée silencieuse un moment, puis elle a dit : – Oui. J'étais réticente à cette idée au début, mais Charles voulait. Cela l'excitait, cela l'avait toujours excité, de regarder un autre homme me faire l'amour.
>
> Et je crois que l'idée qu'Elimane serait cet homme-là l'excitait encore plus.
>
> – Pourquoi, à votre avis ?
>
> – Je ne sais pas. Peut-être parce qu'il voyait en lui une sorte de jumeau.[44] (Sarr 230-31)

This conversation between Diégane Faye and Thérèse Jacob shows us that, unlike the previous generation, who were spiritually disconnected and thus unable to form a triangle, Elimane and Charles create a spiritual brotherhood. This is symbolized in the physical world by a shared oppression and expressed through a successful trio with Thérèse.

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[44] – So, you and Charles were a threesome with Elimane?
Thérèse Jacob remained silent for a moment, then she said:
– Yes. I was reluctant to do that at first, but Charles wanted to. It excited him, it had always excited him, to watch another man make love to me. And I think the idea that Elimane would be that man excited him even more.
– Why, in your opinion?
– I don't know. Maybe because he saw him as a sort of twin.

Another persistent generational pattern illustrates that Elimane relies on his spirituality to intervene and restore his family's fractured tradition. A notable characteristic of these trio relationships is the sudden, untimely death of one male and the longevity of the other male, who avenges his brother's death. When a crocodile kills Waly, his brother leads an expedition that kills the beast. Therefore, like his great-uncle Tokô Ngor, who avenged the death of his brother Waly, and unlike Ousseynou, who does not care how Assane dies, Elimane tracks down the Nazi responsible for Charles's deportation to a concentration camp. He finds him in South America and avenges the death of his spiritual brother. With these clues scattered throughout the narrative, finding Elimane requires the seeker to grasp the spirituality that underpins his relationships, his family's legacy, and ultimately, his missions.

This understanding of Elimane's spiritually-focused epistemology exemplifies his worldsense approach, creating a pathway that allows us to trace the methodology he might employ to fulfil his primary mission—avenging the false accusations. Once again, we revisit his family to identify patterns that indicate his education and training. With one patriarch, Assane, dying early, this analysis flags and follows the other patriarch, Ousseynou Koumakh's life, the knowledge systems he embodies, and his ways of being.

Although Ousseynou Koumakh typified and submerged himself in what Ahamdou Hampaté Bâ called "the great school of life," as seen earlier, he failed miserably in engaging with other nonindigenous schools of life. Hampaté Bâ describes oral tradition as a school of life in his article, "The Living Tradition," where he maintains that spiritual and material are not dissociated within oral traditions. He explains that oral tradition passes from the esoteric to the exoteric and "is able to put itself within men's reach, speak to them

according to their understanding, unveil itself in accordance with their aptitudes" (Bâ 168). Bâ equally argues that oral tradition is "based on initiation and experience, engages man in his total being, and therefore we can say it has served to create a particular type of man, to sculpt the African soul." Through Bâ's approach to African philosophies and religions, I consider the personhood of Ousseynou Koumakh, a man reputed for his "science mystique, ses pouvoirs sotériologiques, ses facultés de voyant" (Sarr 302; "mystical science, soteriological powers, and his clairvoyant faculties"). I interrogate what levels of oral tradition Ousseynou might reach and how his initiation and experience inform his total being. Ousseynou's embodiment serves as a map towards sketching Elimane's incarnation. Recalling Ousseynou's total rejection and hatred for Western traditions and education, it becomes needful to lean into his trajectory to retrace Elimane's possible exoteric to esoteric routes, given his positionality as a black African man with a justified motive to hate the Western world equally.

Our first impression of this formidable character reveals a rapid transition from the exoteric to the esoteric self. His Western-educated daughter, whom he equally despises for pursuing "their" paths, minces no words in expressing the deep hostility between father and daughter. Her depictions of Ousseynou Koumakh evoke an initial image of a frail, putrid, stinking, ninety-two-year-old body. Siga D's passionate hatred for her father manifests in her strong commitment to inscribing a legacy of disgust, even repugnance, into his reputation.

> Il m'a imposé son odeur de son vivant ; il me l'inflige encore depuis sa tombe. Fétide haleine. Crachats visqueux. Incontinence urinaire. Sécrétions anales.

> Hygiène sommaire. Inévitable pourrissement de l'ensemble. Mon père était une vieille charogne irregardable.[45] (Sarr 125)

But even as she tries to construct this decaying, corrupt image of Koumakh in the reader's imagination, hints of her father's virtue escape Siga D's condescending, sarcastic narration. As if her father's whole, disgusting body does not suffice, Siga D generously provides details on dying parts of his body: weak torso, drooping shoulders, protruding ribs, and a mouth that made it difficult for him to speak. However, the focus on Koumakh's failing body parts, in a way, works counterintuitively to propel another part of his body that has long ceased functionality—his eyes.

Ousseynou Koumakh's failed eyes convey his intimacy with oral traditions.[46] Despite his sagging shoulders, weak chest, and the protruding outline of each rib, his eyes exemplify the permanence of his body's inevitable decay. (Sarr 127-28) Nevertheless, as the narrator, Siga D, disdainfully scans her father's dying body, the blind eyes offer a firm resistance, troubling the conscripted immanence of his person that Siga's narration resolutely situates Koumakh within. This intriguing resistance becomes more compelling when we juxtapose the permanence and implication of blindness in the material world with the state of Koumakh's other (functioning) body parts. Although Koumakh's other body

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[45] He imposed his odour on me during his lifetime; he still inflicts it on me from his grave. Foul breath. Slimy spit. Urinary incontinence. Anal secretions. Rudimentary hygiene. Inevitable putrefaction of the whole. My father was an old, rotting bastard.

[46] See Monika Brodnicka's article, "The World as Manifestation of Spirit: Mysticism and Metaphysics in West African Religions". In this article, Brodnicka explains the mystical conceptions A. H. Bâ terms the oral tradition. Inspired by Fulani and Bamana mysticism, according to Bâ, oral tradition delineates the connection between the material and spiritual dimensions of the universe through three main elements: the person, the word, and the world. My engagement with this concept focuses on the first element. I cultivate ways to read the person of Ousseynou Koumakh by considering his revered application of mysticism.

parts are somewhat functional, they remain powerless under the ageist, unkind scrutiny of the narrator. Yet the blind eyes, which should have ceased all primary functionality within the material world, challenge Siga D's dehumanising objectification:

> Ses yeux ne voyaient plus depuis ses jeunes années. Mais lorsqu'il les ouvrait et les posait sur toi, Diégane, tu réprimais un tremblement. Tout autour croulait sous la vieillesse et la puanteur, mais ce regard, lui, tenait au milieu de cette carcasse. C'était comme le dernier orgueil de mon père face à la ruine du reste du corps.[47] (Sarr 128)

However, it is not just her father's pride that is at stake under Siga's scrutiny; it is also the nation's understanding of and engagement with the human principle. Koumakh's defiance upholds a transcendent understanding of life and human existence beyond the physical realms of the world.[48] In pushing back against his daughter's dehumanising gaze, Koumakh asserts his position as a *saltigi* and a *kumax;* positions that are part of the five functions of spiritual power in Seereer traditions.[49] As a *kumax*, a title his name carries, he holds the position of a *saltigi* and must lean into his "grand savoir" to resist the Western gaze. Whether he be old or frail, the holder of this community's ancient tradition must

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[47] His eyes no longer saw since his early years. But when he opened them and laid them on you, Diégane, you suppressed a shiver. Everything around was crumbling under old age and stench, but this gaze held firm in the middle of this carcass. It was like the last pride of my father in the face of the ruin of the rest of the body.

[48] See Henry Gravrand's *La civilisation Sereer: Pangool le genie religieux sereer*.

[49] See Madior Diouf's "Les cinq fonctions de pouvoir spirituel dans le monde sérère traditionnel" in *Voyages en pays seereer. Le Sine-Saloum (Sénégal), des patrimoines en partage*. In this contribution, Diouf explains that a *kumax* uses his scientific and esoteric powers to heal and protect newly circumcised initiates and train the younger generation during the ndut (initiation) ceremonies. As for the *saltigi*, Diouf writes that he is "un homme de grande science exotérique et ésotérique …Il est choisi parmi les membres d'une famille qui comprend traditionnellement des madag (devins)." (134) We notice that the word, a Kumax, pronounced as Koumakh, is also Ousseynou's name and therefore his identification. The title madag also stands out at this point given that it is Elimane's surname.

protect his nation's convictions. Hence, beneath the surface of this father-daughter, old-young confrontation lies the precolonial-postcolonial tensions where an African civilisation not only confronts the Western gaze but disproves its efficacy in African spaces by highlighting the cultural blindness that underlies the Western gaze.

When blindness resists and disrupts the postcolonial, uniquely corporeal gaze, it situates, through mysticism, the re-humanisation of the objectified within the spiritual realm. When Siga D's eyes actively observe an ageing body's frailty, they confine the African person to a material, physical existence. Hence, the necessity to counter this perilous positioning by 1) reversing the objectifying tool—blind eyes for seeing eyes; 2) shifting the battleground from the material to the spiritual realm—spiritual glare confronts the physical gaze; and 3) re-enacting and validating an endangered timeframe and its epistemologies—pre-colonial paradigms disrupt postcolonial epistemes. If the master of indigenous traditions must demonstrate his mystical potential, then there can be no room for the material body to participate in this battlefield of sight. This necessity for spiritual totality explains why Koumakh's eyes are not 'somewhat functional' like his other body parts. In the entirely blind eyes of an old man lies a different capacity for seeing, and accurately, too. This totality becomes essential for reclaiming indigenous validity. We discern that the intense exchange between father and daughter reflects the tension between postcolonial and indigenous systems, for as soon as the young daughter enters her father's bedroom, Siga's eyes work to achieve this limited depiction of her father's humanity.[50]

[50] It is worth highlighting the unconventional age difference between Siga D and her father, Ousseynou Koumakh. The tale explains the span by detailing Koumakh's life experiences that led to a delay in marriage. When he eventually got married after working years in training to become a "savant", a knowledgeable man in mystical sciences, he was gifted wives young enough to be his daughters by grateful villagers who sought to honour him for his work; Siga D's mother was the last wife of Koumakh, and Siga D, his only child with

> Voici la charogne du père. Je le revois encore au milieu de sa couche et de sa pestilence, immobile comme un gisant…Je vis dans la pénombre son profil décharné, son torse nu et faible, ses épaules affaissées, le dessin saillant de chaque côte.[51] (Sarr 127)

But a timely interruption from Koumakh disrupts the dehumanising[52] agenda, retiring Siga's gaze:

> --Tu me trouves répugnant, Marème Siga? Je te dégoûte, c'est ça ? Oui, je te dégoûte, Siga. Mais toi, contrairement aux autres, tu n'as plus l'hypocrisie de le dissimuler. Ça, je n'ai pas besoin de mes yeux pour le voir.[53] (Sarr 128)

When Koumakh confronts his daughter's vision-based disgust with knowledge that transcends sight, he redirects the reader to an epistemology that supersedes Siga's postcolonial worldview. By stating that he does not need eyes to see, the master of spiritual traditions and guardian of Seereer customs draws on his worldsense sensibilities. If the eyes of a Western-educated youth function as a postcolonial tool of dehumanisation, the

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her. I reckon that such a significant gap transcends age difference but marks an irreconcilable generational, ideological divide between Koumakh's pre/coloniality and Siga D's post/coloniality.

[51] Here is the rotting bastard. I can still see him wrapped up in his blankets, in his pestilence, motionless as a tomb effigy. In the gloom, I saw his bony profile, his naked and weak chest, his slumped shoulders, and the protruding outline of each rib.

[52] Since the spiritual and corporeal principle makes up the human principle in most African cosmology, it becomes dehumanising to conscript personhood to the body and the weaknesses that it encumbers—old age, sickness, death, etc. Siga D conveniently excludes Koumakh's character, his reputation and position within the community, and his spirit.

[53] Do you find me repugnant, Marème Siga? I disgust you, is that it? Yes, I disgust you, Siga. But you, contrary to the others, you no longer have the hypocrisy to conceal it. I don't need my eyes to see that.

blind eyes of an elderly oral tradition specialist restore the mystical potential to the postcolony. Ousseynou Koumakh mobilises spiritual forces to create balance in a universe threatened by a disconnect from the spiritual world. In Bâ's words, one could say that Koumakh maintains universal harmony.[54]

Traces of the great irony that the nonseeing precolonial eye can *see* while the seeing postcolonial eyes cannot see can be found among various Africanist conceptualisations. Calixthe Beyala's quote above clearly denotes this understanding among the precolonial nations of modern-day Cameroon. Furthermore, in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater,* a Western-educated medical doctor and father named Saul remains blind to his daughter's spiritual identities. Oluwadunni Talabi's article, "Writing the Polyphonic African Queer Future: Reflections on Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater*," argues that the portrayal of a modern Igbo as metaphorically blind serves as a double entendre. According to Talabi, the father in Emezi's novel, Saul "is not only blind because he exists in the physical form with no connection to the spiritual realm, unlike his daughter. He is also blind because of his disconnection from his cultural temporality." Talabi explains by listing a series of Saul's actions that demonstrate his *blindness*: he kills a python that should have been revered, causing severance of the sacred connection between the child, Ada and her spiritual mother. He baptises Ada and succumbs to the priest's demand to change the name he and his brother had critically chosen for a "Christian-palatable" name. Beyala and Sarr's texts illustrate the continent's preeminent worldsense concepts, while Saul in Emezi's narrative exemplifies the dangers that accrue from the misapplication of dominant epistemes to an indigenous scenario. To find Elimane, the *madag* (seer) raised by the *kumax* (knower), the

[54] See Bâ's "The Living Tradition" for more on universal harmony.

seeker must learn how not to see with seeing eyes and hone their ability to know without seeing.

Judicial Interventions: Dis/embodiment, Enspiritment, and Bilocation as Correctional and Healing Methodologies

> *Il faut bien qu'il y ait des morts, pour qu'il y ait des naissances.*
> Seereer Proverb (Gravrand 1990, 225)
> *There must be deaths so that there can be births.*

La plus secrète mémoire des hommes auspiciously provides us with an example of how mobilising our non-seeing faculties not only serves as a source of knowledge but also initiates the individual into spiritual voyages across time and space. Unsurprisingly, this example is illustrated by the *kumax*, Ousseynou, and narrated by his daughter to Diégane. Still searching for the elusive writer, Diégane finds himself in the apartment of Siga D, Elimane's cousin, where Siga D gives him a compilation of the deaths of all Elimane's critics. Unable to find a link connecting the serial suicides besides Elimane, Siga D, still contemptuous, recounts a story about her father's mystical practices to Diégane Faye. But before telling the story, Siga D offers an unsurprising caveat:

> Voilà.
>
> Je ne crois pas au sous-entendu de ce rapport car je ne crois pas à la mystique. Mais j'ai entendu dans mon enfance beaucoup d'histoires surnaturelles. Et en songeant à ces suicides en série de critiques littéraires que rien ne liait, sauf leur métier et le

> fait d'avoir écrit sur *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, l'un de ces récits m'est revenue à l'esprit.[55] (Sarr 301)

Recalling the earlier confrontation between Ousseynou and his daughter, it is not surprising that Siga begins this narrative with an expression of doubt that attempts to disprove the incident even before the story is told. Yet, the story remains and carries a profound significance despite the daughter's attempts to sabotage its validity. A few hints enable the story's validation despite Siga's invalidation attempt. One of them points to the uncanny presence of Ousseynou Koumakh in this storytelling encounter between Diégane Faye and Siga D.[56] Now, it is (chrono)logically evident that Koumakh, who never left the physical space of Senegal, has long been dead. In addition, this storytelling occurs in Siga D's Amsterdam apartment, where Diégane visits her. Hence, maintaining that Koumakh presents himself to ensure an unbiased rendering implies that this formidable personality penetrates and blurs spatial and temporal boundaries for the political purpose of transmitting his version of events to the future. By transposing himself into Siga D's apartment and invading her body, the sage penetrates the protected space of Europe and, concomitantly, the "protected" domain of literature. His presence in contemporary Europe

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[55] So.

I don't believe in the implication of this report because I don't believe in mysticism. But I heard many supernatural stories in my childhood. And thinking of these serial suicides of literary critics that nothing linked except their profession and the fact of having written on *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, one of these stories came back to me.

[56] In *Contes Initiatiques Peuls* Bâ highlights a saying among the Bambara initiates that transmitting to the children is the best way to preserve one's ways of knowing across time (Bâ 11). If we juxtapose this suggestion with Bâ's famous saying that in Africa, when an elder dies, a library burns, we see the image of a burnt library returning to Diégane to transfer its archives.

dismantles the sovereignty of European nation-states and their corresponding onto-epistemologies.

Koumakh's mystical presence in this storytelling mimics the enspiritment dynamic[57] and vitiates a Eurocentric worldview by showcasing the power of the spiritual world he represents. There is an intentional switch to the Seereer worldsense paradigm as this art of oral traditions evolves. As Siga D's narration unfolds, it reaches a climax where she "oublie l'odeur, la mort, la chambre," "forgets the odour, the death, the room" where her father's putrid body lay (Sarr 133). Siga becomes engulfed by the voice "qui s'échappait du corps de mon père," "that escapes the body of my father." Importantly and interestingly, when Siga D recalls being lost in the voice that escapes her father's body, her interlocutor, Diégane, closes his eyes and becomes, himself, lost in the voice that tells the story. Diégane confesses to not knowing the voice that emanates from Siga D's body; he also loses touch with their exact location. Are they in Siga's Amsterdam living room or Koumakh's stinking bedroom? (Sarr 133) He concludes that they are "dans un récit" --"in a narrative". Indeed, they are lost in Koumakh's narrative, one that collapses time—Koumakh's time continuum folds into Siga's—and space: a Seereer village and a Dutch city. The temporal and spatial collapse transforms the bodies participating in the ancient tradition. One body hosts the spirit that transfers an ancient narrative founded on precolonial cosmology into the postcolonial. The other body modifies its ontology by closing its eyes to be at par with the onto-epistemologies at work. Closing his eyes prevents a limited description of space since there are no details on the apartment where they are

[57] See chapter three for more information on the theory of enspiritment that this project theorises and develops.

physically located. It further invalidates any demand for empirical proof. When one voice melds into another and when the listener stops looking at the speaker, the narrative retains an opacity that dismisses authorship, allowing the narrative to live and exist independently and to weave in and out of texts without the fear of plagiarism.

It is worth noting that when Diégane closes his eyes, he mimics Koumakh's blindness. Having previously engaged with this nation's not/seeing spiritual traditions, we can suggest that Diégane temporarily shuts out the Eurocentric knowledge systems that dominate his physical location. Additionally, the temporary nature of his nonseeing typifies the border passages that Glissant advocates for: when he closes his eyes, he connects with African spiritual traditions, and when he opens them, his engagement with the postcolonial continues. Interestingly, the trio from the previous generation recognised the need for their children to gather all available knowledge systems.

> Il faut connaître l'islam, qui est une part essentielle de ce que nous sommes devenus. Il faut aussi connaître notre culture traditionnelle, ce qui était là avant l'islam. Mais il faut également voir ce qui arrive. Il faut penser à votre avenir. Et ce qui arrive, c'est que ce pays va appartenir aux Blancs. Peut-être qu'il leur appartient déjà.[58] (Sarr 146)

Driven by a deep-seated hatred for his brother, Assane, and his daughter, Siga D, the permanence of Koumakh's blindness, while it upholds a threatened epistemology, obstructs engagement with the flavours of other cultures, contrary to his parents' wishes.

[58] You should know Islam, an essential part of what we have become. You should also know our traditional culture, what was there before Islam. But you also have to see what is coming. You have to think about your future. And what is happening is that this country is going to belong to the whites. Maybe it already belongs to them.

It further risks confining African traditions to the past. For the previous generation, engaging with alternative ways of knowing would not negate indigenous knowledge; instead, it ensures that African traditions occupy the same critical stage as Western traditions.

> J'en avais souvent parlé avec Waly, votre père, Dieu ait son âme. C'était son souhait le plus profond. Que ses futurs enfants, un d'eux au moins, aille à l'école des toubabs, pas pour faire comme eux, mais pour se défendre quand ils diront que leur façon de voir est non seulement la meilleure, ce qui est discutable, mais la seule, ce qui est faux.[59] (Sarr 148)

Consequently, Diégane's ability to close and open his eyes grants him access to both seeing and nonseeing epistemologies, paving the way for a future where nonseeing epistemes are embraced. Based on this premise, the Seereer tradition can evolve from the past into the present. This vital capability enables Koumakh to translate his knowledge of African spiritual traditions into contemporary contexts without hostility. With Diégane's eyes closed, Koumakh can freely navigate this space and share his knowledge, entrusting Diégane with the commission to uphold oral traditions.

Because Koumakh's spirit is hosted by Siga D's body, and considering the intense hostility between the two, it would be especially tendentious not to broach the question of agency in this enspiriting encounter. Siga D, who consistently rejects her father and all he stands for, has been deliberately absent from her community and boldly rejects all

[59] I had often spoken about it with Waly, your father, God rest his soul. It was his deepest wish. That his future children, at least one of them, would go to the foreigner's school, not to be like them, but to defend themselves when they say that their way of seeing is not only the best, which is debatable, but the only one, which is false.

philosophy and ideological positions from home. On his part, Koumakh explains his hatred for his daughter. Twice in the narrative, the old man states that when she was in her mother's womb, he *saw* her face between theirs—Elimane and Assane (Sarr 142, 181). Hence, he knew that she would follow them, that "her destiny was far from our culture", that she would search for intelligence in the French language, and that she would be a writer. We learn from her experiences that Europe never embraces Siga D, just like they never embraced Elimane. Elimane, however, had the opportunity to return to the village, practice the Seereer tradition like Koumakh and be honoured in death. Marème Siga, as her father called her, never gets this opportunity. But this unique storytelling experience, an oral tradition that Beyala's narrative integrates, crucially serves as an invitation to oral traditions and, therefore, to her father, affording her a legitimacy that Europe never promises to an African woman writer. As a creative, Siga could have chosen to write to Diégane about Ousseynou,[60] but when she opens her mouth and offers an oral rendering of Ousseynou Koumakh's story, she employs the same literary style her father uses, thus relating with him and his onto-epistemologies. Orality functions as an invitation to Ousseynou, who had himself stated that he and Siga would never see each other "in this life." (Sarr 129) By choosing orality over the pen, Siga D yields her body to mysticism and elevates herself to such heights that oral traditions find her worthy of transmitting "les connaissances de notre monde". And in so doing, her voice and her story attain a legitimacy that Europe never offers.

While this encounter serves as evidence of the spiritual transposition into physical bodies and minds, philosophically foregrounding the logic behind Elimane's critics' serial

[60] The novel is riddled with missives and letters, with some letters constituting the entirety of a chapter.

suicides, the story of Koumakh's separation of body and spirit explicitly dramatises his spiritual access, offering further insights into Elimane's possible trajectory. Contrary to her expectations, Siga D's unbelief creates tension and suspense, drawing the reader's attention to the story. Moreover, given that she and Diégane have exhausted all possible material options to find her cousin, Koumakh's mystical story becomes the last resort for unpacking the serial suicides. Koumakh's narrative dramatises the reach and impact of spirit-body relations. The participation of the immaterial and material selves of the human principle, according to Seereer traditions, reinforces the interventionist agenda of the Seereer spiritual world. Koumakh's disembodiment demonstrates that if the selves of the human principle—material and immaterial—connect to form a united embodiment, then the careful and expert application of mystical knowledge can also facilitate, where necessary, the permanent or temporary separation of these selves.

The master of the Seereer religion, Ousseynou Koumakh, disembodies himself as a healing intervention for Mbar Ngom, a resident of a different village afflicted with an incurable illness. Mbar Ngom's suffering was physical, psychological, and mental to the point that his wailing tormented and terrified his entire village. (Sarr 301) His community sought, to no avail, all forms of cure—traditional and Western—to heal him, and when this failed, they hoped he would die, but "la mort elle-même ne semblait pas vouloir de ce patient" (Sarr 302; "death, itself, did not want this patient"). Desperate, his community sends a messenger to the Kumax, the Saltigi, the spiritual guardian consulted only for the most complex and dire cases—Ousseynou Koumakh. Although Koumakh lived in a different village, he anticipated the messenger's arrival even before he reached his home, ready with an answer. He informs the messenger that no medicine "in this world" (Sarr

303) could heal Mbar Ngom and that healing could only come from "the other world." Koumakh's response unveils another aspect of spiritual interventions we have yet to explore—the healing interventions. It questions the scope and meaning of healing, challenging us to transcend our expectations of what healing can be. How can one heal a man too sick to die?

Mbar Ngom's inability to die mirrors the experience of Ada in Akwaeke Emezi's novel *Freshwater*, reflecting similar beliefs and practices regarding life and death across sub-Saharan Africa.[61] In his book *Le thème de la mort dans la littérature,* Amade Faye discusses "ces artistes de la mort," known in Seereer traditions as the *ciif a paaxeer*. According to Faye, the *ciif a paaxeer* are spirits exceptionally skilled in the art of death. They are recognised for their continuous "visits" (births) and "returns" (deaths), sometimes occurring within the same family and to the same couple, whom they relentlessly overwhelm. (Faye 210) In a desperate effort to prevent further deaths of their child, the couple would consult with a *kumax* or *saltigi* and perform a sacrifice to ensure that the current "visit" is the last for the child. In other words, the parents of a *ciif a paaxeer*

[61] In Emezi's *Freshwater*, the Ada suffers from a spirito-physical condition known as the Ogbanje in Igbo cosmology or the Abiku in Yoruba cosmology. This condition is not body-based but could result in illnesses that affect the body, as in the case of Mbar Ngom. Ontologically, the Ogbanje in Igbo cosmology are spirit children who are forced into a body and plague the body with physical and mental illness until the body dies so they can freely return to their spirit world. The ogbanje would often return to the same family and die again quickly as children. To prevent the deaths of their children, desperate parents would perform a sacrifice that traps the bodies in the physical world, thus, making it difficult for them to die. Other families might in consultation with a *kumax* or their equivalent based on their traditions, name the child with a name that corresponds with their spiritual condition, in a sort of calling-out technique. The belief is that when such a child bears a name that calls them out, they refuse to die for fear of proving their parents right. Emezi's first name, Akwaeke, egg of a python, denotes her connection to the Igbo land, a nation that considers pythons sacred. On his part, Sarr's Seereer name, Mbougar, the unloved, reads as desperate parents' defiant attempt to dare him to die because he is unloved. While Emezi has openly acknowledged being an Ogbanje and writes auto-fictional experiences, Sarr inputs subtle hints that could point to a personal experience into the characters of his narratives. Seereer historian Sobel Dione informed me of the meaning of Sarr's Seereer name in an interview on October 2, 2024, in Dakar, Senegal.

render the child incapable of dying. Typically, this inability to die lasts only through childhood, as the "game of death" [62] becomes less appealing after that stage. This is partly because, ontologically, the concept is limited to children in various traditions and because a *ciif a paaxeer*'s game aims to torment the parents. Surviving into adulthood subverts the game of life and death, especially after the mother may have exceeded childbearing age. Moreover, it is likely that the parents would have had other children after successfully keeping the *ciif a paaxeer* alive. While losing any child would be distressing, the parents would not be losing their only child, which is essentially the game the *ciif a paaxeer* plays.

Mbar Ngom's inability to die closely resembles the condition of a *ciif a paaxeer.* Yet, his adulthood troubles his society's harmony and threatens the community and family's unity with the spiritual world. Enter Ousseynou Koumakh, a man who epitomises the priest of Seereer traditions. He, like the *kumax* Faye discusses, is "d'un âge très avancé, polyvalent, l'authentique chef religieux, le symbole vivant de la tradition" (Faye 200-201; "of a very advanced age, versatile, the authentic religious leader, the living symbol of tradition"). Faye adds that:

> Incarnation de la sagesse, le prêtre est une référence et un recours. Initié aux mystères des songes et de l'au-delà, mis dans les secrets des forces de la nature, rompu à la science des plantes et des formules sacrées, il reste dépositaire d'un savoir ésotérique qui fait de lui un guide écouté. Il assume en effet une fonction déculpabilisant dans son action quotidienne en faveur des morts.[63] (Faye 201)

[62] Game of death is a translation of "jeu de la mort", an expression that Amade Faye uses in his book to describe the activities of these artists of death.

[63] The incarnation of wisdom, the priest is a reference and a recourse. Initiated into the mysteries of dreams and the afterlife, immersed in the secrets of the forces of nature, and experienced in the science of plants and

Koumakh's priestly role in this scenario enables him to access the realm from which Mbar Ngom's illness originates. Since Ngom's illness transcends the physical, explaining previous failed attempts, only a priest or a *kumax* capable of intervening in the game of life and death can effectively assist the suffering patient. Koumakh's expertise in this matter can be measured in terms of the degrees of knowledge.[64] Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ, an initiate of Fulani and Bamana traditions, provides a biography of his teacher, Tierno Bokar. In this biography, he creates evocative imagery representing the degrees of knowledge through the metaphor of knowing a river. Bâ records that Tierno Bokar spoke of three ways to know a river. The first person hears about the river from others, the second journeys to the river to see it, and the third person immerses themselves in the river to become one with it.[65]

Similarly, in his book, *Deep Knowledge: Ways of Knowing in Sufism and Ifa, Two West African Intellectual Traditions*, Ogunnaike Oludamini inspires equally evocative imagery with the opposite of a river—fire. Commenting on degrees of certainty in works of Sufism, Ogunnaike draws attention to three degrees of certainty: "'the lore of certainty" (ʿilm al-yaqīn), "the eye of certainty" (ʿayn al-yaqīn), and "the truth of certainty" (ḥaqq al-yaqīn).'" (34) For Ogunnaike, "'The lore of certainty'" is likened to hearing about a fire, "'the eye of certainty'" is compared to glimpsing the fire, while "'the truth of certainty'" is being consumed in its flames. In this last degree, the knowledge of the object,

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sacred formulas, he remains the custodian of esoteric knowledge, which makes him a well-respected guide. He indeed assumes a guilt-free function in his daily action in favour of the dead.

[64] See the Introduction to Amadou Hampaté Bâ's *A Spirit of Tolerance: The Inspiring Life of Tierno Bokar* for more information on how degrees of knowledge stems from one's proximity to, access and availability to the systems of knowledge.

[65] p. xx.

the being of the knower, and that of the object are all identified." (34). The metaphors of totality that these opposing elements evoke forge a pathway to unpacking Ousseynou Koumakh's unconventional healing methodology. Koumakh's disembodiment typifies his total immersion into the Seereer principle of life and death, allowing him to successfully navigate both worlds unharmed.

Through the phenomenon of bilocation, Ousseynou Koumakh exemplifies becoming one with the river of life and death. Writing about this uniquely transcendent phenomenon, Amade Faye notes that the separation of the body and spirit occurs "au moment de la mort." (Faye 192) Impressively, Koumakh, through his "science mystique, ses pouvoirs sotériologiques, ses facultés de voyant" (Sarr 302; mystical sciences, soteriological powers, and clairvoyant abilities), bilocates not just himself, but, as we will soon see, Mbar Ngom "au moment de la vie." Aware that engaging with the physical only addresses physical problems, the sage discerns the spiritual undertones of Mbar Ngom's illness even before the messenger from Ngom's village arrives at his domain and prepares the answer: "Je n'ai plus besoin de me déplacer physiquement" (Sarr 303; "I no longer need to move physically"), With this bold declaration, the narrative theatricalises the art of spiritual voyage:

> Le lendemain, à la tombée de la nuit, l'esprit de mon père quitta son corps. Les villageois racontent qu'ils sentirent un grand vent souffler à travers le village. Les plus sages surent que l'esprit d'Ousseynou Koumakh était de sortie et dirent à leurs familles de rentrer dans les maisons et d'y rester. À ce moment-là, le corps de mon père était chez nous, dans la cour, bien visible de ses femmes et de ses enfants. Ce soir-là il est resté immobile de longues heures, assis sur sa chaise pliante, les yeux

> ouverts, comme s'il avait soudain retrouvé la vue. Mais on savait qu'il n'était pas là, que son esprit avait quitté son enveloppe charnelle et qu'il ne fallait surtout pas s'adresser à lui ou l'approcher.[66] (Sarr 303-304)

We notice that Koumakh's precarious disembodiment succeeds due to his community's varying degrees of certainty. The first sentence presents a fact established by this society—that Ousseynou's spirit has left his body. The villagers exemplify the first degree of knowledge, with the focus shifting from hearing to sensing. By sensing the spirit's exit from the body, the wisest in the community know and confirm this occurrence without dispute. Koumakh's family occupies the second degree of certainty, though in a limited way. According to this story, they see his immobile body in the compound and understand that his spirit has departed. However, like the rest of the village, they, too, do not see the act of disembodiment. Finally, Koumakh, the one who bilocates, naturally occupies the third degree of knowledge. His immersion in the river of this tradition allows for his bilocation; he engages with the forces of nature, a precarious situation depicted through the cautious actions of the villagers and his family.

A consistent prioritisation of the worldsense paradigm exists in all three degrees of knowledge, whose communal contributions, we can sense, facilitate Koumakh's successful bilocation. Amade Faye's work notes that bilocation occurs at the time of death,

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[66] The next day, my father's spirit left his body at nightfall. Villagers say they felt a strong wind blowing through the village. The wisest knew that the spirit of Ousseynou Koumakh was out and told their families to return to the houses and stay there. At that time, my father's body was clearly visible to his wives and children at our home in the compound. That evening, he remained motionless for long hours, sitting on his plain chair, his eyes open, as if he had suddenly regained sight. But we knew that he was not there, that his spirit had left his carnal envelope and that we should not speak to or approach him.

yet Koumakh bilocates while still alive to perform interventionist healing. When we consider Faye's theory of bilocation alongside the actions of the wisest, who instructed their families to stay indoors, and his family, who did not approach his body, we recognise that bilocation could be dangerous if unsuccessful. Even more compelling is that Koumakh's spirit's exit from his body renders his body immobile, echoing the immobile hands of the Boko Haram terrorists in the Gwoza women's report, making him as vulnerable as the terrorists. On this premise, it becomes logical to posit that if one must bilocate, one must be located in a safe space, within a society that espouses some communal degree of knowledge about this tradition. The Gwoza society also evinces this safety, for their vague report bespeaks their degree of knowledge. By not elaborating on the report's details, there is an expectation to know. In the context of the society in Sarr's narrative, they know without seeing, the reader only receives details of Ousseynou's disembodiment because the Western-educated Siga D narrates the story. Recalling once more the purpose of telling Koumakh's story, it becomes clear that if Elimane Madag, like Ousseynou, bilocates to the location of his literary critics to enact a judicial intervention, the place from where he bilocates must be chosen carefully. Given that he lived in a worldview centred on European civilisation, his continuous and successful bilocation must originate from a highly secretive location, making it impossible for anyone searching for him to find him. Thus, the effective enactment of justice in French society must originate from a classified geographic space. In addition to the need-to-know basis of his physical location, Elimane remains elusive to the Western world because it lacks all degrees of knowledge in the Seereer tradition. His spirit may operate within this society, but since they cannot *see* beyond sight, they cannot witness his presence. Therefore, Elimane

remains absent from Western literary circles insofar as the Western world remains spiritually blind.

The communal degree of knowledge evinced by the community members is further enhanced by knowledge and interpretation of time. A common saying in Senegal, "Cesse de sortir en crépuscule,"[67] reflects the dense symbolism of twilight. A time known as *timis*, twilight, according to Senegalese traditions, is the time when invisible, immaterial beings occupy the world and become active. Children are cautioned against going out at *timis* for fear of encountering malign spiritual beings. Senegalese filmmaker Awa Moctar Gueye's 2023 short film, *Timis,* reflects the anxiety that surrounds this time. A film about children, *Timis* tells the story of a young girl who ventures into the market at dusk to prove her bravery. What the film shares with the conversations on this subject of time is the undisputed depiction of dusk as unsafe. It is, therefore, within reason that the wisest in the village warn their families to stay indoors since Ousseynou's disembodiment occurs "à la tombée de la nuit." Furthermore, it also denotes Ousseynou Koumakh's mastery of time and space, for choosing this time to bilocate communicates a mastery of the workings of Senegal's spiritual realities. Mobilising through mystique the spiritual resources he needs when they are most available, the Kumax's mission sails on the wings of esoteric degrees of knowledge.

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[67] Here, I cite the words of Amade Faye, who recalls his grandmother's warnings, "Cesse de sortir en plein jour. Cesse de sortir en crépuscule, quand le soleil se couche." According to Faye, these two times, *plein jour*, noon and *crépuscule*, dusk are crucial spiritual times. Focusing on the dusk or sundown, Faye explains "Au moment où le soleil se couche, c'est l'instant où d'autres êtres se reveillent. Ces êtres occupent la nuit. Ils peuvent être dans le noir, dans l'invisible. Le symbolisme du temps est très dense." When the sun sets, other beings wake up. These beings inhabit the night, can be in the dark, and can be invisible. The symbolism of time is very dense.
Interview with Amade Faye at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar Senegal. August 20, 2024. Also, chapter three explores the relationship between sunset and spiritual realities more critically.

However, no part of this story illustrates the varying levels of knowledge and this society's understanding of the human principle more clearly than when Koumakh's spirit encounters Mbar Ngom's spirit. Koumakh arrives at Mbar's house and calls the one unable to die, and his spirit answers. In response, Mbar Ngom's spirit separates from his body, an act that terrifies him and reveals his level of knowledge. Drawing on mysticism, Koumakh takes charge of the situation, reassures the frightened spirit, and guides him to a safe location where he explains to him:

> --N'aie pas peur, je suis là pour te libérer.
>
> --Me libérer ? Qui es-tu ? Et que sommes-nous ?
>
> --Qui suis-je n'a pas d'importance. Mais tu sais ce que nous sommes en cet instant précis. Nous sommes ce que nous sommes vraiment au fond de nous : des esprits. Des énergies vitales.[68] (Sarr 304)

This conversation, by displaying an interesting spirit-body dynamic, affirms that the Seereer tradition's conceptualisation of the human principle resonates with the continent's general understanding thereof: the belief that the human principle comprises the material and immaterial selves. While interpretations may vary according to specific cosmologies, there are universally applicable concepts across the Sub-Saharan continent. Daniels Kyrah Malika's article, "Vodou Harmonizes the Head-Pot, Or Haiti's Multi-Soul Complex",

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[68] --Do not be afraid; I am here to free you. --Free me? Who are you? And what are we?

--Who am I doesn't matter. But you know what we are at this very moment. We are what we truly are deep down: spirits. Vital energies.

explores a plethora of multi-self-conceptualisations in diverse African cosmologies, stretching from the Western to the Central nations of the continent. These different nations share convictions on multiple selfhoods. Though they have different names and expressions that capture the multiplicities of personhood, there are significant similarities and overlaps within the cosmologies that Daniels covers.

My project identifies and theorises two spirit-body dynamics based on universal beliefs across the Sub-Saharan continent. Enspiritment occurs when an external spirit takes over a body to achieve suprarational feats; for instance, Ousseynou Koumakh enspirits Siga D during the storytelling encounter to tell his story from his point of view.[69] Another spirit-body dynamic, embodiment, stems from established African thought that spirits animate bodies. Hence, human beings consist of spiritual and material selves that fuse at birth and split permanently at death. While enspiritment is temporal, embodiment remains permanent; spirits merge with bodies at birth and separate from bodies when they die. Once again, we perceive the precarity of Ousseynou's disembodiment since his body and spirit split while he remains alive. Because of his access to mysticism and knowledge of the invisible realities, the kumax manipulates the material and immaterial sciences to effect successful disembodiment without damage.

Variations occur according to the names and functioning of the immaterial to the material; still, in general, the spiritual supersedes the physical. In the previous excerpt, the narrator uses the term "envelope charnelle" to designate the body and to distinguish between the visible and the invisible components of Ousseynou's humanity. In this

[69] See Chapter 3 for more details on the justifications and workings of enspiritment.

excerpt, the kumax, Koumakh, demonstrates his spiritual knowledge and rank by reminding the terrified Mbar of their belief—that deep down, every human is a spirit. These elements put together intimate a hierarchisation that reiterates Nwando Achebe and Calixthe Beyala's superior, preeminent designation of spirits. If spirits are what humans fundamentally are, addressing bodies in matters as sensitive as Mbar Ngom's threads on futility, since the body ranks lower than the spirit. Zooming into the Seereer tradition, we understand that this tradition identifies Roog Seen, "Dieu, dans la conception seereer du monde," as the author of life. (Faye 179) Beneath Roog Seen, Faye mentions intermediaries that maintain Roog Seen's order with humans: Pangool (ancestral spirits), priests (guardians of the altars), and seers such as the madag, the saltigi, the "more-than-men." (Faye 194) Given the predominant spirituality that implicates each level of the social hierarchy, access to the spiritual world via mysticism is necessary to maintain universal harmony.

Speech is an active agent of mysticism, creating a link between the spiritual and physical world. Monika Brodnicka's article, "The World as Manifestation of Spirit: Mysticism and Metaphysics in West African Religions", examines three elements from Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ's teaching: the person, the word and the world. According to Brodnicka, "the living tradition as total knowledge can be defined as an interconnection between the three elements of the person, the world, and the word that elicits an experience of mystical presence in the human being. It encompasses the interactive participation of the person—the agent of internal and external harmony; the world—the interworking material and spiritual environment; and the word—a supralinguistic communication." (318) Koumakh's mastery of knowledge is explicitly choreographed in the interconnection

between these three elements. His spirit seamlessly voyages across the immaterial world while his body remains safe in the physical world. When his spirit seeks to invite another's spirit to participate in this suprarational experience, Koumakh employs the last element—the word. Through speech, Koumakh enjoins Mbar's spirit to separate from his body, and it is again through the word that he announces his mission. Interestingly, the word maintains a link between the components of the disembodied selves, creating a line of contact between the selves in their respective worlds:

> Dans la cour de notre maison, à ce moment-là, Ta Dib me raconta que mon père parlait, à voix basse, les yeux exorbités et le corps toujours immobile sur sa chaise.[70] (Sarr 305)

Within this disembodiment dynamic, where the material and immaterial aspects of a person split into their respective worlds, the word maintains a link between them, keeping Koumakh alive. Because spirits and bodies fuse at birth and only separate permanently at death, speech assures the connection between a person's spiritual and corporeal selves.

In addition to creating the link between the spiritual and physical worlds, the word functions as a healing agent for the man who could not die:

> --Pourquoi es-tu là ?
>
> --Tu le sais, Mbar Ngom. Il faut que tu meures. Il n'y a plus de vie pour toi ici. Si tu continues à vivre, il se produira ce qui peut arriver de pire à un homme sur terre.

[70] In the courtyard of our house, at that moment, Ta Dib told me that my father was speaking in a low voice, his eyes bulging and his body still motionless in his chair.

> --Qu'est-ce que c'est ?
>
> --Tu continueras à souffrir. Mais ce n'est pas ça le pire. Le pire est que ton âme malade, de ton vivant, se détachera de ton corps. Celui-là continuera à vivre, mais torturé. Quant à ton âme, elle errera aussi dans le monde des esprits. Ici ou là-bas, tu seras seul et perdu.[71] (Sarr 305)

The word's function transcends mere conversation. Brodnicka describes it as a supralinguistic communication whose interpretation relies on the philosophical background that produces it. In this excerpt, Koumakh's word embodies a paradox that can only be understood through the Seereer philosophical framework: dying is the only way to live. When we consider the diagnosed condition of *ciif a paaxeer* that afflicts Mbar Ngom, the paradox deepens: his inability to die can only be resolved through the capacity to die so that he can truly live. Resonating with the Seereer proverb that frames this section, Koumakh insists that if Mbar willingly dies, the spirits that await him in the spirit world will grant him the chance to heal; healing through death restores his decaying humanity.

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[71] --Why are you here?

--You know it, Mbar Ngom. You must die. There is no more life for you here. If you continue to live, the worst thing that can happen to a man on earth will happen.

--What is this?

--You will continue to suffer. But that's not the worst part. The worst is that your sick soul, during your lifetime, will detach from your body. This one will continue to live but be tortured. As for your soul, it will also wander in the spirit world. Here or there, you will be alone and lost.

Notwithstanding the decay his body experiences, what threatens Mbar Ngom's humanity is the danger of a decadent soul. The context and manner in which Koumakh introduces this invisible third self carries a careful designation reminiscent of Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ's writing in *Aspects de la civilisation africaine* that death allows the soul to find its astral fluidity and be rid of the "carnal weight" of the body. According to Bâ:

> C'est cette pesanteur, cette lourdeur, qui demeure dans le cadavre et qui rend celui-ci impur. Une fois désincarnée, l'âme trouve une base valable d'où elle peut s'envoler à chaque appel pour écarter le danger qui menace l'individu ou la collectivité de sa lignée.[72] (Bâ 118)

A fragility associated with personhood implicates the soul in this discourse. Eugene Mendosa's article, "The Journey of the Soul in Sisala Cosmology", reinforces this precarity by arguing that the soul forms "a fragile relation with the body at birth" (67). At the same time, Kyrah Malika Daniels adds that "the soul can experience fatigue when traumatised." (5) While some scholars of cosmology use spirits and souls interchangeably (Mendosa 67), especially when writing in translation, the subtle divinity, precarity, almost vulnerability, written into the soul in Sarr's narrative resonates with Daniels and Mendosa's findings. On his part and writing precisely about death in Seereer tradition, Amade Faye associates spirits with the collective ancestors, reflecting the collection of ancestral beings waiting to receive and heal Mbar Ngom while the soul is evoked in the

[72] It is this weight, this heaviness, which remains in the corpse and which makes it impure. Once disembodied, the soul finds a valid base from which it can fly away at each call to ward off the danger threatening the individual or the community of its lineage.

context of a specific individual's death.[73] (Faye 194) In *La civilisation sereer: pangool*, Henry Gravrand writes that:

> L'âme est à la fois autonome et toujours en quête d'hominisation.
>
> Elle est localisée dans un corps et mobile par dédoublement
>
> Elle est une entité à la fois spirituelle et substantielle
>
> *Invisible*, elle est en même temps *visible* aux personnages doués.[74] (Gravrand 234)

Ousseynou Koumakh is undoubtedly the gifted person in Sarr's narrative with mystical access that can intervene and prevent a premature "dédoublement" of Mbar's soul. Sarr's narrative intimates that Mbar's corporal illness now threatens the health of his soul, a situation that could cause the latter to break away from the deteriorating body. Gravrand's anthropological work unravels that the soul can split from the body and is always in search of embodiment. Hence, Mbar Ngom's inability to die threatens his substantial, invisible self, preventing him from attaining an ancestral status.

Koumakh's intervention preserves the wholeness of Mbar's personhood, preventing a decadence that reverberates beyond the physical. It is important to note that Koumakh's soul is not evoked in this spiritual conversation, indicating that the wholeness of the sage's being remains secure. His community's saltigi, Koumakh, exemplifies Gravrand's findings about the healers in Seereer society. "Les guérisseurs des maladies

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[73] The soul is mainly mentioned within the context of death, while the spirit remains alive both in the body of an individual in the physical world and among the ancestors in the spiritual world. The exit of an individual's soul from his body marks his death and his spirit becomes an ancestral spirit conforming with the soul. Interview with Amade Faye at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire (IFAN), Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar Senegal. October 22, 2024.

[74] The soul is both autonomous and always in search of embodiment.
It is located in a body and mobile by separation.
It is an entity that is both spiritual and substantial.
Invisible, it is at the same time *visible* to gifted persons.

corporelles sont souvent des connaisseurs de l'âme humaine, parce que leur art les conduit à traiter en même temps le corps et l'esprit. La médecine africaine est une médicine de l'âme autant que du corps." (Gravrand 223; "Healers of bodily diseases are often connoisseurs of the human soul because their art leads them to treat the body and the mind simultaneously. African medicine is a medicine of the soul as much as of the body.") Knowing that the soul could exercise its autonomy and depart from his decaying body, a condition that unbalances the spiritual realm since a decayed soul cannot be reembodied, Koumakh's proposal and assistance in administering healing by death saves Mbar Ngom, his family, and community but also his future since he can *come back* in another cycle. When the one who cannot die accepts Koumakh's proposal for physician-assisted death, he truly lives.

The idea that Koumakh recommends death to Mbar Ngom so that he can live raises the question of how to interpret the suicides of Elimane's critics. To engage with this question, we must first diagnose their condition. Brigitte Bollème, a journalist who had investigated Elimane, reveals that the criticisms of the French gatekeepers were founded on falsely fabricated information. She wonders why Elimane remained silent, even though he had every right and enough evidence to debunk their accusation of plagiarism. Bollème ends her report by speculating that a bigger secret must have caused Elimane's silence. When we reconsider the preeminence of the spiritual world and the interventionist practices of this world, we can posit that Elimane was neither silent nor missing. Instead, recognising the decaying physical literary world, he leans into his access to mysticism and, from his cosmology's spiritual world, enacts a healing campaign on the French literary world. Purging this world of the decay of racism and antisemitism, the madag applies the

knowledge he learnt from the kumax and keeps the door open for African oral traditions to invade an already invasive Western literature. It might be rational to conclude that Elimane defends the Seereer onto-epistemes by convincing the Western gatekeepers who refuse to acknowledge and validate African traditions to commit suicide. However, treading on the path of benevolence, we might consider that Elimane preserves the soul of the literary world, like his predecessor before him, by urging the spirits of his critics to leave their bodies in the face of moral decay. Given the true-life undertones that pervade this narrative, one can speculate that the soul of the French literary milieu has been saved such that the work of a young black African writer, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, becomes "Goncourable."[75]

Conclusion

In Sarr's narrative, characters draw upon the resources of Africa's spiritual world when life in the physical realm becomes overwhelmingly suffocating. Their reliance on the spiritual as a point of intervention reveals a lack of physical power, thus prompting the resort to spirituality. The invisible world, therefore, serves as a locus for various interventionist practices, providing support where necessary. The spiritual also disrupts the power dynamics at play without violating the agency of the bodies. Just as the Gwoza women triumphed over armed terrorists by utilising spiritual weapons through mysticism, Sarr's characters navigate borderised spaces by invading both intimate and public areas. Since Ousseynou convinces Mbar Ngom to die willingly, Siga D imagines that Elimane

[75] René Maran won the Goncourt prize in 1921, becoming the first black author to do so. Sarr's prize in 2021 comes 100 years after the previous black author's, making him only the second black winner and the first black African winner. Also, his age at the time of the award, 31, is reminiscent of Yambo Ouologuem, who was 28 when he published *Devoir de violence* in 1968.

could have convinced his critics to take their lives. In both cases, the dying person retains agency over life and death. An agentic culture arises from this practice, which resonates with the embodiment and enspiritment dynamics throughout this project. *La plus secrète memoire des hommes*'s illustration provides a breakdown of the selves that constitute the human principle in this African tradition. Through Ousseynou Koumakh's disembodiment, we access and examine the interplay of the body, spirit, and soul.

The body in Sarr's novel carries and houses the immaterial selves in the physical world. It distinguishes the human principle and navigates relationships with other beings that endure beyond the physical realm. In the novel, the spirit is the life force that animates the body. Its presence guarantees that bodies function within the material, and its absence renders the body immobile. When bodies become frail and sickened, the spirit, when activated through mysticism, ensures that the person retains personhood by becoming more active in both worlds. *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* locates spirits as communicative selves that can use the word to relate with another person's material and immaterial selves. The spirit of a knowledgeable initiate, Ousseynou, transposes to wind and air and transports himself to another geographical location. This voyage path sketches a map for the routes that initiates of African traditions can take to nullify the borders erected to "protect" and keep them out. The narrative depicts that with this exclusive knowledge, an initiate writer, like Elimane, can invade the physical spaces and bodies of Europeans who have already invaded the African continent, fulfilling Glissant's hope for mutual invasion.

The interventionist practice reaches the nooks and crannies of private and intimate spaces to correct failed relationships. In addition to restoring a family's twinship legacy,

the spiritual resolves the ambiguity surrounding Elimane's paternity. Diégane, still searching for Elimane, finds himself in Elimane's Seereer village in Senegal, where Elimane is described as Ousseynou's heir, having inherited his *seeing* capabilities. Also, the two are consistently described as full heads. At their deaths, there are physical manifestations of their departures, events that suspend natural occurrences and point to the preeminence of the immaterial world. For Koumakh, it rained all day, an unusual event given the dry season, and for Elimane, the sun did not rise until evening. Even more noteworthy is the description of their tombs as twin graves, a description that reminisces this family's twin legacy and basically confirms that Ousseynou is Elimane's father. (Sarr 447)

Mossane resurfaces as the narrative concludes with the image of Elimane sitting under the mango tree opposite the cemetery. She sits under this tree, insane, waiting, and longing for her son. Ousseynou also sits beneath the mango tree, seeking an explanation from Mossane and Elimane before his death, takes the same position, yearning for his mother's forgiveness. The trio forms a transgenerational triangle of longing and desire. While this mango-tree triangle confirms Elimane's maternal lineage and paternal patronym—Ousseynou Koumakh Diouf, Elimane Madag Diouf—Mossane's madness highlights the trauma and plight of the women left behind, illustrating how the state of unknowing leaves them in anguish. In the next chapter, we encounter the notion of the women left behind in Léonora Miano's novel, *La saison de l'ombre.* This chapter interrogates embodiment within female bodies, questioning how material and immaterial selves interact and manifest agency. Retaining the concept of bodies as "enveloppe charnelle," the upcoming chapter stages an interdisciplinary discussion between gender

studies, African philosophies, and religion to engage with identities and gender normativity within the pre-colonial Africanist ethos.

CHAPTER TWO:

The Wo/man, Her Body, His Spirit: Reading Agency in Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre* (2013)

Karmen, the main character of Joseph Gaï Ramaka's 2001 film *Karmen Gei,* positions herself at the centre of applauding, encouraging women. Before introducing this protagonist, the film's credits roll onto the screen to the rhythm of African drumming and saxophone sounds, enticing the viewer with its celebratory commencement. The transition from the credits to the first scene is quick, almost brutal, and sonically enhanced by the addition of clapping sounds accompanying the saxophone and drumming. The first shot is wide, strategically framing Karmen at the centre of an almost entirely female group. Besides the drummer to her right, the rest of the people in this frame are women, with most standing dressed in colourful African fabrics, an aesthetic choice that heightens Karmen's centeredness in this narrative. The only seated dancer dressed in black, she smiles and writhes her waist seductively to the rhythm of the melodic sounds as the women cheer on. The camera cuts to a close shot of her face, showing a female body that enjoys the attention of the women around her. The camera quickly pans down to her legs, opening and closing in rhythmic succession. Given that she is sitting in front of the applauding women, the opening and closing legs suggest the presence of another object of Karmen's desire. The easy transition to a close shot of a woman dressed in a green uniform immediately resolves the question of Karmen's target. The close shot shows the woman with braided hair nodding, taken in by Karmen's gestures. When the camera returns to Karmen, it frames a close shot that intensifies her actions; her eyes and teeth are beautifully attuned to the seduction we now understand she is performing. Biting her lower lip, Karmen, a prisoner, traps the prison warden in her web of erotic authority.

Figure 2.1. Still from *Karmen Geï. Karmen is seated, dressed in black and flanked by drummers. (0:39/1:23:27)*

Figure 2.2. Still from *Karmen Geï. Prison guard dressed in green, wholly taken in by Karmen (0:47/1:23:27)*

Figure 2.3. Still from *Karmen Geï. The intensity of Karmen's seduction shines through her eyes and teeth (0:50/1:23:27)*

I begin my interrogation into the agentic potential of spirits and bodies with the Senegalese film *Karmen Gei* because, although it is a film about freedom, rebellion, identity, and power, there is a subtle depiction of the dynamics of spirituality and corporeality that eludes the unknowing viewer. Female bodies dominate the narrative's earlier scenes, dancing, clapping and applauding, nearly deceiving the audience into misreading their subjugation. However, as the telling evolves, oppressive political powers become more pronounced, and the audience understands that the women are isolated in prison under the domination of the patriarchy, whose physical presence is highlighted by the phallic representation of the canon guns above the prison.[76] Naturally, the question at this stage rests on identifying the workings of the spiritual world in such an overtly

[76] See Ayo A. Coly's "Carmen Goes Postcolonial, Carmen Goes Queer: Thinking the Postcolonial as Queer." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 57 (3): 391–407. doi:10.1080/14735784.2015.1056540.

physical dance space. But when we consider the geo-graphic placement of the prison on Gorée Island of Senegal, the port of the transatlantic slave trade, whose spiritual deity is believed to be Koumba Kastell, a Senegalese female spirit who seduces men and women, this geo-graphic location of subjugation considerably collapses into the spiritual location that subverts carceral structures.

Spiritual presence forges the pathway for corporeal, carceral freedom. Nevertheless, *Karmen Gei* theatricalises the barriers existing in a world navigating the boundaries of precolonial Africa and its systems of knowing and postcolonial Africa and her persistent systems of subjugation. The film's title, *Karmen Gei,* is suggestive: it is the first African adaptation of Georges Bizet's Carmen. The film is generally faithful to the original plot of Bizet's Carmen as it portrays a main character who seduces a person in power but is murdered by the frustrated, powerful subject because of unrequited love. Nevertheless, this African adaptation complicates the narrative by situating the locus of power subversion as spiritual. The preeminence of the spiritual in this restrictive subaltern space is demonstrated in Karmen's successful seduction of a female prison guard while under the watchful gaze of other prison officers. However, the spiritual resources she harnesses and the significance of the spiritual influence on her ontology draw attention to this project, linking Karmen to the women characters in Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre (2013).*

The structural representation of women in an isolating punishment space that simultaneously echoes slavery, colonialism, imprisonment and patriarchy invokes a subalternation that invites spiritual intervention. Karmen performs the *sabar*, a Senegalese seduction dance; through this dance, she transcends the patriarchal expectations of the

postcolony. Rising from her seated position, she jumps up and down, flailing her hands and legs as she entertains the women surrounding her. However, when she turns to refocus on the object of her desire, her dance becomes more targeted. The rhythm of the drums shifts, reflecting Karmen's slow and deliberate movement towards the prison guard. This action marks her agency as the shot cuts to her legs, steadily advancing towards the guard. Once in front of the guard, Karmen moves her waist forward and backwards in a gesture that mimics penetration. This spiritosexual encounter foregrounds our imagination of the female body's identity and possibilities within Africanist thinking. It also raises the question of women's agentic participation in these super/natural encounters. Even though multiple levels of subjugation mark the isolated, narrow space, applause, dance, and laughter become possible through a collaboration between female bodies and spirits.

This chapter imagines spirits and bodies as co-agents in the dynamics of enspiritment and embodiment. It argues primarily against depicting spirits as hostile agents—a conceptualisation of dominant possession scholarship—because this thinking flattens and limits bodies to the position of victims. Moreover, reflections on spirit-body relations focus on the subalternation of bodies by the spirits in a possession framework. Instead, this chapter suggests that an extant subalternation of bodies prompts the re/emergence of spirits who aid the bodies in achieving their subversive agenda. With a focus on Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre*, this chapter argues that an embodied spirit remains an agentic actor in physical interactions and relations such as sex. At the same time, an enspirited body also exudes agency in spiritual interactions. It also expands the conversations on the politics of identity, sexual orientation, and (postcolonial) non-normative identities within a precolonial Africanist ethos.

Spirit in *La saison de l'ombre* denotes many things. They[77] are the unencumbered manifestation and expression of individuality. They are essential to the principle of personhood, joining with the body to form the wholeness of the human person. They are the unseen part of a person that links the identities of community members with those of their ancestors. Spirits move in and out of bodies on whom they depend, to belong and to form a part of a community within the narrative's Bantu cosmology. This chapter will show that the movement, whether temporary or permanent, relies on the body's consent and availability for a successful or unsuccessful separation and reconciliation. In return, how a body acts or does not act depends, to a large extent, on the inhabiting spiritual principle that animates the body. For the functioning of bodies in the private and public spheres, spiritual presence is encouraged and required in certain extreme circumstances.

Much like in Sarr's narrative, the spirit is also the untouchable part of the person.[78] As a result, they cannot be trapped, kidnapped, or killed. They occupy a superior hierarchical status in relation to bodies such that *La saison de l'ombre* describes their entrance as a descent, a downward movement from a higher position (Miano 58). This eternal principle of the person is the constant in the precolonial setting of the novel, where the constitution of communities changes and the humanity of individuals is questioned due to the continuous arrival of the slave trading "men with hen feet." (Miano 107) By asking

[77] I use they as both a third person singular and the third person plural because the gender specificity of the English language paralyses the concepts that form the core of my research. Moreover, John S Mbiti's work, which I cite later, cautions me against the use of 'it.'

[78] I clearly describe spirits in this chapter because, unlike the previous chapter, which engages with a novel that represents the workings of the spiritual while framing this representation around postcolonial skepticism, Miano's text is set in a precolonial society where spirits and the language about them are integrated into everyday life. Miano's novel is free from the angst and doubt that surround the spiritual world and prompts a direct, more explicit engagement with spirits.

how Léonora Miano portrays spiritual manifestations in the physical world, I seek to understand how the narrative depicts this, arguably, untranslatable indigenous principle, which remains consistent in multiple African cosmologies and is described in many African indigenous languages.

Spirits elude vision and are only recognised via the world-sense episteme (Oyèrónké 4). In contemporary African narratives, they glide and drift, run and walk, and other spirits can hear and respond when they speak. They sleep and wake up.[79] In many African narratives, spirits are gendered, male or female, manifesting this gendering within gendered bodies. In Ahmadou's Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendences* (1968) for instance, a violent male spirit rapes the female body of Salimata and impregnates her (Kourouma 38). In other cases, spirits enter and leave bodies but can also enter specific parts of bodies, most significantly, the womb, to merge with forming flesh. Maryse Condé's *Segu* typifies this specific entry dynamic when the spirit of a kidnapped, enslaved son, Naba, returns to his homeland and re-enters his mother's womb. Spirits personify natural elements such as winds of the air, waves of the sea, and shadows. These elements' natural expressions reflect the movement of the spirits and further reinforce the belief in their presence within the physical world. Nwando Achebe's historical book, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa,* documents the lives of African women leaders who navigated a preeminent existence between the human political constituency and the

[79] In *Freshwater*, Emezi narrates, "We trembled in our sleep, the taste of clean clay wiping through us. Our brother sister tilted its head, and the headdress angled sharply against the black sky. It was irritated. Wake up! At the sound of its voice, deep within the Ada, deeper than the ash of her bones, our eyes tore open" (19). Sleeping in Emezi's narrative refers to a state of dormancy, where spirits become inactive although they remain present within the body. The sleeping spirit ceases to influence the attitudes of the body. In Emezi's *Freshwater*, the spirits fall asleep after the body is subjected to a baptism, an initiation to a different metaphysical tradition. They wake up after the body attends a masquerade parade. This traditional performance serves as a catalysing moment that reactivates and re-enacts spiritual presence within the body.

spiritual realm. According to her, the pre-eminence of these women leaders has diminished in the post/colonial era. In this literary work, spirits are alive, giving life to bodies. Their implicit and explicit resistant presence in the narratives of contemporary creators like Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019), Léonora Miano's *La saison de l'ombre* (2013), Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021), Joseph Gaï Ramaka's 2001 film *Karmen Gei* and the prolific Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018), among other works on the subject, gestures to their continued relevance in African thought.

It is, therefore, an intriguing paradox to observe that while spirits are required and needed in most African societies, they are not always welcome. This contradiction is evinced in the practice of pouring libation. Offering visitors and strangers food and drinks is a universal hospitality act in traditional African communities. Yet, John S. Mbiti writes that "the food and drinks given to the living-dead[80] are paradoxically acts of hospitality and welcome, yet of informing the living-dead to move away. The living-dead are wanted and yet not wanted." (109) Mbiti's interpretation calls attention to the anthropocentrism of traditional life and the tensions between spirits and bodies in narratives such as Akwaeke Emezi's *Freshwater* (2018). The aversion to spirit possession, among other reasons, and the danger violent spirits pose to bodies underscore this paradox. Importantly, spirit possession narratives report the suspension of consciousness. The possessed individual loses his personality and may not recollect his actions during possession (Mbiti 106). At the height of possession, the spirit dispossesses the body of its faculties and denies the body agency. This is one of the most reported and theorised dynamics of spirit-body

[80] The living-dead is the term that Mbiti uses to designate spirits of persons who have recently died. They are living because the living can remember them and are dead because their bodies cease to exist. We will engage further with the notion in the coming pages.

relations.[81] However, this project departs from the idea that denotes spirits as possessive and prioritises, through embodiment and enspiritment, the representation of the spiritual principle as an empowering force that enables oppressed victims to transcend corrupt power dynamics in the physical world.

By staging my project on the notions of enspiritment and embodiment, I amplify what various indigenous studies have discussed on the presence of an unseen world and the functioning of the unseen principle within the visible world. What this work introduces to possession studies is a new way of negotiating with the invisible world. Exorcism, I argue, eliminates the spiritual potential and the wealth of "complexities" that it adds to personhood. I interpret exorcism within the postcolonial as a vestige of colonial hauntology that expunges and dismisses indigenous mores, convictions, and beliefs as barbarous. Choosing enspiritment over possession in my analysis of Miano's *La saison de l'ombre*, this paper reconciles African spirits and bodies and affords bodies the privilege of complicatedness.

Critical Remembrance and *La saison de l'ombre*

Published in 2013, the Cameroonian novelist Léonora Miano writes in the acknowledgement of *La saison de l'ombre* that the novel stems from a 1997 UNESCO report—La Mémoire de la capture—that attempts to recapture the memory of the transatlantic slave trade from sub-Saharan African countries. Miano questions the memory of sub-Saharan Africans on the capture and the events that changed the continent forever. She wonders: "can we remember these uprootings without saying who the people were

[81] For example, see Mary Keller's *The Hammer and the Flute: Women, Power, and Spirit Possession*

who experienced them and how they saw the world?" (240-41) In *La saison de l'ombre*, Miano responds to her inquiries by imagining the lived experiences of sub-Saharan African inhabitants during the transatlantic slave trade. Through extensive research, her fictionalised report paints realistic imagery of the structural components of sub-Saharan communities and how the slave trade disrupted these structures. Miano humanises the populations whose hi/story she narrates by depicting the pain, turmoil, and sorrow of the families and communities of kidnapped folks. She also portrays the humanity of the African slave traders. Their greed for power, on the one hand, and fears of being forced into slavery by the powerful, armed "men with hen feet," on the other hand, ensured a continued supply of human cargo.

Miano's narrative engages with critiques of African intellectual thought, particularly responding to Achille Mbembe's assertion that no African memory of slavery exists. For Mbembe, if/when such memory exists, it is relegated to the realm of witchcraft (Mbembe 259-60). These critics highlight the prominence of colonialism as a subject matter in African literature (Kumavie 52) and the absence of the slave trade as a subject of African writing. Buttressing the absence, Opoku-Agyemang, in "A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis)Representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature," writes that: "For the most part, our creative writers hug the bare shorelines of African history, touch the colonial experience and report that to be all there is. The vaster depths and structures of African history, slavery, and the slave trade are hardly ever regarded in a sustained way or mined seriously for its lessons, truths, and metaphors" (64). Opoku-Agyemang, whose poetry, *Cape Coast Castle*, centres on the structural and architectural legacies of the slave trade, intervenes strongly in this paucity.

Léonora Miano's fictional work joins Opoku-Agyemang's poetry to confront and mine the lessons, truths, and metaphors of the transatlantic slave trade.

It remains unsurprising that Léonora Miano's works enjoy a continued presence amongst francophone literary theorists and critics. *La saison de l'ombre* remains a constant literary staple for scholars of transatlantic commerce and precolonial African experiences seeking inquiries into wars, community structures, and class systems. Her use of natural language to describe places and time has drawn the attention of scholars like Mbégane Ndour, who argues that through literal authenticity and polyphonic writing, Miano recreates existential territories that produce an African-European identity—afropéenne. Mbégane writes that the novel

> englobe les lieux de présence et ceux de l'absence, appelle la réunification de l'ici et de l'ailleurs dans un langage où toute simultanéité se conjugue au milieu du temps, dans un présent poétique qui rompt avec le passé (99).
>
> encompasses the places of presence and those of absence, calls for the reunification of here and elsewhere in a language where all simultaneity is combined in the middle of time in a poetic present that breaks with the past.[82]

For Mbégane, the novel's themes of displacement, loss, and absence team up with the language of time and place to create a new world poetics that he describes as "hybridations térritoriales entre l'espace de la réalité et le lieu de la fiction." (100) I read these "hybridations territoriales" as a space where exorcised African cosmology is recalled and

[82] My translation.

validated across colonial boundaries. *La saison de l'ombre* refreshes and clarifies vague memories of what has been in the precolonial era and reimagines and reifies what could be in the postcolonial. Setting the physical experience of the slave trade on the backdrop of the spiritual encounters, the novel unravels new sites of pain but also envisions a new healing space for the postcolonial—the spiritual.

Critical in *La saison de l'ombre* is the recentering of spirits and female bodies—suppressed groups in the colonial/postcolonial—within the novel's precolonial setting, such that Miano's characters recollect and recentre these forgotten categories. The novel's repositioning agenda troubles the haunting colonial restrictions, whose legacies extinguish the flames of traditional convictions, and it shades the patriarchy with the dominant presence of female bodies. The tale opens with the disappearance of twelve men, ten young initiates and two men who led the young men through their initiation rituals. The two men are spiritual and political leaders of the community, and their absence creates a vacuum that Miano intentionally fills with women. The novel justifies this replacement via literary historicism; the narrative voice flashes readers back to the events that founded the Mulongo clan, where she zooms in on Queen Emene, the founding matriarch of the Mulongo:

> Le statut des femmes avait changé au sein de la communauté, lorsque Sa majesté Emene avait rejoint le pays des morts. Son premier-né, un garçon baptisé Mulongo, recevant le bâton de commandement, avait décrété, il y avait maintenant plusieurs générations, que le tabouret et le bâton d'autorité se transmettraient de mère en fils. Les hommes pourraient prendre plusieurs épouses, si tel était leur souhait (44).

> The status of women changed when Her Majesty Emene departed to the land of the dead. When her firstborn son Mulongo received her staff of command several generations ago, he decreed that the seat and staff of authority would be transmitted from mother to son. And men could take several wives if they so desired.[83] (40)

In addition to being a sociocultural construct, patriarchy in this society is also a historical construct whose construction/origin can be traced to a specific era. The novel returns to this period to recuperate and recreate appropriate language, incorporating female bodies and voices within the textual space. However, beyond recentring the female body, Miano grounds her intervention spiritually, employing spiritual reinforcements to situate female corporeal participation in the public sphere.

Léonora Miano's 2013 novel invokes precolonial spirits from the colonial abyss, causing them to occupy their original positions within the postcolony. The novel's language and embodied characters recall metaphysical realities from the lost collection of the Zamani into the Sasa time-space, where they can be vividly remembered. John S. Mbiti theorised the Sasa and Zamani principle of time in his book, *African Religions & Philosophy.* Using two Swahili words to explain these concepts, Mbiti argues that Sasa becomes a personal time, the time when people exist physically in the world and when they are remembered, even after their physical death of the living. Sasa can be interpreted as the present, the immediate past, and the immediate future (Royster 79). When a person ceases to be remembered as an individual by someone still living, that person leaves Sasa

[83] For most of the translations in this chapter, I cite Gila Walker's English translation of Miano's narrative, *Season of the Shadow*. Translations from Walker have page number references.

time and enters another part of the time-space continuum, the Zamani dimension. In Zamani time, a person joins the collective or the community of spirits and achieves collective mortality. Royster states the concept more clearly when she explains that Zamani serves as the past, the present, and the non-time, or a macro dimension in time, which is beyond both before (past) and after (future). I argue that Miano frames *La saison de l'ombre* as a literary, historical project that returns precolonial Africa from the Zamani into the Sasa by rendering the traditional components of its societal values visible.

The beginning pages of the narrative, dedication, epigraph, and opening sentences establish Miano's contention that metaphysical realities enjoy a coeval status with their physical counterparts. These founding scriptures foreground *La saison de l'ombre's* argument that spirits, albeit invisible, sustain a similar experience with bodies within the precolonial. Ergo, each word, each phrase, and each sentence provoke a vision of the invisible beings, solidifying a permanence within the textual space. Miano dedicates the novel:

> Aux résidents de l'ombre,
> que recouvre le suaire atlantique.
> À ceux qui les aimaient.
> To the shadow-dwellers
> Wrapped in the Atlantic shroud.
> To those who loved them.

The description of these unseeable beings gives them a form, a shape that renders them visible. The reader sees the unseeable spirits to whom the novel is dedicated before meeting the human characters (notably females first); her resulting vision enables conceptualisation. This dedication dignifies spirits as the persons they are in many African

cosmologies. As persons, they are dwellers, residents who occupy a legitimate space, not aimless wanderers without objectives. Like bodies in the physical, they are wrapped, not ungraspable, fleeting beings, appearing and disappearing. Like humans within a community, they are loved. Spirits, invisible principles of personhood, are not more personified than a body existing in the physical world, but this dedication facilitates perception with concrete imageries. The personification of spirits serves as a trope where knowledge from the "men with hen feet" and ignorance of the indigenous epistemologies culminate.

The narrative's opening lines explain the dedication's efforts at personifying spirits. They introduce the plot's heroines, mothers of the ten missing sons, who, desolate and in despair, plunge into a state of cognizant impotence:

> Elles l'ignorent, mais *cela* leur arrive au même moment. Celles dont les fils n'ont pas été retrouvés *ont fermé les yeux*, au bout de plusieurs nuits sans sommeil (11). They do not know it, but the *thing* comes to them simultaneously. After several sleepless nights, the women whose sons went missing *shut their eyes* (5). (Emphasis mine)

The "thing" in this passage is the spirits of the women's missing sons. Untraceable physically, they return in their spiritual forms to their mothers. Unfortunately, the mothers fail to recognise them in their fatigued, downtrodden state. The omniscient narrator only reports how the mothers conceptualise their sons. What could have been if the women's despair had not robbed them of their sensitivity and ability to discern? Distinguishing between the living-dead and spirits in *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti's theory explains the precarious positions of the ten initiates:

> Nevertheless, the living-dead are bilingual: they speak the language of men, with whom they lived until "recently," and speak the language of the spirits and God, to Whom they are drawing nearer ontologically. These are the "spirits" with which African peoples are most concerned: it is through the living-dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men…The two groups are bound together by their common Sasa, which for the living-dead is fast disappearing into the Zamani. The living-dead are still "people" and have not yet become "things," "spirits," or "its"…When the last person who knew a particular living-dead also dies, then in effect, the process of death is now complete as far as that living-dead is concerned. He is now no longer remembered by name, no longer a "human being," but a spirit, a thing, an IT. He has now sunk beyond the visible horizon of the Zamani" (108-09).

For Mbiti, "spirits" exist in the Zamani dimension, a time-space of collective unknowing. He explains that metaphysical beings whose names are known and remembered are the living-dead. They are humans who remain alive, although not physically; they are not things or IT. The young initiates would belong to the category of the living-dead because their mothers know their names, and their community still mourns their loss. However, when they reappear to the ones who suffer the most from their disappearance, the mothers who would draw solace from the spiritual comeback, they are conceptualised as "the thing." When not known, a spirit becomes a thing. Little wonder, Miano's dedication "personifies" the thing, informing readers that they are, in John Mbiti's words, the living-dead. Unfortunately for these living-dead sons, their fatigued mothers shut their eyes to

sleep, an act that symbolises their lack of spiritual sensitivity and is further highlighted in their inability to recognise their sons.

But before the narrative begins with this unfortunate incident, Miano's epigraph warns her readers of impending danger. The cautionary rhetoric functions as a warning against a looming spectrum of dangers: of the slave trading "men with hen feet," of foreign invasions, of the expulsion of traditional convictions, of colonisation, of neo-colonisation, the list could go on. However, the irony of Miano's chosen scriptures underpins their urgency and precarity:

> Sentinelle, que dis-tu de la nuit?
> Sentinelle, que dis-tu de la nuit?
> La sentinelle répond:
> Le matin vient, et la nuit aussi
> ESAÏE 21, 11-12
> Watchman, what of the night?
> Watchman, what of the night?
> The watchman said,
> The morning comes, and the night too.
> Isaiah 21:11-12

In this apostrophic address to a guard, the poet inquires specifically about the night. Because Miano pulls this epigraph out of the Bible, an interpretation based on Christian metaphysical traditions suggests that the night could symbolise a time of trials and testing. On the other hand, it conveys a time of danger, sin, and evil activity, often contrasted with

light or morning.[84] Nighttime, a period of darkness and invisibility, is also a time of ignorance and the absence of light or knowledge. Nevertheless, the watchman responds, hopefully announcing the morning first, before stating the inevitable—that darkness, the night, is coming. This prophetic statement foreshadows a season that transcends the narrative's precolonial context but extends to the postcolonial era. The night season is a season of unknowing, unseeing, and unsensing. Bodies are asleep at night, their senses dormant, numbed. The engulfing night marks a time of oppression and suppression that subdues indigenous knowledge systems. Spirits and the spiritual principle in general are dismissed during the season. Consequently, their inhabiting bodies suffer from this period of darkness; they struggle and wander, groping blindly in the dark.

Such is the case with the ten mothers whose sorrow has plunged them into the night. In this dark, they cannot know, and their not-knowing threatens their wholeness and healing. With these mothers, Miano allegorises Africa, whose invaded lands and kidnapped children, ravaged bodies strip them of their light. However, the sentry does not speak of the night alone. She also prophesies of the morning, an assurance that light will be restored, knowledge will return, and spiritual realities acknowledged. In Miano's narrative, the prophecy hints at a hopeful end for the mothers and the continent they represent.

A different interpretation suggests that Miano scripts against the Scripture by deriving her epigraph from the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. While there is ample

[84] John 3:19-20 KJV states "And this is the condemnation, that light comes into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved."

evidence that various precolonial African societies, such as the Nubites of present-day Sudan[85] practised different forms of indigenous orthodox Christianity, the nations of central and western Africa were predominantly adherents to African traditional and philosophical beliefs. Christianity and the Bible form a part of the colonial heritage, suppressing agents that exorcise both the spirituality and humanity of the colonised. Very importantly, for a novel filled with various references to spirituality, the epigraph, the warning about impending darkness, is the only reference to Christian metaphysical traditions. Miano's epigraph resonates with conversations on Toni Morrison's narratives that use scriptures to write against the Scripture. Commenting on Toni Morrison's *Paradise (1998)*, Deborah Mix argues that the convent where *Paradise* is set functions as a site where tensions between the physical and the spiritual are in constant conflict. Mix likens the bodies of inhabitants of the convent to the decorations of the convent: ashtrays and doorknobs, which function as objects without thoughts and feelings, existing solely for male pleasure. Contrary to expectation, Morrison's spiritual backdrop becomes an oppressive space and a criticism of spiritual institutions that have done violence to the Black/African experience.

Drawing from Mix's interpretations, I read the convent as a failed site of solace for the spirits and bodies of its women inhabitants. Despite the physical and spiritual protection and security a convent supposedly offers women, their oppressors penetrate this impotent space and murder them. Similarly, in Miano's warning epigraph, the Christian warning is impotent, spiritually and physically. It fails to successfully forewarn

[85] See Kings and Generals. "Nubia - Christian Kingdoms in the Heart of Africa." YouTube, 9 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKIoLwKYpuY.

the Mulongo (and Africa) from impending darkness; it does not protect them from invaders who dehumanise and mutilate their bodies, nor does the spiritual backdrop effectively function to validate their humanity. Rather than bringing light to the precolonial as various Christian scriptures claim, the Scripture clashes with the light of traditional religions and philosophies, blinding the people and bringing the night.

Despite the allusion to the biblical warning, the novel remains consistent with its purpose of remembering the people for whom the slave trade was their lived experience. Most slave narratives engage, quite necessarily, with the trauma and experiences of the kidnapped and enslaved. For instance, Olaudah Equiano begins his autobiography, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African Written by Himself,* by painting a picture of his life at home in present-day Nigeria. In this story, Equiano describes his life, family, and everyday activities of the people in his community. Olaudah notes his closeness with his mother as her youngest son. The relationship was so tight-knit that he observed the monthly exclusion with her during her times of the month rather than being separated from her. However, as soon as Olaudah is kidnapped, the narrative follows him and his sister until they are separated. There is no reference to Olaudah's mother's inevitable suffering from the loss of her only daughter and closest son. The memory and corresponding trauma remain one-sided. Miano's narrative addresses this one-sidedness by juxtaposing the suffering of the kidnapped victims with the pain of the mourners. This juxtaposition responds to Saidiya Hartman's question in her book *Lose Your Mother*. Recalling a line from Ghanaian poet Kwadwo Opoku-Agyeman, Hartman restates that "Africa was a land of graves without bodies." According to Hartman, the poem evokes the millions of people who disappeared from Africa, the empty homes, and deserted

villages. However, she expresses dissatisfaction in her observation that the poem does not mention the mourners. "Were there no mourners because the graves were empty?" (57) Hartman speculates. The troubled bodies of grieving mothers and the lost spirits of captured bodies in Miano's narrative delineate these mourners. Deploying multiple voices, *La saison de l'ombre* follows bodies and spirits through the journey of finding closure in this unexplained tragedy of loss. Yet, it also offers a pathway to reconciliation where the spirits of bodies without graves and the bodies of the mourners can retrace their way to a common place of rest.

Remembering for Miano includes reckoning with Africa's role in bringing the night to her shores. Scholarship on transatlantic commerce often focuses on the white slave traders and enslavers as the oppressive class, but Miano points to the complicities of Africans in selling their neighbours[86] to the slave traders. In fact, Miano's narrative uses non-racialised terms to refer to the slave traders: men with hen feet. This reference deracialises them and positions them as monstrous beings, dehumanised antagonists of the transatlantic slave trade. But the humans responsible for the pain and trauma of the slave trade remain complicit Africans. Hence, the narrative focuses on the victims—the suffering protagonists and even their African antagonists. Through the depiction of the psychological pain of African protagonists and the mental struggles of African antagonists, *La saison de l'ombre* humanises her African characters without excusing African participation in the slave trade. Miano indicates that to mourn our loss genuinely,

[86] Using the word neighbours agrees with an observation from Saidiya Hartman that, contrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their family members. Instead, they sold their kidnapped neighbours, outcasts, or violators of community norms. Leonora Miano's narrative conforms with Hartman's observations as it depicts the Mulongo clan as victims of their more extensive and powerful Bwele clan neighbours.

we must accept responsibility for our actions and reckon with our contribution to bringing forth the night.[87] If remembering the people who lived and relived the slave trade retraces Africa's memory and recalls her trauma, it follows that the narrative relocates the spirits of African bodies without graves from the Zamani dimension of the time-space continuum to the Sasa dimension. Furthermore, it re/members these lost spirits within the spirit world of African cosmology.

The Wo/man, Her Body, His Spirit: Agentic Encounters, Patriarchal Subversions, Female Masculinity in *La saison de l'ombre*

La saison de l'ombre begins with the dilemma of the disappearance of twelve bodies from the Mulongo clan: ten young initiates and two accompanying adults. However, the disappearance of these twelve male bodies from the community creates a gap that results in the presence and visibility of spirits and female bodies. First, the ten mothers of the young initiates isolated in a hut acquire a new identity repeated throughout the narrative : « Les mères de ceux qui n'ont pas été retrouvés » (16 ; "The mothers of the missing," 10), « Les femmes dont les fils n'ont pas été retrouvés » (12, 17 ; "The women whose children were missing," 6, 11). Their unjust isolation recalls the imprisoned women in *Karmen Geï*, demanding spiritual intervention. Secondly, the absence of two (male) Council members during the crisis forces the rest of the Council to

[87] Miano's text sustains ongoing cultural conversations involving leaders and delegates from different African nations such as Ghana, Benin and Cameroon who have on different occasions, apologized for the participation of their ancestors in the slave trade. In a recent pilgrimage to the site of the Quindaro Underground Railroad, Ghanaian delegates offered their apology for Africa's participation in slavery. For more information on this event, see:
https://www.communityvoiceks.com/2022/09/24/kc-hosts-ghana-delegation-for-enslavement-apology/

consult with two older women, whom, due to their ages, the community henceforth considers equal to men:

> Des femmes ont été consultées : les plus âgées. Celles qui ne voient plus leur sang depuis des longues lunes. Celles que le clan considère désormais comme les égales des hommes (11).

> They summoned two women for advice, among the oldest of the clan. Two women who have not seen their blood for many moons. Women whom the clan now considers equal to men (5).

Finally, the spirits of the ten young boys depart their captive bodies, return to the Mulongo community, and hover over their mothers:

> Une présence ombreuse vient à elles, à chacune d'elles, et chacune reconnaîtrait entre mille la voix qui lui parle (14).

> A shadowy presence comes to them each one, and each one recognises the distinctive voice speaking to her (8).

These unusual visibilities set a trend that situates spiritual presence and female participation as public, cultural, and normative. By placing the absence of male bodies with the re/emergence of spirits and redefining femaleness within the context of the transatlantic slave trade, *La saison de l'ombre,* from the beginning of the narrative, entangles mothernormativity, female leadership, and spiritual indwelling with patriarchal conventions of the postcolonial era.

Examining this novel, we can unpack the spiritual terms on which Miano enacts her campaign for indigenous gender nuances and patriarchal subversions. The novel positions spiritual constituents as essential to bodily animation and identities. Accordingly, *La saison de l'ombre* delineates spiritual absence from African bodies as a devaluation that portends a spectrum of consequences. Unconsciousness, death, weakness, unbelonging, and indecision all stand in stark opposition to consciousness, life, strength, will, identity, and legitimacy:

> Musima avance vers l'ancien avec le plus d'autorité possible, tentant de discipliner le tremblement de ses jambes. Il ne se sent pas prêt à endorser ce rôle, n'est pas légitime, tant que son père ne lui est pas au moins apparu en rêve. Tant que son esprit n'est pas descendu en lui pour léguer son savoir, avant de gagner l'autre monde (19).
>
> Musima walks towards the dignitary with as much authority as he can muster, trying to keep his trembling legs under control. He does not feel ready to assume this role. It is not legitimate for him to do so as long as his father has not appeared to him in a dream. His father's spirit has not descended upon him to transmit his knowledge before entering the other world (14).

In the passage, Musima, the son of one of the missing elders, hesitates to assume his father's responsibility. At the same time, the young lad awaits enspiritment from his father's spirit; his body trembles at the thought of his illegitimate standing. The hesitancy and trembling offer an interesting cultural analysis of the politics of inheritance and the legitimacy of children within the community. One would think that sonship—the

biological privilege of being sired by one's father, in this case—suffices to endue on the son the title or position of the father after death. However, Musima's trembling body belies this thinking. Even temporarily, the son's body would require enspiritment from the father's spirit to function successfully as the community's spiritual guide. Notable in this passage is the notion that knowledge in this *worldsense* rests principally within the spiritual constituency. If Léonora Miano's categorisations of bodies/spirits function as an epistemological, cultural marking of binarism, then, accordingly, operating within the purview of a community spiritual guide, Musima's body occupies the place of ignorance. Hence, the body trembles due to its deficiency, lacking relevant knowledge of the principles necessary to keep it firm.

In another scene, Ebeise, Musima's mother, faces the same challenge. As one of the women the Council chose to lead the community through a crisis, the Mulongo midwife cannot function. Like her son, Ebeise relies on the spirits of the departed to validate her actions:

> La puissance de notre mère [Queen Emene] m'a désertée depuis longtemps. Je m'interroge sur mes décisions. Et puis, il y a la disparition de mon époux. Il ne s'est manifesté ni à moi, ni à notre fils aîné. Ce n'est pas normal. J'ai peur… (47).
>
> The power of our mother [Queen Emene] deserted me long ago. I wonder about my decisions. And then, there is the disappearance of my husband. He has not manifested himself to me or to my elder son. Something is not right. I am afraid… (43).

In the earlier passage, Musima expects his father's spirit for an initial enspiritment, but in this passage, Ebeise laments on the desertion of the "puissance" of the clan's founding mother, Queen Emene. This implies that Ebeise's successful service to her clan as the community midwife—and recent Council member—relies on the spirit of an ancestor. To depict this implication more clearly, the woman who brings forth young bodies from their mothers' bodies draws the knowledge, inspiration, will, and strength from the spirit of the departed. It also indicates the presence of ancestral spirits at birth, reinforcing the notion that for Ebeise and the Mulongo, spirits are welcome, guiding agents on whom bodies depend to assert their subjectivity fully. Spiritual absence, therefore, remains an unusual tragedy that adds to the series of unfortunate events the Mulongo clan faces: the fire disaster that destroys their lands, properties, and living, the disappearance of twelve bodies that threaten the physical circle of life, and the absence of spirits that troubles the corporeality of bodies. Unable to undo the effects of the fire or find their missing loved ones, the elder utters a desperate prayer she hopes will restore some normalcy and assure a new beginning and healing for the clan: « Emene, fais descendre ton esprit sur ta fille. » (58) "Emene, let your spirit descend upon your daughter." (54)

Miano locates spirits as the body's true essence. Explaining the notion, Diana Fuss writes that the true essence is "a belief in the real, the invariable and fixed properties which define the "whatness" [sic] of a given entity" (xi). In Miano's narrative, spirits are the invariable and fixed property of the human principle. Bodies change, grow old, die, and are captured in the physical world, but the animating spirits remain constant and free. In addition, the absence of the spiritual essence reads as a disability:

> Puisqu'il lui est impossible de bouger, il se concentre pour que son esprit, qui ne peut être entravé, s'échappe, observe. L'œil de son esprit voit, entend tout…Ensuite, il retournera dans sa chair…Intérieurement, l'homme récite les paroles qui permettent à l'esprit de se détacher du corps (85).
>
> Since it is impossible for him to move, he concentrates to allow his spirit, which cannot be held captive, to escape and observe. The spirit's eye sees and hears all…Then he will return to his flesh.[88] …Inwardly, the man recites the words that would allow the spirit to detach itself from its body (83-84).

Slave traders entrap the body in this passage, and the entrapment, limited to the body, supports the claim that the spirit remains the principal agent of the human principle. The passage evokes a new system of binaries that privileges spirits over bodies—entrapment/freedom, immobile/static, inaction/action, not seeing/sight, not hearing/hearing, uninformed/observant, etc etc etc. Notwithstanding, this scene situates human qualities, rights and privileges spiritually but offers an exciting twist that raises questions on agentic encounters between spirits and bodies: the body expels the spirit. From the passage, we glean that the body decides to send out the spirit, and there is no evidence that the spirit can resist the dispatch. Therefore, although the spirit functions as the body's essence, the agency is located within the body's ability/capacity to invite the spirit, as the midwife shows, or expel it, as the kidnapped body demonstrates.

[88] My reading of the original French version differs here. Gila Walker translates the word "chair" as "body." Miano uses the word "corps" to refer to the body, and here, she uses "chair." I show below that her use of different words merits a different reading.

In the embodiment dynamic, expelling a spirit from one's body is not without consequences. The passage uses the word "corps" "body" to name the physical component that bears its spiritual counterpart. However, it changes the naming of this physical envelope to "chair" or "flesh" when the spirit separates from the body. The flesh represents a bodily state of dismemberment and mutilation. It suggests the possibility of ripping up, a tearing that not only orphans the body but also unidentifies it (Spillers, 1987). In her influential article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers retraces the stereotypical marking and branding of Black female bodies to the transatlantic slave trade, whose legacy reduces the black female body from the gendered category, body, to an ungendered category, flesh. Spillers cites the weighing practices of the slave traders to illustrate this devaluation of the black female body. According to her, black flesh in slave ships was categorised according to weight with no deference to the female body. In this system, the flesh is only relevant and measured by its weight and can be divided into parts: hands help, carry and work, and the vagina is used for white male sexual pleasure. It serves as the entrance to the uterus that reproduces more labour. For Spillers, this cultural branding of the female reproduces new stereotypical categories such as "Peaches" and "Sapphire." The body in Miano's passage, however, belongs to a man named Mutango. In this capture scene, Mutango contemplates expelling his spirit from his body to plot an escape. But spiritual absence, even for a short while, implies that Mutango’s body will be reduced from “corps” to “flesh” (a risk that the African male body considers worth taking). Suppose the category flesh ungenders the captive black female on one side of the Atlantic, as Spillers argues, in that case, on the other side, flesh performs a reverse ungendering on the African male that unclans both body and spirit within a

patriarchal and patrilineal milieu. This implies that as Mutango's body reduces to flesh due to a premature separation of the spirit from the body, the spirit loses ties and connections to the ancestral patrilineage. When we compare Ousseynou Koumakh's disembodiment in Mohammed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* with Miano's rendition, it cultivates an even more precarious reading of Koumakh's successful bilocation.[89] Lost spirits wander around the spiritual world and hover over the physical world, restless and understandably, in some cases, angry. They could wreak havoc on humans due to their restlessness, for an unresting spirit also troubles humans, denying them peace. Not surprisingly, humans sacrifice to appease and send the troubled spirits away, hence the complicated practice and belief of pouring libations. Nevertheless, what is arguably of the most consequence for the spirit is the lack of belonging that such a detachment causes in the circle of life. Mutango's lost spirit would be unable to come back through his descendants due to his situation of unbelonging, threatening his lineage's (spiritual) circle of life. Yet, as he contemplates his condition and situation of physical bondage and slavery, a temporary disembodiment is a risk he considers worth taking.

Just as Mutango's body exercises agency within the dis/embodiment dynamic, bodies also exercise agency within an enspiritment dynamic. This suggests that bodies can choose or reject enspiritment, countering possession narratives.[90] However, the repercussions of acceptance or rejection depend on the implications or reasons for the spiritual presence in the first place. In Miano's narrative, bodies are positioned as subjects that curate the movement—entry and exit of spirits in and out of them. In one of the scenes

[89] See chapter one for the story of Mbar Ngom in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*.

[90] For more details on enspiritment and agency, see chapter three.

that begin this narrative, the bodies of the ten isolated mothers are visited by the spirits of their kidnapped sons, and the bodies' reactions to this visit reinforce this position:

> Les femmes dorment. Dans leur sommeil, il leur arrive une chose étrange. Comme leur esprit navigue dans les contrées du rêve qui sont une autre dimension de la réalité, elles font une rencontre. Une présence ombreuse vient à elles, à chacune d'elles et chacune reconnaîtrait entre mille la voix qui lui parle. Dans leur rêve, elles penchent la tête, étirent le cou, cherchent à percer cette ombre. Voir ce visage. L'obscurité, cependant, est épaisse. Elles ne distinguent rien. Il n'y a que cette parole : *Mère, ouvre-moi, afin que je puisse renaître*. Elles reculent d'un pas. On insiste : *Mère, hâte-toi. Nous devons agir devant le jour. Autrement, tout sera perdu…*D'un même mouvement, les femmes se retournent. Le geste est nerveux. Elles n'ouvrent pas les yeux. La voix se fait pressante, s'évanouit. Les derniers mots résonnent dans leur esprit : ... *devant le jour. Tout sera perdu*. Les paupières closes laissent filtrer des larmes, tandis qu'elles glissent une main entre les jambes, plient les genoux. Elles ne peuvent s'ouvrir comme cela. Se laisser pénétrer par une ombre. Elles pleurent. Cela leur arrive à toutes (14-16).

> The women are asleep. In their slumber, a strange thing is happening to them. As their spirit travels through the dream realms that are another dimension of reality, they have an encounter. A shadowy presence comes to them, to each one, and each one recognizes the distinctive voice that is speaking to her. As they dream, they lean forward, stretch their neck, try to peer into the shadow. To see this face. The darkness, however, is thick. They distinguish nothing.

> Nothing but these words: *Mother, open for me so I can be reborn*. They recoil. The voice insists: *Mother, hurry up. We have to act in front of the day. Otherwise, all will be lost…* In a single movement, the women turn over. The gesture is nervous. They do not open their eyes. The voice becomes pressing, then vanishes. The final words echo in their minds: …in front of the day…all will be lost. Eyelids closed, but tears flowing, they slip a hand between their legs, draw up their knees. They cannot open themselves like this. Let themselves be penetrated by a shadow. They weep. This happens to them all (9-10).

Over the isolated hut that houses ten women hover the spirits of the ten missing boys. Just as Mutango was attempting in the previous passage to separate his spirit from his body, the spirits of the ten successfully depart their bodies and return to their mothers, asking to be reborn. We read this request as permission to embody new flesh, to transform new flesh—within a body—into a body having left behind their captured carnal vessels. For the mothers of the ten, this spiritual entrance would produce a different kind of enspiritment. Different, in the sense that the spirits are limited and located in the womb and do not suspend the embodied spirits of the women. The women would retain their essence, characters, and personalities while harbouring within them the spirits of their sons. The return of their sons in a different flesh offers the mourners consolation and closure, a new beginning for the lost, and an assurance of the security of the patrilineage.

The benefits of this return notwithstanding, the bodies of the ten women and their embodying spirits reject this enspiritment that could have led to pregnancy and rebirth of the missing lads. This exciting dynamic raises curious questions about Miano's feminist

and sexuality politics. Given that the ten women were wrongly isolated because of their missing sons, to what extent would the refusal of motherhood sustain or trouble the novel's feminist politics? Also, can we read the rejection as a refusal to reproduce for the patriarchy? Is there a possibility of a lesbian continuum in this scene, given that the women were alone with no male presence? Does the failed pregnancy promote nonprocreative sex? Or does the failed pregnancy miss out on an opportunity to argue the possibility of a continued lineage without a male presence? How can we read this failed pregnancy?

Agentic enactment functions corporeally and spiritually to resist the constructed mothernormative trope that dominates African feminist thought. The conversation on the dominant representation of African women as wives and mothers centres the argument on policing African women's sexuality by imposing respectability politics on their image.[91] This chapter extends this argument by contending that the mothernormative trope controls and limits women characters' identities to the home's conscripted space. In this way, the politics of character development and representation of African women regulate their agency in the domestic and private spheres. As agents, African women's actions can be explained or justified as functioning within their respective roles as wives and mothers. Reading *La saison de l'ombre* against this tradition of mothernormative representation is evocative, for the passage portrays both spirits and bodies in a precolonial setting as co-agents who resist this trope, a vestige of postcolonial hauntology.

[91] In Postcolonial Hauntology, Ayo A. Coly notes Sylvia Tamale's critique in "African Feminism: How Should We Change?" of the trope of motherhood in African feminist scholarship for its patriarchal underpinnings. Coly emphasises Tamale's contention that the conflation of motherhood and womanhood feeds an Africanist feminist culture of "mothernormativity" and "marriagenormativity." Furthering Tamale's argument, Coly adds that both mothernormativity and marriagenormativity constitute anti-feminist ideologies that police women's sexuality by regulating when and why women can have sex (62-63).

We can glean from the rejection that bodies are active agents within the spiritual constituency, just as spirits exercise agency within the corporeal world. The encounter occurs while the women are asleep, their physical senses numbed. The women's spirits meet and recognize the spirits of the young men : « Comme leur esprit navigue dans les contrées du rêve qui sont une autre dimension de la réalité, elles font une rencontre. » "As their spirit travels through the dream realms that are another dimension of reality, they have an encounter." Instinctively, each woman makes movements that would enable her to see clearly, but is unsuccessful. More tellingly, Miano's tale narrates that while they could not see the spirits of their sons, they recognise them and hear them calling on them to open their bodies. This peculiar manner of recognition recalls Oyěwùmí Oyèrónké's advocacy for a world-sense epistemological paradigm rather than the dominant Western worldview episteme.[92] Oyěwùmí points out that the use of the term "worldview" in the West to sum up "the cultural logic of a society captures the West's privileging of the visual" (Oyěwùmí 4). She proposes the term "world-sense" as a more inclusive way of conception in different world groups. Given the pitch darkness in the scene, we can say that the worldview episteme proves insufficient and demands another epistemological analytic to the text. A world beyond bodies requires a sense beyond sight. It is, therefore, not surprising that the ten women recognise their sons without seeing them. However, their unified rejection of their sons' requests remains shocking. The passage emphasises the body parts that enable the rejection, thereby situating the physical actions spiritually: eyes

[92] Oyěwùmí argues this in the chapter "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects" (3-21 in African Gender Studies: A Reader). For Oyěwùmí: "the reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight." She exemplifies this notion by citing the differentiation of the human body by sex and skin colour (Oyěwùmí, 4). Her intervention becomes necessary in the analysis of the scene where the visual becomes inactive.

closed, hands slipped between legs, knees bent. Thus, the spirits of the ten lads meet with the spirits of the mothers who recognise them via the world-sense logic, but the bodies of the women, inactive due to sleep, transcend the physical world to the world of their spirits, where they enact agency by deciding against enspiritment.

The uniformity and unity of the women's actions imagine a possible lesbian continuum in this collective denial of motherhood. Adrienne Rich develops the term lesbian continuum in her article, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”, to describe the not necessarily sexual art of women supporting women. Rich expands the term lesbian continuum beyond the conscious desire of women to engage in a sexual experience with other women. For Rich, the lesbian continuum encapsulates both the sexual category of women-identified women and the political stance of women supporting women. It includes bonding against male tyranny, sharing lived experiences, and giving and receiving practical and political support (299-300). The women’s mutual rejection of motherhood carries a political consequence and signifies an act of resistance to the injustice of isolation. According to the narrative, twelve males disappeared from the community on the night of the fire. The two elders who accompanied the young boys to the initiation rituals have yet to be found. Still, none of their relatives are isolated like the ten women who are mothers. The elders' wives are present in the narrative, and so are the boys' fathers, albeit fleetingly. Yet only the young mothers are separated and questioned on the whereabouts of their sons.

Given that the community equates older women to men, it follows that the action of separating the younger mothers from the community verges on the ideology of punishing the subaltern. In this case, the women are punished for their failure to secure the

continuity or patrilineage of the clan. Isolation in the novel functions as one would quarantine a body infected by a dangerous, communicable virus or, alternatively, as one would imprison a criminal for a crime: this means that young female bodies that are neither mothers nor wives could be considered an infection or a crime. Culturally, isolation marks and disconnects the isolated from their community and families, tearing kinship ties and denying them the subjective right to mourn. Politically, separating the ten from an entire community that experienced a fire and unresolved disappearance brands their vulnerable bodies as suspects, even criminals, rather than as the subjective mourners and victims that they are. Under these circumstances, the women collectively resist this accusatory positioning by closing the entrance to their wombs. In so doing, their spirits and bodies disavow an identity grounded on motherhood and choose another identity founded on and unified by their mutual experiences as subjective mourners, even victims. In this unlikely twist of fate, the women unanimously subvert patriarchal ideologies by rejecting a penetration that would result in reproducing the ten missing boys for the patriarchal Mulongo clan. When the mothers entered the isolated hut, the Council spoke for them and determined their destiny. However, at the point of their exit, the nonmothers claim an ideological stance as individual subjects empowered for a trajectory that transcends the private sphere. Refusing penetration affirms the subalterns' speech.

Eyabe is one of the women who exits the hut with a new identity that launches her into the public sphere. Since she occupies a subaltern social function, the fact that the tale follows her trajectory in a narrative based on a communal tragedy raises questions about what fleshes her out to the readers. She does not belong to the Council, has no royal blood, and does not yet fit into the category of older women considered equal to men. The first

time we meet this remarkable character is the morning after the incident with the spirits of the young lads. Musima, the hesitant spiritual guide, inquires from the women about what happened the previous night. With his mother Ebeise, they had witnessed the appearance of Mwititi, the shadow, over the communal hut. Still recovering from their shock, nine women deny that the spirits were their sons, but Eyabe boldly speaks differently:

> L'ombre est tout ce qui nous reste. Elle est ce que sont devenus les jours…Et toi, homme, qu'as-tu à dire de Mwititi ? Crois-tu qu'il suffise que dix femmes soient reléguées dans un coin du village pour que la communauté y échappe ? (25)

> The shadow is all we have left. It is what the days have become…And you, man, what have to say of Mwititi? Do you believe that all it takes is to relegate ten women to a corner of the village for the community to be safe? (20)

From this point onwards, Eyabe emerges as a principal character in the narrative. This passage portrays her as the courageous confronter of oppression and its representatives. In the act of defiance, the woman applies white kaolin on her face to mark and symbolise the previous night's event and, very remarkably, steps out of the communal hut without permission from any Council member.

Eyabe's resistance draws more attention to her from the Council eager to brand female bodies as guilty. Fortunately, in her capacity as an ad hoc Council member, Ebeise, advises the Council against their misogynist path:

> « Douze hommes du village ont disparu après une attaque. Nous souffrons. Justement, il ne faut pas nous aveugler par nos émotions. Chacun ici connaît

> le caractère d'Eyabe. C'est une femme particulière, qui règle rarement son pas sur celui des autres. Allons-nous la condamner pour cela ? » (34)
>
> "Twelve men from our village disappeared after an attack. We are suffering, but we must not be blinded by our emotions. Everyone here knows that Eyabe has a character all her own, that she walks to the beat of a different drum. Are we going to condemn her for that? "(30)

This passage offers an initial description of Eyabe that alerts the reader to her difference. At this stage, we cannot pinpoint the origin of Eyabe's difference. However, the passage tells us that her particularity is common knowledge, at least amongst the Council members who evince some awareness of Eyabe's ontology. Again, we recognise the epistemology behind the recognition—the world-sense paradigm. The common knowledge about Eyabe among the Council members transcends the physical. The midwife highlights "le caractère d'Eyabe" as the signifier of Eyabe's otherness. We also know that this othering is based on her society's construction of womanhood: "une femme particulière." Hence, Eyabe differs from other women and the difference, what makes her unique, is a characteristic that eludes the world*view*.

But before launching a successful voyage into the public sphere, the renewed character must reckon with her respectable identity as a wife and a mother. Once in her family compound, Eyabe performs the dance of the dead under the tree where her son's placenta was buried. Next, she detaches herself mentally from the burden of wifehood and motherhood by highlighting, via indirect free discourse, her family's betrayal: her husband and other children had not visited her throughout the isolation. In fact, the narrative voice buttresses that for the ten women "Leurs enfants ont d'autres mères. Leurs hommes,

d'autres compagnes à étreindre." (Miano 2013, 38; "Their children have other mothers. Their men, other companions to embrace," Miano 2018, 34). Given that she remains the only person in the community to acknowledge that the kidnapped are dead, the woman seeks an explanation for the mystery of this tragedy. However, she must shed the imposed limitations of secluded motherhood and wifehood. When Eyabe departs the compound, she exits, inarguably, a nonwife. However, her identity as a mother remains complicated since her exit from her family hut doubles as a public entrance. In her book, *Postcolonial Hauntology: African Women's Discourses of the Female Body*, Ayo A. Coly argues that the politics of respectability and the trope of motherhood cover up the African female body "in the wake of its uncovering by colonial and neocolonial discourses." (Coly 62) Citing Sylvia Tamale, Coly argues that the mothernormative trope carries patriarchal underpinnings. Because Coly argues that motherhood desexualises the African female body, arguments against mothernormative tropes, however well-meaning, carry the risk of rendering the African female body hypervisual and hypersexual. In Miano's *La saison de l'ombre*, when Eyabe refuses to reproduce her first son after his spirit returns and asks for permission to be reborn and when she leaves behind her other children to begin her journey, she disrupts these mothernormative expectations. Nonetheless, Eyabe embraces a redefined motherhood that does not succumb to the patriarchy by carrying with her the earth where her son's placenta was buried to grant his spirit the respect and dignity that slavery denies his body. Therefore, rather than the birth of a male child that feeds the patriarchy, motherhood nurtures a young spirit into the spirit world and grants him rest. By mothering his spirit instead of his body, Eyabe depicts motherhood that transcends

physical reproduction, turns attention away from the female body, and sabotages any hypersexual potential.

The narrative voice highlights the significance of Eyabe's mission to mother her son's spirit with the single sentence: « Le jour où le chef et les hommes de sa garde prennent la route du pays bwele, la femme quitte le village. » (111) " The day the chief and his personal guards set out to Bwele country, the woman leaves the village." (111) By juxtaposing the chief's investigative journey with Eyabe's spiritual mothering, Miano accords equal status to the woman and equal significance to her mission. The shift from the previous communal identity, les femmes dont les fils ne sont pas retrouvés, reinforces her elevation and separation from the privacy of the foyer to a protagonist of a spiritual assignment. She had gathered some earth from under the tree where her firstborn son's placenta was buried; her objective would be to find the appropriate place to scatter this earth where she "saluera dignement l'esprit de son premier-né et de ses compagnons" (111) "will honour with dignity the spirit of her firstborn and his companions." (111) The narrator rolls back on the woman, telling her lived experiences and presenting her journey, having begun the narrative from its climax, Ebeise's voice already informs the reader of Eyabe's difference from other women. So, as the woman reminisces about her youth, the narrator's free indirect discourse provides more hints about the body, the spirit, and the social presentation, which indicate the location and reasoning behind her othering.

Motherhood relocates Eyabe's female body to the feminine side of the masculine/feminine binary. During her pre-motherhood years, her position on these gender constructs suggests a female body with masculine characteristics: the woman lived in rivalry with her brothers, performing masculine activities such as sling-shooting. She also

shunned feminine roles like basket weaving.[93] Later, despite motherhood, she developed and maintained what the narrator describes as "un corps svelte" (119) or a " lean muscular body" (119). We can posit at this point that the performance of masculinity resulted in a body that produced and conformed with Eyabe's performance. Nevertheless, after childbirth, the woman's position shifts socially, before her community: "L'enfant dont la venue au monde a consacré sa féminité aux yeux du clan." (119) "The one whose coming into the world consecrated her femininity in the eyes of the clan." (119) This feminine consecration, the novel indicates, is both outward to the community and inward to the woman as well, for the birth of the child produced for the first time in the woman's life certain "feminine traits": inventive, knowing, and gentle (119). It is worth noting that the years that precede the childbirth are described as an "époque turbulente" or "turbulent period," indicating that the woman's nonconforming gender performances may have been perceived as deviance. Still, as Eyabe embarks on the journey of a nonmother, the journey constituting a masculine performance, the woman reverts to an identity that initiates the reader into the workings and dynamics of precolonial indigenous gender mobilities.

Perhaps most trenchant is the reversal of what I call the production/performance order. Just as Eyabe initially performed masculinities—sling-shooting, for instance—before her body produced muscularity associated with maleness, she would first produce femininity through childbirth before performing motherhood, associated with femininity. This arguably remarkable reversal questions the inherence of either trait. Moreover, Miano conveys Eyabe's choice and corresponding agency in determining her identity and how

[93] For more on the performance of gender, see Judith Butler, "Preface [1999]," *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), vii-xxvi.

she is read. Hence, the positioning of Eyabe's body and spirit on opposing sides of the binary: "Eyabe est restée une femme abritant un esprit male" (119). "Eyabe has always been a woman inhabiting a man's spirit" (119). This analysis focuses on Miano's choice verb, "rester" which means to stay or to remain. It is also considered grammatically as a movement verb. Therefore, a more gender-readable translation of the sentence would be: Eyabe stayed or remained a woman sheltering, hosting or housing a male spirit. Earlier in this chapter, we argue that Miano positions spirits as the essence or whatness of the human principle. We also maintain the contention that despite these privileged positioning of spirits over bodies, bodies exercise agency in both enspiritment and embodiment dynamics. Considering these arguments, can we succinctly categorise Eyabe on either side of the male/female, masculine/feminine, man/woman binary? Is s/he a (passing) man? Or a masculine female? Why must we attempt this (Western) categorisation, and what sociocultural politics spurs such demand?

This critical reading benefits from anthropological, religious, and historical scholarship on precolonial sub-Saharan African gender identities and performances. Oral historian Nwando Achebe's *Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (2011)[94] and Ifi Amdiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987)[95] provide historical evidence and anthropological language and ideas that explain

[94] The figure of Ahebi Ugbabe, a female king who lived in Igbo and Igala nations of present-day Nigeria is the subject of Achebe's book. Ahebi was a female born woman who performed spiritual, social, and cultural masculinities. She was a female husband and father and held positions such as female headman, warrant chief and finally king.

[95] In the book, Amadiume writes: "the flexibility of Igbo gender construction meant that gender was separate from biological sex. Daughters could become sons and consequently male. Daughters and women, in general, could be husbands to wives and consequently males in relation to their wives" (15). Ahebi Ugbabe is one such example of a historical figure who took advantage of and exemplified the fluidity of gender constructs. Eyabe can be read against these indigenous gender fluid dynamics.

Eyabe's complicatedness. Although their works focus on the Igbo nation of present-day Nigeria, the indigenous mores and practices share some similarities with the Mulongo people in Miano's narrative. Furthermore, they constitute useful frames to read Miano's story. For instance, commenting on Ahebi's ability to marry wives for her brothers, Achebe writes: "The precedent that allowed Ahebi to marry for her brothers could be found in the fact that in Igboland *oge Ahebi*[96] exceptional and menopausal women were often constructed as male (gender, not sex) and in that capacity could marry wives for themselves, for their husbands (if they were married), for their sons, and/or for their siblings" (39). Therefore, constructing menopausal women as men would feature at the intersection between these precolonial indigenous African nations. On this fluid frame, one can argue that the indigenous society in which Eyabe lives provides and enables bodies with spiritual resources to transcend conditions of subalternation—kidnapping and slavery, conscripted womanhood. Therefore, we can argue that Eyabe lived as a man until childbirth, when, due to her love for her child and desire for acceptance from her community, she stayed a woman by performing femininity.

While it might seem rather ambitious to designate manhood to Eyabe, an interesting sexual encounter with her husband reaffirms this argument:

> Les amants de sa jeunesse ne lui ont jamais reproché ce trait de caractère, celui qu'elle a épousé non plus. Parfois, lors de leurs ébats, il est arrivé que l'époux dise, avec un sourire : *Tu sais quand même que je suis l'homme ?* A quoi elle répondait : *Autrement, je n'aurais pas consenti à m'unir à toi.*

[96] Oge Ahebi means during the time of Ahebi. Achebe employs this term to refer to the era of Ahebi's life and rule.

> *Sache, cependant, que moi aussi, je suis l'homme. Lorsque la divinité a façonné l'être humain, elle lui a insufflé ces deux énergies…* (119)
>
> At times during their lovemaking, her husband would remind her with a twinkle in his eye: You do know that I am the man? To which she replied: I would not have agreed to marry you otherwise. But know that I too am the man. When the divine fashioned the human being, she breathed both energies into us (119-120).

This passage offers readers the voice and opinion of Eyabe as she describes herself during the sex scene. Each body contends for manhood as they engage in this seemingly "heterosexual" sex. While the bone of contention may not have been clearly stated, we can infer that the male body (the husband) and the female body (Eyabe) vie for the privileged position of sexual virility, which culminates in sexual pleasure and even dominance. Hence, the gentle reminder: "*Tu sais quand même que je suis l'homme ?"* Eyabe's response is startling. The narrative voice depicts her as a woman embodying a male spirit, and the elder Ebeise classes her as a different woman, but in this passage, we hear Eyabe describe herself in her voice as "moi aussi, je suis l'homme". Eyabe uses the same definite article her husband employed to legitimate her manhood, but the words "moi aussi" suggests difference. A difference that is only located in the body that bears the spiritual identity. While her husband is a man in a male body, Eyabe is a man in a female body, like King Ahebi Ugbabe. Ergo, prior to motherhood, Eyabe was a masculine performing man. She chooses to stay a woman and perform femininity after childbirth. When the tragic events rob her of physical motherhood, she redons her spiritual manhood identity to carry out her objective.

Reading the sex scene through Eyabe's shifting identities complicates any assumptions that this precolonial setting is inherently heteronormative. The participation of Eyabe's male spirit in this sexual encounter, although not explicitly seen or stated, remains evident through the world-sense episteme. The narrator mentions that Eyabe's husband and previous lovers do not always condemn her masculinity. However, Eyabe's husband senses another masculine presence that prompts his reminder. This also implies that for the husband and the patriarchal Mulongo clan, sexual expressions are limited to heterosexuality. Since her "trait de caractère" is considered deviance, in the same vein, her sexual assertion could be discouraged on occasion. Moreover, Eyabe's defensive response informs my reading of her husband's reaction to her sexual exuberance. First, she insists that she is also the man, then foregrounds her manhood spiritually by invoking "La divinité," but she also states that she would otherwise not have married him. She then concludes her defence by stating that all bodies possess "deux energies." Relying on the spiritual constituency of the African world, Miano's 2013 novel strikes a crafty nonheterosexual potential into the postcolonial by deconstructing the human principle in a precolonial narrative. For if all bodies possessed "deux energies", what is to say that Eyabe's husband is distinctly a man in the way the postcolonial understands manhood? He could be a female's spirit in a man's body, hence the need to assert his manhood on his partner and reclaim his patriarchal authority. This speculation becomes even more viable when we reconsider Eyabe's "I would not have agreed to marry you otherwise." In an interview with the *New Books Network*, oral historian Nwando Achebe speaks on gender balance in spiritual relationships. Achebe emphasises that a priestess would serve a male deity or god while a priest would serve a female deity or goddess. The priestess, according

to her, is not necessarily female-born but *is* a woman.[97] Harnessing this concept of the gender balance of spiritual forces, we can argue that Eyabe, a female-embodied man, may have only agreed to marry a male-embodied woman.

We can, without question, argue that *la saison de l'ombre* maintains African gender-transcendent repertoires through a spirituality that validates and legitimates indigenous gender-fluid possibilities. This idea deserves mentioning given that dominant metaphysical traditions—Christianity and Islam, for instance—oppose all gender fluid possibilities; nonetheless, we cannot help but question the feminist politics of a narrative that portrays exceptional females—Elder Ebeise and Eyabe—as potential and/or possible men. While arguing that female bodies produce masculinities and can be men if they choose, the narrative maintains the gender hierarchy such that a male-embodied woman, for instance, fears this identification, while a female-embodied man aspires to an identity that is inherently provided. Still, the novel boldly reaffirms precolonial anthropological and historical findings even for the censored readership of the postcolonial.

Despite its flaw of positing masculinity as aspirational, the novel sustains, in other depictions, feminist politics. The prevalence of female bodies, voices, thoughts, and imaginations indicates Miano's feminism. These female voices—characters and narrative voice—tell their tales through a feminist lens. Miano employs periodicity to narrate what we can describe as the beginning of patriarchy in the Mulongo. Taking the readers back to the founding of the Mulongo clan, we understand that Queen Emene is the founding

[97] According to Achebe, she made the mistake of asking a male priestess how he became a woman, and he responded, "I did not become; I *am*."

Matriarch of the Mulongo. After her death, her son instituted a patriarchal community with restrictions on women alone. This historicity indicates that gendered restrictions in the novel's precolonial setting are not just social constructs but also historical constructs traceable to a Sasa: after the queen's death. Little wonder that the narrative's unfortunate ending portrays the geospatial end of the Mulongo. In the tragic scenes that close the telling, Ebeise buries the bodies of the dead Mulongo victims of the slave trade raid while Eyabe is entrusted with Bana, the young mute lad, in whom nine of the spirits of the missing boys reside. The narrative ends with the voice of Ebeise echoing the prologue in a silent acceptance of both day and night.

Conclusion

Miano's secluded women, like female prisoners in *Karmen Geï*, face the threat of erasure because their shared experience of bondage jeopardises their individuality. In defiance, they propel themselves beyond the limitations of their seclusion in a manner that recalls Adrienne Rich's theories on the lesbian continuum. The two stories' main protagonists, Karmen and Eyabe, further defy unjust power structures that police their identities by undoing the effectiveness of the power structures within the isolation spaces before breaking out of these forced locations towards a future they choose. Both women rely on spirituality as a power source, manifesting identities that trouble the postcolony's constructions of womanhood. Their identities are further buttressed through their sexual performance of masculinities. In the film, the camera captures Karmen's penetrative gestures, and in the novel, the narrator tells of Eyabe's sexual virility. For both women, accessing inward masculinity via spirituality provides an escape. This is particularly critical because of the temporal difference that undergirds both narratives. Joseph Ramaka

Gaï's postcolonial oppressive structures are hardly surprising, but Léonora Miano's precolonial setting normalises spiritual presence in the society such that an intervention from the spiritual should not have been required.

The source of oppression and the reason for intervention develop when Miano's narrative voice introduces the men with chicken feet. This deracialised terminology strips the slave traders of their racial power but also bestialises them, reducing the people of this "civilisation" to animals. This reduction and denial of humanity to the white slave traders is further reinforced by the depiction of humans as primarily spiritual. Hence, a society whose ways of being and knowing deny spiritual realities could be described as bestial—the chicken feet. Both narratives are sensitive to the slave trade and to its continued impact on the people of the continent. The film implicitly sets the scene on the slave island but replaces the dehumanised Africans with happily dancing female bodies whose erotic autonomy is sponsored by the spiritual world. Miano's narration is explicit, paying attention to both the struggles of the captured and the trauma of those left behind. In both cases, the spiritual intervenes as escape: the kidnapped boys collectively leave their bodies and choose another body after their mothers refuse to rebirth them and one of the women relies on the spiritual to transcend her body's conditions of womanhood.

Nonetheless, the spiritual world's provisions for fluidity within the self do not necessarily vitiate the hierarchical gender pyramid and do little to challenge class constructs. The narrative's 2013 publication of a pre/slavery narrative maintains that forms of oppression and subjugation abound across eras. Its reliance on precolonial epistemological and ontological conventions to resist subalternation proffers and advocates indigenous solutions to the inevitable gender and class inhibitions that

pervade the postcolonial. *La saison de l'ombre* imagines the spiritual world and the spiritual principle as the backdrop from which prescriptions and proscriptions on the female body are questioned, initiating a conversation on indigenous paths of resistance against gender, class, race and all hegemonies in the postcolonial. Looking ahead, the next chapter will continue the discussion on transcending class and gender constructs through the project's theory of enspiritment. It will explore the trauma of another category of women left behind, not by forced kidnapping and slavery but by economic exploitation. A postcolonial challenge, economic difference heightens the class tensions, only exacerbated by the postcolony's corrupt structures. The next chapter fully focuses on the filmic genre that this chapter touches on a little, and pays attention to the people who invite and maximise the overt workings of the enspiritment dynamic.

CHAPTER THREE:

Reviving the Original State: Enspiritment in Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019)

> "'You fly out of your body because *our original state* is in you.' She poked Kirabo in a *Lucky You* way.
>
> 'Our Original State?'
>
> 'Yes, the way women were in the beginning.'
>
> 'We were not like this?'
>
> 'Of course not.' Nsuuta was indignant as if this current state were contemptible. 'We changed when the original state was bred out of us.'"
>
> (Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, *A Girl is a Body of Water*, 50)

What is a woman? remains a question that rattles and unnerves even the most established scholars of different fields. From the legislative floor of the United States during a hearing of a Supreme Court justice appointee[98] to well-written, critical forays into the question of womanhood and the situation of women,[99] the interrogation into the ontology and performance of womanhood remains one that systems and organisations seem unable to answer. Yet these organisations and systems of governments remain invested in establishing regulations despite their glaring lack of understanding. The sports world is one area where the play and politics of womanhood are choreographed. Athletes who identify as women confront different obstacles and humiliations, ranging from being stripped to prove their femaleness to total bans and limited participation in various sports

[98]Senator Marsha Blackburn asked the now-Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson to define the word "woman" during a Supreme Court hearing on Tuesday, March 22, 2022. https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2022/03/24/marsha-blackburn-asked-ketanji-jackson-define-woman-science/7152439001/

[99] Here, I am thinking collectively of Toril Moi's *What is a Woman,* Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Second Sexe,* Oyewumi Oyeronke's *The Invention of Women,* and Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*.

stages.[100] While athletic organisations have admitted that the science that upholds their decisions is still inconclusive,[101] what draws this chapter's attention to the conversation is the physicality that grounds these discussions. The African athletes disqualified from participating in female sports are females, but apparently, not women enough. These female nonwomen are ejected from the "protected" space for women because their bodies betrayed them by insisting on staying outside the margins of what a woman's body is expected to seem and perform. This project again steps into the conversation on identity and gender by extending the conversation from the dominant material to the unexplored immaterial self. However, this chapter joins the discourse that complicates the ongoing visually-focused interpretations of a woman's corporeality by engaging with a visually-based narrative medium—film. In this chapter, I argue that conversations incorporating spiritual identifications enrich our understanding of women's ontology, agency, and relationalities within established patriarchal structures. I also make a case that these ontologies shift before, during and after the spirits enspirit their bodies. Therefore, engagements with women and humanity as a whole should expand the purview to incorporate these changes and nuances. By questioning the visual, physical conscriptions of identity that severely impact women, this chapter unhinges from its source, the

[100] The medalists at the Rio 2016 800m women's finals, Caster Semenya of South Africa, Francine Niyonsaba of Burundi, and Margaret Wambui of Kenya, are among the many predominantly African female athletes banned from competitive sports. https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/rio-2016/results/athletics/800m-women
The International Olympic Committee (IOC) admits that the science supporting the banning of these naturally born African women remains inconclusive. Still, they are prevented from pursuing their chosen careers simply because of how they look and perform.
https://apnews.com/article/sex-eligibility-tests-female-athletes-07572d23d409126a8e069cb0bced1706

[101] The debate on womanhood returned during the just concluded 2024 Summer Olympic Games, prompting conversations such as Graham Dunbar's online article on sex eligibility for women:
https://apnews.com/article/sex-eligibility-tests-female-athletes-07572d23d409126a8e069cb0bced1706

dominant sense that fuels and spurs the limitation and concomitant exclusion of women: sight.

To what extent can a film, a visual medium, betray the very sense fundamental to its production and reception? Given the consistent characterisation of Africa's spiritual world as invisible, can the mechanical eye capture the immaterial workings of precolonial Africa? Pertinently, in the context of this chapter, how does the camera stage the desires, entanglements and anxieties between the postcolonial nation-state and the female body? Indeed, if Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel casts a growing female child navigating the boundaries of an original state and a conformed state, at what stage of growth and development does the camera confront African women, and how can its technology grasp the *flying* subject?

While previous chapters have primarily questioned the play and dynamics between bodies and spirits linked permanently as they weave through their corporeal and spiritual selves—embodiment—this chapter pays attention to a different, temporal spirit-body relationship existing persistently within the ethos of sub-Saharan Africa—enspiritment. Enspiritment is known more commonly, sometimes pejoratively as spirit possession, but this chapter resists the stereotypical connotations that follow possession—ownership, jealousy, invasion, etc.—and its prescribed "solutions": exorcism, adoration, or fetishisation[102] by tapping into the power of neologism to argue for a different methodological space that considers both the exerting spirits and the "mounted"[103] bodies.

[102] See Janice Boddy's "Spirit Possession Revisited."

[103] J. Lorand Matory's engagement with the concept of "mounting" in Yoruba cosmology will be further discussed in the coming pages.

In her 2015 article, "Enspirited Bodies and Embodied Spirits in Toni Morrison's Paradise," Deborah Mix uses the term enspirited to designate the Marian construct, a dichotomy that locates women in opposition to the destructive, seductive Eve. The enspirited Mary, unlike the embodied Eve in Mix's article, denies self and worldly pleasures. She submits to patriarchal authority and endures the pain inflicted on the female body because she exalts her spirit above her sinful body. The term, enspirited, is captivating because it designates persons that transcend the realms and expressions of materiality/corporeality. However, for this project, I redefine an enspirited body as a being wherein an external, sometimes unknown, spirit and a hosting body fuse to achieve harmony.

Enspiritment captures the concept that encapsulates the third space of spirit-body relations. It differs from embodiment primarily in its temporality—bodies and spirits unite and split after achieving a specific, suprarational purpose. Notably, the enspiritment dynamic produces a being whose nuanced ontology complicates identities that incorporate spirituality and corporeality within its cosmos and ethos—ancestral, gender, and, I will show, sexual. Unlike dominant possession narratives, enspiritment generously accommodates the functioning and role of the body even as the enspirited person negotiates the presence of an un/invited alien being. This chapter argues that while the enspirited body might lose agency within the suspension period,[104] her pre-enspirited consciousness and spatial awareness during enspiritment sponsor an interrogation into her possible participation and agency while under the influence. I explore this concept within Mati Diop's 2019 film *Atlantique*. In this award-winning feature film, the enspirited body

[104] John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophies* employs the term "suspend" to describe the period when bodies are under the influence of external spirits.

confronts, in addition to the statutes of the postcolonial nation-state, the mechanical eye and defies its subjective gaze.

Enspiritment is inherently disruptive in its characteristic introduction of power. Functioning as an inside job within the postcolonial, enspiritment penetrates and voids the tightly sealed, or so it appears, suffocating space of Senegal. It forces the nation-state's symbolic agents—a police officer and middle-class contractor—to capitulate to precolonial power structures. The ability of enspirited bodies to reach—in spite of established post/colonial obstacles—these crucial branches of the nation-state that represent the nation's politics and economics, demonstrates the efficacy of effecting change from within. However, it exposes the insideness to the outside by introducing a new sexual, political and economic order. In *Atlantique*, the agents of the postcolonial succumb to precolonial Africa's banished epistemes and realities. First, the film re-enacts women's participation in public spaces and repositions them as agents of social change.[105] The film achieves this significant feat by reanimating the women's spiritualities. Given that the women's boy/friends' departed spirits foster the reanimation of the women's spiritualities, one can understandably argue, within a gendered discourse, that the film subscribes to patriarchal ideals of men rescuing women. Nonetheless, this chapter cautions against Western-inspired gendered readings and encourages us to consider a precolonial interpretation of the wo/man.

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's narrative indicates that the idea of the postcolonial African woman remains a construct. This fictional narrative is not the only warning bell

[105] See Jacqueline Mougoué's *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon.*

we hear on how women's social standing has consistently declined across colonial regimes south of the Sahara. Anthropologists Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí have explored diverse yet similar possibilities in two different pre-colonial societies—Igbo and Yoruba. Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands (1987)* interrogates the flexible gender system in the precolonial Igbo nation that allows female-born individuals to transition into masculine roles—husbands and fathers—within the precolonial Igbo society. On her part, Oyěwùmí Oyèrónké's *The Invention of Women (1997)* argues that in the precolonial Yoruba society, the "anatomic male" and "anatomic female," which she shortens to "anamale" and "anafemale," differ from "men" and "women" structurally and function differently from what the postcolonial now understands as man and woman. Considerably, Oyěwùmí's theories have drawn criticism from African scholars (Matory 2008; Olupona 2011; and Bakare 2003), who have pointed to critical nuances that complicate Oyěwùmí's theories. Bakare, for instance, argues that only gendered females can be married in and out of a family. The exit and entrance reduce their social standing because they cause older females to be ranked lower than younger males within the family in a society that prioritises age in social classification.

What we learn from these debates on the precolonial anafemale's situation is the possibility and availability of social mobility structured, even sutured, within patrilineal societies. Amadiume's findings inform readers that this social mobility of womanhood to manhood requires the ritualistic performance of rites that invite and legitimate the social transfer. Within this premise, it becomes logical to understand that the socialisation of a female-born child as strictly a woman disinvites the enabling spiritual principle that legitimises her social fluidity. This vast span of African scholarship insists that becoming

a woman is to disinvite what allows the female-born to transcend her body, hence, the flying self in Makumbi's narrative. Pointedly, the exchange between Nsuuta and Kirabo in Makumbi's story indicates an original state of women. Spiritually situated, the original woman flies out during breeding—or socialisation and acculturation. We can speculate that the flying self is the fluid self whose functioning within the society is hampered by the rigidity that the postcolony forces on the woman. If inventing a postcolonial woman demands a spiritual flight, it follows logically that reviving precolonial Africa's gender-fluid female principle necessitates a spiritual catalyst—male or female. On this premise, this chapter prioritises a precolonial, sexuo-political reading of *Atlantique*'s male spirits' revival campaign over a gendered discourse since the female-born's ontology (which encapsulates gender performance) has been unquestionably altered through enduring, postcolonial expectations.

Arguing for Enspiritment: The Original State, the Filmic Genre, and Mati Diop's *Atlantique*

Franco-Senegalese Director Mati Diop became the first Black woman director to be selected for the Cannes Film Festival in 2019 and to win the Grand Prix with her debut film *Atlantique.* The film was also chosen as Senegal's entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 92nd Academy Awards and was shortlisted for the award. *Atlantique* has been screened and nominated for prizes at numerous prestigious film festivals. In 2019, Netflix acquired worldwide rights to the film, whose themes of transnational displacement, migration and economic subalternation are eerily situated within the frame of spiritual presence and bodily absence.

The plot of *Atlantique* appears simple: a girl, Ada (Mama Sané), falls in love with a boy, Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), but is engaged to a man in the diaspora, Omar (Babacar Samba). The diasporic figure is wealthy, promising Ada a secure life. Souleiman is a construction worker who, along with other poor, unskilled workers, labours fruitlessly on a futuristic tower: the project of a middle-class contractor, Mr N'diaye. Their labour is fruitless because Mr N'diaye has not paid them for months. Contrastingly, the tower exudes the promise of a bright future for the nation, yet the youths, whose work ensures its eminence, scatter at its feet with broken, distraught, and dejected demeanours [00:02:24-00:03:40]. Burdened by personal and family responsibilities and unable to reach Mr N'diaye, the young men (including Souleiman) attempt to sail to Spain for a better future. Unfortunately, their boat sinks, drowning the men's bodies. However, the men come back very quickly. Not in the next generation as most African spiritual traditions anticipate, and not in their mothers' bodies to be reborn as narratives like *Segou* and *La saison de l'ombre* portray; instead, when they *come back*, they choose the young adult bodies of their girl/friends.

The unusual choice foregrounds this chapter's foray into an intriguing spirit-body dynamic where subaltern agents in the physical world form a spiritual resistance alliance that transforms their ontologies. Wrestling with the phenomenon that emerges with this fusion, Nicholas Whittaker carefully designates the ontology as she/he/they in his 2024 essay, "Haunted by the Past."[106] Whittaker highlights the paradoxical experience of Diop's film that plays with absences and presences, allowing for imaginative conclusions. Are the

[106] See Whitaker's full article here: https://thepointmag.com/criticism/haunted-by-the-past/

drowned boys present or absent? Are they alive or dead? How can they be present when their bodies lie at the bottom of the sea? Whittaker's engagement with these paradoxical im/possibilities[107] is understandable since Mati Diop employs substitution strategies that omit crucial information, such as the young men's departures, to juxtapose the young men's exit as bodies with their re-entry as spirits. Both events, the arrival of spirits and the departure of bodies, are absent from the plot but present in the story. By not showing the departure of the bodies from Senegal, Diop prepares her viewers for the absent presence of their spirits. We learn of these events from other characters' accounts, enhanced by constant shots of the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. However, the narrative intentionally focuses on the activities of the men's spirits and the women's bodies. Suddenly and without warning, the film's plot becomes complicated, even eerie.

The diverse scholarship on *Atlantique* underscores the film's depiction of material and immaterial realities. For instance, there is much conversation about the effects of Diop's use of unexpected shots of the Atlantic Ocean that either interrupt the flow of the tale or serve as a foreshadowing that guides the story's direction. For Lindsay Turner, "this cold Atlantic undercurrent is old, at least as old as the transatlantic slave trade" (Turner, 2020, 190). When Turner links shots of the Atlantic to the slave trade, she situates the film within the conversations of life and death across the Middle Passage. She locates the departed men's bodies in the postcolony with the bodies of the departed enslaved Africans in the precolony. Naturally, the question of mobility and migration emerges along with the scenes of the Ocean. For example, citing the brief relationship between Omar and Ada,

[107] The word, im/possibility, and all its variations appear more than ten times in Whittaker's essay, signalling the writer's entanglement with the ir/reality of African spiritual traditions.

Gigi Adair's work highlights the absent, tech-dependent relationships that follow migration to Europe. At the same time, Paul Nildeep interrogates the socio-economic conditions that force these departures, noting, quite crucially, the contrast between the public, approving spaces where Omar courts Ada with the discretion that the postcolonial nation-state and Ada's family force on her and Souleiman. (Nildeep 5) While these critiques contribute to our conversations with the film, they are missing an equally critical engagement with *Atlantique*'s unexpected eeriness.

It is worth mentioning that although the discourse on the film unanimously agrees that the story takes a metaphysical turn, engagement with these esoteric dimensions of Diop's film is considerably hesitant. When it appears in these conversations, the spiritual world of precolonial Africa only inflects the landscape of the postcolonial nation-state. Commonly, scholars acknowledge the presence of the men's spirits by reading the women as possessed.[108] This chapter pursues a different discussion by interrogating the women's ontology, their agency and their relationalities within established patriarchal structures before, during and after the spirits' presence within their bodies. For me, the women's reliance on precolonial resources to navigate the strictures of the postcolonial triggers a methodological approach to their states of being that reframes their identities across space and time. Moreover, because this entanglement is produced in Diop's visual medium, the tensions in this sight-focused genre further push my interrogation towards the unexplored domain of enspiritment.

[108] Chelsea Wessels and Jude Dry's engagements with the women's identities will be discussed further in the coming pages.

Whittaker's article gestures towards enspiritment when he writes that the women become mysterious, impossible, she/he/they. Remarking on the boys' demise at sea, he writes that "the boat sinks, and the boys drown. Nevertheless, they return. Each night, a group of girls—friends and lovers of the boys—are possessed by the dead." Whitaker's optional yet encompassing pronouns, on the one hand, signal the shifting positions of the characters as they experience the transformation from the spiritual realms. On the other hand, his indecision also points to the complications that follow a forced categorisation of Africanity into Europeanness. It exposes the impotence of Western epistemes in unpacking African concepts since the characters' identities in Whittaker's argument shift through Western-stipulated borders of gendered pronouns. Furthermore, it tips us off on the dangers of such reading: designating non-European realities as mysterious and impossible.

Proposing the concept of enspiritment as an alternative methodology to conceptualise the women's ontology becomes a necessary intervention. This episteme, grounded in African religions, thoughts and philosophies, suggests new pathways to reading the characters by reviving banished Africanist sensibilities. Enspiritment does not collapse characters' identities into stringent European pronouns; instead, it shows how precolonial identities can remain complicated yet accessible to the postcolonial audience. Through this methodology, we poke around the entanglements surrounding the women in *Atlantique* by foregrounding diverse yet similar theories on precolonial women's ontology covering a vast span of the continent—Amadiume, Oyěwùmí, Makumbi and the concept of *faru rab* in Senegal. If there is an original state of women in pre-colonial Africa, as Makumbi writes, enspiritment forges a pathway to her revival.

What, then, is enspiritment, and why does this study propose its distinction from possession? Enspiritment, like possession, refers "to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power and corporeal reality, in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are acknowledged to be permeable, flexibly drawn, or at least negotiable." (Boddy 407). However, while Boddy remarks on integrating material and immaterial within the dynamics of possession, her description could also fall within this dissertation's broader designation of embodiment. This spirit-body dynamic integrates bodies with spirits. Enspiritment differs from embodiment in its temporality. From the narratives this project interrogates, the fusion between the material and immaterial is permanent in the embodiment dynamic; they merge at birth and separate permanently at death.[109] Within the dynamic of embodiment, spirit constitutes a person's immaterial, invisible self, whereas spirits within enspiritment introduce new selves to the host. This tendency to infuse bodies with attitudes that transcend cultural constraints becomes one of the significant tensions surrounding enspiritment. By suspending and disrupting the consciousness of bodies within cultural spaces, enspiritment contends with the hosts' assigned moralities and abilities.

Now, and this is significant, enspiritment, like possession, occurs when an external spirit temporarily "mounts"[110] a body and, through the body, achieves suprarational feats that the person may not recall. While acknowledging the body's inability to recall activities

[109] See chapter One for more details.

[110] J. Lorand Matory uses the term "mount", a direct translation from the Yoruba word, gùn, to designate the relationship between a god and the priest the god "mounts" during possession rituals. Matory writes in the chapter "Government by Seduction", published in the book *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, that "mounting" is a foremost translation of the concept of possession. I choose to foreground "mounting" because of its originality and directness to African traditional religions. Theorising enspiritment through an original, unaltered concept grounds the methodology within the culture it defends.

done “under the influence” could sabotage any arguments on agency, I lean on Naminata Diabate’s description of agency in her book, *Naked Agency*, as “women’s ability to act or react, intentionally or otherwise, in punishing offending males and signalling vulnerability, or both,” (Diabates 19) to argue that that the scope of what we consider or designate as agency transcends action and extends to will, emotions and desire. This project argues that unexpressed will, emotions and desires should constitute action when oppressive powers inhibit the expression of said will, emotions and desires. In the case of *Atlantique*, we might ask: what would the women do differently if, unenspirited, they had the power to restore justice? Arguably, one can maintain that this premise lies on speculative actions: perhaps so. Nonetheless, the filmic genre provides ample theatrical evidence—mournful expressions, crestfallen visages, passionate outbursts—suggesting that the women left behind would take necessary actions to keep the boys in Senegal if they could. Hence, enspiritment is a catalyst that wrestles with inhibiting forces, empowering agents to “act or react, intentionally or otherwise, in punishing offending males.”

The case for enspiritment becomes most imperative when we consider how Mati Diop’s film breaks multiple visual conventions of possession. The film’s persistence in disrupting possession codes foregrounds the research that sketches a different epistemological path beyond possession—one that considers bodies before, during and after spiritual takeover as agents rather than victims. In his review of Mati Diop’s film, Jude Dry writes that “the film is a far cry from “The Exorcist,” “Paranormal Activity,” or other classics of the demonic possession horror, it rides the line of the genre just enough to be considered a cousin — if a distant one.” Dry notes that possession films usually end with the possessed person going mad and terrorising their loved ones, but the characters

in Diop's story are left with a sense of peace, resolution, and, I add, hope for the future. Dry's observation is not the only break from the traditions of possession studies that Mati Diop's film shows. As such, this consistent disappointment of possession expectations reframes the women's ontology as enspirited.

What makes this breakaway from possession conventions even more striking is that Diop pairs this failure with a stubborn resistance to submit to visual pleasures of possession practices, within a film genre traditionally marked for entertainment. For instance, possession conversations critically cite possession cults and ceremonies as sites and spaces of invitation[111]. Within the filmic genre, these scenes are embellished with objects of ritual practice, such as candles, leaves, and white fabric, as shown in the 2019 film *The Possibility of Spirits.* The gathering that comes close to a possession cult in Diop's film occurs when the girls arrive at a nightclub and realise that the boys have left by boat. This women-only gathering, I maintain, functions as the invitation space, in the same way members of a possession cult would assemble for a possession ceremony, because the scene marks the beginning of the availability of their bodies. However, while bodies in a possession ceremony are rendered available via sacred, exciting spectacles that "promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation,"[112] Mati Diop collapses the separation by availing the women's bodies through mournful expressions punctuated by patterns of limited lighting and sheer darkness.

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[111] See Fritz Kramer's *The Red Fez: On Art and Possession in Africa (1993).*

[112] Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* discusses the conditions of looking and narrative conventions that give the spectator the illusion of looking in a private world where the spectator, via exhibitionism, projects a repressed desire onto the performer. (Mulvey 17) I argue that the darkness in this scene complicates this separation since the performer and the viewer (in a cinema) share the same fate.

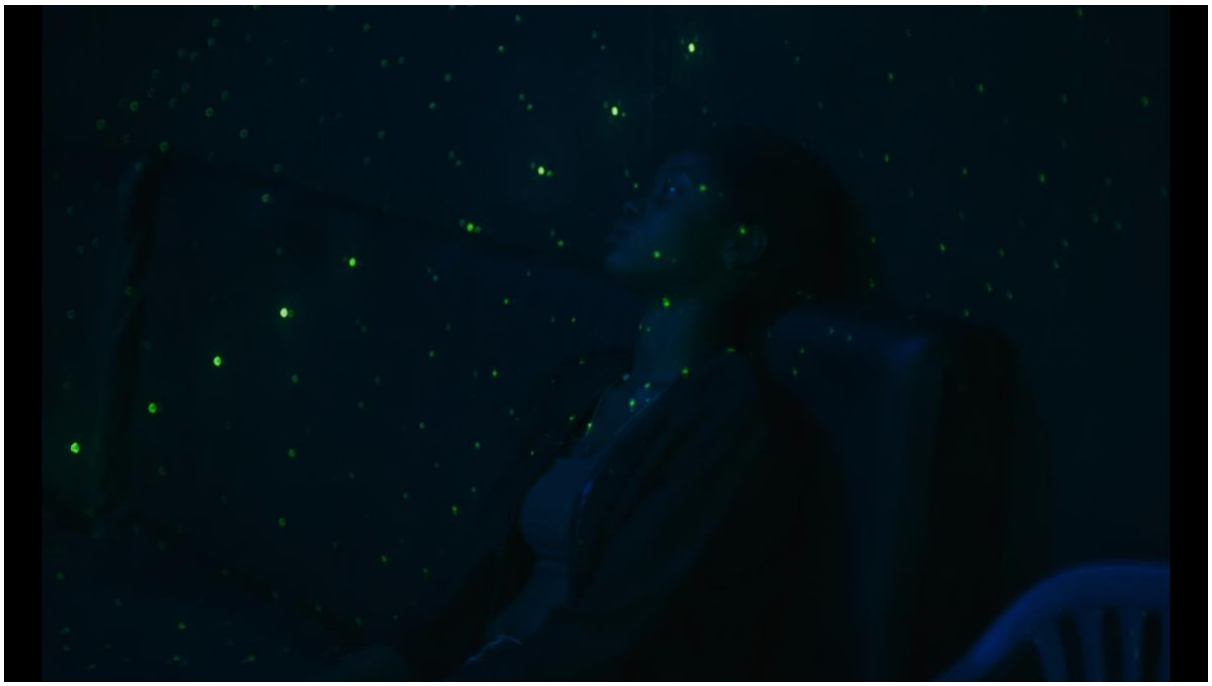

Figure 3.1. Still from *Atlantique. Waves of neon lights shimmer against engulfing darkness. (00:21:33)*

The darkness in this invitation sequence transcends a physical night-time shade. It is worth mentioning that the setting's physical darkness does not set the scene for the candles' illumination and paranormal flame-dance as depicted in *The Possibility of Spirits*; instead, Diop has neon lights wave in and out of sullen expressions (Image 1). The secularity that the neon lights infer mainstreams enspiritment within the mundane and, importantly, situates the enspirited as ordinary and prosaic rather than exotic and fetishised. Furthermore, Diop uses darkness, crucially double, to disrupt the performer-spectator divide. Double because night-induced darkness engulfs the physical space of the beach bar and because the men's departure triggers an emotional crisis for the women left behind who fear for their beloveds' safety. Under this circumstance, scenes in this dark sequence deny the spectator the visual pleasure of looking into the despair of the women but, at the same time, transmit the sentiments of pain through subtitled words while stubbornly

maintaining mutual darkness with the spectator since the spectator can barely see the characters in the dark hue of the screen. Hence, scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, is limited by one's inability to see. Indeed, in a cinema setting, the spectator and the performer are engulfed in a mutual darkness that collapses the voyeuristic separation, preventing the spectator from projecting otherness onto the performer. Restraining the audience's ability to view the prosaic performer troubles the audience's exhibitionist position. This collapse of the spectator-performer divide becomes a crucial distinction between this sequence and scenes from possession narratives, where entertained viewers bask in their ability to look in on a private, fetishised, and usually othered world.

The dark invitation sequence ends with an unexpected shot of the moon. As stated earlier in this paper, much has been said about the natural elements such as the Atlantic Ocean in the film; however, this sequence draws our attention to two more forces of nature that, like the Atlantic Ocean, enjoy sustained shots in different sequences—the moon and later, the sun. We see the sun primarily in motion, rising or falling, each movement signalling the start or end of the night, introducing or ending darkness, a critical visual technique in the film. When the sun sets, it gives way for the moon to reflect its light. The first lunar apparition occurs at the end of the women-only invitation sequence. The transition is sudden, even brutal. The camera switches swiftly from a medium shot of Ada, who reclines on a chair, devastated (see Image I above), to a long shot of a dark sky. In the previous scene, neon lights float in and out of Ada's face, allowing the audience a limited view of her pained visage. She is motionless; the only movement emanates from the neon lights that do little to relieve the setting's darkness. Without warning, the shot changes, framing the dark sky and the only light source at the centre—the moon (Image 2). Like

Ada, the moon enjoys a long, sustained shot lasting ten seconds. Just as the neon lights move across the young woman, clouds pass by the moon's slim sliver, hinting that a more significant force and/or source is responsible for the darkness in the sequence. The two scenes share the same sounds of the ocean's waves, such that when one engages these scenes with closed eyes, there is no evidence of a scene change. Motion and sonic techniques in both scenes collapse a sullen Ada with a dark moon, each reflecting one-half of the double darkness in the sequence.

Figure 3.2. Still from *Atlantique. The crescent moon hints at elemental darkness. (00:21:58)*

It is crucial to note that this is the only scene where the moon is shown to be in the crescent phase in the film. Having established that Mati Diop employs darkness to collapse the spectator-performer divide, the lunar cycle's crescent phase underscores the director's work with supernatural and natural agreement. Natural, since the slim sliver and the passing clouds deny the beach bar setting as much light as it can receive from this early phase of the lunar cycle. Moreover, it is supernatural because this sequence marks the end of the plot's simple storyline and introduces the working of the spirit world into the corrupt

postcolony. Previous chapters have shown how spiritual principles reify or imitate natural elements such as the winds. Following the same tradition, it is not far-fetched to assert that this lunar apparition joins the spiritual principles to highlight the moral darkness that drives this nation's subaltern youths beyond the Atlantic's shores. Against the backdrop of economic injustice and the incompetence of law enforcement to defend the rights of poor citizens, leading to the departure of desperate citizens from their native land, the moon's crescent phase minimises light reflection to its smallest possible visibility while marking a new beginning.

If darkness in this sequence does not suffice to dismantle possession codes, Diop further denies the viewer the pleasure in looking through the absence of a dance performance—a major characteristic of possession rites. When possession cults display bodies, notoriously and predominantly female, they show them performing (erotic) dances that invite spirits into their bodies.[113] Often, these films are punctuated by voiceovers that undermine the givenness of spirits, luring viewers to a bizarre enjoyment of the female body's performance. In *Atlantique*, the space where women gather is neither a shrine nor a temple. It is, pointedly, a beach bar by the Atlantic, and the fact that there is not a single dance scene in this bar that doubles as a nightclub reinforces this argument. In fact, when Dior, the subversive woman who runs the nightclub, laments that the men's departure will cost the nightclub, another woman speaks these encouraging words:

[113] In addition to *The Possibility of Spirits*, I am thinking specifically of *Karmen Geï's* opening scene and *Africa, the Bible and The Gun* (19:48-20:58) by Basil Davidson.

"No, once the girls hear from the boys, they will be back here to dance." (1:23:40-38)

Unfortunately, the girls never hear from the boys and do not dance. Again, Diop refuses to entertain the male gaze with the sensual motions of the female body. This is especially worth mentioning when we consider that the women are dressed in tightly fitted, contour-showing outfits that the predominantly Islamic nation-state considers improper.[114] Yet, despite their supposed immorality, the film refuses to fetishise their bodies through dance. *Atlantique* displaces the spiritual invitation dance that nourishes the male gaze with images of crestfallen women who learn of their boy/friends' departure. Chaotic lamentations at a bar disrupt the rhythmic performance of uniformed song and dance that characterise possession ceremonies in religious spaces. In fact, for some of the lamentations, the camera adopts a long shot that affords the mourners some semblance of privacy, and in other cases, the camera chooses not to show the lamenter at all. (00:20:02 - 00:20:10) Mati Diop's mechanical eye combined with the characters' gloomy visages brook no entertainment. In addition to refusing to feed the male gaze, this depiction of an unentertaining invitation scene challenges postcolonial religious rigidities since Islam and Catholicism frown on such spiritual invitations. Ultimately, it demystifies and un-fetishizes traditional religions by choosing an open, accessible urban space rather than a secluded, rural shrine only frequented by initiates.

[114] The 2012 CIA World Factbook reports demography of Senegal as follows: 94% Muslim, 5% Christian and 1% exclusive practitioners of African traditional religions. However, it is commonly acknowledged among Africanists that much of the population in African nations practice a version of traditional religion concurrently with Islam and Christianity. The same is the case for Senegal.

Figure 3.3. Still from *Atlantique. Long shots allow the women to privately grieve. (00:21:01)*

In other films, the stage of transition or the possession trance offers the spectator another opportunity to feed their scopophilic desires in possession narratives. Notoriously choosing female bodies, this stage is characterised by violent shaking, sometimes to the beat of music, yelling/screaming, exaggerated outcry or incomprehensible verbal expressions. The possessed close their eyes, overwhelmed by the presence within them and signalling their departure or loss of consciousness from the material world. In possession ceremonies, once possessed, the individual relies on the people around them to function during the possession trance. They are surrounded by aides who keep them safe, carry them when needed and keep their extraordinary body movements under control. Again, these depictions maintain the possessed as the incoherent, unpredictable, possibly

violent other.[115] But in *Atlantique*, the transition stage boldly departs from these dominant conventions. Sparing most of the women from objectification, Diop's transition stage focuses on three characters: Inspector Issa Diop, the only man whose body experiences the takeover, and on two women: the pious, conservative Mariama and Fanta, who represents the subversive, nightclubbing faction. Within the postcolonial, Fanta belongs to the resistant, rebellious women pushing back against patriarchal oppression, while Mariama typifies the woman who has been bred, conditioned and accultured towards conformity—the woman whose original self has flown out. The hijab-wearing Mariama had objected to Ada spending time with Dior and Fanta, whom she referred to as "those sluts." Because the transition stage focuses on a male police officer, the agent of the nation-state, and two different factions of women: one conservative, the other liberal, enspiritment becomes an inclusive political intervention that daringly penetrates the nation-state's oppressive structures, dismantles them and from this vantage point of power, introduces a new power structure that protects the most vulnerable victims of postcolonial oppression—women, irrespective of faction.

Each character's transition is significant, to say the least. But Mariama's visible, intentional inclusion in this campaign is particularly curious and verges on the conflicting for many reasons. For the Senegalese audience, the concept of male spirits in women's bodies is easily recognisable as the *faru rab*, a subcategory of the diverse *rab* (spirits) that make up the Wolof-Lebou cosmology.[116] Scholars have made the connection between the

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[115] See Feldman and Romero's *The Possibility of Spirits* and Ousmane N'diaye's *The Bible and the Gun* (19:49-20:59)

[116] See Rachel Mueller's *The Spirits are My Neighbors: Women and the Rab Cult in Dakar, Senegal*

workings of the *faru rab* in Senegalese belief systems and *Atlantique'*s supernatural tendency. Dry points out that "the idea of men possessing women's bodies, and the very direct way Diop dramatises and visualises it, is a literal representation of the way men control and police women's bodies." Dry's critical observation hints at how traditional folklore has been co-opted into the postcolony's hegemonic agenda and recalls a passage from Makumbi's novel where the aforementioned character, Nsuuta, reiterates that stories have been told and retold to force women into constructed categories.[117] For her part, Chelsea Wessels notes that the *faru rab* are spirits that enter women who dress immodestly. Wessels, who anchors her work on executive possession,[118] draws attention to Mariama's inclusion in this campaign and asserts that Mariama's experience delineates the women's lack of consent. What Dry and Wessels's contributions have in common is that they both highlight the women's lack of agency, controlled physically by men and spiritually by male spirits. Because Wessels anchors her work on executive possession, her position on the women's agency within the heavily studied, stereotypically fetishised, and negatively constructed concept of possession locates the women "possessed without consent" (309) as the victims of the men's spirits. But what happens when we engage the women's ontology through my project's theory of enspiritment? Since enspiritment foregrounds bodies' suppressed agency and contends with their assigned moralities, it follows that the pre-enspirited body is already a victim without agency. Ergo, enspiritment, this brazen

[117] See Jennifer N. Makumbi's *A Girl is a body of water*

[118] In Wessels's words: "Executive possession concepts mobilise cognitive tools that deal with the world of intentional agents; the spirit entity is typically represented as taking over the host's executive control or replacing the host's 'mind' (or intentional agency), thus assuming control of bodily behaviours." Because of the lack of agency inherent in this possession theory, Wessels's engagement with Mariama's participation is understandable. Nonetheless, agency is crucial to the enspiritment methodology and therefore sponsors a different reading of Mariama's part in the film.

fusion between the spiritual and physical worlds that sabotages economic, political, religious, and, we will soon see, sexual power structures, intervenes to ensure the woman's revived presence in public spaces. On this premise, each character's enspiritment becomes a necessary intervention that benefits the entire nation. Inspector Issa Diop's enspiritment recruits the participation of men and the government, Fanta's transition scene signals the validation of the spiritual world in the resistance she and the women at the beach bar represent, while Mariama's inclusion undoes the process of subalternation that produces her conformity to the nation's constructed conservative ideals.

Although scholars point to the *faru rab* as a backdrop for *Atlantique*'s supernatural twist, a close examination of this *rab*'s conceptualisation and functioning in Senegalese thoughts shows some inconsistencies with Mati Diop's film. Wessels and Dry agree that *faru rab* spirits gain access to the bodies of women who dress immodestly. Also, Rachel Mueller's thesis on the *rab* spirits in Senegal explains that immodest dressing is an ideology that critiques Western fashion and its associated identities (Mueller 71). Mueller further maintains that since Islam encourages conservative dressing, this precaution against the West fits into postcolonial Senegal. Yet through Mariama's character, Mati Diop troubles the idea that the conformed woman perfectly fits the nation-state. Despite Mariama's non-Western, conservative Hijab attire, Diop's film ensures that she receives the "punishment" meted out to immodest women. From Rachel Mueller's ethnographic work, we understand that "although Senegalese women do not wear the veil, they are meticulous about covering their legs and torsos" (Mueller 70). Mueller's observation heightens Mariama's conservatism since she embraces the veil in a space where it is not even required. If we agree with Dry and Wessels that the *faru rab* inspires the film's

supernaturality and if the *faru rab* retains its assigned women-controlling role in the Senegalese imagination, then Diop's narrative becomes a pointer to the insatiability of control and power. Mariama's undeserving body functions as the stage that choreographs the politics of control. Her participation shows that further conformity is, and will always be, required of the conformed in oppressive spaces.

A significant religious shift occurs through the enspiritment of this undeserving embodied prototype of the postcolonial woman. The *faru rab'*s operation in Senegal unravels an interesting partnership between Islam and African traditional religious practices in controlling women's bodies. The collaboration between the two religious traditions is further evinced in the syncretism between djinns and the *rab*. Writing on the difficulty of most Senegalese in distinguishing the two, Mueller notes that "the spirit world of the *rab* cult has become intertwined with that of Islam, maintaining a distinct, if murky, identity." (Mueller 73). Here, we understand that the force of oppression transcends the Western-influenced political and economic structures but extends to religious systems of oppression. Djinns (spirits in the Qu'aran) and the *rab* syncretise to control women's fashion expression. Together, they enforce a dress code whose violation carries severe consequences for women. Since Mariama upholds Islamic dress codes, the *rab*'s presence in her body disrupts the agreement between both religions and signals the pre-eminence of this traditional religion in Senegal. While the economic and political campaign of enspiritment explicitly initiates a rebuttal of Western colonial hegemony, this religious disruption gently affirms the religious colonisation that elevated Islam in Senegal.[119]

[119] See the chapter, "Colonialism and Decolonization in French sub-Saharan Africa 1" in *Routledge Handbook of Francophone Africa* by Tony Chafer, Margaret A. Majumdar

Although the film pushes back against the Islamic colonisation of Senegalese religious spaces, it also shows that African traditional religions are hardly a utopia in the ways they foment oppressive beliefs. The *faru rab'*s very existence as a punitive controlling force inherently suppresses women. Mueller notes the signs that indicate a woman has a *rab* include "strange behaviour towards men, sexual dreams, infertility, and a strange, bad odour that won't go away" (Mueller 64). Bodies possessed by this *rab* cannot live daily lives, have a family, or pursue a career because of the notoriously jealous *rab* within them. This punishment is rather extreme for the crime of immodesty, and the reach of its extremity indeed underlies the purpose of control that spurs its existence in the first place, i.e. if a woman refuses to be physically policed to prescribed dress codes, she will be subjected to frustrating manipulation of her self. Mati Diop's film, therefore, redefines this oppressive spiritual principle by repurposing the spirits. They transform from manipulative forces that destroy the lives of their hosts to enabling forces that aid their hosts in achieving their unexpressed desires.

The wedding sequence where Ada's matrimonial bed is set on fire exemplifies Diop's reimagination of the *rab*. It might be reasonable to highlight these scenes as the stage where Souleiman's spirit, like the *faru rab*, exercises untoward control over Ada. However, *Atlantique* sabotages even this typical example of the *faru rab'*s workings by differentiating Ada's experience from the lived experiences of women in Senegal. Rachel Mueller records the lived experience of a woman in Senegal possessed by a jealous *rab*:

> One young university woman, Laye Fatou, told a story of her dormitory neighbor. "She [my neighbor] was so beautiful she only had to leave the house to make everyone start talking. Well, her boyfriend came over one day and she said, 'I'm coming, just watch T.V.' and she left, boiled water, and came back and threw it on him. Just like that! She had a jealous faru rab (Mueller 64)."

The major difference between this lived experience and Ada's narrative is the benevolence of Souleiman's spirit, for he does not cause physical harm to any party involved. Importantly, in the scenes that precede the arson, we see Ada devastated on her wedding day; she stays indifferent to her beautifully furnished matrimonial room by refusing to take photos with her friends. Just before the fire, Ada breaks down on the balcony of her new home, surrounded by friends trying to console her. In this striking scene, two friends offer Ada two different paths to freedom: for Fanta, marriage to a wealthy diasporic figure frees Ada from patriarchal shackles to live freely since Omar will be absent in Europe most of the year while Dior boldly asks Ada to walk out with her if she cannot handle marriage to Omar. Therefore, the fire that breaks out in the next scene delivers Ada. Albeit temporarily, it sets off a series of events that give her the time and opportunity to choose for herself. Consequently, Souleiman's arson is unlike the act carried out by the girl in Mueller's story because it is not simply an act of jealousy spurred by his desire for Ada, since the fire incident enables her unexpressed desire to walk out of the marriage.

Figure 3.4. Still from *Atlantique. Wedding day facial expression betrays Ada's unexpressed desire. (00:36:59)*

Under this premise, Souleiman's spirit, through the body of the police officer, forges an enspiriting partnership with Ada. Ada rejects all forms of luxury that come with the marriage: she exchanges the expensive iPhone Omar gifted her for a cheaper phone, moves into Dior's and gets a job at the beach bar. Rather than ruining the lives of hosts or target bodies,[120] Diop's film reimagines the *faru rab* as a force of freedom, a significant shift from the control it is expected to exert in collaboration with Islam. This reimagination of an African traditional religious practice conveys a counterpower movement that demands the liberty of the victims of the nation-state's established structures. Crucially, the demand for freedom is effected through African convictions. Indeed, the film's

[120] I use the term target bodies to refer to bodies that the enspirited persons target for different purposes. Ada, Dior and the contractor, Mr N'diaye, are all target bodies that function for different purposes.

employment of traditional religion and philosophies first designates African traditional religions as workable. By reimagining control mechanisms that suppress freedom into forces that liberate, *Atlantique* proffers African solutions to African problems. Mati Diop's film defies any missionary campaign to liberate the postcolonial nation-state, advocating for indigenous solutions to the nation's economic, political and religious challenges.

Male "bride", Female bride: Identity, Sexuality and the "Mounted" Subject

I would be remiss not to discuss the question of identity in *Atlantique* and, concomitantly, the question of gender. There has been much conversation on the identity of the enspirited women in the film, with scholars inarguably drawing our attention to the gender boundaries that the women break at the point of enspiritment. My research, however, sketches the identity route with an Africanist ontological methodology. I map this route because there is a noticeable lapse in the scholarly engagement with the one male enspirited body: Inspector Issa Diop (Amadou Mbow). When discussed, the Inspector's presence in the film is circumscribed as the medium of Souleiman's sexual expression with Ada, while conversations on identity focus on the women. While it can be more interesting, even justifiable, to centre the women's gender transcendence given that they considerably outnumber the one man, one cannot help but wonder if the persistent engagement with the women's identities participates in the obsessive legacy that defines and proscribes what a woman is. In any case, beginning the question of identity with the male subject addresses the lapse in engagement and, at the same time, fosters fluidity, spreading the conversation on identity across and beyond gender and bringing to our attention the ontological possibilities that exist within African convictions on the notion of a man enspirited by a male spirit and of women enspirited by male spirits.

Inspector Issa Diop enters the film almost insignificantly. Waking up suddenly from a confused slumber, he hurries to the arson scene to commence an investigation of a crime for which Souleiman is the prime suspect. This insignificant entrance into the film gradually becomes noteworthy as the camera purposefully associates him with consciousness—falling into a slumber or waking up from one. When conscious, Inspector Diop pursues his quest for Souleiman; when un/conscious, he morphs into the man he pursues. At this early phase, the film's play with absences and presences hides Issa Diop's significance in the film. The viewer never sees Souleiman's body board a boat, and she does not see his spirit fuse with the Inspector's body either. Yet, as the story evolves, the visual medium relies on other media to relay this message, allowing the audience to create their own imagery of Issa Diop's identity. There is a lesson to be learned from the Director's choice to deny the viewer this pleasure in looking that circumscribes and objectifies the character. Because we do not see Souleiman's exit and entry, we are invited to join Issa Diop in the search for Souleiman, a quest that culminates, unexpectedly, in self-discovery. And when we finally apprehend the possibility of a morphed ontology, we are reminded of this culture's fluid imagination of the human subject. In this respect, the inspector's insignificant entrance develops into a paramount campaign that draws the viewer into endless ontological possibilities.

Because the director's camera denies the viewer certain pleasures in looking, it forces the film genre to reckon with its relationship with Africa. A relationship that is fraught with "colorful images, naked breast women, exotic dances, and fearful rites. The Unusual."[121] Given that *Atlantique*'s storyline takes this "unusual" turn, Mati Diop's

[121] See Trinh T. Min-ha's 1982 film, *Reassemblage.*

absent presence undermines the camera's subjectivity. Still focusing on the case of the Inspector, the film's play with absences fosters the search for Souleiman. Souleiman was said to have boarded a boat for Spain, yet one week later, on the night of Ada's wedding, Mariama claims to have seen Souleiman at the wedding. The contradictory eye-witness report conveys, as African thoughts persistently demand, the insufficiency of sight and sight-based knowledge systems. Yet the inspector relies on visual cues in search of the criminal. In Souleiman's room, he finds a heart scribbled on the wall with "A + S" in it and erroneously concludes that Ada is Souleiman's accomplice. He follows her from the hospital, hoping to see her with him. Instead, Ada meets up with her friend, Dior, and confides in her about receiving a message from Souleiman. At the police station, Issa Diop's boss asks why he couldn't reach him at night, and he says he was sick. A pattern emerges at this point, one that hinges on absence but leaves behind a trace. While the boss could not reach the inspector at night, Ada received a message from Souleiman at the same time. It becomes clear that the Inspector and the criminal cannot functionally exist simultaneously, and as such, the search for the latter verges on futility. Inspector Diop comes to this shocking realization as he reviews the video from the wedding. He scans scenes from the wedding, searching for Souleiman; rather, he finds his own body, white-eyed and sweaty, lurking around the walls at Ada's wedding. Alarmed, Issa Diop finally comprehends his body's shifting ontology: during the day, it functions as the agent of the nation-state, the young star of the police force, and an agent of oppression, but at night, he becomes the gentle lover of Ada, an advocate for the poor and oppressed. At night, the Inspector's body serves the subaltern Souleiman.

Through the notion of "mounting", Yoruba cosmology provides us with an Africanist example of becoming another and assuming an identity that suspends and supersedes one's previously unmounted state of being. A justifiable logic questions reading the experience of Senegalese characters through the lens of concepts in Yoruba cosmology. Without ignoring this arguable position, this research pursues the West African concept of "mounting" not just because of the geographic location's proximity to the Wolof-Lebou but because this concept forms the backdrop that spurs this research's theorisation of enspiritment, a concept applicable to but not limited to Senegalese traditional religions. In "Government by Seduction: History and the Tropes of "Mounting" in Oyo-Yoruba Religion," J. Lorand Matory astutely notes that the term "mount" (gùn) analogously elicits the relationships between husband and wife, god (Shango) and possession priests, and rider and horse. The hierarchy of "mounting," Matory adds, positions the state of "mountedness" as feminine in apposition to the structurally male and alien power that "mounts" the priests, the wife, the rider, and, in the case of *Atlantique*, I include, the Inspector. The male-female hierarchy, Matory writes, is condensed in the symbolic wifely relationship possession priests have with their god: "In being called "brides" (ìyàwó) of god, the Shango possession priests share the symbolic nature of royal wives as well." (Matory 65)

If the hierarchy of "mounting" locates male Shango priests as the "brides" of Shango, it is not illogical to reframe the Inspector's positionality as Souleiman's symbolic bride. Like the horse to the rider, the priest functions as a medium in service to Shango. In the same spirit, the Inspector would function as Souleiman's medium in service to him. A conversation between the Commissaire and the Inspector affirms this argument. The

Commissaire, Issa Diop's boss, orders him to place a patrol at Mr N'diaye's to prevent the enspirited girls from going there. In a moment that shows Issa Diop's possible moral standing, the inspector asks, "Were the girls there because of the unpaid wages?" (01:07:29) The Commissaire shuts down Issa Diop's morality by insisting that the unpaid wages "c'est pas notre problème,"[122] "that's not our problem." He goes on to add that Mr N'Diaye "a beaucoup fait pour nous," "has done a lot for us." (01:07:33). Justice for all, it appears, is not the aim of this law enforcement agency. Rather, they exist in service to and enable the corrupt middle class. Little wonder, the spirits' presence in the postcolonial state. The departure of men signals the failure of postcolonial government systems to their citizens, and their return forces the system's hand to work for the citizens as expected. However, changing corrupt systems must begin at the individual level. For the Inspector, not only does he become an agent for the oppressed, but his state of being experiences a fluidity made possible by indigenous epistemology.

This shocking transformation of self could have been dramatised to please the spectator. Following the tradition of fearful rites that characterise the camera's relationship with Africa, one would imagine that the rite that allows a spirit to "mount" a body would involve exotic dances, slain animals, incantations, etc., but the film reimagines a new relationship with African philosophies. As soon as he sees his body in the video, Issa Diop glances at a watch (a time marker), grabs his personal belongings, and drives home hurriedly. In place of the exotic, Mati Diop renders this transition with a background of upbeat, eerie music that signifies the urgency of Issa Diop's drive. The upbeat music is

[122] These are the exact words of the Inspector. The characters mostly speak a French-inflected Wolof. The film, however, provides English subtitles. All the English-written citations in this chapter are drawn from the subtitles.

enhanced by a strained brass instrument sound punctuated by the noise from a passing train that situates him outside. The camera cuts between close shots of his sweaty, panting visage to the 'paysage' he lives in behind him as he drives home. The sun comes into focus in this sequence. It is so significant that the Inspector looks repeatedly at this time marker. Previously, Issa Diop glanced at his watch for knowledge of time but as he drives, the sun's position becomes the new signifier. Employing the two time markers in the same sequence underscores the harmony the film portends between the postcolonial and the precolonial epistemes. However, since the sun enjoys a more sustained presence than the watch or clock, this choice time-signifier affirms the film's politics of centring ancient epistemology.

The camera links Issa Diop to the sun in the same way it connects Ada to the moon. A close shot of the inspector's face shows drooping eyelids closing and opening in a repeated lowering gesture. The sweat on his body underscores the heat from the sun. The further he drives, the more the interchange between him and the sun, whose position, like the man's eyelids, lowers further. Issa Diop reaches his apartment just as the sunset forms a beautiful golden crescent on the Atlantic. Inside his apartment, lighted by the golden rays of the setting sun, Issa Diop cuffs his right hand to a sliding door's handle and tosses away the keys. The sequence ends theatrically. With one hand handcuffed above his head, there forms an arch that lets the sun's rays through. Mati Diop suspends music at this crucial moment, leaving the spectator with the heaving sounds of a man whose consciousness mirrors the setting sun that silhouettes his portrait. As the day inevitably succumbs to the night, Issa breathes loudly; his face carries the resigned demeanour that awaits the inevitable. Just as the mighty sun resigns rulership of time and space, a powerful police

officer, who threatens Souleiman's mother, locks Ada up and seeks to arrest an unpaid labourer, submits to the eminence of a force more powerful than he. The unchallenged power dynamics established by the post-colonial nation-state faces resistance from her pre-colonial nation, and we are reminded of the infallibility of resistance to oppression.[123] Issa breathes continuously, waiting helplessly for the sun's dominance to end. When his eyes droop down and turn white, his arched hand falls above his head, closing the gap that lets the sun rays through. And when the handcuffs click in response to his un/consciousness, the moon's reign commences.

Figure 3.5. Still from *Atlantique. Sunset forms a beautiful golden crescent that sits on the Atlantic. (00:30:15)*

[123] I am thinking specifically of Michel Foucault's known statement in the *History of Sexuality, Volume I:* "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (95)

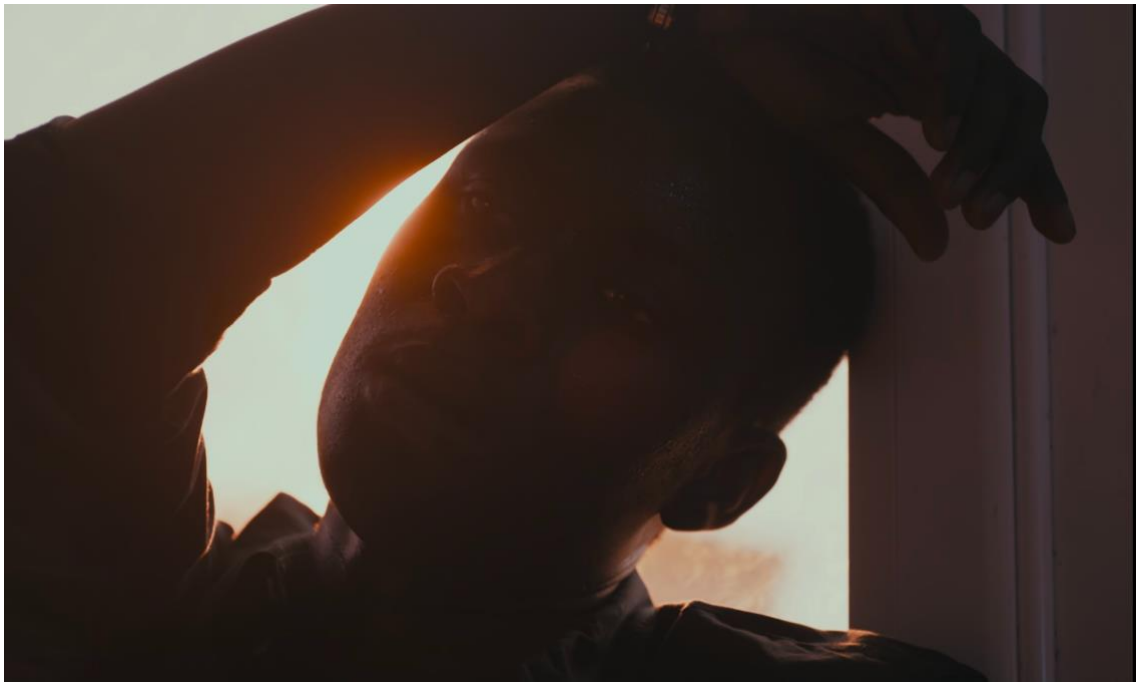

Figure 3.6. Still from *Atlantique. Inspector Issa Diop's face carries the resigned demeanour that awaits the inevitable. (01:30:34)*

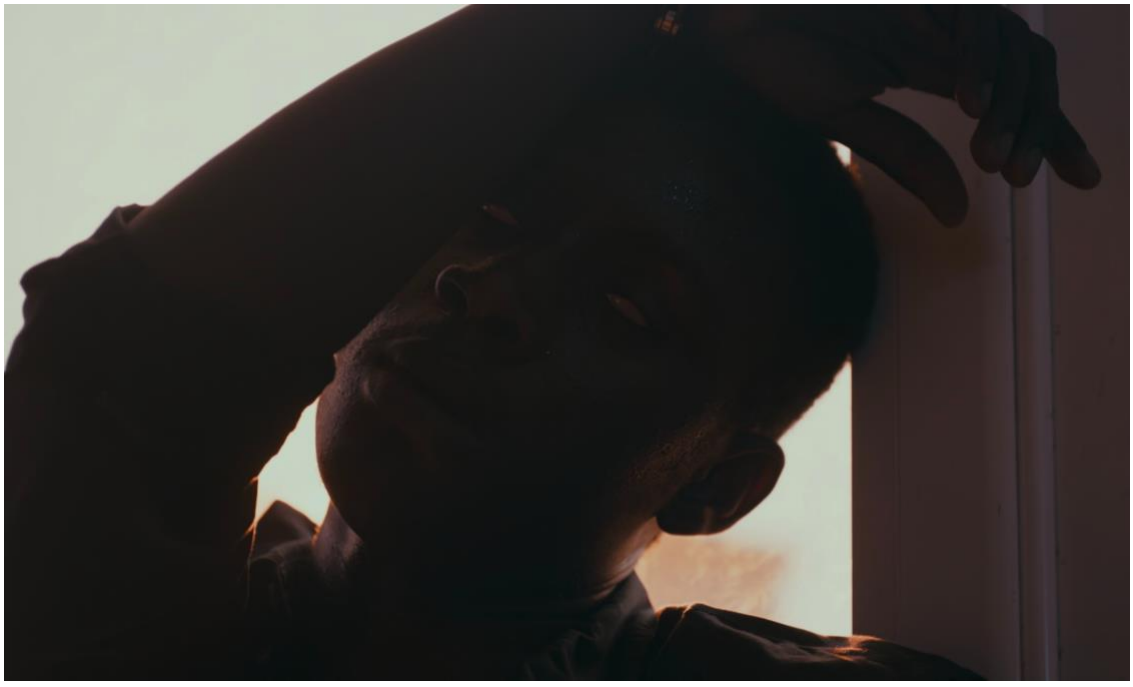

Figure 3.7. Still from *Atlantique. His eyes droop down and turn white. His arched hand falls above his head, closing the gap that lets the sun's rays through. (01:30:48)*

It comes as no surprise that the sequence that marks the beginning of the moon's dominance begins with Ada. A pivotal transition between the two sequences enables this reading. The previous sequence ends with a scene that portrays the lost, defeated Inspector's visage. This scene yields to a close shot of Ada's face in the next sequence. Ada is seated and relaxed as Dior braids her hair in preparation for an upcoming event. The last time we saw Ada being prepared, it was for her wedding to Omar, where, surrounded by applauding women, she was led to Omar's; the entire transaction was curated under the approval of the patriarchy. Ada's expressions betray her lack of agency at the wedding, but in this close shot taken at sunset, the young bride's face bears the appearance of a victorious smirk. The frame cuts to a long shot that situates Ada and Dior in Dior's room. Previously, she was prepared for her wedding to Omar by her parents and was controlled by demands from her and Omar's parents.[124] However, Ada readies herself brazenly for a reunion with Souleiman from her peer's house, unafraid of the consequences. The sunset, it seems, breaks the wheel of the patriarchy. Ada, the crying, helpless bride at the wedding, walks boldly to the beach bar, where she meets the "mounted" Inspector. The camera pauses at the beach bar to frame her in a medium shot that portrays a determined woman in control of her destiny. As Souleiman walks into the frame in Inspector Diop's body, the camera frames a shot-reverse shot that portrays Ada, tall, confident, the top of her head almost edging the frame. Free from the limitations and

[124] After the fire incident, Omar's parents demanded a virginity test from Ada. Her parents agreed to the test with her father insisting that she must have done something wrong to warrant it. A male doctor performed the very invasive test, and her parents denied her access to her phone until they got a satisfactory result.

expectations of the nation-state, she walks to her man, a revived, transformed target body, ready to express her erstwhile suppressed desires.

Figure 3.8. Still from *Atlantique. Shot-reverse shot portrays Ada, tall, confident, the top of her head almost edging the frame (01:34:58)*

The sex scene climaxes, literally and figuratively, the tensions in the film, bookending its political, economic, and spiritual undertones with Ada and Souleiman's love story. Director Mati Diop writes of her process in creating this sex scene:

> On a pensé à un moment que Souleiman reviendrait hanter le corps d'une femme qui ferait l'amour avec Ada. Nous avons abandonné l'idée car je pensais que le public sénégalais n'était pas prêt pour cela, j'ai eu le sentiment que si Souleiman revenait posséder Dior (amie d'Ada, Ndlr), cela aurait pu créer une polémique stérile. Depuis, je m'interroge souvent pour savoir si j'ai fait le bon choix, parce

> qu'il est essentiel d'avoir le courage de ses idées, même dans des contextes plus agressifs et offensifs.[125]

Mati Diop's confession here underscores the intention to integrate sexual subversion into the political tensions that *Atlantique* raises. Interestingly, Diop's narrative is not the only traditional paradigm that links politics and sex. J Lorand Matory stipulates in his article, "Government by Seduction," that a political and sexual disorder followed the departure of the Oyo Dynasty from Igboho. A town whose equestrianism, ergo horse/rider symbolism, is associated with "extraordinary gender transformations," Igboho not only lost her economic and political prosperity, but a chaotic sexual occurrence ensued with the departure. This "improper politicosexual order was repaired with the arrival of the Aare—a ritually prepared and usually transvestite palace delegate—who led the royal wives in the worship of the kings' graves," (Matory 63) Matory writes. While Diop's narrative is free from what we might consider restorative "rituals," the transvestite[126] palace delegate's presence in Igboho echoes implicitly with the sex scene. Diop may have closed the door to a sexual encounter between a female-enspirited-man (resonating more conspicuously with Igboho's transvestite figure) and Ada. Nonetheless, if we engage with the idea of Souleiman "mounting" the Inspector through the epistemology of "mountedness", we are offered a more fascinating possibility of "extraordinary gender transformation."

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[125] "At one point, we thought that Souleiman would come back to haunt the body of a woman who would make love to Ada. We abandoned the idea because I thought the Senegalese public was not ready for it. I had the feeling that if Souleiman came back to "mount" Dior (friend of Ada, Editor's note), it could have created an unnecessary controversy. Since then, I have often wondered whether I made the right choice because it is essential to have courage for one's ideas, even in more aggressive and offensive contexts." See Mati Diop and Olivier Demangel's interview with Cahen Ava: frenchmania.fr/mati-diop-et-olivier-demangel-atlantique-lecriture-du-scenario-episode-2. English translation by me.

[126] I use the term to reflect Matory's exact words in his article.

Symbolically and functionally, the "mounted" subject, according to Matory, occupies the hierarchical position of a bride. Hence, when the Inspector enters the scene, he embodies the wifely symbolic role in service to Souleiman. On her part, Ada's identity in the film has been predicated on marriage. From the beginning of the narrative, Ada's positionality is forged on being a bride and on wifeliness. As the story nears its end, she walks into the frame that situates her at the beach bar with braided hair[127]; the literal bride and the symbolic bride stand on opposite sides, captured by the camera's counter shots, ready to consummate their union. On one end of this counter shot, Inspector Issa Diop, the male bride,[128] faces the camera. Ada, the female bride, stands with her back closer to the camera. In this exhilarating encounter lies the promise of a new politicosexual order—one that initiates consent and agency in unions. However, the unwitting fulfilment of Mati Diop's intention troubles the nation's heteropatriarchal conventions. Although she may not have depicted two female bodies engaging in sex, she successfully, and via the epistemology of "mounting," presents her viewers with two brides in the full sexual act. Following the tradition of breaking the wheel of the patriarchy, this sex scene dismantles

[127] Certain ancient Senegalese nations, like the Seereer culture, identify married women by their braided hair. In fact, the Wolof word for a girl is "njegemaar," a borrowed term from Seereer, which translates into "one without braids" in Seereer. This significant derivative from the Seereer culture shows the interconnectedness between the nations in Senegal. Conversation with Birane Sene at Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar, July 26, 2024. It is important to point out that on Ada's wedding day to Omar and on the days that follow, she wears her hair unbraided, a salient indication of her resistance to the marriage. Although the practice is no longer observed in the postcolonial era, braiding her hair before the sexual encounter signals, through pre-colonial epistemes, her choice to be united in body and spirit with Souleiman.

[128] J Lorand Matory writes that "the verbal and material signs of "wifeliness" and "mountedness" are shared by both male and female possession priests. When imposed on male priests, though, we are led to recognise their quality as distillates, as a signified quintessence. For not every metonym of womanhood is applied to the male priest's body." (Matory 75) One metonym not applied in this case would be the Inspector's hair. Though Ada braids her hair to mark her wifely role, the Inspector's remain unbraided, a significant distinction between one bride and the other. This reading crucially confirms compatibility between the Yoruba concept of "mounting" and the Wolof cosmologies and demonstrates noncontradictory convictions within these different African religions.

the inequality and the concomitant oppression within the heteropatriarchy by wifening the male subject, equating him symbolically and functionally with the female subject.

Notwithstanding the camera's success in capturing the 'wifened' male subject, it encounters a different challenge when portraying his complex ontology and the sexuality that this Africanist ontology potentiates. A somatonormative depiction of the sex scene shows Ada approaching Issa Diop, whose body we have come to understand, Souleiman enspirits. However, the mechanical eye, tactically wielded by hands that acknowledge the reality of Africa's invisible world, accepts its limitation to the visible world by recruiting the mirror. There is a constant interplay between the camera and this reflective surface. The one portrays physical expressions between a male bride and a female bride. The other reflects the passionate, long-awaited consummation of love between a girl and her boyfriend. Any possible interpretation of a dual sex act through a worldview methodology is dispelled when the camera brilliantly pans leftward to the mirror, capturing the simultaneity of the sexual encounter. The camera depicts Ada and Issa Diop; the latter backs the camera, situating Ada behind Issa but facing the viewer. Conversely, the mirror is placed behind the two lovers and reflects the same encounter. However, it locates Ada in front of Souleiman, her back to the viewer. In addition to this technique's condensed temporality, a spatial convergence is punctuated by shimmering neon lights whose quotidian significance situates the lovers at the beach bar.

Figure 3.9. Still from *Atlantique. The camera captures Ada and Issa (01:35:36)*

Figure 3.10. Still from *Atlantique. The mirror reflects Ada and Souleiman (01:35:42)*

Visual as this scene might appear to the spectator, the film utilises nonvisual cues to foreground the immaterial presence within the sexual encounter. Having achieved spatial and temporal convergence, the rest of the sexual encounter transitions consistently from Ada/Issa to Ada/Souleiman until they remove their clothes. Once naked, Ada and Souleiman are engrossed in each other's arms. One would think the physicality that inheres nakedness would justify an Ada/Issa portrayal. Instead, in choosing to singularly capture the naked bodies of Souleiman and Ada, the director here underscores the pre-eminence of the spiritual in this encounter. Furthermore, ignoring the camera and focusing on the mirror signals the deception of this Western worldview, for the camera, the mechanical Western eye, functions as an extension of the Western gaze and, therefore, based on its worldview, can only capture the visual. What the spectator sees is not what a camera, understood in Western terms as a window into the filmic world, should reveal; instead, the spectator sees what the mirror reflects. Defying the camera's fraught fetishisation of naked African bodies, Mati Diop, once again, denies the viewer the pleasure in looking at naked bodies by craftily substituting Ada/Issa's naked bodies with Ada/Souleiman's naked reflection. Through the Western worldview epistemology that produced the camera, the audience sees no nakedness because the nakedness the mirror reflects does not empirically exist.

The immateriality of this sex scene troubles the existing engagements with sexuality. A diversity of conversations about immaterial sexual relationships arises in different forms and contexts across different African nations. Still, the sexuality of spirits and the sexual potential that is produced with these unique material-immaterial encounters remains largely undertheorised. With the Global North dominating the conversation about

diverse sexual orientations, indigenous identities and sexual expressions fall outside of the margins of these view-based theories. Diop's narrative contributes to the expansive literature on immaterial sexual encounters in African narratives.[129] A sexual encounter between Ada's embodied self and the inspector's embodied self could pass for heterosexuality,[130] but a sexual encounter between an embodied self and an enspirited being transcends the scope of extant theories of sexuality. In the case of the climax in *Atlantique*, the embodied Ada (which includes her spirit merged with her body at birth) meets with the enspirited Issa. An Afrocentric reading of Issa's ontology gestures towards engaging with Issa's wifened role. As the "bride" of Souleiman, having sex with Ada provides us with a sexuality that is symbolically akin to a lesbian encounter—two brides—but structurally akin to a heterosexual encounter—the penetrating phallus. Because both possibilities are unexclusive and simultaneous, the singularity of time precludes a plural interpretation of the sexual encounter. What terminology encompasses a sexual encounter between spiritual and physical principles, one that involves these multiple selves but stays singular?

Medium sexuality comes to mind as we ponder and explore epistemes that cover the scope of sexual expressions. The term frames Issa's body as a vehicle through which Souleiman's spirit expresses his desire. But as I negotiate the implication of medium sexuality, it becomes clear that the idea of Issa as a medium limits sexual desire to the spiritual only. At sunrise the following day, we see Issa staring down at Ada's body, the

[129] The list of narratives with sexual encounters between bodies and spirits is expansive across genres. In film, Cameroonian Director Jean-Pierre Bekolo's 2005 film *Les Saignantes* comes to mind, while the 1968 novel *Les soleils des indépendances* by Ahmadou Kourouma recalls a violent sexual encounter between a male spirit and a female body.

[130] See the previous chapter on embodiment and Eyabe's sexual expressions with her husband.

duration of this scene reflects the Director's intentions to portray his expression. Issa's expression acknowledges the acceptance of a feeling of sexual desire that has caused tensions throughout the narrative. Afterwards, Issa Diop walks into his Boss's office and closes the case against Ada and Souleiman. Because these actions are carried out during the day, signifying the end of his enspiritment, it bears mentioning that Issa is an active participant in the politicosexual intervention. For this sexual expression, desire originates from the immaterial but gradually grows, not without resistance, to the host, material body. During the act, all agents—material and immaterial—engage simultaneously in a singular, meta-physical[131] sexual expression that condenses time (occurs at the same time) and space (in the same place). The Ada/Issa/Souleiman sexual encounter, like the quotidian life, reflects the reality, co-dependency and collaboration between the invisible world and visible world in African consciousness.

Reviving Hosts, Reviving Target Bodies: What, therefore, is a Woman?

The rest of the returned spirits choose women's bodies for a politicoeconomic subversion. Now parodying yet redefining the *faru rab*, the spirits of the unpaid construction workers forge an enabling partnership with the most vulnerable and marginalised group of the patriarchal nation-state: poor, unmarried women. In her book *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon,* Jacqueline Tchouta Mougoué joins the extensive conversation on how the colonial regime abolished and dismissed indigenous practices whose spiritually centred convictions guaranteed women's participation in public spaces. In addition, J. Lorand Matory also links women's visibility

[131] The term meta-physical indicates that the encounter is both a physical and spiritual encounter. It is not to be confused with metaphysical because it considers the physical as important as the spiritual.

through "mounting" to the practice of initiation rites. The departure of initiation rites, Matory argues, led to women's systematic marginalisation and exclusion. Considering the banishment and decline of African indigenous practices, the return of the unpaid men's spirits to the tabooed space is subversive. The spiritual return develops further into resistance when the spirits choose female bodies as their carnal envelopes and frontline for vengeance. However, this interesting dynamic at once underscores and undermines the film's feminist politics. On the one hand, we can argue that the men's departure creates a space for women's public participation and that situating this public participation spiritually legitimates their unauthorised public presence. On the other hand, the film vitiates any feminist potential by portraying women who disrupt power dynamics as enspirited by men's spirits. Whichever way we choose to read the women's politicoeconomic participation, unpacking their identities when under the influence of the male spirits poses a challenge that Issa's enspiritment does not raise because, although wifened, he remained structurally male. To what extent can we structurally and symbolically unpack the women's ontology during enspiritment? Do they remain women or become men while under the influence?

In "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith offers a new way of rereading books like Toni Morrison's *Sula* through a critical black feminist lens. Smith's engagement with *Sula* negotiates a lesbian reading of the relationships between Morrison's female, heterosexually perceived characters. Leaning into Smith's critique, this analysis imagines how indigenous religions and philosophies offer a feminist potential to the notion of women enspirited by male spirits, especially when we consider Mary Keller's observation in her book *The Hammer and the Flute* that weak bodies are more susceptible

to alien, spiritual indwelling. While Issa Diop's enspiritment proposes, quite counterintuitively, a feminist reading countering the premise of weak female bodies, since it portrays a male body—associated with the hypermasculine role of law-enforcer no less—receiving enspiritment at the same time and in the same manner as the women, it will be particularly tendentious to dismiss the fact that the enspirited women far outnumber the Inspector. Boddy's "Spirit Possession Revisited" suggests that "if we focus on what women do, rather than what they cannot, we find them working in the spiritual realm on behalf of themselves, their families, households, or communities, channelling spirits' assistance or heading off their wrath, protecting future generations, even protesting injustice." (416) Boddy's suggestion harnesses women's social responsibility as upholders of morality and social identity in indigenous societies. In African(ist) scholarship, conversations on what women cannot do are predominantly foregrounded in the postcolonial, as discussed earlier with Matory and Mougoué, while engagements on what women do nostalgically recall the precolonial. Therefore, we can sketch a feminist potential into the women's enspiritment through indigenous knowledge systems by reading their enspiritment as a clarion call to resume their social responsibility.

Importantly, assuming their social responsibility changes their ontology but not outside precolonial possibilities within the continent. Makumbi and Amadiume's respective fictional and anthropological positions identify gender-fluid and socially mobile opportunities for women. Makumbi cites the flying subject, the immaterial self, as the root of women's original identities, implying that women lost their originality in the breeding process. On her part, Amadiume shows how females transcended womanhood and males transcended manhood within the precolonial Igbo society. Both writers locate

different fluid opportunities within the spiritual world, and *Atlantique* complicates these conversations on gender transcendence by explicitly depicting the enabling spirits as male. If we recall Nwando Achebe's reflections on gender balance in spiritual relationships and how this gender balance ultimately reflects the gender-neutral Supreme God in African consciousness, it becomes logical to assume that the self that flies out during a woman's breeding is her immaterial male "energie."[132] Moreover, the supreme being for the Seereer people of Senegal is Roog Sène. When we read the first part of the name from left to right, the word roog means female, while a right-to-left reading of the same word produces the word goor, which means male.[133] Therefore, God for the Seereer is also gender neutral in the same way Achebe's work suggests. If the supreme being is gender neutral and if the women must reflect this neutrality and return to their original states, their bred-out male "energie" must return to their bodies and be reactivated within their ontologies. Therefore, and even counterintuitively, male spirits in female bodies become critically feminist, for they disrupt the postocolony's inhibitions and stipulations on womanhood by restoring and reviving the female body's gender-fluid originality.

A key point to remember is that *Atlantique's* interesting convergence of oppositely gendered spirits and bodies is crucially temporal. The temporality enhances and produces gender-fluid opportunities by maximising the film's night-day dynamics. As women under the sun's reign, they maintain their social responsibility by mourning the men's demise: an act that signals their will for justice and marks them as agents. The moon's governance

[132] See the previous chapter for a detailed discussion on the concept of two energies in a body and for more information on Nwando Achebe's reflection on God and spiritual relationships in African thoughts.

[133] The second part of the supreme being's name in Seereer 'Sène' reads from left to right as "qui est à mon image" and from right to left as "qui est partout." Together, supreme being can both literally mean a female in my image and an omnipresent male. God, for the Seereer is androgynous. Conversation with Birane Sene at Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD), Dakar, July 26, 2024.

revives the other half of their 'energie'; male spirits and female bodies converge, empowering the women to become the dead men's vindicators. Sitting with legs spread apart, climbing fences, laughing and smoking, their performance of masculinity at night reifies their states of being as female-enspirited men who boldly seek justice. While Issa's "mounting" turns him into a bride to restore a politicosexual order, the women's enspiritment transforms them into structurally female men. This complex ontology restores their original state and allows them to *penetrate* Mr N'diaye's home at night to demand politicoeconomic justice without sabotaging their social responsibility as women during the day.

Demanding politicoeconomic justice threatens the chasm between the wealthy and the poor in Senegal's postcolony. From the beginning, the tensions between ancient and modern, rich and poor, abound within the film's entanglements with presence and absence. For instance, the beginning shots of the film capture the Senegalese landscape with a focus on the tower and the surrounding projects. The ongoing project promises a future for the nation's youth. However, the shots switch from long to close shots, capturing the reality of the youths' lived experience. Tattered, dirty, exhausted and tired, the young men littered around and below the tower trouble the nation's pretensions of prosperity. The camera's long shot of the tower and the prosperity it exudes only enhances the distance between the government and the governed. Furthermore, the director subtly infuses mobility amid the random shots that frame the film's beginning. At first, we see cars, buses, trucks and construction vehicles jostling and bustling by, carrying with them a promise of a bright future for the moving pedestrians, but the interesting inclusion of cows walking by, without a herder, into these opening shots challenges once again, the promise of economic and

political prosperity. Soon, the plight of the construction workers comes into focus as the camera highlights their distress, and we realise that, like the cows without a herder, the young construction workers are without the protection and provisions of their government.

Through his absence, Mr N'diaye, the wealthy contractor and symbol of economic prosperity, enters the stage at these beginning shots. As the young workers protest the non-payment of wages, their supervisors inform them that the contractor is "away on business and hasn't left the money." (00:04:20) They try to contact him on the phone, but he remains unreachable. Helpless and unable to force his hand, the young workers leave the construction site utterly devastated. The film choreographs this departure with close shots of the men's crestfallen faces and a continued distance between the futuristic tower and the men sitting at the back of a truck. The continued distance between the tower and the workers foreshadows that the future is exclusive. The film displays a rich-poor chasm through the binary of presence/absence, availability/unavailability, and visibility/invisibility. The wealthy Mr N'diaye is unavailable, his body free from the camera's objectification and the physical deterioration accompanying manual labour. On the other hand, the spectator is abundantly fed with the sweaty, dirty and distraught faces that mark the poor workers' bodies. As the truck carrying the workers moves further away from the tower, the film cuts to continuous shots of the Atlantic Ocean, inviting viewers to its expansive significance. Later, Ada and the women at the beach bar learn that the men have boarded a boat to Spain. For a film that until then focused on mobility, movement and objectification of the poor, the camera's inability to capture the men's departure by boat and their subsequent demise at sea equates them, through absence, with the wealthy man the camera has yet to grasp.

In addition to rendering poor, unskilled labourers absent from the camera, the film furthers its subversive politics by presenting Mr N'diaye to the audience. The erstwhile inaccessible and untouchable middle-class figure, whose presence is only known through his absence to his workers, becomes the target of the female-enspirited-men.[134] At night and under the moon's governance, they daringly storm the home of the middle-class contractor whose unjust withholding of salaries forced the young men to leave home. (00:53:30-00:56:00) Limited lighting intertwines with noise from chirping crickets to confirm the nighttime of the incident. The film's eerie sounds conspire with barking dogs at an unknown distance to heighten the viewer's senses. The fluttering palm tree leaves beautifying the neighbourhood further hone the audience's senses, gesturing towards supernatural influence in these otherwise natural events. The structurally male women are barefoot, dressed physically in nightgowns and pyjamas. Their heavy breaths, extended-paced walks and wide-legged sitting postures affirm their structural positionality and inform the audience of a specific mission. Headlamps of passing cars and streets and security lamps of upper-class houses in wealthy neighbourhoods illuminate the sequence and indicate the geographic and economic shift. They march together to Mr. N'diaye's home, where they sit like men, waiting patiently as he returns home with his wife. For the first time, this singular act renders an unavailable, absent contractor visible to the spectator.

The interaction between a powerful, wealthy man and the female-enspirited-men demonstrates how the latter lean into authority from the spiritual world to reverse the

[134] A language problem presents in this description. To designate characters as male-enspirited-women acknowledges that they are embodied women hosting male spirits. It also agrees grammatically with the modifier, male-enspirited indicating the presence of male spirits in these women's bodies. However, describing them as female-spirited-men follows the pattern of body-dynamic-spirit that the chapter maintains. In chapter two, a character is understood to be a female-embodied man. This remains a work in progress and critically points to the insufficiency of language in encompassing indigenous ontologies.

nation's power dynamic. The unavailable contractor who exploits and manipulates the law without consequence faces the music while the women, now empowered, break the nation's laws with impunity. The first committed crime—arson at the wedding—and the search for the criminal spurred the narrative's storyline, providing thrilling suspense that sends law enforcement agents on a wild goose chase. Subsequently, the women *break and enter* Mr N'diaye's home repeatedly, where they *harass*, *threaten*, *blackmail* him and *set his house on fire*. The police's fruitless attempts to arrest and stop the harassment and their utter confusion when they realise that the one person they managed to arrest has disappeared exemplify the new power play in the nation. Moreover, the women's safe return to their homes after enspiritment shows an unusual sense of care for female bodies. Easily marginalised and exploited for the patriarchy, as seen in Ada's invasive virginity test and temporary jail time, this group of underclass women are not left in the hands of the police; rather, each woman resists arrest and returns safely to her bedroom after each enspiriting phase. Before enspiritment, neither the young construction workers nor their girl/friends possessed the power to force the hand of the contractor or escape numerous arrest attempts. However, the men's spirits-women's bodies fusion taps into resources from African indigenous practices to override the man-made laws that subjugate the subaltern. Not only are structural forces of oppression impotent, but their insignificance under the moon's governance encodes a new political order.

Just as every political revolution in history carries an economic consequence, the film includes an economic, restorative aspect to its resistance campaign. The burning of the contractor's house carries a significant financial loss, especially considering the contrast between the women's and Omar's houses. Housing stands out importantly as a

marker of class in *Atlantique*. At Ada's wedding, for instance, her friends are shocked at the beauty of her new house and its luxurious interior decoration. When she cries at her wedding, Fanta advises that she stay married because of the beautiful house. Even the subversive Dior acknowledges the house's significance and the economic stability it portends:

> When I advised you to marry Omar, it was so that you'd enjoy it. Not for this. It was for your happiness. So you'd be at peace. In your interest. But look at you. Come on, let's go if you can't do it (…) But you should understand one thing. Out there is one big struggle. You'll have no father or mother. It'll just be you, all your own. If you will rather face that reality than stay in this house of happiness, then let's leave." (00:36:40-00:37:16)

The irony of Dior's statement is particularly striking. Ada stands on the balcony of the luxurious house, inconsolable and yet Dior describes the house as a "house of happiness." In the face of Ada's pain and tears, the house, for Dior, remains a house of happiness because of the financial ease it signifies and promises. Therefore, burning the contractor's equally luxurious house denies him the economic status that comes with the luxury and eliminates his happiness.

Although the burnt house breaks the economic chasm between the contractor and the workers he exploits, besides the satisfaction of vengeance, there is no significant change for the subaltern. Fortunately, the economic resistance does not end with the arson. Just before they set his home on fire, Mr N'diaye receives an ultimatum: he must present himself at the cemetery at 3:00 am with the money he owes. While many scenes have shown the dominance of these female-enspirited-men, this demand exemplifies their

control of time and space under the moon. Lacking power and dominance, the terrified Mr N'diaye arrives at the cemetery with their unpaid wages and watches helplessly as they count the money. He pleads to leave and apologises for his actions, but the women deny Mr N'diaye's agency by keeping him with them as they count the money. The ultimate reversal of power dynamics is displayed when they demand that he dig their graves. As the contractor digs, they criticise his skills and ridicule him. They yell commands— "Dig until your hands burn. Faster. Faster"—and subject him to the same treatment lower-class labourers receive at work. We see a male body subject to intense physical labour, sweating and panting in a manner that recalls the young men's sweaty, dirty bodies at the beginning. Exerting the same labour required of subaltern male bodies on the middle-class man makes the contractor a labourer, while non-working bodies who observe, criticise and yell commands leave with money. The following day, Fanta's mother finds a trail of money littered around the house. The camera follows the broken tiles and scraped walls that mark the house as a "house of sadness." Nonetheless, the trail of money littered on the floor parallels the scrapes on the wall and broken tiles, carrying the promise of happiness. The men may not have received their wages physically, but through the fusion of their spirits in the women's bodies, they receive reparations for their unpaid labour.

A critical engagement with the role of women in *Atlantique* leaves us questioning if, according to the film, subversive women are uniquely structurally male. The presence and relevance of the two major female characters, Ada and Dior, very quickly dispel this thought. Dior and Ada are the troublesome, rebellious women of postcolonial Senegal. Like Mattie in Saidiya Hartman's "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments," Dior wears tight shorts that reveal her shapely bottom, and she boldly marks her skin with tattoos and

elaborate, enticing jewellery that brands her as the unscrupulous, sexual deviant of her society.[135]At Ada's wedding, Dior boasts that she can "gobble up his [Ada's groom's] cash without scruples" (1:08:36), and when she realises that Ada is unable to go through with the marriage, it is Dior who advises her to leave and supports her throughout the film. In a predominantly Muslim nation where alcohol is frowned upon, Dior runs a nightclub where young men and women meet to drink, smoke and dance. Her support encourages a formerly virtuous potential wife, Ada, to reject "protection" from her parents, wealthy husband, and in-laws and join Dior in the nightclub to serve alcoholic beverages. There is a message of genuine female friendship between Dior and Ada, a non-sexual relationship that recalls Adrienne Rich's theory on the lesbian continuum.[136] Dior and Ada's relationship shows a positive, non-competitive, and jealousy-free friendship, without judgment and based on truth and honesty, no matter how brutal.

Even though their exemplary friendship carries a message of women supporting women, it is worth noting that it is to these two unenspirited, rebellious women that the men reveal their identities and narrate their stories. This intentional revelation positions the women as griots of the men's lives. An act that shades the heteropatriarchal postcolony, the choice of revelation suggests that the men's spirits entrust Ada and Dior with the responsibility of keeping them alive through memory.[137] Instead of their traditional family members, the radical, deviant women are bestowed with the duty to recall and re-member

[135] Dior's character joins the culture of rebellion that Mattie in Saidiya Hartman's "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments" represents—women unafraid of their bodies who embrace their womanhood and express their sexuality.

[136] For more analytical information see the previous chapter's study of Adrienne Rich's theories from her article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

[137] See John Mbiti's explanation of living-dead in *African Philosophies and Religions*.

the young men with their ancestors in the spirit world. By showing themselves to the women, their death loses its mystery, and their stories cease to be incomplete. Understandably, Souleiman exposes himself to Ada while the rest of the men unveil themselves to Dior at the club. Ada and Dior receive a first-hand account of the events that occurred at sea. Since their rebellious lifestyle separates them from their families and from the generational life cycle that marriage and childbirth assure, the men's revelation offers a new spiritual heritage to the women, a deal that far exceeds reproducing for the patriarchy. As precolonial agents, the new knowledge-bearers carry the nation's spiritual heritage in their hearts and minds.

Unsurprisingly, the mirror becomes Ada and Dior's primary source of information, having seen how the reflective surface sketches a methodology that enables a nuanced engagement with *Atlantique*'s complex spirit-body ontologies. In true *Atlantique* fashion, looking into the mirror for details on the self is subverted. The undoing occurs at multiple layers. For instance, when Ada gazes into the mirror and views Souleiman's reflection (26:58), the film replaces the dominant male gaze with a female gaze. The female gaze, unlike the sexually objectifying male gaze, is an empowering source since Souleiman and other men rely on Ada and Dior's looking into the mirror for re-identification. Significantly, when Ada gazes into the mirror, the impact of the spiritual reflection trumps any Me-self objectifying possibility.[138] Initially, Ada is shocked; she rushes to the beach bar, where Dior informs her that the boys are back. Together, both women listen to the men's stories, weep over their unfortunate plight and mourn their passing. In this sequence,

[138] See Harter Susan's *Visions of Self: Beyond the Me in the Mirror.* Highlighting the difference between the active observer, the I-self, and the observed and objectified Me-self in the mirror, Harter explores how one's self-concept, the Me-self, is constructed, packaged, enhanced, and protected.

the camera never captures Ada and Dior's reflections in the mirror. Instead, the focus is on the women who sit at the bar with male postures and on the men the mirror reflects. In a critical stunt that crucially reverses the male gaze, the vantage position of the looking-glass other is reserved for women.

Figure 3.11. Still from *Atlantique. The camera depicts Fanta's female body sitting like a man; the mirror reflects a male body. (01:23:36)*

By not reflecting the women in the mirror, the film evades appearance-related conversations that dominate the discourse about the mirror and propagate harmful body image standards, majorly on women. In *False Bodies, True Selves*, Nicole Schnackenberg explains how looking into the mirror and perceiving an ugly self affects girls as young as four. In her words, the mirror functions as "a window into self-loathing, abandoned self-worth, and disintegrating self-respect." (Schnackenberg 7). Not surprisingly, Schnackenberg grounds the obsession with the body in Western culture's commodification and identification of bodies as sites of health, beauty, glamorous identities and powerful sexuality. Indeed, the people who suffer the most from this commodification and idealised

projection of bodies are women, and the mirror contributes to how each woman perceives herself. Against Western culture's capitalised mirror projection, *Atlantique* mobilises African culture to reimagine and establish an Africanist mirror epistemology. On this epistemological background, the mirror's reflection of male bodies disrupts a possible commodification of female bodies. While the camera portrays female bodies sitting on chairs, the mirror reflects male bodies in the same posture. There is an unexpected protection of the female subject in this production. Indeed, it remains unclear what a spirit looks like since the camera shows female bodies and the mirror reflects male bodies. Nonetheless, this Africanist methodology of an oppositely gendered reflection defies every definition of a woman. The mirror forges an epistemological standpoint from which an Africanist scholar can reread its impact. Rather than portraying and objectifying the female body through popular culture's projections, the mirror's male body reflection shields the female body from any constructed standards. Since the male body functions as the female body's reflection, the mirror redefines womanhood by reflecting the nuanced possibilities of a woman's true self.

Do all female bodies reflect a true male self? *Atlantique's* last scene readily answers this question. The film concludes with the two women preserved from enspiritment, Ada and Dior. The latter begins her daily life, setting up the beach bar as Ada wakes up. This concluding scene offers a futuristic imagining of the nation-state. Even though the boys will not return to dance, Dior sets up the beach bar as a significant resistance frontier for the nation's youths. On her part, Ada wakes up from sleep to face her future. The moon is gone, and the sun is rising, but she does not look outside where the sun dominates. Instead,

she turns backwards to the mirror. The reflective surface shows Ada's female body: beautiful, bright, bold. Her voice-over narrates her thoughts:

> Some memories are omens.
> Last night will stay with me,
> To remind me who I am…
> And show me who I will become.
> Ada, to whom the future belongs
> I am Ada

These powerful words are spoken with some theatrics. Ada says the first two lines in a voice-over style as the camera trails Dior, following her set-up activities. Through this visual and sonic convergence, the first two lines confirm the two women's futuristic roles. When Ada speaks line three, the camera switches to a determined portrait of herself, her demeanour deep in thought. Turning away from the world and focusing on her reflection in the mirror, Ada speaks lines four and five. The camera follows her dramatic turn to the Me-self, where the mirror reflects her young, passionate and determined female inner self. Instead of self-loathing, Ada projects a sense of pride to her me-self and her determined future trajectory nullifies any feelings of abandoned self-worth. When the camera shuts down and Ada intimately and powerfully speaks the last words, it becomes clear that neither the mirror nor the camera, however well-meaning, can undermine her self-esteem. Revived, Ada finds the courage and strength to live and reflect her true, original self.

Conclusion

Atlantique's wrestling with Africa's invisible reality forces the camera to confront a world that functions in parallel to the camera's accustomed culture. Beyond the unusual, white-eyed bodies that the camera successfully shows us, hinting at the workings of the

immaterial, the camera's technology, we have seen, requires reflective and sonic aids to render an accurate narrative that incorporates the spiritual realities, however fictive. Mati Diop's film stays faithful to visuality while mobilising the viewer's multiple senses to pursue the film's politics. From the white-eyed characters who appear blind to the material world yet functioning within it to conflicting information from supposed eyewitnesses, the film fosters an engagement beyond the visual. It locates the visible as a significant starting point for understanding the complexity of humanity. The mobilisation and recruitment of senses beyond sight sketch a methodology for unpacking characters in this African narrative.

Since the major characters in the film are subaltern figures, and because the process of subalternation alters and violates a person's whole ontology, a body-based engagement with these characters proves insufficient. The spiritual world and its technologies and resources provide subalterns, often the victims of constructed conscriptions, with the authority and legitimacy they need to resist oppression. In the case of the poor young men at the film's beginning, their justice comes in the form of literal payments of outstanding wages and a symbolic burial. Their symbolic burial signifies an end to the men's spirits' unrest and accords them their rightful burial rites. Though the film does not portray the fact, the burial marks the end of their girl/friend's enspiritment since the men's displaced spirits can now rest in their homelands. When we consider their lack of power before leaning into spiritual resources, it becomes inarguable that inequality, injustice and oppression necessitate spiritual intervention in the physical world. The young men's powerlessness recalls a scene in the 2023 fantasy comedy film *Barbie*, where a young man asks if being a man with no power makes him a woman. While mutual vulnerability to the

oppressive power structures alone does not equal the experience of the men and the women, it signals both subaltern groups as victims of the unjust, corrupt regime.

Atlantique shades popular culture's obsession with defining a woman. Belonging to the most vulnerable group of the postcolonial oppressive regime, the female body becomes the stage where desires and entanglements between the postcolonial and the precolonial dramatically choreograph. In this material world where identity politics of what a woman is and how her body should perform continue to generate controversy,[139] the film's enspirited women reify and defy Western anxieties on womanhood. And although their enspiritment symbolically ends with the symbolic burial, the enspiriting mission does not leave the women empty-handed. They receive financial compensation that promises an economic transformation, while Ada and Dior are entrusted with reinstating the nation's spiritual, politicosexual order.

Atlantique's enhancement of the camera's capacities with sonic and reflective technologies undermines body-focused conclusions and assumptions about womanhood. Through sounds that challenge sight and reflections that question the visual, the film encourages viewers to engage critically with bodies. The film promises a future where bodies, spirits and more (sentient subjects) derive power after sunset to exercise their erotic, economic and political autonomy within and outside their bodies. The women of the postcolony, those who live in female bodies under the conditions of womanhood in the world, find revived expressions from Africa's immaterial provisions.

[139] The case of Imane Khelif, an Algerian boxer at the 2024 Paris Olympics, is a recent example that adds to the West's persistent questioning of (African) women's womanhood. Often, African athletes are subject to humiliating tests to prove their womanliness and those who fall outside the West's margin of woman are banned from competitive sports.

CODA:

"Les morts ne sont pas morts"[140]: Personal and Futuristic Deliberations on *Coming Back*

The mandate to begin this project came to me very unexpectedly while I lay on the floor of my mother's living room in Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria, during the summer of 2021. My second year of graduate school had just concluded with a harrowing qualifying examination experience, and I desperately needed to return home. As soon as the COVID-19 travel restrictions lifted, I packed a suitcase of books and clothes and flew home. One of those books was Léonora Miano's 2013 novel, *La saison de l'ombre*. On the day my project found me, I had taken a break from reading Miano's novel to browse through my grandfather's diary, which until then had remained undisturbed in an old, weary leather box. The box must have been untouched for decades, as none of my siblings were interested in its contents. However, enduring the pandemic and double isolation in the United States gave me a sense of longing to both be home and learn more about myself. So, Grandpa's box was opened for the first time in decades.

My paternal Grandpa recorded random stuff. On September 10, 1963, he bought a Pye Radio. Not long after, his wife, my Grandma, bought a canoe for 3 pounds, 15 cents. As I read through these random recordings, my indifferent siblings wondered at my curiosity but politely chuckled each time I read them an entry from Grandpa's diary. There were ancestral land records and important documents about my father, one of which was a report card that stated he talked too much in class. Grandpa wrote them all down: purchases, weddings, births, deaths, funeral rites, etc. However, an interesting recording

[140] Poem from Birago Diop's last chapter, "Sarzan" in *Les contes d'Amadou-Koumba*.
Translation: The dead are not dead.

of the birth of a child aroused my curiosity further. The child, a girl, was born on my sister's birthday. Finding this strange, I asked my mother if we had a cousin with the same birthday as my sister. My mum responded by saying the child was my sister and the names were the names Grandpa had hoped she'd be named. One year after my sister's birth, my grandfather recorded the death of his wife, my grandmother, and one year later, he wrote of the birth of another daughter with the name Nnenna Nkemdiri Onyima. I had not thought of the specialness of the situation until I made fun of my elder sister for having different sets of family names. She asked me to check the names assigned to me in Grandpa's records, and they are the names I still bear. What is apparent from these records is that both my father, who named me, and my grandfather shared the same conviction about the child. They both believed that the spirit of their departed mother and wife had *come back*, ergo the names Nnenna (mother of the father) and Nkemdiri (let what is mine remain).

Unsure of where my discovery leads, I continued reading Miano's novel. The two readings seemingly shared nothing in common: one book bears my grandfather's handwritten family records; the surprising legibility of his all-capitalised English words impressively betrayed his minimal education. The other book is a French-language novel published by an established Cameroonian writer. Yet, the narratives from these two conspicuously different pieces of literature revealed an unusual commonality—a conviction that the human principle comprises both the spiritual, immaterial self and the physical, material self. Stimulated by these readings, I took a photo of a striking sentence from Miano's text that describes a female character who embodies a male spirit, posted it on my WhatsApp status and asked if the character was a man or a woman. My status viewers, predominantly postcolonial Pentecostal Nigerian Christians, vehemently opposed

the basis of my question. Citing God, they passionately reminded me that, according to Christianity, one is either male or female. Because I had not mentioned any religion, I found these responses puzzling. Are contemporary Africans unable to think beyond the prescriptions of dominant religions? Are we not, as a people, slightly curious about how our ancestors lived and perceived life and existence?

My grandfather and father were members of the Anglican church, but they also espoused African philosophical beliefs, hence the naming. They did not allow their belief in Christian traditions to erase their understanding of the African life cycle. In fact, my mother later informed me that when a priest insisted that my father's children be baptised with the English names of saints, my father refused this colonial branding of his children. He famously asked the priest if English people had Igbo names and would have taken us back unbaptised had the priest insisted. Throughout my childhood and adulthood in Nigeria, I scarcely knew a friend or classmate who did not wear the much-desired saintly brand of an English name. Often, my schoolmates bore their English names in school, while at home, they were called by the names their parents and grandparents could pronounce. A consequential separation of identity emerges with this practice, one that philosophically indicates that African ontology and epistemology belong outside the classroom. Historically, considering that Nigerian schools were introduced by missionaries who worked with the colonisers, this practice becomes one of the legacies of colonial erasures that seek to eliminate African personhood by devaluing their human philosophical conceptualisations.

Birago Diop dramatises the grave consequences of devaluing African philosophies in his 1961 collection of stories, *Les contes d'Amadou Koumba*. The final story, "Sarzan,"

follows a former tirailleur soldier, Sergeant Thiémokho Kéita, who returns to his hometown of Dougouba and is tasked by the colonisers to "civilise" his people. Kéita takes his civilising mission seriously, insulting and ridiculing ancient traditions, which he views as "des manières des sauvages," the ways of savages. Diop communicates Kéita's derogatory attitudes toward African culture by listing the places where the soldier has travelled and fought—Marseille, Toulon, Fréjus, and Beyrouth (Diop 175). His exposure to and proximity to whiteness render him superior to his uncivilised community, whose road Kéita promises to build. Similarly, like the separation of identities by English names, modernity, in this case, roads, is portrayed as incompatible with African convictions. The story takes an intriguing turn when, one year later, the narrator visits Dougouba and observes that the road has been built. However, when the narrator approaches Kéita, now known as Sarzan, a mispronunciation of sergeant, the soldier screams African philosophical beliefs.

> Le souffle des ancêtres morts
> Qui ne sont pas partis,
> Qui ne sont pas sous terre,
> Qui ne sont pas morts.
> Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis,
> Ils sont dans le sein de la femme,
> Ils sont dans l'enfant qui vagit,
> Et dans le tison qui s'enflamme,
> Les morts ne sont jamais sous terre…
> Ils sont dans la forêt, ils sont dans la demeure,
> Les morts ne sont pas morts.[141]

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141 The breath of dead ancestors
Who have not left,
Who are not underground
Who are not dead.
Those who are dead have never left,
They are in the woman's womb,
They are in the crying child,
And in the burning ember,
The dead are never underground, …

The road-building, civilised Kéita transforms into an insane person who confesses the conviction of the "uncivilised." His insane poetic rendition recalls Mossane's mad ramblings in Sarr's narrative. In both texts, the state of insanity becomes the mental state where the character confesses their inner truth. While Mossane confesses her desire and pursuit of sexual freedom, Sarzan avows, in a lyrical style, the persistent conviction of his people. Ironically, enlightenment emerges in Sarzan's madness as he speaks the poem. The highly repetitive verses carry one message: the dead are not dead. The poem's anaphoric negations indicate resistance to colonial erasures. By stating that the dead are not dead, have never left and are not underground, the poem pushes back against ideological erasures that relegate African philosophies to the past. The affirmative anaphoric verses then inform readers of the dead's location. Having rejected colonial erasures through negations, the poem affirms a futuristic positioning of the dead—woman's womb, crying child. It is worth noting that the narrative opens by alluding to the perilous activities of violent jihadist movements led by El Hadj Omar. Consequently, the poem at the end of the story resists Western colonial erasures and Islamist jihadist impositions.

I highlight Birago Diop's 1961 rendition in this project's conclusion to illustrate the ongoing presence of African spiritual traditions in literature. Since this project's primary sources are predominantly contemporary, Diop's narrative strengthens the argument by tracing the existence of African spiritual realities in francophone literature back to the twentieth century. It presents a temporal span that transcends five decades of enduring spiritual conviction in literature. The main thesis of this project, understanding and integrating spiritual identities, is essential for unpacking characters in African

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They are in the forest, they are in the dwelling,
The dead are not dead

narratives, and becomes particularly significant in the story of Sarzan. An engagement with Sergeant Kéita (embodied), who becomes Sarzan (enspirited) at the end of the story, remains critically incomplete if the spirituality underpinning his change of identity is overlooked. Therefore, this project's theorisation of embodiment and enspiritment highlights these obscure epistemologies in a manner yet to be achieved in literary theory. Despite being prevalent in African narratives across space, time, language, and genre, there has been limited scholarly engagement with spiritual traditions in literature, as demonstrated by *Embodiment and Enspiritment*. Moreover, this project's diverse genres—photography, film, poetry, prose—and the application of the worldsense paradigm across these genres further sustains critical engagements with the invisible self. When Diop writes that the dead are not truly dead, for example, he conveys the African philosophical thought that asserts only the visible, material body dies when a person passes.

Engaging with this belief figuratively offers optimism that the erasures of the past, what we may consider dead, remain not dead in different forms. Literature, film, photography and more are among the ways we encounter the return of the not dead. Beyond the explicit resurgence of the spiritual principle within contemporary narratives, each text discussed in this project subtly offers a hopeful vision for the future, pointing to the continuity of African spirituality in hostile spaces. Sarr's narrative concludes with the protagonist symbolically burying a book underwater, a practice believed by the Seereer to signify rebirth. In Miano's novel, an elderly woman buries all the deceased members of her nation, while a younger woman is entrusted with the mute body of a young man in whom the spirits of other young men reside. Mati Diop's film illustrates a contractor digging graves to symbolise the burials of young men who departed by the Ocean. Perhaps

these burial endings signify hope for a futuristic *come back* of the dead and banished epistemology. African belief systems show that material death, like my grandmother's, is required to remain spiritually not dead. This project ensures that, when we encounter not dead epistemology and ontology, we have the appropriate analytical and theoretical resources and vocabulary to engage with them.

APPENDIX

Les Saameel

Dans les années 1971 – 1972, j'ai reçu une lettre du Président de la république, Léopold Sédar Senghor, à propos d'une chercheuse américaine d'origine brésilienne qui faisait des recherches sur la culture seereer. J'ai oublié son nom[142]. Comme elle avait le soutien du Président Senghor, elle avait accès à tout, même aux aspects de la culture inaccessible aux allogènes et aux femmes. Elle bénéficiait d'un privilège exceptionnel grâce au soutien du Président Senghor. Elle passait même des nuits auprès des initié seereer et portait par devers elle des gris-gris. Elle avait adopté même un nom seereer. Tout le monde était disponible à son égard excepté les *Saameel*. C'est ce qui, sans doute, a motivé la lettre de Senghor me demandant de l'aider. J'étais du même village que ces devins d'un genre singulier.

J'étais agacé, à la fois, par le choix de ma personne et par ma position délicate qui m'exposait à devoir contribuer au dévoilement d'un rite réputé jusque-là occulte. Rite funèbre exécuté par un devin testamentaire *ab intestat*, le *Saameel* inspire la crainte. Fort embarrassé, je décide d'aller demander conseil à un ami de mon père. Ensemble, ils avaient fait la même expérience de la case de l'homme (l'initiation). Je lui raconte ma situation. Après m'avoir écouté, il me rassura qu'il réussirait à convaincre le *Saameel* et que j'obtiendrai ce dont j'ai besoin. J'étais touché par sa générosité car ce que je lui demandais n'était pas évident.

Le jour des funérailles, la chercheuse se présente au village. J'oublie toujours son nom. Tu sais, avec l'âge, la mémoire est quelque peu défaillante. La dame est arrivée accompagnée d'un caméraman avec tout son équipement : un magnétophone, deux appareils photo et une caméra ; Nous partîmes avec les griots *saameel* dans une même charrette. À l'approche de la maison mortuaire, le chef des *Saameel*, le principal desservant du rite, me dit avec gravité : « On se sépare ici ! ». Je quitte la charrette pour permettre aux *Saameel* de se préparer, de s'habiller selon les exigences du rite. Dans la maison du défunt, d'autres griots animaient la cérémonie. Mais, dès qu'ils voient les *Saameel* apparaître à l'improviste, ils abandonnent leurs tam-tams sur les lieux et s'égaillent dans la foule qui, elle-même, se disperse. Et la cérémonie commença. C'était un spectacle incroyable. La chercheuse et son équipe firent des vidéos et des audios et prirent des photos. À la fin de la cérémonie, elle était ravie et reconnaissante. Elle avait, finalement, ce qu'elle cherchait.

Je repris le chemin de retour avec elle jusqu'à Dakar. Et je passai la nuit chez elle avant de continuer sur Saint-Louis où j'étais enseignant. Mais dès le lendemain, elle m'appela en pleurs au bout du fil pour m'apprendre, à ma grande surprise, que tous ses appareils étaient vides. Ni ses deux appareils photo, ni les vidéos qu'elle avait fait, ni les audios qu'elle avait enregistrait, rien n'avait réussi. Tout état vide. Elle pleurait et se lamentait pendant que moi, désemparé, je ne savais quoi lui dire. J'étais incapable de restituer la cérémonie.

[142] Il s'agissait de Maria Eugénia de Castillo Amstrong du Laboratoire d'Anthropologie de l'IFAN-UCAD de Dakar.

Le chef des *Saameel*, frère de case de mon père, m'avait pourtant bien dit : « tout ce dont tu as besoin, tu l'auras ». C'était, donc, là d'accepter ma requête sans effectivement me la donner !

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