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Ritual and Roles for Women in Werewere Liking’s L’Amour-cent-vies

by Ann Elizabeth Willey

CAMEROONIAN AUTHOR Werewere Liking has long been read as an advocate for the "ritual healing" of Africa as enacted through both her plays and novels. Scholars celebrate the ways in which Liking reinvents traditional ritual practices for the present, including the space she claims for women within these rites. For example, Irene d’Almeida and Anne Adams trace the specific outlines of Bassa ritual in the first two novels, Orphée Dafric (1986) and Elle sera de jaspe et corail (1988), and celebrate the ways in which Liking writes female virtues and voices into these rituals. Though rarely discussed, her third novel, L’Amour-cent-vies (1989), is Liking’s strongest answer to date to the question of how to write a contemporary African feminism. L’Amour-cent-vies accomplishes what the other two novels do not: it reinvents received tradition while at the same time claiming the historicity of women’s roles. In doing so, L’Amour-cent-vies avoids falling prey to either ahistorical generalizations about the roles of women or gender-coded discourses of culture and tradition.

L’Amour cent-vies deserves to be a central text in any reading of Liking’s project as proposing a paradigm of ritual that fully incorporates women in the healing of African society. Like the first two novels, it foregrounds the need for healing the cultural complexes legated by colonialism and posits two elements as essential to this healing process: the ritual search for knowledge and the need for women to be involved in this work. And yet, with reincarnation as its controlling trope, L’Amour-cent-vies fundamentally reformulates these two pillars of Liking’s project. First, it destabilizes the shape of ritual by emphasizing the dialectical necessity of the search for new knowledge appropriate to each period of history. Secondly, through incarnations of the figure of Sogolon, L’Amour-cent-vies makes Liking’s first concrete argument for the historicity of powerful roles for women in Africa. It is this paradoxical move of opening up her definition of ritual while firmly embedding her narrative in the particular cultural history of Mande women (West Africa) that distinguishes L’Amour-cent-vies from both Orphée Dafric and Elle sera. I suggest that the nondefinitive
representation of ritual and the specificity of the historical context keep critics from appropriating this novel for the ahistorical, Pan-Africanist, feminist intervention in postcolonial Africa ascribed to Liking’s first two novels.

Werewere Liking and the Reinvention of Ritual

Few female artists in Africa have enjoyed the international recognition that has come to Werewere Liking. A playwright, novelist, painter, and theatrical troupe leader, Liking has performed with her troupe across the globe in Europe, North America, Australia, and of course in her home base in Africa. Liking’s performance troupe, Kiyi Mbock, is housed in its own villa in the suburbs of Abidjan where she has lived since 1979. Originally from Cameroon, Liking was raised in a primarily rural area and was fully initiated in the Bassa group. But in 1977, Liking left Cameroon citing the increasing levels of censorship imposed by the Ahidjo regime. After an eighteen-month research trip to Mali, she settled in Abidjan where she worked at the University of Abidjan for six years and then founded her own self-supporting theater group and artists’ colony. While in Ivory Coast, she has published numerous plays, essays, poems and three novels. In all of her work, Liking proclaims the urgent need for a postcolonial Africa to address the societal ills that plague it through an honest appraisal of its present and a reinterpretation of the values and traditions that sustained it in the past. Through its involvement with discourses of tradition, modernity, and feminism, all of Liking’s work, and her novels in particular, seek to imagine what a healthier Africa may look like and what role women can play in attaining it. And her critics uniformly applaud these efforts as they take shape in her first two novels.

Most critics of Liking have pointed to the regenerative topoi of her work, especially in her use and reformation of ritual as both a trope and structure for narrative. In tracing the use of ritual in her first two novels, these critics claim that Liking has found an indigenously based way to address successfully the social ills of postcolonial Africa, especially for women. Irene d’Almeida shows how the first novel, Orphée Dafric, rewrites rituals of initiation to serve the needs of contemporary Africa. The novel recounts the dream of the main character, Orphée, on the night of his wedding to Nyango. Orphée dreams that Nyango has drowned and he must cross into the underworld to get her back. In order to accomplish this, Orphée goes through a trial of initiation symbolized by ascending a floating staircase of seven steps. On each step, Orphée must reach a state of enlightened reflection on a variety of social ills before he can ascend to the next step. When he awakes from his dream, he finds that Nyango has had a similar dream and they each write the lessons they have learned in their journals. In discussing Liking’s recasting of the Orphic myth along the lines of traditional Bassa initiation rites, d’Almeida says, “Ritual,
then, is reinforced in the African treatment of the myth to show its potency in bringing about knowledge and resolution” (“Echoes” 58). Part of Liking’s reworking of the myth, according to d’Almeida, is her development of the Eurydice character, Nyango. D’Almeida poses the question “Can a woman who functions within the accepted parameters of her society be a vehicle for change? Liking [...] surely holds that view as illustrated by her development of Nyango’s character” (“Echoes” 63). She ends her essay with: “The myth is thus brought to powerful heights to become, ultimately, a life-restructuring force” (“Echoes” 68). In Orphée Dafric, then, d’Almeida finds resolution through ritual and emphasizes that a woman’s participation in this ritual is appropriate within her own cultural sphere.

Anne Adams extends this argument by comparing Orphée’s personal ritual of initiation with the communal ritual of healing in Liking’s second novel, Elle sera de jaspe et corail. Adams goes further than d’Almeida in identifying the specific ritual structures that shape these narratives. In Orphée Dafric, she finds the three-part structure of a ritual of initiation suggested by Pierre Medehouegnon: novitiate, disciple, and initiate. Similarly, in Elle Sera she finds the structure of a community healing ritual as described in the work of Liking’s collaborator, Marie-José Hourantier. Hourantier explains that these rituals follow a very clearly defined progression of steps: self-questioning, self-examination, locating and expelling negative force, reestablishing unity, new order (Adams 155). Ritual provides both the content and the structure for these novels, according to Adams, and both of these novels ensure a special role for women.

In Elle sera, especially, the role of the woman artist is central: she is the traditional leader or facilitator of the communal process of self-examination (“historien”). Elle sera takes the form of a journal intercut by various voices. The narrator and writer of the journal is a citizen of the fictional village of Lunai, which she describes as badly in need of revitalization. Much of the description of the village is centered on two characters, Babou and Grozi, who hold long conversations on the neuroses of their neocolonial society. The narrator, in dialogue with Babou, Grozi, and a spiritual “voix de Nuit-Noire,” first undergoes a personal initiation and then, in her nine-page journal, proposes nine steps for a community healing ritual. After identifying these ritual structures in both the narratives, Adams argues: “What Liking achieves in these novels, then, is the subordination of formal specifics of the rituals to the principles of initiation and collective healing as institutions to be retained for their value as centering force for the African man or woman and [...] as social psychotherapy for the African community [...]” (167). The last sentence in her essay proclaims the success of Liking’s endeavors: “Liking offers a viable model for adapting this dramatic tradition to another literary language” (167). For both Adams and d’Almeida, Liking’s novels are successful attempts to translate traditional ritual practices into a functional contemporary
discourse that accommodates women. But if we accept that Liking’s aim is to reinvent traditional forms of ritual for the sake of contemporary society, two fundamental problems occur with this presentation of ritual; 1) the rituals presented are inescapably individual and 2) the form of ritual described in these two novels is finite and hierarchized, or, in other words, static.

The efficacy of ritual thus presented is severely limited by the mode in which the reformulated ritual is presented to the community: novels written in French. What community can they heal? Conteh-Morgan defines the participation of a community that shares a common belief system as an essential component of ritual. Despite the critical insistence that her novels enact ritual, Liking herself admits that her novels do not reach her wider immediate community. In an interview with David Ndachi Tagne, she argues, “Je reste consciente du fait que beaucoup de gens ne lisent pas [...] mais ce sont les gens qui décident au nom de l’Afrique qui m’intéressent. Parce que je sais que mon théâtre est souvent compris par des analphabètes, je crois que tout compte fait, j’ai un pied à la base et un pied au sommet” (196). In saying this, Liking acknowledges that her novels do not reach the wide audience that her theater addresses and are thus more limited in their functioning as ritual.

Indeed, both Adams and d’Almeida, almost in passing, mention that in Liking’s novels, ritual begins with the individual. In both novels, the individual undergoing initiation (Orphée and the unnamed narrator of Elle sera) is highly educated and a self-presumed leader of their communities. The personal nature of their initiations is further highlighted by the fact that the main characters in each of these novels write down the lessons they have learned rather than passing them on in the much more communal mode of orality (as in theater). Even when the initiation is shared, Liking’s initiates keep individual records of their new knowledge: in Orphée Dafric, Nyango and Orphée have had the same dream but they each write it down in their own private journals! Similarly, the narrative frame of Elle sera rests on the premise that we are witnessing the narrator discover the nine essential steps for community healing, which she then writes down in her nine-page journal. And what does she do once she has this knowledge? At the end of her narrative, she promises to burn the journal: “Ce que je vais faire maintenant [...] c’est brûler ce projet de journal” (154).

Not only are the rituals identified in Orphée and Elle sera highly personal in nature but perhaps more importantly for my discussion of the third novel, both d’Almeida and Adams describe ritual as a finite process. Orphée Dafric and Elle sera, as Adams and d’Almeida, have pointed out, are marked by the readily definable stages of ritual such as separation, symbolic death of an old self, mastery of a new knowledge, and rebirth of a new self that is reincorporated into society. While Adams claims that Liking subordinates “formal specifics” to “principles,” her own essay proceeds by identifying very clearly delineated structures of specifically Bassa
rituals and then tracing those structures in the narratives. The understanding of ritual that operates in Adams’s essay emphasizes flexibility in content but finality in form. A ritual, whether personal or communal, is recognizable by its shape: it follows very clearly delineated sets of steps or stages to their completion. The first two novels both present an anthropological and finite sense of ritual in that the main characters master an available body of knowledge through a succession of clearly defined and ordered stages, and the knowledge thus gained in turn leads to a healthier lifestyle that they then promise to promote in their communities.

While the tracing of ritual in these two novels depends on identifying their sources in established traditional forms, both d’Almeida and Adams insist that Liking effectively writes women into her updated practices of ritual. D’Almeida works hard to draw out the agency of Nyango that is implicit, though very much in the background, of Orphée Dafric. Adams establishes the narrator of Elle sera as occupying the role of “historien” which is central to structure of communal rituals. Both these female characters also serve as inspiration for the search for knowledge. Orphée is spurred on by his desire to regain Nyango; the narrator of Elle sera insists that she is burning her journal so that others will be inspired to seek out the same wisdom she has gained. In the rituals themselves, feminine virtues are presented as necessary and complementary to masculine values. The definition of ritual that we can draw out of the first two novels, then, is one that insists on clearly identifiable structures from West African traditions while updating these structures to include more central roles for women.

From this discussion of Liking’s work and the ways in which it has been received, it should be evident that there are two main sites of tension that Liking is trying to negotiate: the use of tradition in the present and the description of a role for women that is grounded in indigenous practices. These two discourses are intertwined chiasmatically: the desirable historicity of women’s roles in Africa is undercut by the contemporary uses of traditional discourse to bolster male domination of the public sphere. This masculine script of tradition writes women out of the traditional rituals that Liking wishes to bring into the present. Writing women into contemporary cultural life smacks of feminism and cultural neocolonialism. How can Liking both reinvent tradition and claim the historicity of women’s roles without falling prey to either ahistorical generalizations or gender-coded discourses of culture and tradition?

**Discourses of Feminism and Cultural Nationalism**

In working through the problematic of incorporating the past into the present and at the same time recovering the roles for women that have been erased from the historical accounts, Liking faces two main sites of tension: resistance to feminism as a western import and the masculinist
bias of anticolonial cultural nationalism. *L'Amour-cent-vies* responds to each of these concerns much more convincingly than Liking’s first two novels. First, it firmly embeds its female characters in indigenous histories that contain powerful female characters. Secondly, it rewrites the histories of West African nationalism to better reflect the presence of women throughout the area. Because the roles for women created in *L'Amour-cent-vies* are much more deeply embedded in local practices, they are more difficult to appropriate for globalizing theories of feminism or African culture than either the largely absent Nyango or the highly abstract unnamed narrator of *Elle sera*. Instead, *L'Amour-cent-vies* offers a vision of local female practices that are in direct conversation with contextual discourses of gender and society.

**Feminism**

In an interview recorded in 1989, Werewere Liking was asked whether she considered herself a feminist. She offered the following reply:

> I’m a relatively tolerant person, and I realise that there are women who have great problems arising from their womanhood, and I understand that feminism had to exist so that certain women could feel relatively liberated. So I have nothing against feminism, but I don’t feel personally involved. I don’t think women need feminism to survive. It’s a bit like Negritude, you know, one doesn’t need to sing about Negritude to be a Negro, you’re just born that way. But it was necessary all the same so that certain blacks could discover a pride in being black. In the same way, feminism was necessary so that certain women could be proud to be women. But it’s a crutch. There are some people who preserve their dignity regardless of what happens to them, and they don’t need all that: they maintain their value simply as human beings. There are others who need crutches of that kind to survive. (Hawkins 220)

The regeneration of Africa, she goes on to assert, will only be possible when women reclaim their place in society. In reference to the title of her second novel, *Elle sera de jaspe et corail—journal d’une misovire*, Liking explains: “[I]t was my way of saying that if women didn’t take themselves in hand, Africa would never survive, because in our tradition women have a sacred role to play” (Hawkins 221). At the same that she declares a “sacred role” for women, Liking dismisses feminism and negritude as “crutches” used by those who have forgotten “their value simply as human beings.” She rejects these two discourses of identity because of their links with Western, or European, epistemologies. A more suitable source of human dignity for Africans, and especially African women, she argues, lies in the practices of the African past updated for the present. There are historical and social precedents of strong, engaged women in Africa’s past, but colonialism and the nationalist rhetoric of the anticolonial movements have erased these models.

The mistrust of feminism as a tool of the cultural imperialist project of
the west is not unusual. As construed in many debates, International Feminism would have African women combating African men at a time when these men have already been emasculated by their subjugation to the imperialist regimes of the West. Feminism is often described as a deliberate ruse to divide and distract a population with pressing needs. And while the writings of Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala, Aminata Sow Fall. Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo or Bessie Head may look like Western feminism in the appeals for education, civil rights, and greater presence in the community for women in contemporary Africa, African women are wary of unproblematically adopting this term. In fact, the debates about feminism’s applicability to Africa are longstanding and often strongly partisan.

Obioma Nnaemeka’s polemical essay titled “Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Companions” (1995) castigates self-proclaimed Africanist feminists for blindly applying theoretical tools that do not respect local conditions. She writes:

My paper speaks by documenting, in part, my deep concerns about the blatant distortions of the works of African women writers by feminist critics in the name of “feminist criticism.” [...] As I read some of the feminist analyses of African literature that are, unfortunately, proliferating faster than a harmattan fire, I cannot help but ask, “What’s feminism got to do with it?” (81)

She quotes several African women academics and writers, including Flora Nwapa, who all distance themselves from feminism. Nor are these debates new—as early as her first novel, Our Sister Killjoy (1977), Ama Ata Aidoo contemplates the role of women in the new nations of Africa and how their struggles are not related to the struggles faced by women in Europe. Similarly, in Une si longue lettre (1979), Mariama Bâ’s narrator muses at length about the ill-fitting nature of the “western” customs and costumes adopted by her daughters. In the context of these debates then, Liking’s novels are notable for the ways in which they, like Nwapa, denounce ideological constructs like feminism that are inherited from colonialism and propose in their stead indigenously grounded epistemologies that will serve African women. And, as discussed above, scholars go to great lengths to show how Orphée and Elle sera create rituals that include important roles for women as inspiration in the search for and keepers of the knowledge necessary for the healing of Africa.

Cultural Nationalism

Feminism is represented not only as a Trojan horse for Western ideologies, but also as a divisive factor at a time when the first concern should be the construction of a national identity. The fight against colonialism (and neocolonialism), both cultural and economic, is often based on a return to indigenous systems of thought and bases for identity formation.
The nations of Africa may have inherited their borders from the former colonizers, but they proclaim their legitimacy based in local practices and traditions. The establishment of nationally validating traditions, necessarily an exercise in invention, reflects the needs of the politicians who led the anti-colonial struggles and the postcolonial nations.

In her article “Problématique de la parole: le cas des camerounaises,” Eloise Brière asserts that in Cameroon, Francophone literature and nationalist discourse developed at approximately the same time. Because women were excluded from education in French at this time, they were also excluded from the development of these two discourses. The resulting discourse of the state was necessarily masculine and tended to center on the protection of indigenous traditional identities, articulated as a response to the denigration of Africa so often voiced by Europe. Literary and philosophical trends such as Negritude or the “African personality,” espoused by Senghor and Nkrumah respectively, are examples of this search for an authentically African source of identity. The rhetoric of anti-colonial nationalism claimed the rights of Africans as men and bemoaned the rape of the Mother Africa. Cultural nationalism constructed the land as female and subjugated, while the state was male and resistant. The surest way to resist the blandishments of the West was to return to ancestral knowledge and the ancestors they found are almost overwhelmingly male.

While Liking calls for the use of traditional forms, she rejects the kind of nostalgic cultural nationalism that more often than not reduced women to tropes for the landscape. Nostalgia implies static past insurmountably separated from the present—it is the loss of the past that makes us nostalgic. As indicated by her comments about Negritude cited above, Liking sees herself operating in a different mode. Her response to stasis of nostalgia comes most clearly into focus in L’Amour-cent-vies where ritual provides a tactic to be applied contingently to the ever-changing demands of the present struggle. It is a dynamic process rather than a static symbol of lost (or even recovered) virtue. L’Amour cent-vies emphasizes ritual’s dynamic nature while the first two novels, in their rather schematic uses of ritual as structure, present ritual as a static symbol or structure. In short, the types of ritual identified and celebrated in the first two novels is teleological, while the third novel resists any such codification or closure.

**The Uses of Ritual and Roles of Women in *Orphée Dafric* and *Elle sera de jaspe et corail***

Critics tend to identify the structure of ritual in Liking’s first two novels as explicitly based on Bassa rituals and show how each present a finite and definitive ritual form, the completion of which provides closure to the novels. In each case, well-defined steps are followed in order
to uncover certain truths about healthy societies while women provide the inspiration for these rituals. *L’Amour-cent-vies* offers no such program for health; instead, through the multiple female narrative voices from the past and present linked in repetitive and circular story telling, it changes both our sense of how ritual operates and the historicity of women’s participation in society.

**The Forms of Ritual and Roles for Women in *L’Amour-cent-vies***

*L’Amour-cent-vies* is similar to the other two novels in that ritual provides a thematic focus. The novel follows the main character Lem through two different periods in his life: his childhood, during which he experiences an unsettling attraction to his grandmother, and his time as a student participating in strikes at the university. In a narrative comprised mainly of flashbacks, Lem recounts the stories that his grandmother had told to inspire him during these difficult periods. While *L’Amour-cent-vies* has the same basic concerns of the first two novels, namely the neo-colonial complexes that weaken many African cultures and women’s roles in addressing them, it introduces into Liking’s novelistic corpus the trope of reincarnation. Reincarnation functions both to shape the understanding of ritual that this text promotes and to ground its feminist sentiments in African practices. Reincarnation allows *L’Amour-cent-vies* to redefine ritual as an ongoing process of struggle that is not dependent on specific cultural models. The roles described for women are paradoxically concretely grounded in the specific histories of the Mande and Cameroon. It is this chiasmatic relationship of *L’Amour’s* abstracted ritual and historic women versus her first two novels’ concrete Bassa rituals and abstract paradigms of women that keeps *L’Amour-cent-vies* from receiving the critical attention paid to *Orphée Dafric* or *Elle sera*. But despite this lack of attention, I believe that *L’Amour-cent-vies* successfully addresses Liking’s desire to create an indigenous form of feminist practice that draws on tradition without being limited by it. The opening-up of ritual space, combined with the concrete temporality of the roles of women in Cameroonian history possible through the trope of reincarnation, allows Liking to present women in their “sacred roles” without falling prey to the nostalgic “salvaging” of tradition, as cultural nationalism so often did.¹¹

Through reincarnation, Lem and his grandmother are each attributed several personalities that lived throughout African history. Lem occupies the roles of Soundiata, Roumen, and Lem, while his grandmother is Sogolon, the mother of Soundiata; Ngo Kal Djob, the lover of the Cameroonian nationalist Roumen; and Madjo, Lem’s grandmother.¹² The historical breadth of these characters links the times of precolonial kingdoms, the anticolonial struggle, and the postcolonial present. And their stories are linked in topic: in each era, society has become corrupt and complacent.
Soundiata/Roumen/Lem must find a way to fight the corruption that stifles his countrymen while depending on Sogolon/Ngo Kal Djob/Madjo for her wisdom, support, and inspiration in the struggle.

*L’Amour-cent-vies* is in one sense just the kind of initiation story that L’Amour’s other novels present. The framing narrative is set during a university strike when Lem, disheartened by the betrayal around him, retreats to his village and his grandmother. As in the definitions of initiation outlined above, Lem withdraws from his community (novitiate), seeks new knowledge (disciple), and returns to the struggle with a new and improved understanding of his destiny (initiate). In this ritual initiation of Lem, as in the initiations of *Orphée or Elle sera*, women contain the knowledge and drive necessary to lead the initiate through the ritual. But what *L’Amour-cent-vies* suggests that the other texts do not is that initiation is an on-going process: Lem’s avatars have already undergone several initiations that precede this one. In this book, initiations occur across a hundred lifetimes. The centrality of reincarnation makes knowledge-seeking a desirable and constant human condition rather than an act that, once achieved, is complete. The most harmful quality to the human spirit, L’Amour tells us, is complacency.

**Ritual and Reincarnation in L’Amour-cent-vies**

Complacency, or stasis, is routinely reviled in *L’Amour*. When Madjo begins her story telling, she explicitly tells Lem that man’s destiny is constant evolution. At the beginning of the Soundiata epic, she describes the realm of the Mande as “peacefully rotting under the peaceful reign of Maghan Kon Fata” (30). Peace, she says, had frozen everything: artistic creativity, inventiveness of women, innovativeness in children, the philosophical explorations of old men, and the desire for conquest among young men. She tells Lem:

> L’homme est ainsi fait qu’il ne progresse plus quand il est ou croit être heureux  
> Il oublie qu’il est sur terre pour grandir,  
> Pour retrouver son intégrité  
> Pour evoluer vers le divin  
> Une evolution qui s’acquiert par l’épreuve [...]. (30)

Similarly, when the story of Roumen is introduced, the setting is one of complacency: “Roumen était venu à l’époque où les Nègres se laissèrent convaincre qu’ils étaient les descendents d’un Cham-maudit-fils-de-Noé et conclurent qu’ils seraient éternellement esclaves [...]. En chantant et dansant, ils confortaient l’ordre établi avec le respect dû aux ancêtres [...].” (118). And Lem describes his own time as overshadowed by the “Machine-Gouttes” of the neocolonial state that reduces the populace to dependency through a steady drip of pabulum that they gladly ingest. The struggle in
all of these time periods, finding a way to challenge the status quo, is the same, while the solution, a better way of life, constantly changes.

_L’Amour-cent-vies_, more clearly than either Orphée Dafric or Elle Sera, points out that each age has its own knowledge, its own wisdom, its own remedies for the ills that afflict it. The “secret” revealed by any initiation is good only for that lifetime. After fully realizing the multiplicities of his lifetimes and connections to Madjo, Lem thinks to himself,

 Nous renaissons à chaque réveil pour refaire le monde!  
 Nous renaissons à chaque étape pour recommencer l’effort  
 cent fois, mille fois, le même chemin [...]. (139)

In the afterword to the novel, Liking stresses that the dynamic process of reincarnation and reinvention of self that Lem ruminates on has undergirded most African belief systems:

 Le phénomène de la réincarnation, qui sous-tend la plupart des croyances négro-africaines précoloniales, m’a permis de suivre des personnages depuis “l’aube des jours”, à travers un amour qui survit et revient au fil des vies, de destin en destins, d’ancêtres en lignées, de chaînons en chaînons [...]. Il y a toujours eu, et il y aura toujours, des fins de monde. C’est pourquoi il y a eu, et il y aura toujours, des renaissances [...]. (156–57)

Liking forbids her characters or her readers to remain complacent in “bonne conscience,” and encourages everyone to prepare for a new age across every time period. The successful completion of one trial, whether independence from colonialism or initiation into adulthood, should not lead one into complacency.

Unlike Orphée and Elle sera, _L’Amour-cent-vies_ does not offer specific remedies to the various social ills described. In this way, it is much less prescriptive than either of the other two novels. While the various narrative voices freely offer commentary on the social evils plaguing particular time periods—lack of curiosity during the reign of the Mande, acceptance of second-class status under colonialism, or dependency on neocolonial regimes—they do not offer blanket statements about what a more humane society looks like.

**Roles for Women in L’Amour-cent-vies**

While the trope of reincarnation allows Liking to nuance her presentation of ritual as a state of striving rather than as a state of grace, it also allows her to reinforce the idea that women across Africa’s history have played essential roles in leading the evolution of society. Through the three major time periods presented in the novel (the far past, recent history, and the present), Liking establishes women as key players in challenging the complacency of their societies and offering their wisdom, blood, and determination to help in the struggle for better ways of life.
The trope of reincarnation allows her to bring the mythologically powerful figure of Sogolon down through the ages from the time of Soundiata to the period of the anticolonial struggle and the present resistance to neocolonialism. In each time period, she emphasizes, more than the commonly circulated versions of these same stories, how women were and are central to the struggles of their communities.

Liking’s rearranging of history or accepted stories in this novel is a conscious ploy both to claim the weight of history and to escape the marginal roles ascribed to women in the typical nationalist histories. She writes in the afterword:

Oui! les noms de personnes et lieux rappelant des personnes existantes ou ayant existé sont vrais et ne sauraient être “pure coincidence” ... Ils sont dans l’histoire et la mythologie africaines ... Il y en même de célèbre: Roumben, Soundiata, Sogolon, Ngo Kal Djob, Yém Mback, Bipol ... Il y en a de moins célèbres: Ziwore, Lem, Gol ... Mais ... Pas de précipitation! Pas de vérité historique ici! (156)

In saying that her characters did exist in history but that her story is not “historically true,” Liking gives herself license to rewrite African history, to reinterpret the truth of these stories, especially for her female figures.

This rewriting is perhaps most obvious in her telling of the Soundiata epic. In the version recounted by Madjo, the epic of Soundiata takes up approximately thirty-five pages and ends with Soundiata’s being forced into exile. His eventual ascension to the throne of the Mande and battle with his archenemy, Soumamouro, are left out entirely. These thirty-five pages are almost evenly split between a description of the lasitude that enervated the court of Maghan Kon Fata, symbolized by the fact that the capital city’s “door of surprises” had rusted shut from disuse, and the story of Sogolon’s resistance to marriage and alliance with the powerful Buffalo of Do. Sogolon is shown both to be spiritually endowed in her alliance with the supernatural buffalo and perhaps more significantly, socially rebellious in her refusal to marry according to her father’s desires. Madjo’s recitation of the epic ends when Soundiata becomes responsible for himself and no longer depends on his mother: Soundiata’s story becomes a footnote to Sogolon’s. While Sogolon is routinely hailed in Mande texts as the mother of Soundiata and as embued with powerful spiritual energies, in no other version of the epic that I have seen does Soundiata’s story become so obviously subsumed by Sogolon’s.¹⁴ Liking’s female-centered re-vision of this widely known and revered foundational epic stresses the virtues and strengths that Sogolon brought to the Mande during a time period of great decay, thus establishing a historical/mythological figure for women as centrally located in the regeneration of their societies.

Similarly, L’Amour-cent-vies, through the characters of Madjo and Gol, recounts the life and times of the Camerounian nationalist leader, Ruben...
Um Nyobé, called Roumben in the novel. Roumben’s story, like Sondiata’s, is a great deal more concerned with the female figure (Ngo Kal Djob) than the actions of the well-known male hero. In fact, Roumben’s story as Lem’s aunt Gol tells it, suggests that the primary motivating force in Roumben’s actions was his lover, Ngo Kal Djob:

Ngo Kal Djob regardait l’homme de ses yeux de pierre
Et elle lui dit:
“Je ne veux que des pas de guerriers qui frappent le sol en détermination et avancent sur l’ennemi qui recule
La peur qui recule
Frappent le sol de savoir qui avance sur l’ennemi qui recule
La misère qui recule la mediocrité qui recule”
[...]
Et Roumben se mit à danser...
[...]
Il s’en fut en guerre ma sœur
Pour l’amour de Ngo Kal Djob. (114–16)

In rewriting the history of one of Cameroon’s most popularly supported nationalists as being undergirded by the strength and willpower of a woman, Liking once again writes women back into a well-known story, this time the nationalist struggles of Cameroon. Ngo Kal Djob, as an avatar of Sogolon, is embued with the same force of spirit and desire to struggle against oppression of the spirit.

It is this very same belief in the necessity to fight for the freedom of spirit that Ngo Kal Djob, now known as Madjo, implants in her grandson Lem. Madjo tells Lem the story of Roumben when Lem, discouraged by the failure of his colleagues to sustain the strike, tries to commit suicide. At the end of her story, she walks away and Lem is left with the realization that he has tried to live his life through others and must now take responsibility for his own actions. He must become his own man. He symbolically buries the rope made of umbilical cords with which he was trying to hang himself and thinks:

J’ai creusé de mes mains ma terre injectée d’angoisses matérielles et de richesses véniéuses importées
Creusé ma terre gorgée d’assistés
J’ai creusé de mes mains et enterré le protectorat
Enterré le tutorat
Avec ma corde de pendaisons ombilicales
Puisque je devais vivre, comme en avais-je le devoir...
Pour les marches roides et ineluctables qui avancent
Et l’ennemi qui recule... (147)

Lem goes on to list the enemy as fear, slavery, misery, and inertia while the values to advance should be determination, knowledge, and passion. He phrases his realization through the words that Madjo has been reciting to him and takes up her challenge to be a warrior. The choice of a
rope made of discarded umbilical cords is so unlikely as to call attention to itself as a highly symbolic figure: not only is Lem declaring his independence (he is no longer a child) but Liking is also rejecting the nostalgic male search for a maternal figure, Mother Africa. The search for a past connection or hope to return to a nurturing mother figure can only stifle. Women are not reduced to the always already lost "mother" but instead become companions and social agents in their own right. With Lem’s failed suicide attempt and rejection of the damaging myth of a return to the womb, he turns to face change and evolution with a resolutely forward face. And the text tells us that Lem indeed succeeds in becoming a well-adjusted engaged person: the narrator describes him as a socially conscious artist of some renown, “un être exceptionnel auprès de qui on ne peut pas vivre une vie banale” (155).

Reincarnation thus allows Liking to emphasize the centrality of women to the history of West Africa and Cameroon through the use of myth and history while it decentralizes the forms and procedures associated with ritual in favor of a nonteleological process of seeking after knowledge. In each of the three time periods represented in L’Amour, women are inscribed as central to the process of struggling to build better societies. And while Liking denies the historical veracity of her novel, the choice to rewrite the epic of Soundiata and the history of Camerounian anticolonial resistance firmly grounds her female characters in recognizable histories. Liking thus creates space for a feminist practice of searching for better ways of living in community that is both grounded in local histories and freed from the gendered constructions of tradition that accompany the incorporation of past social practices into the present.

So why has L’Amour-cent-vies been ignored in the critical work on Liking? I have tried to show that this silence is caused by the ways in which L’Amour-cent-vies resists both the finite forms of ritual and the paradigmatic figures of women that critics identify and celebrate in the first two novels. Liking’s search for historically grounded significant roles for women in African public life demands a dismantling of contemporary discourses of tradition and a reconstruction of the historical spaces occupied by women. Traditional forms of ritual, especially when understood anthropologically as Liking’s critics tend to present it, are limited by their emphasis on spatial, hierarchized epistemologies. Feminism is similarly limited by its cultural freight of neocolonialism. All of Liking’s work has striven to define a feminist practice of ritual that avoids these traps; but L’Amour-cent-vies is most successful in addressing these concerns because it neither falls into the category of narratives structured by clearly identifiable ritual steps, nor does it provide us with highly abstract and symbolic figures of the feminine. Through the reincarnations of its two main characters, L’Amour-cent-vies denies the finitude of ritual, explores the individual nature of initiation by not presenting it as paradigmatic for a
larger group, and writes women back into the historical record of Africa. These changes in form allow Liking to propose a feminist practice that resists the limitations of the discourses of both (African) tradition and (western) feminism. In her ever changing incarnations, Sogolon/Ngo Kal Djob/Madjo challenges her contemporaries to imagine and then work toward a better society. And while she claims for women in African society a central role that may look feminist to a western reader, Liking shows that it is firmly grounded in West African history.

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Notes

1 D’Almeida concedes that Nyango is partly symbol, the object of the quest—namely, a healthy African society—but goes on to describe how Nyango is characterized by her family and social background and granted agency through her personal recording of the dream of initiation.

2 Many people discuss Liking’s theater as “ritual drama,” a label she herself uses. See, for example, the introduction to the English translation of Liking’s plays African Ritual Theater: “The Power of Urn” and “A New Earth” (translated and edited by Jeanne Dingome et. al) or Afrique Nouvelle (25 January 1984): 12-13.

3 Many critics have made the argument that Senghor’s formulation of Negritude was heavily influenced by Western epistemologies. Among other things, he has been described as accepting the manicheanism of colonial discourse, as well as engaging in a romanticization of past cultures, or nostalgia. See Hountoundji, Anozie, Miller, etc.

4 I use this formulation for lack of a better word to describe the ways in which Feminism has been presented in the past as an international phenomenon. As Chandra Mohanty details quite strongly, so-called feminist analyses of “Third World women” have tended to normalize Western conceptions of gender and social order, in effect recolonizing third world spaces. While most contemporary feminists in the United States academy at least voice a concern for this dynamic, the strongly suspicious response to feminism as a cover for western cultural imperialism is still strongly felt.

5 The term “Womanism” has often been suggested in diaspora studies as a possibility for replacing Feminism. The term reflects African-American women’s efforts to find a place for themselves apart from the mainstream feminist movement that they critique for being too narrowly defined and primarily concerned with the needs of white middle-class American women. Womanism as such hopes to encompass the groups marginalized in this tradition. As Nnaemeka notes in her essay, while female African intellectuals and writers are sympathetic to this effort to critique feminism, they are slightly wary of Womanism as representing yet another paradigm imposed from the outside.

6 I am referring particularly to the main character’s flirtation with a German housewife while in a youth work program in Germany. Sissie realizes that the young German woman, Marija, is lonely and neglected in a German bourgeois culture that isolates women and reduces them to domestic functions. Sissie, while sympathetic to Marija’s plight, finds her pathetic and easy to disdain, even reveling somewhat ironically in the masculine prerogative of spurning romantic attentions.

7 One of the most common signs of this is the replacing of the colonial names with the names of historic empires or indigenous groups: French Sudan became Mali, the Gold Coast became Ghana, Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe, Upper Volta became Burkina Faso, etc.
While the rhetoric of decolonization and independence was largely masculinist, if not entirely masculine, one could quibble with the idea that education in French was necessary for participation in forming anticolonial rhetoric. This type of argument unfortunately neglects to take into account the largely popular nature of the pressures that the europhone elites rode into power. To claim that the voices of those illiterate in European languages were not part of the anticolonial movement reinscribes the history of a nationalist bourgeoisie that seeks to consolidate its own power at the expense of the vast majority of their constituents. See for example, the participation of Ghanaian market women in the formation and organization of the CPP. While most of these women were illiterate, they were essential in ensuring the success of the CPP in the countryside. Similar arguments could be made about the Women’s branch of the RDA in Senegal or Mali. See Awa Keita’s autobiography Femme d’Afrique or Sembene’s version of the railroad strikes in 1947 in Les Bouts de bois de Dieu.

I am thinking of de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactic. According to de Certeau, Strategies are actions that [...] elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical spaces in which forces are distributed [...] they attempt to reduce temporal relations to spatial ones through the analytical attribution of a proper place to each element and through the combinatorial organization of the movements specific to units or groups of units. [...] Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time—to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favorable situation, to the rapidity of the movements that change the organization of a space, to the relations among successive moments in an action, to the possible intersections of durations and heterogeneous rhythms [...]. (38)

I read the outlines of ritual as presented by Adams and d’Almeida as operating along the principles of strategy while L’Amour-cent-vies resists this typology of ritual in favor of a practice of ritual that resembles de Certeau’s concept of tactic—it is temporary and contingent.

See Clifford’s description of ethnographic accounts as enacting a type of nostalgia for a lost way of life that needs to be “salvaged” from the past. While he does not extend this argument specifically to negritude, this genre of critique has been made by the critics mentioned above in note 1.

While Ngo Kal Djob and Madjo are technically the same person, the text spends a great deal of time treating them as separate characters. The reader, like Lem or the framing narrator, Lem’s aunt, does not learn that they are one in the same until fairly late in the text.

Madjo explains to Lem early in the narrative that human beings were originally double-sided, masculine and feminine together like two sides to a coin. Through the jealousy of the gods, human beings were split into men and women precipitating human beings’ constant search to find their missing original doubles. This parallels the story that Plato tells in his dialogues about the origins of love. D’Almeida has commented extensively on Liking’s use of intertexts from a wide variety of traditions, such as Plato, in her essay “The Intertext: Werewere Liking’s Tool for Transformation and Renewal.”

I am thinking here primarily of versions of this story most widely available to literate or urban audiences, such as Niane’s Soundjata, ou l’épopée mandingue, John William Johnson’s Epic of Son-Jara with Fa Digi Sisoko, or Kouyaté’s film Keita!

Works Cited


