

The Representation of the Congolese and their Traditions in Alain Mabanckou's Novels

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Abstract

Folklore covers too many territories that prompt one to be specific about the kind of Folklore and where it is drawn from. Using the Congo region as a sample of African folklore culture, this paper examines how Alain Mabanckou depicts the disharmonious behaviour of the Congolese in his novels (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans* (2010), (translated as *Tomorrow I'll be Twenty*) and *Memoirs de Porc-épic* (translated as *Memoirs of a Porcupine*) and *Petit Piment* (translated as *Black Moses*) through folklore and the presentation of the vices of some persons in the region, their belief in traditional superstitions as it relates to the progress of the region under study. Through the lens of folk narrative theory, this paper examines how folktales serve not just as an entertainment but also as vital tools to critique the anomalies in a given society. Mabanckou's use of folklore in his narratives succeeded in creating a vivid portrait of rural Congolese society, their values, ways of thinking and behaving, how they learn, who they are and how they make meaning out of the world around them. This paper centres on folklore as a tool for addressing the negative activities of the Congolese as well as their beliefs in traditional superstitions which have hindered development in the Congo region. The findings reveal that greed, power and human nature are interconnected and that he who lives by the sword dies by the sword. This paper concludes that folklore is not just body of expressive culture but also a tool to correct the anomalies in a given society.

Keywords: Alain Mabanckou, Traditional Superstitions, Folklore, Congo region, Cultural Practices

Introduction

African culture shares historical and cultural experiences which shape how they share and exchange intellectual concepts, material goods and cultural traditions. The term “folklore “ was first used in 1846 by an English scholar, William John Thoms, who molded his ideas for studying expressive culture on the work of the Grimm brothers (Oring, 1986c,6). Folklorists looked for references to traditions and beliefs in other to locate folklore within a certain ethnic, social or cultural framework, and to trace the migration of texts as people moved from one geographic region to another and transmitted texts within and across generations or social groups. Taking note of the significance of words, symbols or references, as well as looking for literary patterns in oral and written texts, anchored this approach in academic and literary study, which reinforced the idea of a text as an object that could be studied separately from settings of the people who shared and created the texts (Sims, M. and Stephens, M. 2005, 23).

Literature is a part of people's culture and language. The examination of Alain Mabanckou's *Demain, j'aurai vingt ans* (translated as *Tomorrow I'll be Twenty*), *Memoirs de Porc-épic* (translated as *Memoirs of a Porcupine*) and *Petit Piment* (translated as *Black Moses*) looks at literature and it's role as a mirror of the society.

Folklore is a widely used term that is adopted in reframing a holistic picture of grief, archetypes, identity, myths and factual picaresque form of originality and oppression (P. Hoideiniang and B. Evangeline: 2023). The selected novels uses folklore as a mechanism to portray the price of power in the society while shading light on the level of greed in the Congolese society. Folklore is an arrangement of expressive culture like those of oral history, customs, music and so forth, which transfigured itself into an assessment of Information and tradition of various social fields (Zou and B, 2023).

Following the definitions of great scholars in folklore such as Alan Dundes, Mary Hufford and William Wilson, folklore plays important roles in every day life of the people in the society. It shapes every day experiences in stories and also helps in the way they discover and express who they are and how they interact and fit into the world. In the novels under study, Mabanckou passed through the roles of folklore to denounce the backwardness of the Congo region without outright confrontation. Mabanckou personified an animal – the Porcupine who has a human double to achieve this in *Memoirs de Porc-épic* and *Petit Piment*. While belief in traditional superstitions is used in *Demain, j'aurai vingt ans* as a vehicle to denounce the actions and activities of the Congolese in the face of their plight. The novels under study touch what folklore does and what it means to the society that shares it in a bid to expose the greed, power tussle and unhealthy competition in the Congo region.

Many definitions illustrate the ways that folklore is part of unofficial, non-institutional knowledge and experience. For Jan Harold, “folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, values, attitudes, understanding, assumptions, feelings and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples (1978,4). The process of folklore is a combination of both changing (dynamic) and static (conservative) elements that connect with a group's past and present in ways that evolve and change through sharing, communication performance (Toelken, 1996,). Folklorists such as Mabanckou go into the field in contemporary societies to observe, record and write about people, what they do, what they believe in and how they communicate not just to shape or preserve culture but also to convey political message through animal characters. Alain Mabanckou passed through traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices to mock the Congolese for being responsible for the backwardness in their region.

Memoirs de Porc-épic is Mabanckou's folk narrative that personified a Porcupine who has a human double and serves as a source of terror for the local population. The Porcupine is known for its intrigues and enormous capacity to outwit bigger opponents, including supernatural beings. The Porcupine is more of a trickster and culture bearer. The novel presents the character of the Porcupine not as a creator but a destroyer who failed to fulfil his promises and who dupes others at will. Mabanckou in *Demain, j'aurai vingt ans* and *Petit Piment* made references to the Congolese reliance on traditional superstitions to make progress in life. This paper affirms that Mabanckou passed through his folk narratives not only to teach a lesson but also to convey a political message about the state of affairs in the Congo region.

Folk Narrative Theory

Theories complement the social functions and educational values of the folktale. Tales are the mirrors of the society which validate culture; it can entertain, educate and also critique the state of affairs in a given region. This paper deploys folk narrative theory for the analysis of the message that Mabanckou tried to pass to the Congolese in relation to the state of affairs in their region. Folk narrative theory is the best tool for this analysis as Mabanckou paid close attention to literary elements such as character roles, structure and moral lessons inherent in the texts under study. Mabanckou's character choice helps to shed more light on societal expectations and conflicts in the region. Folk narrative theory is a framework used to interpret and analyse oral literature and traditional stories passed down through generations within specific cultural groups (world literature, 2024). The theory is more concerned about the role of storytelling in shaping values, social norms and cultural identity as well as its function in community bonding and historical preservation.

Folk narrative theory is very relevant where references are made to how folktales serve not just as a tool for entertainment but also for correcting the societal ills that hinder development. It is

also necessary where the storyteller is seen or considered as a pivotal figure in maintaining the dynamic nature of oral traditions through performance. Folk narrative theory is very relevant for cultural studies as it shows themes that revolve in narratives across different societies while reflecting unique cultural contexts.

Folk narrative theory is the right tool box for the analyses of the novels under study because it helps us to appreciate the significance of oral traditions within a given society or region. The personification of a Porcupine in *Memoirs de Porc-épic* reveals the level of greed in the society and how the Congolese hide under the umbrella of superstitions to inflict pains against one another. Folk narrative theory provides valuable insights about the role of oral traditions in the preservation of cultural identity and shared values within specific groups. Mabanckou's exploration in the novels under study reflects the region's social norms, history and moral lessons. Mabanckou's role in the narratives fosters a sense of belonging and continuity in the culture. The author's involvement in the most exciting developments of knowledge on folklore and cultural studies were made manifest in the publications of the novels under study.

In today's society, folk narrative theory remains relevant because it helps to highlight diverse experiences that contribute to the global cultural diversity while preserving core values.

Literature Review

Existing literature that relates to the present study is available both in English and French languages. However, the existing body of works leaves scope for reading Mabanckou's *Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, *Memoirs de Porc-épic* and *Petit Piment* through the perspective of folk narrative theory. Below is a brief literature review concerning the present study.

Sims, M. and Stephens, M. (2005) affirm that folklore is a way of understanding people and the wide-ranging creative ways we express who we are and what we value and believe. Mitra (2007) attempts a reading of selected Bengali folktales in his book *Methodology of Folklore* through the perspectives of historical materialism and psychoanalysis. The study reflects the nature of a feudalistic society, its forms of oppression and subsequent class struggle.

Tagore (2018) maintains that folktales reflect the resistance of common people against the forces of social oppression, economic exploitation and unjust sufferings experienced in Indian society. This study is very relevant to the present study from the perspective of Alain Mabanckou in the selected novels as they relate to the Congolese society. Nath (2023) examines the themes and characters of two selected tales, namely Tejimola and Panesoi, from the collection of Assamese folktales entitled *Burhir Aair Sadhu*, in the light of historical materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis respectively. The paper affirms that the body of folk literature is the symbolic representation of the class struggle itself.

Folklore: A representation of reality in the Congo region

Folk literature stands as oral narratives among the people of a particular nation or community. This paper examines Mabanckou's depiction of the state of affairs in the Congo region through folktales and the region's belief in traditional superstitions. The expectations and desires of a given society find expressions in items such as music, myths and folktales. Thus, the reading of Mabanckou's *Demain, J'aurai vingt ans*, *Memoirs de Porc-épic* and *Petit Piment* through the lens of folk narrative theory provides valuable insights to repression, social problems, anxieties as well as people's responses or reactions in the face of their plight.

Memoirs de Porc-épic is the tale of a Porcupine who has a human double, Kibandi. The main character is just an ordinary Porcupine in the Congo region until Papa Kibandi performs a ritual that transformed him into the harmful double of his son : a vrai dire, je n'ai rien à envier aux hommes, je me moque de leur prétendue intelligence puisque j'ai moi-même été pendant longtemps le double de l'homme qu'on appelait Kibandi et qui est mort avant-hier (*Memoirs de Porc-épic*, 2006:8). To be honest, I would not want to be a man, they can keep their so-called intelligence, for years I was the double of a man named Kibandi, who died two days ago ... (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 2011:11).

According to Greene, L and Burke, J. (2017), myth offers us a vast array of stories about parent-child relationships. The human imagination finds solace and enlightenment in creating tales about mothers, fathers, sons and daughters and the mystery of what binds them together through unbreakable emotional cords. Family myth revolves around how parents expect nothing less than success and progress from their children. Mabanckou passed through the character of Papa Kibandi to make sense of how parents go to the extreme for their children to succeed in life.

In *Memoirs de Porc-épic*, the Porcupine reveals that Papa Kibandi performs a ritual to transform him into a harmful double of his son in a bid to secure his future and make him more powerful in the society. Kibandi is a symbol of a common man in the society whose actions and activities (killing innocent people with the help of his animal double, the porcupine through fetish means) have indirectly caused many families the Joy and happiness they deserve : ... Mama Kibandi ne sut rien de plus sur l'affaire , le père et le fils savaient de quoi ils parlaient et il y avait ces décès qui se multipliaient à Mossaka, des décès qui ne s'espaciaient plus, les enterrements se suivaient, on avait à peine fini de verser des larmes sur un mort qu'un autre attendait son tour, Papa Kibandi ne se rendait pas à ces funérailles , cela suscita des interrogations dans un village où tout le monde se connaissait ... (*Memoirs de Porc-*

épic, 2006:51). Mama Kibandi knew nothing more about it, father and son understood each other and there were so many deaths in Mossaka, one hard upon the other, nose to tail burials, you had no sooner finished lamenting one dear departed, and there was another one lined up, Papa Kibandi did not go to the funerals, which got people asking questions in the villages, where everyone knew everyone ... (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 2011: 54). Folklore draws all participants into highly active roles. The characters of Kibandi and Papa Kibandi play active negative roles in the society. They both had animal doubles that terrorised the local population and caused them their peace of mind. Kibandi has a Porcupine as an animal double while Papa Kibandi has a rat with abnormal tail as the animal double.

Mythological stories often describe events which occur outside of the human experience with non-human characters and events that cannot be proven to be true or false. Mabanckou deploys folklore as a self-help psychology to explain the mysteries of life and shed more light on human nature as they relate to the state of affairs in the Congo region. Mossaka which formed part of the settings of *Memoirs de Porc-épic* is presented as a deadly environment where people died in numbers. The high number of deaths occurred not as a result of environmental degradation or pollution but as a result of man's inhumanity to man.

Mabanckou through *Memoirs de Porc-épic* retold the stories of humans with animal doubles, exploring the psychological themes associated to it with insights on how the stories apply to the lives of the Congolese in the face of their plight. From man's inhumanity to man, to corruption, exploitation, oppression, wickedness family conflicts and ambition, to ultimately facing the responsibility and roles of the individual in the society. Mabanckou passes through folklore and traditional superstitions to expose the darkness, challenges and loss in the Congo region due to the negative actions and activities of the people.

The depictions in *Memoirs de Porc-épic* seem to represent a denouncement of the date toll emanating from incessant killings in tribal wars in the Congo region. Mabanckou's characters were used as symbols to represent the evil that exist in the society, in relation to the ethnic crisis that claimed many lives as a result of greed, anger, envy and jealousy among the ethnic groups:

sans doute étaient-ce la frustration et la révolte qui avaient conduit mon maître à vouloir s'occuper de cette famille parce que, je dois le préciser, mon cher Baobab, pour qu'un être humain en mange un autre il faut des raisons concrètes, la jalousie, la colère, l'envie, l'humiliation, le manque de respect, je te jure que nous n'avons en aucun cas mangé quelqu'un juste pour le plaisir de le manger, ... (*Mémoires de Porc-épic*, 2006:77).

I expect it was frustration and fury that drove my master to take on this family, because, let me make it quite clear, dear Baobab, for one human being to eat another you need concrete reasons, jealousy, anger, envy, humiliation, lack of respect, I swear we never for once ate someone just for the pleasure of eating, ... (*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 2011:81).

Mabanckou deploys folk narrative to ridicule the level of anger, hatred, frustration and jealousy in the society. The Congo region has been known as a resource-rich country, but sadly, the region has been facing a major rebel attack and has been ravaged by tribal conflict with high number of deaths for so many years. Although many have condemned and denounced the silence of the international community in the face of perpetual crisis in the region. Alain Mabanckou, as the son of the soil shows his

engagement and commitment in the literary arena of Central Africa through the publication of *Memoirs de Porc-épic* to denounce corruption, tribalism, power tussle, mismanagement, greed, terror and other societal ills that lead to loss of lives in the region. Although Mabanckou passed through folklore and traditional superstition to achieve this, but he made success through his characterisation, settings, themes, plots and other literary devices deployed in the novels under study.

Consequently, the character of Amédée is regarded as a symbol of light in the society but this light was deemed as a result of the level of jealousy, envy and hatred inherent in the society:

d'un type qu'on appelait Amédée, si je parle de lui au passé, c'est qu'il n'est plus de ce monde, paix à son âme, il était ce que les humains appellent un lettré, un homme cultivé, il avait fait de longues études, on le respectait pour cela, en plus il avait beaucoup voyagé, il était monté à plusieurs reprises dans l'avion, cet oiseau bruyant qui déchire le ciel et manque chaquefois de trancher ton faite, il paraît qu'Amédée était le plus intelligent des gens du Sud, pour ne pas dire du pays entier, eh bien, nous l'avions quand même mangé comme tu l'apprendras bientôt, (*Mémoires de Porc-épic*, 2006:81).

... from a guy called Amédée, and the reason I speak of him in the past tense is because he has passed on to the next world, may his soul rest in peace, he was what humans called an educated man, a cultivated man, who had studied for many years, he was respected for it, he had travelled widely, he had been up in a plane several times, one of those noisy birds that rip the sky in two, every

time you think it's going to take your head off, apparently Amédée was the most intelligent man in the entire south, not to say in the whole country, but that did not stop us, we still ate him, as you will soon learn, ...(*Memoirs of a Porcupine*, 2011:85).

The death of Amédée is an allegory of how the actions and activities of the Congolese have caused the region the progress and development they so much desire. The narrator made reference to Amédée being the most intelligent in the society but was killed out of envy because he was respected by all in the society.

Tradition and Superstition

The population's incorrigible faith in magic is seen as one of the reasons why the Congo region is lagging behind. The novels under study made reference to beliefs based on superstition and how they were sources of misery and sorcery in the society. Traditional beliefs in the Congo region as the novels depict them led to irrational decisions that cost the society the peace and sanity that is needed to live a normal life. Moses, the narrator of *Petit Piment* (2015) reveals how superstition and traditional beliefs lead to a high number of abandoned girls in the orphanage because there is a belief that having a girl child as your first child is a sign of failure:

En ce temps-là, mon petit Moïse, les enfants m'appelaient « Maman l'animatrice » et nous n'avions à peine qu'une trentaine de pensionnaires, pour la plupart des filles dont une bonne dizaine avaient été abandonnées par leurs parents devant la porte de l'orphelinat parce que dans les coutumes de ceux-ci, c'était un

échec d'avoir comme premier enfant une fille (*Petit Piment*, 2015:66)

'Back then, my dear Moses, the children called me "Mama Organiser", and there were just thirty orphans, mostly girls, a good number of them were cast aside by their parents at the gate of the orphanage because in their customs, it was considered a failure to have a first child who was a girl. (*Black Moses*, 2017:54)

Mabanckou deploys flashback to denounce superstitions and traditional beliefs that have hindered development in the Congo region. Superstitious and traditional beliefs of this kind reduced the affected girls to victims of a stagnant traditional belief in a society whose citizens suffer from extreme deprivation, precisely the one from the family that is meant to protect and care for them.

The narrator of *Demain, j'aurai vingt ans* (2010) Michel, affirms that the fetisher accused him of being a child during the day and an old man with white hair at night, who meets up with a gang of other old people that hates the mother to plot against the mother: C'est pour ça que tu as bien fermé le ventre de maman Pauline. Quand les enfants veulent venir, ils trouvent la porte fermée et ils meurent juste devant cette porte. Or la clé qui ouvre le ventre de ta maman c'est toi qui l'as avec toi (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, 2010:189), "So it is because of that, that you closed up Maman Pauline's belly. When children want to come, they find the door shut and they die just in front of the door. So you are the one that has the key to your mother's belly" (*Tomorrow I'll be twenty*, 2012: 188).

Mabanckou further reiterates the place of superstition in the Congolese society through the story of the president of the Republic. The narrator alerts this study that people book appointment to see the fetisher in their region just like you do when you want to see a white doctor. Mama Pauline while pleading with the husband to give her a chance to go and see the most powerful fetisher in their quarter because of her childlessness affirms that, their president also has a personal fetisher, who is also regarded as the most powerful among all. Mama Pauline rejected the idea of Papa Roger to go and see a white doctor for being childless because she believes that their president was able to bear a child through the help of the great fetisher, Sukissa Temb :

Il y a un f ticheur qui vient de s'installer dans le quartier Voungou, juste sur l'autre rive de la Tchinouka. Tout le monde dit du bien de lui. Il a gu ri la st rilit  de la femme du chef du quartier. Il a m me fait parler un enfant de dix ans qui n'avait pas prononc  un seul mot depuis sa naissance. — Comment qu'il s'appelle, ce f ticheur? — Sukissa Temb . Il vient du nord du pays et il para t qu'il  tait le f ticheur personnel du pr sident de la R publique. Si le Pr sident et sa femme ont maintenant un enfant c'est gr ce   lui, Sukissa Temb  (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, 2010:156).

'There is a fetisher that comes to work in the Voungou district, just across the Tchinouka. Everyone says he is very good. The wife of the local chief was sterile and he

cured her. He even got a ten-year old child who had never spoken a single word to talk.' 'What is he called, this fetisher?' 'Sukissa Temb . He is from the north. Apparently he was the personal fetisher to the President of the Republic. That is the only reason the President and his wife has a child, thanks to Sukissa Temb .' (*Tomorrow I'll be twenty*, 2012:156).

Consequently, the superstitious beliefs inherent in the society draw attention to the fact that the population's incorrigible faith in superstition could be one of the reasons why the Congo region is still underdeveloped. The society replaced hard work with superstition as *Demain, J'aurai Vingt ans* highlights:

Tout le quartier le consulte, m me ceux qui cherchent du travail et ceux qui veulent que leurs enfants r ussissent aux examens scolaires. Sans compter ceux qui ont d'autres maladies comme la diarrh e chronique, les r gles douloureuses, etc. C'est un long travail qu'il va faire pour nous, et il faut que je prenne rendezvous pour toute une demi-journ e au moins (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, 2010:157).

Everyone round there goes to see him, even people looking for work and people who want their children to do well in their exams. Not counting the ones with chronic diarrhoea or painful periods and

the rest. It is a difficult thing you are asking; we will need a half-day appointment, at least.' (*Tomorrow I'll be twenty*, 2012:157)

The narrator's worry increased when Mama Pauline stopped crying because Papa Roger reassures her that they will book an appointment with the Fetishier as regards her childlessness. Confused by the emotional state of the mother, whom he believes attends Saint-Jean Bosco every Sunday and professes her faith, the narrator questions the society in what seems to be a rhetoric question: Est-ce qu'un féticheur est capable d'attraper les enfants qui foncent directement au Ciel sans passer par la Terre? Est-ce qu'un féticheur est plus fort que Dieu? (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, 2010:157), "Can a fetishier be able to catch children who go directly to heaven without stopping off on earth? Is a fetishier more powerful than God? (*Tomorrow I'll be twenty*, 2012:76). For the narrator, superstitious beliefs can only lead to disappointment, hopelessness and failure as no nation develops through magical means.

In *petit Piment* (2015), superstition was also shown in the narrator's belief that the sharks in the Atlantic Ocean were evil spirits whose wickedness was stirred up by the sorcerers of Pointe-Noire. The narrator affirms that the sorcerers hide under the superstitious belief that the water goddess (Mami Water) usually kills children who go to swim at the Côte Sauvage to perpetrate evil against the people. The sorcerers kill minors and put the blame on the water goddess who they claim turns to a shark to complete her task.

Demain, J'aurai Vingt ans (2010) demonstrates the population's belief that every human being has an animal double. The character of Little Pepper affirms that the lone cockerel in his grandfather's house is the grandfather's animal double. Mabanckou personified the cockerel by attributing human characteristics to it to show that humans have animal double. The

character of Little Pepper in *Petit Piment* confirms that the grandfather warned him never to play with the lone cockerel if he truly loves him the day, he tried to throw a piece of wood at the cockerel. The narrator also affirms that the moment he gave up his war against the cockerel and started feeding it, the cockerel started following him round the compound which also brought him breakthroughs:

Chaque fois que je traitais avec respect ce coq, la chance me souriait tellement que lorsque j'allais à la pêche je ramenaient plus de poissons que mes camarades. À l'école du village mes résultats étaient les plus brillants, j'étais le meilleur élève de la région, premier au certificat d'études primaires. Il me suffisait de penser à ce coq pour que tout ce qui paraissait compliqué aux autres élèves devienne pour moi aussi clair que l'eau de roche (*Demain, j'aurai vingt ans*, 2010:197).

Whenever I showed the cockerel respect, fortune shone upon me, so that if I went fishing I would bring back more fish than all my friends. At the village school I came top in every subject; I was the best pupil in the whole district, with the highest marks in the Primary School Certificate. All I had to do was think about the cockerel, and everything that the other pupils found complicated became as clear as spring water to me. (*Tomorrow I'll be twenty*, 2012:196)

The population's traditional belief in the idea of humans having an animal double is a clear critique of the Congolese incorrigible faith in superstition. If showing respect to an animal double of a grandfather could bring all the breakthroughs as the character of little Pepper affirms, there will be no need for struggles and hard work. Mabanckou in this analysis reveals that one of the reasons why the Congo region is still struggling economically is because of their faith in traditional superstitions.

Conclusion

Mabanckou explores folktales and traditional superstitions as they relate to the various stages of life and the necessary challenges all human beings encounter. Rather than following the familiar format of real-life situations, which gives direct interpretation of the state of affairs in the society, he used folktale around fundamental human experiences, beginning with family relationships and ending with death as the final mythic journey. The novels touched every area of life and the characteristic conflicts and joys we all encounter. The novels under study deploy myths to illustrate positive and negative issues relevant to every sphere of life. They passed through tales and traditional superstitions to expose internal conflicts.

The Congo region has been a resource-rich area but internal conflicts, greed, power tussle and other societal ills have changed the story and reality of the region. Mabanckou's engagement and commitment in the novels under study give insights on the fact that beauty, talent, wealth and power bring their own forms of suffering; and that in the darkness of loneliness, failure and loss, we have always discovered light and new hope. Myths do not give easy solutions to family difficulties but they portray family dynamics just as they are, with all their joys, sorrows and complexities, yet there is a mysterious and transformative power which lies embedded in these stories. Mabanckou uses folklore to denounce the cycle of wickedness in the Congo region and the failure of development.

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