

AN OVERVIEW OF OCCULTISM IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF UNITY DOW AND EMMANUEL MBOGO

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Abstract

Although modernity as evidenced by formal education, urbanization, globalization and an ICT-driven age has resulted in tremendous social-cultural changes in Africa, the practice of occultism, often considered as belonging to a primitive age: persists. On the other hand, and despite the challenges that occultism poses to humanity, African writers have shunned and not written much about it. This paper underscores the challenge of regional literature in addressing the important theme of occultism by analyzing the few voices on the occult as demonstrated in the literary works of Unity Dow and Emmanuel Mbogo from Botswana and Tanzania respectively. The books, comprising three novels and a play, are deliberately selected as being representative writings on the subject of occultism as a cross-border theme within the SADC region. The paper is guided by the theory of power as manifested at various levels in the texts.

Key Words: Occultism, Unity Dow, Emmanuel Mbogo

Introduction

Oxford English Dictionary defines the occult as “magical or supernatural powers, practices, or phenomena”. It has its etymology in ‘*occultus*’, a Latin word which means ‘hidden’ or ‘secret’. Occultism, science and religion share certain characteristics of inaccessibility to the ordinary people in that they are accessible only to the initiated members or practitioners.

In the general African context, occultism as the practice of magic, sorcery, or witchcraft may also entail traditional ancestral beliefs and *juju*. Witchcraft is believed to be performed by people who can cast spells by calling up evil spirits. In African cultural practices witchdoctors and sorcerers are believed to possess magical powers of healing, seeing into the future, rainmaking, among others.

Occultism is an integral component of society. It is a combination of superstitions and religious beliefs which are in turn supported by social customs, rituals and taboos. Consequently,

witchcraft or occultism is invoked whenever calamities occur. Beidelman (1970: 351) explains that witchcraft and sorcery “differ radically from society to society”. This explains why what may be categorized as the occult in one community may appear as a religion in another. However, the practice of occultism affects people’s attitudes to one another, their social-political behaviour and how they conduct business.

In literature occultism manifests itself through the portrayal of traditional life, healing, articulations of identity and the creation and retention of wealth and power. Although occultism is considered a universal human experience with cross-cultural, religious and quasi-religious qualities (Kiernan, 2006), the belief in the occult entails a focus on matters that are not discernible through scientific logic or knowledge.

Theory of power

There are generally three perspectives to the theory of power: pluralist, elitist and Marxist (Barry, 2012). The pluralist view of power deals with how power is distributed among social classes, say between the rich and poor or between employers and workers. On the other hand, elitism is concerned with how and where power is concentrated. This is to say that there are many sources of elite power, such as, wealth, traditional, modern (education), and religious authority.

On the other hand, Marxist perspectives to power focus on, among other principles, the ownership and control of property, wealth, the means of production (assets), and the control of finances. The Marxist approach further sheds light on how those in positions of power control ideas through the media and processes of socialization and ideologization in educational and religious domains leading to class conflicts and power struggles between the wielders of power and their subjects.

Kiernan (2006: 6) is of the view that the occultism is complicated when he argues that “the occult may not confine only to what is dark or sinister. It contains darkness and light, goodness and evil, each in contention with the other”. For instance, ancestral and religious rituals can be conducted communally, and for the benefit of those concerned. Occultism is a source of mystical power, either legitimate or illegitimate. Occult power can either be acceptable or unacceptable in a society. It can also be beneficent or malevolent as wielded by those who control the factors of production.

Religious rituals are performed openly to invoke ancestors for healing purposes. On the other hand, witchcraft is practised secretly by an individual with evil intent. However, both practices may be variously associated with competition and conflict, power and social control, reconciliation, wealth and capital accumulation and leadership, kinship, and sexuality.

Occultism has resisted modernity and exists in all civilizations and cultures. For instance, cases of occult practices targeting women, minority groups, and children have been reported around the world. In Africa, reports of occult-related activities such as human trafficking, ritual murders and the harvesting of body organs targeting albinos and children have been cited in several countries. The main reason behind the continued practice of occultism is the perceived benefits and the attendant power; that accrue from practising magic, witchcraft and sorcery.

Pasi (2008) explains that the very concept of occultism carries with it connotations of power. If knowledge is power, then it is to be wielded by a small group or a secret cult. Some of the advantages of occultism include social-economic benefits such as control of spouses. For instance, in some communities there are ancient and modern stories about medicines that are believed to expose a cheating partner by getting stuck with a secret lover during a sexual encounter.

In pre-Christian and contemporary times, African witchdoctors were consulted by the elite and those seeking wealth. People offered sacrifices in the form of livestock to attract fortunes or avert bad omens. This is still the case today, the difference being that a majority of people may resort to Christianity or Islam. The main sacrifice is money to attract prosperity. To some people, therefore, religion is the new occult.

The occult in Unity Dow's novels

Unity Dow is a Motswana writer. Apart from the two novels under review, she has written other works of fiction. Unity writes in English. *The Screaming of the Innocent* (2002) deals with the disappearance of Neo, a pre-teenage girl who is murdered for ritual purposes. Neo is abducted while taking care of her family's donkeys in the village. Her killers are three powerful men in the community who believe that *diphoko*, the 'traditional strengthening medicines' will bring them more wealth and power.

In the novel, occultism is used to acquire and retain wealth. The occult is reinforced by association with economic and political power. It is clear that the rich and powerful circumvent the law to get away with murder in line with the Marxist conceptualization of power. In this particular instance, the elite do not only violate human right to life, but they also undermine the rights of the child. Occultism in this case is used as a means of capital accumulation and wealth. People who engage in occult practices believe that they can get rich through the practice of witchcraft. Cases of disappearances of children and albinos usually increase during election periods in Kenya and Tanzania with politicians trying to get medicine to win elections (<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/07/brutal-black-magic-tanzania-election-150720073105627.html>). When people acquire wealth in such communities, it is sometimes believed that they have powerful medicine.

The Screaming of the Innocent exposes the inversion and negation of the ordinary by those in authority; especially men. In book three men led by Mr Disanka, a wealthy and respectable villager, together with his equally powerful accomplices, abduct a girl to be used in a secret ritual. Such abductions and disappearances are allegedly accomplished with the help of the police and the Minister for Safety and Security who help to cover up the crime. The crime does not only signify the abuse of power by the ruling elite but also the paedophilic nature of occultism in Botswana.

Mr Disanka is portrayed as a psychopath who derives pleasure from killing young girls when "his mind went back to the previous harvesting, memory crushed into anticipation and a pool of pleasure spread through his body" (p. 6). Mr Disanka is a heartless, hypocritical and selfish murderer who loves and takes good care of his own children but has little regard to other people's

children. His behaviour sheds light on how evil forces inherent in occult practices have been used to destroy human life owing to the impunity of powerful individuals in African societies.

That men are the ones who are mainly involved in the practice of witchcraft in *The Screaming of the Innocent* implies that occultism can be used as a tool to discriminate against women and children. This view of occultism which is controlled by men provides a gender dimension to power in that women and children are the victims while the men are the beneficiaries.

In *The Screaming of the Innocent*, occult or *muti* killings have been going on unresolved (p. 64). One of the characteristics of occultism is that it is done very secretly under the cover of darkness. The community members may not know who is directly responsible, but Amantle Bokaa; an upcoming young female human rights lawyer takes up the challenge to expose the culprits. Amantle becomes the leader of the masses in revolting against the oppression of the powerful few.

In dialectic Marxist principle, the poor masses finally unite and take action. The villagers hold the clinic's nurses hostage until they have the audience of the Safety and Security Minister and get assurance that justice will prevail. The masses' respect for human life and dignity triumphs over the inhumanness of the affluent class represented by Minister Mading and Mr. Disanka. The novel demonstrates that the poor can succeed in challenging unlawful authority to bring change. It shows that people should stand for their rights and resist unacceptable, repugnant and immoral practices that are also a threat to justice. The incident shows that the *hoi polloi*, when sufficiently informed and empowered, can take up arms to protect their right.

The villagers of Gaphala protest Neo's murder in an attempt to get justice and stop the abuses perpetrated by the bourgeoisie. The villagers are portrayed as victims who repeatedly suffer in the hands of the few greedy but powerful individuals. In *The Screaming of the Innocent*, ritual murders are presented as real and frequent occurrences. Neo's murder is not the first that Mr Disanka had committed because "a school child did occasionally disappear, so it seemed ritual murders mightn't belong to the realm of myths after all" (p. 59), hence the need for serious treatment of this theme by Botswana writers.

There are people who do not believe in occultism, sorcery or witchcraft and believe that they are just myths or fictional stories. Fictional narratives can be used by folks to deal with phenomena that they may not understand or explain in scientific terms. In fact, some of the myths created may be propagated further by the media as evidenced in *The Screaming of the Innocent*.

The power of the mass media through newspapers, radio and television are evidenced in the way it is used to spread such myths. Some of the headlines, such as, 'young girl vomits snakes'; 'dead boy seen driving family cattle'; 'man turns into python and kills grandmother', and "all kinds of bizarre stories" (p. 57) not only serve to demonstrate the fear and despondency in the country but also encapsulate the power and agenda-setting function of the mass media in Africa.

Whenever incidences of ritual murders and disappearances are reported, citizens panic and fear for their safety and that of their children. Fabulous stories, commonly referred to as urban myths, get created to discourage the children from getting exposed to dangerous people and situations.

Through such urban myths, children are advised to beware and to be wary of strangers and their intentions. In *The Screaming of the Innocent*, for instance, adults create stories to discourage children from walking alone at night because they may fall prey to dangerous men as graphically narrated below:

...the ten-kilometre walk between Molope and Rasitsi lands is also undertaken by big, black men from the north, heading for the South Africa's goldmines. They carry suitcases surrounded by swarms of flies. They grab young girls out walking alone, rape them and cut them in two, across the waist. They stuff the bottom half of the corpse into their suitcase and carry the suitcase for days, so they can re-use the half-corpse until either they have found another young girl or the half-corpse has broken up from rotting. The big, black men from the north have a prominent forehead; flaring nostrils; large, white teeth; and black gums. They speak a strange language, too" (p. 58-59).

The story indicates that urban myths may be created to confront the unknown and unfamiliar. In the above story, children are warned to avoid strangers. There is the element of change as the men from the north are travel-bound for employment in the mines which had come up in South Africa. The story captures the power of the spoken word in Africa in that through narrative, inherent changes and threats are analysed. This particular myth apportions blame to immigrants who may be held accountable for ritual killings. Such incidents have been observed as being causes of xenophobic attacks on foreigners within the SADC region; hence the recommendation that scholars and writers from the region should write more about the occurrence of occultism and the dangers it poses to humanity (Laccino, 2016).

The novel captures a time when Batswana were undergoing tremendous cultural transformations in the form of modernity through education and confrontations with unfamiliar phenomena. Occultism may, therefore, be associated with what is foreign, far away and alien in space and time. Today, more urban legends may be noted due to various forms of human interactions at both local and international levels due to accelerated rural-urban migration, cross-border and international migrations.

Ritual murder is a global challenge that involves strong networks of child and human trafficking. Unity Dow, quoted in Kalua (2007: 130-131), explains that the ritual murders that take place in Africa subvert and undermine African cultural practices. Ritual murder is not part of the Batswana culture, or indeed, any other African culture.

The murders in *The Screaming of the Innocent* are not tolerated by the people who are actually victims of the evil deeds of a few greedy individuals. The ritual murders are difficult to investigate due to the secrecy associated with the cults that practice them. For instance, Mr. Disanka and his acolytes eat their victims' organs and drink their blood. These are occult practices of vampirism and cannibalism.

Ritual murders, therefore, do not qualify to be cultural items because they are not generally acceptable to the community and they do not serve any known function for the whole "geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or occupational grouping" (Bauman: 2000: 5). Some rituals, such

as those openly done for religious reasons may be said to belong to the culture of the community. This may be the case in rituals to appease the spirits, for healing or the practice of rainmaking. The ones cited in *The Screaming of the Innocent* are done to acquire wealth and influence by individuals and may not have a communally utilitarian value. Ritual murder is not in the common knowledge or practice of the people but a secret of a few members of the community. It represents a misuse and abuse of power by the privileged and, ultimately, it causes a lot of pain to the majority members of the community.

Juggling Truths

Unity Dow's other novel, *Juggling Truths* (2004) portrays the experiences of Monei, a girl growing up in pre-independence rural Botswana in the 1960s. The childhood memoirs of Monei bring to light the cultural contradictions inherent in her society as she gets introduced to new ways of life and as she struggles to understand and navigate the traditional beliefs and practices at home. The book captures the dilemmas of an African child as she tries to understand two powerful and opposing cultural influences that she gets exposed to.

The novel signifies a young African's attempt to reconcile indigenous culture with the new European culture that one is exposed to in school and church. Modern education, a foreign religion and globalization are some of the changes that Monei has to adapt to as she grows. Through Monei and her grandmother, the author interrogates the principals of both traditional and modern society.

Juggling Truths is set within a traditional Botswana society with enormous references to expressive folklore, such as, folk tales, taboos and beliefs. The traditional background provides a fertile ground within which superstitions thrive. These folklore genres also give the novel arresting command and power because their usage provides aesthetic effects to the book and at the same time situate the social life of the writer's world within a rural setting.

The rural existence portrayed in the novel is fraught with many dangers and hardships that encourages and provides material for the flourishing of different genres of fictional folklore such as the urban myth, superstitions, beliefs and taboos. Folklore is didactic in nature and is a form of informal education; hence, the composition of such fiction is geared towards educating and guiding the young. It warns community members against falling victim to the harsh environment, such as the vagaries of the weather.

For instance, the river which is a source of life for the community as it provides plenty of fish, vegetables like spinach and abundant edible fruits from the *modubu* and *moselesele* trees; is a dangerous place especially during the rainy season. There is usually an outbreak of bilharzia and children are also prone to drowning when it swells. In the novel, adults compose stories and superstitions around cultural beliefs to caution children against the dangerous river. For instance *sethula* the ogre, who smears the butts of his victims with Vaseline before raping them, is said to inhabit the deep waters.

Juggling Truths also narrates the myth about the ghost of *Shinana*, a boy who had fallen from a tree while picking and collecting resin from the big *modubu* tree in the middle of the river. The

story is narrated to children so that they can avoid the rivers and ponds during the rainy season. Other water myths in the novel include *kgogela*, a “snake-human that could pull a child into the river by holding on to the victim’s shadow” (p. 57).

Water is treated with mythical, spiritual and mysterious symbolisms that invoke the awe with which it is held among Batswana. It is not uncommon for Africans to acknowledge the power of water over human life. According to UNESCO (2005: 1) for instance, “water is an intrinsic part of most spiritual beliefs. Its uses and symbolism in religion are many and varied; its spiritual and healing properties are seen in rites and rituals; and its representations are as numerous as they are diverse. These different religious and cultural aspects of water reflect the vast array of civilizations that have made water the central element in their practices.”

Bauman (2000: 23) argues that according to the functionalist theory, urban legends serve the function of providing guidelines for behaviour in a community. This is demonstrated in *Juggling Truths* as they are used as a way of exerting social control especially among children. The children shed off some of these beliefs as they grow older and as they get exposed to new things in school and in church. For instance, Monei and her school-going friends gradually start doubting the truth of these stories, attributing them to “radio news in other places”, and as tricks used by adults to scare them (pp. 57-8).

One may observe that after the mass media starts spreading urban legends, the stories are considered a little bit far-fetched and they start losing their credibility and efficacy as a control mechanism. This is an indicator to the mistrust with which mass media is taken, as opposed to the supposedly eye witness accounts of folklore.

In the novel, Monei also questions some of the beliefs and superstitions that do not make sense. For instance, it is believed that killing the monitor lizard leads to thunder, lightning and torrential rain because it offends God and the ancestors (p. 66). The belief has no scientific evidence to back it other than the community’s endeavour to conserve the environment and animal life. The belief ensures compliance and the enforcement of a cultural edict. It is instructive to note that the death of such beliefs has contributed to environmental degradation leading to complications of global warming. Some forms of cultural erosion are, therefore, detrimental to human life.

On the other hand *Juggling Truths* suggests that some beliefs, such as the stigmatization of albinos, are bad. The fear and stigmatization of albinos are a case in point. Some believe that an albino can bring misfortunes (p.70). Albinism is a rare genetic occurrence; hence the few albinos have been targets of discrimination and misunderstanding. In some communities they are considered to be abnormal or cursed. Unlike most of her peers and with increased literacy, Monei does not fear to associate with Mosweu, an albino. Literacy does, and can explode discriminatory tendencies and therefore discourage the use of albinos in traditional medicine and occultism. This message needs to be taken up by more literary writers so as to sensitise communities about the illegality of the stigmatization of minority groups.

The target audience for specific folklore items is usually well known by the community hence people can outgrow some folklore material because folklore acquires meaning depending on the meaning a group attaches to it. Abrahams (2000: 33) observes that “a story or a ritual is

meaningful only insofar as it operates integrally and successfully within a group". For instance, Monei's critical approach to folklore can be attributed to the liberating power literacy and intellectual maturity which compels her to interrogate the veracity of the community's belief system. From simple beliefs such as not succumbing to drinking a bull's urine in order to learn how to whistle, to complex ones about the special needs of an albino; Monei proves that if more Africans adopted similar progressive ideas, then some retrogressive cultural beliefs, such as witchcraft: would lose their functional appeal.

From the evidence deduced from *The Screaming of the Innocent* and *Juggling Truths*, urban myths originate as verbally-shared stories within a small group of the affected members of a community or a village. They are formulated through the 'wisdom' of the people in that they are communally created and recreated to inculcate certain values. The stories subsequently find their way into the mass media where they are communicated to a mass audience of children, adults, men, women and foreigners.

The Occult in Emmanuel Mbogo's works

Emmanuel Mbogo is a Tanzanian writer who, apart from the novel under review, has authored several other plays and novels. Mbogo writes in Swahili. In *Vipuli vya Figo* (1996) (Transl. Kidney Spare Parts) Matoga, a medical doctor, traffics in human organs harvested from street-children, beggars and the poor in society. He has employed accomplices in mortuaries and hospitals to accomplish his mission. Doctor Matoga sells the human parts to buyers in foreign countries.

The reason for Dr Matoga's inhumanity is greed for money. Apart from medicine, Dr Matoga is also an elected Member of Parliament. He uses his political office to protect his ill-gotten wealth. Despite his education, Dr. Matoga harnesses the occult as a political instrument to attain, retain and maintain political and economic power. The excision of human organs to be used as 'medicine' or simply sold for money is an invocation of the occult for the purpose of bolstering power. However, the wealth does not bring Dr Matoga lasting prosperity owing to his promiscuous behaviour. He not only loses his wife and children but is also arrested and jailed.

Ngoma ya Ng'wanamalundi (1999) [The Dance of Ng'wanamalundi], is a play that is reminiscent of *Vipuli vya Figo* by the same author in that it advances the theme of exploitation of the poor by the rich. In this play, Chidama is a capitalist villain who kills his victims and secretly 'resurrects' them so as to work on his farm as slaves. The zombies cannot challenge Chidama's authority or mistreatment because he has cut off their tongues (p. 17-18).

Slavery is an exploitative social system which, in Marx's (1976: 94) terms "stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes." The integrated farm has dairy cows, pigs, chicken and different types of horticultural crops which are factors of production bringing in a lot of money to Chidama.

The play does not only depict how powerful people use their influence to undermine the rights of the poor and vulnerable but also how such imperialism, corruption and exploitation leads to the acquisition of wealth, fame and undeserved respect for the perpetrators. Despite the benefits that accrue from the business enterprise, Chidama does not pay even a penny to the zombies because they have been brainwashed to accept their condition.

On the surface, the conflict between Chidama and Ng'wanamalundi arises due to their different views on witchcraft. Chidama uses witchcraft to exploit the poor and to enrich himself. A deeper analysis of the conflict, however, exposes the existence of social classes and the subsequent Marxist-type class conflicts involving the poor, workers and peasants on the one hand and the powerful elite on the other. Chidama kills innocent people for personal gain. For instance, he kills Namiti, a girl that he admires but who has rejected him. It is interesting how the author links occultism with sexuality. Ironically, some of the occult practices in Africa such as rape of underage children, harvesting of virgins' genitalia and sexual intercourse with grandmothers, among others, are believed to cure conditions such as HIV/AIDS, impotence, madness and infertility.

Brainwashing of the masses is achieved through the learning of a dance that they are taught by Chidama. The dance signifies the imposition of an ideology that renders the zombies submissive. Chidama's dance is a tool for the suppression of the poor by the rich. Such ideology may be acquired through the erosion and adoption of foreign cultures such as education and religion. The cutting of the tongue symbolises the denial of the freedom of expression. Zombies are used as a powerful metaphor to foreground the dangers of imperialism whereby workers are denied their rights to a fair wage and the muzzling of trade unions to advocate for their rights as workers.

Chidama's sexual greed finally leads to his defeat. He does not cut Namiti's tongue the way he does with the other zombies so that he can communicate and possibly kiss her. Namiti learns "the song of Ng'wanamalundi" which she teaches the other zombies to rebel against Chidama's tyranny. Chidama is vanquished and killed, his property taken up by the slaves. That the liberation of the masses is spearheaded by a woman, a motif that also appears in Unity Dow's works above, is an indication of a power shift from male domination to a pluralist spread of influence.

The defeat of Chidama is achieved through the introduction of Ng'wanamalundi's liberation dance. The revolutionary song of Ng'wanamalundi symbolizes the learning about one's rights. It is a freedom song for the down-trodden. The zombies unite under the leadership of Namiti to fight for their rights and overthrow Chidama's suppressive and exploitative economic structure. The play is instructive in that witchcraft and oppression can be defeated through new knowledge and courage. The zombies are taught to resist subjugation and to understand that they can successfully revolt against their slave master. The play resonates with Marxist perspectives regarding the enlightenment and unity of the masses to overthrow the bourgeoisie.

Conclusion

In this article, the analysis has situated occultism within contemporary Africa. This involved an analysis of four texts in both English and Swahili to demonstrate the concerns of two different authors in discussing the grave concerns of occultism. The discussion has gone some way to show that occultism continues to thrive owing to its perceived benefits by its practitioners. However, the cited literary works clearly demonstrate that occultism and its various methods of practice can be overcome. There is therefore need for writers in Africa, especially within the SADC region, to continuously highlight the challenges that occultism poses so as a way to promote human rights and socio-cultural integration within the region.

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