

Elara Bertho, *Sorcières, Tyrans, Héros: mémoires postcoloniales de résistants africains*. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion (pb €50 – 978 2 7453 5045 9). 2019, 520 pp.

‘What does literature do to history as it takes possession of its object? ... And in a parallel process, to what extent can we locate imagination at the core of the historical archive?’ (p. 337). These are two of the major questions that Elara Bertho tackles in her highly sophisticated and impeccably written first book, *Witches, Tyrants, Heroes: postcolonial memories of African figures of resistance* (my translation). In a publication format uncommon to anglophone scholars, the book consists of her mostly unabridged doctoral thesis, which adopts an interdisciplinary perspective channelling literary, historical and anthropological sources and methods to explore the postcolonial destinies of three African figures of resistance who rose against the colonizers and were defeated in the 1890s: Samori Touré in Guinea-Conakry (and West Africa to a lesser degree), Sarraounia in Niger, and Nehanda in Zimbabwe.

Through extensive fieldwork, archival research and sophisticated literary analysis, Bertho captures the emergence of cultural heroes in African narratives, noting how the profound and multifaceted processes of transformation that Africa experienced in the twentieth century make the continent a privileged field from which to think about the construction of collective identities and memory. Looking at songs, plays, novels, ballets and films, this book is a rare example of literary research conducted across African and European languages (Hausa, Shona, Malinke, French and English). The remarkable range of primary sources allows Bertho to paint a comprehensive picture of the post-independence dissemination and appropriation of African figures of resistance across social groups.

The book is divided into three main sections, each subdivided into chapters. The first section carefully traces the emergence and evolution of the three main figures across the twentieth century. Starting with their presence in or absence from colonial archives, the analysis then examines their uptake at the moment of independence, highlighting the role of literary and intellectual elites in forging national heroes and writing a history of resistance. It then goes on to study the connection between cultural heroes and postcolonial politics. Pointing to the major investment made by postcolonial African regimes in culture and education (through concerts, textbooks, festivals, etc.) to further implant these figures in the national imagination and pantheon, Bertho shows how, at times, this institutionalization stripped cultural heroes of their subversive dimension. Beyond their national inscriptions, the figures are also shown to have operated at the transnational level, inspiring artists in a context marked by Pan-African and socialist ideals of community and liberation.

The variations, attributes and paradoxes of successive and concomitant representations of Samori, Sarraounia and Nehanda are extensively scrutinized in the second section of the book. Here, Bertho deploys her literary skills to produce insightful, close readings of multiple narratives, deconstructing the palimpsest of traumatic memories, emotions and social issues contained in highly stylized novels, songs, poems and scenarios. Bertho stresses the fluidity of the ‘figure’ (first conceptualized by Xavier Garnier), at once a historical and fictional character, challenging authorship and therefore being particularly prone to multiple and fluid appropriations, both institutional and popular. Nonetheless, key moments and aspects are common to most narratives about Samori, Sarraounia and Nehanda: from an extraordinary birth or childhood, followed by a traumatic encounter with the white man, to an unfinished fight against the European

conqueror. For these cultural heroes, paradoxically, are also figures of defeat by the colonizer. Their fall bears the mark of division and betrayal, while announcing the struggle to come, which will, this time, end in victory and open the path to independence.

The final section opens on a stimulating discussion about the complementarity of literature and history to interrogate the elaboration of collective memory and identity in Africa through the example of the cultural hero. The political nature of resistance narratives requires an interdisciplinary perspective that examines how the '*vraisemblable*' (seemingly true) shapes collective imagination and incorporates extratextual elements to identify how literature sublimates traumatic memories. In addition to this powerful evocation of the role of narrative in creating political and cultural communities, Bertho also proposes a perceptive study of the role of the colonial archive in postcolonial Africa. Although it remains a powerful instrument of the state, the archive has become a source of contestation of colonial narratives and of glorification of African heroes: while colonial documents reveal the brutality of repression, photographs become iconic images that further promote national heroes. Bertho rightfully remarks that these strategies of commemoration also serve to impose certain forms of amnesia, as postcolonial regimes are eager to silence contemporary issues and failures through the celebration of a glorious past. However, because they remain essentially paradoxical and ambivalent, and resist total appropriation, resistance figures remain privileged sites from which to interrogate a world in crisis and to announce other narratives to come.

This monumental study successfully weaves fiction, archives and fieldwork to compose a ground-breaking, multilinguistic study investigating cultural heroes and collective identity across the African continent. Sophisticated in its conceptual and theoretical apparatus, elegant and clear in its writing, flawless in its demonstration and bibliographical apparatus, it shows how much literary studies have to offer when exploring contemporary history and memory in Africa.

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Olakunle George, *African Literature and Social Change: tribe, nation, race*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press (hb US\$80 – 978 0 253 02546 3; pb US\$30 – 978 0 253 02580 7). 2017, ix + 211 pp.

Olakunle George's *African Literature and Social Change* is a timely contribution to the study of African literature in a global framework. George's book intervenes in discourses that have posed terms such as 'tribe', 'nation' and 'race' against the 'global', 'transnational' or 'cosmopolitan', instead limning a more nuanced and contested terrain. He achieves this feat through the study of a number of 'liminal' figures: black missionaries such as Samuel Ajayi Crowther in the nineteenth century, Pan-African internationalists such as C. L. R. James, Richard Wright and Peter Abrahams in the early to mid-twentieth century, and a re-reading of two of the field's most canonical contemporary writers, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. George focuses on some of the less-studied works – of fiction and non-fiction – of these well-known writers and thinkers, alongside the missionary materials that are not usually considered within the same frame. This slightly shifted archive, timeframe and black-Atlantic geography allow him to make productive comparisons between these figures in what he identifies as three