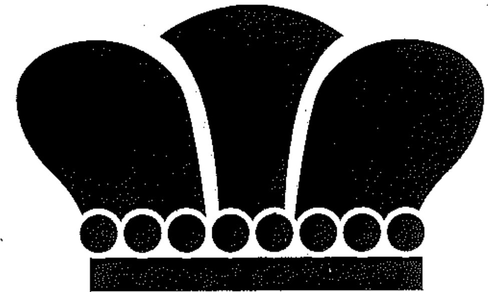

UNMASKING THE AFRICAN DICTATOR

Essays on Postcolonial African Literature

Tennessee Studies in Literature,
Volume 46

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THE UNIVERSITY
OF TENNESSEE PRESS
Knoxville

The Dictator and His Objects: The Status of the Fetish in the African Dictator Novel

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Fetish objects, invoked as the stuff of traditional culture, frequently appear in literary representations of dictators in African fiction. These objects are tied to the historical referents (actual African dictators) that the novels invoke, mock, and aim to subvert. The dictator in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), for example, carries what is referred to as a "traditional" staff and flywhisk and wears a suit decorated with animal skins that recalls Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, among others. The presence of these fetishes is part of the rich fabric of characterization, at once fictional and rooted in historical fact, of these novels. But characterization and critique by association are not the limit of the function the objects serve in these novels. As I will show, the presence of fetishes in African novels about dictators is more than an element of local color or a comic touch. Rather, fetish objects in these novels make visible the ways in which dictatorial power constructs and maintains its authority and are central to the analysis of authoritarian power that these novels put forward.

My reading of African novels about dictators borrows the term "dictator novel" from Latin American literature and criticism, where the genre has a long-standing tradition reaching back to the nineteenth century. The Latin American paradigm provides a useful conceptual and critical analog, a productive touchstone, in reading African dictator novels. As I will show, the Paraguayan novelist Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* (1974) supplies a key to reading the dictator's fetish objects in African novels such as Ousmane Sembène's *The Last of the Empire*

(1981) and Ahmadou Kourouma's *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts* (1998) in particular; in both *I the Supreme* and *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*, the dictator keeps a meteorite as a fetish and views it as the foundation of his power. Reading these texts and the various meanings given to the fetish objects together, I will unpack the function of the fetish in the dictator novel at large. In doing so, I will argue that the literary representation of the African dictator does not simply describe the nature of the dictator but also makes evident the ways in which the dictator is "made"—how he comes into existence and maintains his power. Fetishes are the nodes around which practices of meaning making are staged, demonstrating the ways in which the authoritarian state aims to control the construction of meaning. It is here, rather than in the parodic or farcical representation of the dictator, that the most cogent critique of authoritarianism takes shape.

Sembène's *The Last of the Empire*, which follows the unraveling of a dictator's rule and an eventual coup, begins with the disappearance of Léon Mignane, the Venerable One (*le Vénérable*).[1] The opening scene is a meeting of his ministers, who realize they have little claim to authority beyond their connection to the missing dictator. Afterward, Prime Minister Daouda remains alone, staring at the Venerable One's empty throne. The chair is an amalgam of traditional symbols, each drawn from a different culture. The symbolic excess here functions both as characterization and comic touch, recalling the very real excesses of the Venerable One's historical analogues.[2] Yet in spite of its comic potential, the dictator's throne also possesses a certain aura: Daouda has never sat in the chair, even when substituting for the dictator in his official function as prime minister. It inspires both awe and terror:

> He [Daouda] was fascinated, as if attracted by a supernatural power. Timidly he drew near. The hand-embroidered cushion of Kashmir silk charmed him. He held out his hand to touch the fabric. His heart beat twice as fast. A tide of warm blood flooded up his arm from his fingers. When his middle finger touched the cushion's seam, his blood flowed more quickly, piercingly chill. It seized his whole body. He withdrew his hand as if scorched, breathing heavily. He glanced fearfully at the walls, the folds of the curtains, the masks and statues. He was certain something was spying on him. He turned around quickly. No one! But the feeling remained. (17)

In the fascination and superstitious fear that it inspires, the dictator's throne functions as a fetish object. The term "fetish" is used in the sense inherited from anthropology and colonial ethnography: an inanimate object imbued with magical powers that stirs superstitious or irrational dread and yet also reverence. The pejorative connotations of this description are of a piece with the history of the concept of the fetish in anthropological discourses, particularly about Africa,

and this is part of the legacy with which authors who include fetish objects in their representation of African dictators engage.

The dictator's fetish objects are central to the narrative in Kourouma's *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*. The story hinges on the disappearance of the dictator's two fetishes—a meteorite and a Koran—which he must regain in order to return to power. The novel describes the oral performance of the narrative of the rise and fall of Koyaga, the "president-dictator" (*président-dictateur*) of the fictional Republic of the Gulf (*la République du Golfe*).[3] Koyaga established his dictatorship during the Cold War only to see it unravel after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. His story is presented in the form of a *donsomana*, a genre of Malinke oral literature recited for members of the hunter clan; Koyaga himself is a master hunter and often referred to as a hunter of both beasts and men.[4] The *donsomana* is recited over the course of several days and is performed by a *sèrè*, the oral performer of the society of hunters. The *sèrè* is assisted by a *koroduwa*, a respondent who plays a role similar to that of the court jester: he is trenchant and occasionally insulting but allowed to be so. The *koroduwa*'s interjections provide an explicitly critical edge to the tone of the narration in the novel.

The occasion for the performance is, in fact, the disappearance of the dictator's fetishes. The *donsomana* is a purificatory narrative (*récit purificatoire*), and it is only once Koyaga's crimes have been narrated that the fetishes will reveal where they are hidden, making it possible for Koyaga to return to power. Although the performers initially seem to be in league with the dictator, the explanation of the purpose of the performance emphasizes the omission of substantive information about Koyaga's misdeeds as dictator throughout the narrative: little concrete information is given about his actual time in power, save for his visits to other dictators and the attempts on his life. Together with the critical edge of the *koroduwa*'s interjections, the absence of the promised narrative (Koyaga's crimes) raises questions about the performers' relation to the dictator. Their seeming complicity may in fact be a cover for their opposition and the narrative, therefore, an act of subversion. While the novel does not resolve these questions, the suggestion that the two narrators are not completely in the dictator's service opens a space for opposition to the dictator.

Similarly, the meaning of the novel's title is only suggested at the end of the performance; the *sèrè* remarks, "For you know, you are sure, that if by chance men refuse to vote for you, the animals (*les animaux*) will come out of the bush, seize ballots, and vote for you" (258). This claim is at once figurative and literal: it is impossible that, fetishes in hand, Koyaga will not return to power. In more literal terms, such an event is not outside the realm of possibility of the narrative world established in the novel, as animals have come out of the bush before. The

ambivalence of the *sèrè*'s claim—that is, the budding of potential meanings and interpretations that attach to this statement—is of a piece with the ambivalent tone of the narration as a whole. It is also the impossible event that does not take place; the narrative, at the close of the novel, remains in suspension, the fetishes remain to be found, and Koyaga is still out of office. We are, in short, still waiting, and this links the *sèrè*'s closing remark to the title of the novel.

But the *sèrè*'s claim at the end of the novel both is and is not equivalent to the title, which refers to waiting for the vote of the wild beasts (*bêtes sauvages*).[5] In connection to Koyaga's role as a hunter, the word "beast" is more commonly used, and the two words are not semantically or contextually interchangeable. The *sèrè*'s claim does and does not refer to the title, just as the narration of the *donsomana* both is and is not in service of the dictator. This ambivalent structure recalls (although it is not identical to) that of the fetish, an object that is also a thing with supernatural powers: the Venerable One's throne is both a chair as well as the mark of the dictator's power. In turn, the ambivalence of meaning that the fetish reveals opens onto the political manipulation of language.

As in *The Last of the Empire*, the dictator is not the only one invested in the power of his fetish. Having survived yet another attempt on his life, Koyaga withdraws from the presidential palace but declares that he will return to office via democratic elections. Following Koyaga's disappearance, his fellow dictators launch their own searches for his missing fetishes, wishing to claim their power for themselves. Each dictator sends a team to Kogaya's village in search of the meteorite and the Koran: "[T]here were hundreds of secret agents searching and digging each tuft or parcel of ground" (257). The image is comical, but, like Daouda's superstitious reaction to the Venerable One's throne, the effect that Koyaga's special objects have on others is what confirms their status as fetishes. The value of the fetish object is constituted not by its intrinsic qualities but by the values imputed to that object by those who come into contact with it. This interpretation is central to the nature of the "fetish" whether within the realm of anthropology, psychoanalysis, or Marxist discourses of commodity fetishism. It is necessary, at this point in the argument, to ask how the fetish object achieves its meaningfulness and, further, how it comes to gain an aura of unassailability.

In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe describes the way in which the dictator (or, authoritarian ruler) establishes his *commandement* (authority) in the postcolonial African state. The term *commandement* originally appears in the context of Mbembe's discussion of colonial authority and is used to name a particular mode of colonial control. In the postcolony, the colonial *commandement* becomes what Mbembe calls "the authoritarian modality *par excellance*" (134, n8). The historical phenomenon of dictatorship is directly linked to the colonial experience, not merely as an after-effect but also as an expression of

the neocolonial relations former colonial powers, as well as global powers more generally, attempted to institute after independence. Dictator novels take up this assertion in their representation of dictatorships: the presence of foreign actors or the effects of foreign influence are one of the tropes of the genre in both Latin America and Africa.

Mbembe's analysis of the way in which the dictator institutes his authority, in the chapter "The Aesthetics of Vulgarity," refers directly to the questions under discussion:

> In the postcolony the *commandement* seeks to institutionalize itself, to achieve legitimation and hegemony (*recherche hégémonique*), in the form of a *fetish*. The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the *commandement* produces are meant not merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meaning that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge. To ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts; but they also resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain. The basic goal is not just to bring a specific political consciousness into being, but to make it effective. (103)

The form of the fetish names the excess or additional meanings attached to the signs (symbols, narratives) produced by the dictator and presented as the bases of his authority. Later in the same section, Mbembe also refers to the dictator's *commandement* as a cosmology. The excessive meaningfulness of these objects functions as an aura whose inaccessibility needs to be maintained by supplemental systems and practices, including violence.

In the context of his argument on vulgarity as an aesthetics of authoritarian power, Mbembe engages a critical tradition that reads vulgarity and vulgar representations of power as a subversive act, showing that this is not necessarily the case. In the postcolony, the mobilization of vulgarity functions not as a criticism but rather as part of the practice and aesthetics of power. It is one of the many repertoires to which the dictator makes recourse in maintaining the fetishistic aura of his *commandement*. For our purposes, Mbembe also shows that, while the fetish is seemingly unassailable, it needs to be maintained and protected by a larger symbolic and semantic system as well as, where necessary, recourse to violence. There is, then, a vulnerability to the fetish. This vulnerability originates in the surpluses of meaning attached to the object.

Although the fetishes in *The Last of the Empire* and *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts* have profound effects on those who come into contact with them, these novels also make clear that the meanings of these objects are not necessarily stable and often prove to be flexible. Even as fictional dictators invoke their fetishes, the objects carry additional meanings that complicate the dictators'

relation to them. In order to unpack this, we should return to the origins of Koyaga's two fetishes: the meteorite, which he receives from his mother, Nadjuma, an animist priestess, and the Koran, which is a gift from the marabout (Muslim holy man) Bokano.

As Bokano presents Nadjuma with the fetishes for her son—the objects had previously chosen Bokano as their owner and now demand a transfer to the child Koyaga—he outlines a problematic tension: "Men of your son's race can never be just humane, while neither the aerolitic stone nor the Qur'an can tolerate iniquity and ferocity" (41). The meteorite and the Koran can be of little use to a dictator, for whom iniquity and ferocity are part of standard operating procedure. The fetish objects would seem to be rendered powerless by this founding condition. However, as the interest that other dictators show in finding the meteorite and the Koran suggests, the meaning attributed to the fetish object operates regardless of any proven effectiveness. The narrative itself never asserts, one way or the other, whether the fetishes are the reason for Koyaga's apparent invincibility. These objects are instead the expression of the dictator's authority: that is, of the dictator's ability to define the surplus of meaning attached to an object and to render it non-negotiable.

Kourouma uses the dictator's fetishes to demonstrate the contingency of meaning, made particularly evident as characters move between epistemological systems. There is critical potential in tracing these moves. For example, although Koyaga intends to find his fetishes in order to return to power, the real means by which he will regain his authority (*commandement*) is via democratic elections. The recourse to elections is a political move to appease Western governments that have made their support contingent on the democratization ("democratic" has replaced "anti-communist") of the Republic of the Gulf. Here democratic elections are rhetorically equated with the recuperation of the meteorite and the Koran. "Democratic elections" is rendered as much of a fetish as the meteorite or Koran: each is a symbolic imprimatur of the ruler's hold on power. The narrative points to fissures in the semantic foundations of the fetish object: it becomes clear as the *donsomana* unfolds that Koyaga himself often violates the original meaning of these objects. The force of the fetishes, such as it may be, comes not from the power imbued in them by the holy man but rather from the meanings imputed to them at various points in the novel.

In *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*, the fetish is not a specifically "African" thing but rather the mark of overlapping or shifting economies of valuation. The fetish here stands not as an artifact of precolonial African traditional culture, as the dictator would have it, but rather as the signal of an economy of surplus meanings conditioned by the encounter between various and often competing interests. These interests, as so many dictator novels emphasize, are rooted in

the competitions of global powers, which run counter to the interests of the emerging nation. While Mbembe offers a cogent explanation of the function of the fetish for the dictator, it is also necessary to consider the constitution of the fetish object as the mark, or consequence, of the encounter between different epistemological systems—these are the conditions of possibility for the fetish as we understand it.

As William Pietz explains in his exploration of the fetish in European Enlightenment discourse, the concept originates in the heterogeneous space of European contact with other cultures prior to and contemporaneous with the establishment of colonial relations; specifically, the fetish originates in "the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (5). In "The Problem of the Fetish," a series of essays on the topic, Pietz takes a historicist approach, beginning with the etymology of the term, which has its roots in the creolized Portuguese *fetisso* (*feitiço*), referring to witchcraft or magical practices. The term *feitiço* itself derives from the Latin *facticius*, meaning "manufactured." The fetish object is *made*, and these novels stage the making and unmaking of the fetish as part of the project of unraveling its aura of unassailability.

The fetish is what we could call, borrowing a term of Mary Louise Pratt, a phenomenon of the contact zone: it is constituted in the encounter between different cultural (epistemological) systems, often involving uneven relations of power, and, most importantly, it points to the simultaneous presence of diverse semantic or epistemological systems.[6] The excess of meaning ("superstition") attached to the fetish object is visible to the external observer who does not read the object within the same semantic code as it is presented. This is why the fetish marks the presence of multiple symbolic systems. It is also the reason for the fundamental vulnerability of the fetish. In this sense, the fetish signals the problem of contingency of value brought about by the existence of multiple and often conflicting systems, which are also the condition of its creation. We should recall here the Venerable One's throne in *The Last of the Empire*, which is composed of symbols drawn from throughout Africa. *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*, with its play on cultural, religious, and political symbolic objects, uses the coexistence of multiple epistemological systems to both comic and critical effect. In turn, these objects point to the ways in which the dictator constructs and attempts to maintain his hold on power, and the exposure of the epistemological vulnerability of the fetish suggests the possible subversion of the dictator's authority.

The richest examples of rapid, and strategic, shifts between epistemological systems, which alternately make possible the fetish and threaten to undermine its power, come in the portion of the narrative dedicated to Koyaga's henchman, Macledio. In one episode, as he is escaping from a Bamileke royal court, Macledio

takes with him the skulls of their ancestors to ensure his safe passage, knowing that the Bamileke king draws his authority from these skulls.[7] Macledio's transgression—which includes the desecration of the sanctuary where the skulls are kept—is only possible because he is an outsider to the epistemological system that renders these objects untouchable. To underline this point, the narrators inform us that a band of fierce warriors pursued Macledio, but none dared to attack for fear of harming the skulls.

However, once Macledio reaches the port, he negotiates with a group of Bamileke businessmen and exchanges the skulls for a briefcase filled with money. He explains:

> It was not so much the money (I have never tried to get rich). It was so I would not seem to be an idiot. I knew and admired the Bamileke for their cupidity and their business sense. The rich businessmen would have taken me for the most naïve person in the universe had I not traded the skulls of the ancestors for solid cash. (92–93)

Macledio does not accept the money because it is of value to him while the skulls are not: he accepts the exchange because the money he takes in return for the skulls is of great (if not greater) value to the Bamileke businessmen. In this scene, Macledio is not the only one who maneuvers multiple value systems at once. The Bamileke, too, can value the skulls and their money at once and strategically move between the logic of the two systems in order to achieve their goals. These various epistemological systems not only coexist but also interact, and the characters in the novel are able to shift between them as suits their immediate goals. Nothing, we are shown repeatedly, is truly fixed. This particular example also collapses the temporality of the narrative of the arrival of (implicitly European) modernity by pointing out the extent to which the sequentially ordered narratives of "barbarism-animism" and "civilization-modernity" are more often coterminous.[8] In turn, their simultaneous presence reveals the equivalence between the skull-fetish and the money-fetish of capitalist modernity.

Although we have to this point established that the dictator institutes and maintains his authority in the form of a fetish, made possible but also vulnerable by the co-existence of multiple and occasionally conflicting epistemological systems, some questions remain. First, what does the fetish object mean to the dictator? Second, in the context of the dictator novel, what interpretative possibilities do these objects offer? At this point, it is useful to turn to a Latin American dictator novel, Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme*, a fictionalized exploration of the final days of the nineteenth-century Paraguayan dictator, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia.[9] The novel is composed of "found" historical documents organized by a mysterious figure referred to as the "Compiler;"

the texts include Francia's dictations to his secretary as well as his personal log. Many of these texts are incomplete or overlapping and include marginal notes whose provenance is unclear. The narrative is filled with objects that function as fetishes, for Francia as well as for other characters; these include Francia's pen, a skull, a stone found in the intestines of a favorite cow, and a meteorite. For our purposes, I will discuss the object that offers an uncanny echo with Kourouma's *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*: the meteorite. In the novel, Francia has the meteorite brought to the capital from the provinces, forces it into his house (the meteorite is said to resist), and keeps it chained to his desk chair.

As becomes clear over the course of the novel, the meteorite is the symbolic basis for Francia's conception of the Paraguayan Republic and his role as dictator. The capture of the meteor represents a victory over chance (*el azar*) and the guarantee of total control:

> I understood then that it is only by ripping this sort of thread of chance out of the weft of events that the impossible can be made possible. I suddenly realized that to-be-able-to-do [*poder hacer*] is to-be-able-to-enable [*hacer poder*]. At that instant a shooting star traced a luminous streak across the firmament[.] . . . I had read somewhere that falling stars, meteors, aeroliths, are the very picture of chance in the universe. The force of power lies then, I thought, in chasing down chance: *re-trapping* it[.] . . . Tracing down counter-chance. Removing from the chaos of the improbable the constellation possessed of probity. A State revolving on the axis of its sovereignty[.] . . . In the political universe, States confederate or explore. Exactly like the galaxies in the cosmic universe. (95–96)

Francia's authority as dictator is based on the submission of all aspects of national life to his ordering imperative. The state in this imaginary matrix functions as a universe, with the dictator as the gravitational force at its center. We should recall here Mbembe's language of the dictator's *commandement* functioning as a "constellation of ideas" as well as his comparison of it to a cosmology. The term "cosmology" is the most fitting description of the way in which Francia—and the dictator more generally—envisions the state, precisely because of the totality the term connotes.

As both the founding figure of the metaphorical economy through which the dictator understands the state and the mystical power from which he draws his strength—literally, in the form of the hyper-precise rifles he has made from the stone—Francia's meteorite is the cornerstone of his authoritarian power. But Francia's presentation of the meteorite draws scorn from the anonymous voice (*Unknown hand*) that keeps interrupting in the text: "Did you believe that you were thereby doing away with chance? [. . .] One aerolith does not make a sovereign" (99–100). This interruption removes the aura of the fetish-meteorite,

its surplus of meaning, reducing it to a mere artifact. Francia replies, "You don't understand what I write. You don't understand that the law is symbolic. Twisted minds are unable to grasp this. They interpret the symbols literally. And so you make mistakes and fill my margins with your scoffing self-importance. At least read me correctly" (100). From the dictator's perspective, this is an instance of misreading as the meaning of the fetish object is not negotiable. The dictator's understanding of the metaphor ("I understood then") is contrasted to the unknown reader's lack thereof ("You don't understand"). The differentiation is between reading practices; more precisely, it is a distinction between symbolic systems, although the dictator will not acknowledge this.

As Mbembe makes clear, above, the non-negotiability of the fetish is part of the symbolic systems established to protect the dictator's power. In the above exchange, we are once again faced with the presence of a gap or break that reveals the contingency of the values attached to these objects. To make this contingency visible emphasizes the instability of historical knowledge, as these objects outlive their interpretations and take on new meanings. This epistemological uncertainty is the source of the panic that unravels in the dictator Francia over the course of the novel. *I the Supreme* uses such moments to demonstrate how the dictator might be misread, or, alternately, how it is possible to read against the dictator. In more general terms, if the fetish objects in these novels reveal the ways in which the dictator constructs his authority—concurrently, that his authority is in fact constructed—then they also function as starting points for the subversion of the dictator's semantic system.

While the Venerable One's throne in the scene from Sembène's *The Last of the Empire* referenced above initially inspires fear in the Prime Minister Daouda, his reaction is contextualized. Daouda knows the Venerable One practices "fetishist rites" for symbolically strategic reasons rather than for his own investment in their value: "One day the Venerable One, in an expansive mood, had whispered to him: 'Africa is irrational! Or else its rationality is such as to startle the modern world[.] . . . One has to make use of such practices . . . to protect oneself against enemies within'" (17). The Venerable One here offers us a more cynical version of the dictator's relation to the fetish object: it is explicitly strategic. For the dictator in the African novels under discussion, the adoption of any particular fetish object is a tactical decision. The point is not the dictator's feeling for the fetish object or rite but rather the feeling that the object inspires in others. Daouda's initial reaction confirms this; convinced that the Venerable One is alive and watching, Daouda refuses to assume the mantle of power. But the aura of the fetish object only holds for so long.

In *The Last of the Empire*, Daouda's perspective shifts as political chaos spreads. Deeply frustrated with the still-missing Venerable One and his political machina-

tions, Daouda moves closer to taking power. This shift is dramatized in terms of his relation to the throne, which he now reads differently:

> The throne seemed bare. The carved details were no longer visible. He laid his hand on it. The smooth polished wood invited him to sit down. He listened to his heart. . . Not a cry, not a howl. He recited the *Fatiha-al-kitab* and other incantations. His Koranic training had returned to his memory. He sat down. From the Venerable One's raised seat, his veiled gaze (because of the glasses) swept the two sides of the table. There was nothing there, just emptiness. Now calm, he felt a new sensation flooding gently through his veins. To be so close to power and lose it? To be Number One. A man of caste, was he? Good . . . I'll play it close . . . He leaned back on the panther. (182)

The power of the throne has faded, and this makes it possible for Daouda to take the dictator's place. This occupation is, in turn, accompanied by the institution of other rites on which Daouda's authority (*commandement*) will be based. After Daouda has sat on the throne, two assistants enter; their reaction mirrors Daouda's former reverence for the Venerable One's throne.[10] For a moment, the narrative focus shifts to one of these men, and his reaction confirms Daouda's ascension to the position of dictator: "[He] had seen in this occupation of the throne, the Father's place, a sacred continuity. He left quickly. He was eager to show the new leader how active he was in his service" (183).

As we learn here, fetish objects can rather quickly be re-inscribed with new meanings and put to new uses. More to the point, having established that the dictator's relation to the fetish is instrumental, the novel makes it possible for Daouda to assume and re-inscribe the dictator's fetish, constituting it as the mark of his (Daouda's) own dictatorial authority. In *The Last of the Empire*, Daouda's rise is cut short by the military coup. While the larger argument of the novel is about the involvement of external (European) governments in the internal affairs of African countries, within that framework Sembène presents an argument about the fetishistic nature of the dictator's authority. In this context, the traditional symbols of the Venerable One's throne are little different from the democratic elections to which Koyaga hopes to take recourse. Key here is the fact that the same object can be re-inscribed and used to bolster the authority of another.

The example of Daouda's relation to the Venerable One's throne in *The Last of the Empire* centers on a shift in the reading practices of a single character: understanding the throne's power as metaphorical rather than literal is fundamental to this shift. What makes this shift possible, in turn, is the very nature of language as the primary symbolic system through which authority is constituted. The portion of *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts* that focuses on Macledio's peregrinations offers answers. As Kourouma has stated in interviews, Macledio's story is the key through which the novel should be read: "All of the elements [in the novel]

participate in the meaning [*le sens*] Macledio allows [one] to understand Koyaga, just as Koyaga allows [one] to understand Macledio" (Chemla 27).[11] Although initially the shift to Macledio seems an interruption and a deviation from the purpose of the performance, within the novel, the portion of the narrative dedicated to Macledio is the thematic core of *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts.*

As a young boy in his village, Macledio is charged with killing and eating the soul of a close friend who has died. The body of the dead boy is reanimated by the local sorcerer and seems to implicate Macledio. At first, Macledio resists the accusation, but he cannot withstand the force of the narrative put forward by the sorcerer that conducts the ceremony:

> [T]he facts, details, specificities followed one after another and finally became evident. At first, as if in a kind of dream, Macledio began to doubt himself, his own awareness, his memory. With the insistence and perseverance of the sorcerer, all the accusation took shape and the dream took on substance. The vague reality became experience. So it was true—he was, in fact, a sorcerer, a consumer of souls. It was true, that was really him. (86–87)

Here Kourouma demonstrates the way in which language—fictive or literary language—can harden into apparent fact. Narrative imposes itself onto and molds reality through repetition, accumulation, and insistence. The accused gives way, incorporating the false narrative as experience. To return to Mbembe's language, Macledio here is made to accept the cultural repertoire that renders him a murderer and consequently an outcast.

Much later, after spending some time in France, Macledio returns to another country in Africa—the Republic of the Mountains—and goes to work for the dictator Nkutigi, known as the Man in White. In entering into the service of the dictator, Macledio shifts from the position of victim to aggressor: he becomes the champion of state power who produces the constellation of ideas that shore up the authority of the dictator's fetishes.[12] While working for the national radio of the Republic of the Mountains, Macledio specializes in inventing and denouncing plots against the dictator. He proves particularly adept at the task:

> Whatever he dreamed up out of whole cloth [*de toutes pièces*] became fact, the true phrases of a veritable plot, for the police, the judicial system, the party, and the international press[.] . . . Subjected to instruments of torture, victims repeated Macledio's phrases, adorning them with many details, and finally made them sound accurate, logical, and irrefutable. (111–12)

The language of dreaming, of facts, and of truth recalls the prior scene from Macledio's childhood. Once again there is a combination of the imposition of language and the use of physical force in order to maintain a structure of authority. The similarities between the two scenes draw an explicit connection between

fetishistic rites and the mechanics of authoritarian power. However, by shifting the creation of the dictator's epistemological system—the making-fetish of his *commandement*—to the writer or secretary Macledio, Kourouma is able to more clearly demonstrate the ways in which authoritarian power functions: Macledio is part of the vast system necessary for upholding the dictator's power. In making visible the structure of that system, the novel shows that it is unstable and suggests that it can be shifted or subverted.

The implications of Macledio's move from the position of victim to aggressor do not escape the two performers, as the *koroduwa* (the jester) notes: "Truth and lie are never distant, one from the other, and rarely does truth win out. Macledio's lies became solid truths, even for their originator, who always ended up believing that he had discovered the threads of plots rather than having created them" (112). This observation offers the opportunity to consider what it means to read against the dictator. In the passage from *I the Supreme* cited above, the dictator Francia berated his unknown reader and critic for not understanding that the law is symbolic. Taking Macledio as a generator of the symbolic system that bolsters the dictator's *commandement*, Kourouma demonstrates how it is possible for someone—even the writer of the fictive narrative—to take the narrative (or symbolic system) as truth. Macledio here is simultaneously in the position of "dictator," as the generator of the symbolic system, and also in the position of the "public" or the "masses," for whom that system becomes fact. As a figure that straddles these two realms, Macledio demonstrates both the mechanics of the language of power and the power of language to bring a particular political consciousness into being. Recalling Francia's outburst against his critic above, Macledio fails to read the symbolic narrative literally—in this case, to remember that he himself has written it. To read the dictator's fetish literally is to remember that it has been composed, that it is maintained by an epistemological system to which there is always an outside. This is the danger of the fetish, as a phenomenon of the contact zone, and also its potential.

In the African dictator novel, the dynamics of the language of power become visible in the making and unmaking of fetish objects that the dynamics of the language of power become visible. The fetish in this analysis functions as vulgarity does in Mbembe's analysis of what he calls the "aesthetics of vulgarity." Just as the elaboration of the dictator's physical excesses cannot simply work as a critique when those excesses have been incorporated into the aesthetics of power, the mere presentation of the dictator's fetish objects (as "traditional" objects) does not effectively critique the dictator as "anti-modern" or "barbaric." Instead, the presence of the fetish object signals a larger dynamic of meaning-making of which it is an expression. The fetish figures the way in which the dictator institutes and maintains his authoritarian power.

As a phenomenon constituted in the overlap of multiple epistemological systems, the fetish also marks the vulnerability of authoritarian power. It is necessarily excessively meaningful (it has a surplus of meaning) and therefore open to multiple and mis-interpretations. It is the site where the dynamics of power become visible, and it is also the point from which it becomes possible to read against the dictator. This is not to say the presence of fetish objects in African dictator novels renders them instruction manuals for the dismantling of authoritarian regimes. But it is to argue that, in showing us how authoritarian power works, these novels do more than simply show the negative effects of dictatorship or the dictator as a monster. Rather, they make viscerally present the experience of the dictator's *commandement* by suggesting that there is something beyond its limits.

Notes

1. English quotations refer to Adrian Adams's translation, *The Last of the Empire: A Senegalese Novel* (1983).
2. "This throne was carved of *ekume* wood, with decorative motifs and legendary symbols belonging to the various peoples of the continent. Its mass rested upon four legs each bearing the dignified mask of a bearded Ibibio; the arms were reinforced by two ebony *tyiwarra*; on the back a couched [*sic*] leopard, fangs bared, lay ready to leap upon its prey" (17).
3. In an uncanny intertwining of literature and history, during the unrest that followed the November 2010 election in Côte d'Ivoire, the opposition leader Alassane Ouattara established his headquarters in the Hotel du Golf in Abidjan. Government newspapers began to refer to the opposition as the "Republic of the Golf" (*République du Golf*), echoing Koyaga's *République du Golfe*.
4. For a general introduction to oral literature in Africa, which effectively locates the *donsomana* in its broader context, see Johnson, Hale, and Belcher's *Oral Epics from Africa*. Jean Derive, in "Le *donsomaana:* quelques réflexions sur la spécificité d'un genre," discusses the extent to which the *donsomana* can and cannot be distinguished from other Malinke oral genres. Broadly speaking, the *donsomana* is a hunter's story performed within the community (caste) of hunters; importantly, the bard of the hunter clan is not properly speaking a *griot*—who is the member of an endogenous social caste. The Malinke word *donso* means hunter, and the *donsomana* is literally the story of the hunter. The narrator of the *donsomana* is the *sèrè* (differentiated from the performers of other types of narratives), and the content deals with hunting and wild animals.
5. Coates, in his translation, establishes a direct equivalence between the *sèrè*'s claim and the title, choosing to render *bêtes* in the title as "animals" (*animaux*). My rendering of the title in English aims to preserve a certain ambiguity about this moment in the novel.
6. Mary Louise Pratt uses the term "contact zone" to refer to the space of colonial encounters, "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict" (8).
7. As Macledio explains, interrupting the narration of the *donsomana*: "The Bamileke are Bantu. Like every Bantu king, the Bamilkeke Fundoing receives his political, social, and mystical power from the skulls of his ancestors, which the *gnwala'a* worshipped once every week with libations of wine and anointments of palm oil" (91).
8. The relation between fetish objects (presumed to be part of "barbaric Africa") and money as fetish object (part of capitalist modernity) is often raised in *Waiting for the Vote of the Wild Beasts*. A little later in Macledio's adventures the close identification of these two types of fetishism becomes the basis for one of the novel's many small jokes. Macledio is rescued by a Nigerien patrol from a Tuareg community where he was being held as a slave, after being robbed and left for dead in the desert. The soldiers return to him his "fetish" which they have found on their patrols: "What the soldiers had called a fetish—because it was covered with coagulated blood and feathers—was the sack, Macledio's purse with the gold. They had handled it with great precautions, without daring to open it, and had given it back with all its contents" (107–08). The bag of money—key fetish of capitalist modernity—is taken to be another type of fetish simply because it has been soiled. The joke turns on the problem of the contingency—and misperception—of value. Had the soldiers not thought the purse an animist fetish, they would have emptied it of its contents before returning it, if at all.
9. English quotations refer to Helen Lane's translation, *I the Supreme* (1986).
10. "Intimidated, the two new arrivals walked along the carpet, their eyes lowered" (182).
11. My translation; the original reads: "Tous les éléments participent au sens. Maclédio permet de comprendre Koyaga, comme Koyaga permet de comprendre Maclédio" (Chemla 27). Thank you to Katharina Piechocki for her help in rendering the difficult phrase "participent au sens."
12. "Nkutigi's faith in Islam and in socialism had not excluded his daily practice of traditional African customs (sorcery, sacrifices, charms). Macledio's principal task consisted in inventing the words, the lies, the cynicism, and the eloquence that would supply an element to rational justifications to acts that had none, since they came from the various prognostications of marabout-fetishists" (111).

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Fimbo ya Nyayo: When the Kenyan Dictator Called the Tunes!

MAINA MŨTONYA

When Daniel arap Moi, at a relatively young age of fifty-four, took over as Kenya's second president in 1978, after the demise of the founding president Jomo Kenyatta at eighty-four, he immediately vowed to follow in the footsteps of the late president.[1] This pronouncement was significant in several ways; the young president sought to command similar respect that Kenyatta had and who, due to old age, deserved the title *Mzee*, a revered title for an elder, in Swahili. In this way, Moi was appropriating the idiom of age to justify his authoritarian stance by bestowing upon himself the paternal metaphor of a male, fatherly and old, which was the mask of political power in Kenya. As Ogola argues, this paternal imagery as used at the national level has always legitimized gerontocracy (582).

The oral tradition in Africa epitomises how age and its attendant variables are given prominence. The conceptualisation of the aged as the custodians of the culture responsible for imparting the ancestral knowledge to their juniors cannot be gainsaid. Likewise, in the political arena, especially in Africa, age is equated with wisdom, leadership skills, and foresight. In contrast, Western industrialised societies have given "more and more cultural centrality to youthfulness, symbolised by hard work, sports, playfulness and productivity" (Aguilar 289).

In this oral tradition, whose resonance in contemporary life persists hitherto through the arts, music, and literature, the valorization of old age over the