

Intersecting and Contiguous Identities in African Narratives: Ontological and Anthropological Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: *The tribal and ethnic identities in Africa have been associated with many social tensions, political intolerance and violence. Through the lenses of fatalistic pessimism, many African writers have generally portrayed such identities as the unfortunate societal references that drive social and political allegiance. However, there are some writers who no longer see the tribal and ethnic affiliation as a determining factor for (un)democratic practices and (in)cohesive social interactions. They rather depict such differences as the form of a constructive alterity where the otherness contributes to the acceptance, tolerance, development of attitudes and behaviours that harness peaceful multifaceted and intersecting identities. Through the works of Eugène Nzamboung and Dominique M'Fouillou, respectively *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* (2018) [Love in the mist of tribal wars] and *Ondongo* (2000), one can identify culturally autarkic universes in the shadow of many Africa countries where intersectional identities are underpinned by both anthropological and ontological factors. Traditional identity clashes dissipate in favour of togetherness and hopes that facilitate the construction of societies which share historical symbolic values and destiny. By using a discourse analysis, this paper examines the representation of key concepts, such as identities, existence, being, becoming and representation of historical and social reality. With references to cultural anthropology and ontological perspectives, the study concludes that many dynamics in the interpersonal and community relations can create a fruitful intersectionality of identities and ultimately triumph over a contiguous conception of social differences.*

KEYWORDS: African narratives, cultural anthropology, discourse analysis, identity, intersectionality, ontology.

INTRODUCTION

As it is the case with many communities in the history of the humankind, African nations have not been immune to societal tensions often leading to bloody violence (Ouologuem, 1971). Such violence has often been the result of multiple forms of struggles for survival, the control of territories for economic power, as well for identity claims and allegiances. It is understandable that the heroes of the battles were celebrated by some for their bravery but were perceived as executioners by others.

Socio-political and economic crises that many African societies have experienced are generally attributed to various factors, including socio-economic structures such as class, gender, race,

ethnicity, tribe, clan, religion and caste (Williams, 2016). The absence of what could be the nation-states (Berman, 2014) along with political systems have also been in the critics' collimator as the violence contributing factors (Mawere & Marongwe, 2016; Daniel & Agbiboa, 2018; Kovacs & Bjarnesen, 2018; Fjelde & Höglund, 2018; Mitchell, 2018;). When the main conception of identities and related attitudes and behaviours are primarily linked to tribal and ethnic constructs, it can inevitably contribute to mutual exclusions, with the possibility of leading to open conflicts. The struggles that have marked the conflicting relations between empires and principalities in Africa are part of this ontological logic of existentialism or anthropological perspective related to socio-political and identity solidarity on a continent of many countries but without or at least with fragile nation-states.

There are many narratives and historical essays about conflicts in pre- and postcolonial Africa. Eminent historians and essayists have distinguished themselves in their tacit duty to document and educate generations in order to avoid or minimise the negative impact of oblivion. Let us briefly note that the transmission of cultural content was traditionally shared orally from generations to generations. This is probably what venerates the words that Professor Amadou Hampâté Bâ used during his speech delivered in 1960 at the UNESCO, when he reiterated the African adage that "an old man who dies is a library that burns down". As a result, since oral literature was the channel for the information transmission in precolonial Africa, the historical discourse did not escape the critical eye of the African writers of fictional narratives, especially the novelists of the postcolonial period.

Since the independence of African countries, the debates around violence have attributed conflicts to identity differences. However, the definition of these concepts has not attracted unanimity among sociologists. Nevertheless, the problematisation of such conceptual interpretations has not diluted the tensions that are related to identity differences in Africa. Following the cycles of violence experienced by several communities in many countries on the continent, African novelists have often felt the moral and social responsibility of using representation through fiction as a poignant reminder of the need to resist against the senseless conflicts. The rhetoric of violence has referred to the disintegration of governance systems, the manipulation of identity politics, the conceptualisation and construction of territorial sovereignty and self-determination. The African destiny was mainly perceived and predicted through the fatalistic lenses. The endless questions surrounding the discourse of violence relate to the why and how Africa has earned the predicament of being the bloodiest continent in the world. With the despicable proliferation of armed conflicts, the route-causes remain difficult to spot.

However, some essayists (Abbink, Walraven & Bruijn, 2003; Uvin, 2008;) and novelists have begun to see the glimpses of hope in a changing Africa. The rhetoric of disenchantment gives a way to the perceptions of a brighter future that is based on and influenced by the shared values that strengthen a meaningful socio-political cohesion. The novels of the corpus of the present study represent good case studies for this current of ideas or rather of these trends of the fictional analysis that reflects literary engagement as the writer's community and social responsibility.

The two novels, *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* (2018) [*Love in the mist of tribal wars*] by Eugène Nzamboung and Ondongo (2000) by Dominique M'Fouillou are a good sample of

texts that depict the new perceptions of differences in communities as a nexus between contiguous identities. Through a thematic approach supported by ontological and anthropological perspectives, the study uses the discourse analysis applied to political, social and historical contexts to examine how the manifestation of identity differences can create an intersecting continuum that connect communities, which otherwise should be entertaining their traditional conflicting interests and violent interactions.

RATIONALE AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of African identities is one of the major challenges that various communities face in terms of social cohesion and solidarity. Some analysts attribute the various identity crises to attitudes and behaviours inherited from colonisation, which might have contributed to the rejection of indigenous cultures (Touoyem, 2014). Others attribute this crisis to the (de)construction of social, political and economic structures. This might have contributed to the endemic poverty that the continent is confronted with (Stewart, 2008; Hino et al., 2019). There are also those who argue that it is the intellectual deficiency (Harber, 1994) and the subsequent impact that have played the inhibiting factors that have undermined the consciousness for the African renaissance (Nkouatchet, 2015). Nevertheless, all seem to agree that social, economic and political dynamics depend on patronage claims of identities (Bayart, 1993; Berman, 1998), especially those linked to the tribal and ethnic groupings. The combination of state clientelism with communitarian identities appears as a catalyst for internal wars. However, if African identities are the result of an anthropological process that runs through the history of nations, how and why are they subjected to the partisan and clientelist adherence that leads to violent tribalist behaviours (Lonsdale, 1994)? Could an African identity be reconceptualised and reclaimed (Brown, and Langer, 2010)? If not, what would be the fundamental bases of the identity hierarchy? If the conceptualisation of the ethnic identity is itself difficult to define in the African context (Berman, 2004a; Berman, 2004b), what would be the tangibility of identity dynamics that fluctuate between cultural differences and ethnicity claims?

Mosaic of identities

The idea of an African collective identity is either an illusion (Bayart (2005), the fact of being naïve or in denial. Kertzer and Arel (2001) explore the racial, ethnic and linguistic dimensions in the conceptualisation of identity. Available identity factors allow to refer flawlessly to a mosaic of identities when it comes to the African cultural and social contexts. As it has been mentioned above, the identity construction and configuration are often the result of political motivations, since it is even common to falsify statistical data to justify (un)inclusive policies and their subsequent outcomes (Bayart, 1993).

The visible identities in Africa mainly revolve around anthropological, ethnological and demographic dimensions.

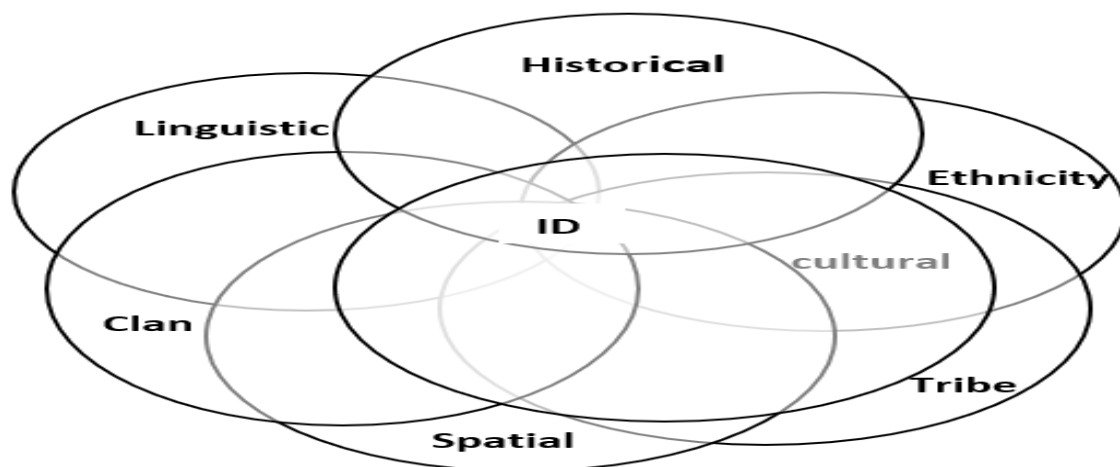


Fig.1. Main identity parameters in African divides.

What is very interesting here is that the extent of identity conception varies from one country to another. As a matter of illustration, it should be noted that the African linguistic landscape indicates a record of 525 languages spoken in Nigeria by more than 216,295,504 (Worldometer). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, there are 242 languages spread over 25 provinces. Zambia, which has 10 provinces is a home to 72 languages spoken by 72 tribal groups. Chad lists 120 languages and Senegal registers 39. The particular cases are those of Burundi and Rwanda where the three ethnic groups (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa) share the same and only mother tongue, respectively Kirundi and Kinyarwanda. Furthermore, it should also be underlined that within these main identity pillars which revolve around language, ethnicity, tribe, region, clan, history, space and culture, it is common to identify multiple micro-identities. This issue of identity is actually linked to the functional definitions of concepts. In problematising ethnicity, Davidson (1997) argues that "In its functionalist sociological form it [ethnicity] comes closest to defining an entity [...] a group of people bounded by language, history, social norms, values, and behavior" (p.27). Given this definition, it could be hard, if not irrelevant, to assign the ethnic group label to some communities in Africa. If Hutus, Tutsis and Twas, either in Burundi or Rwanda, share the same characteristics that Davidson has listed, should they be of different ethnicity? And yet, the history of both countries displays a long list of tensions and violence that have taken place in the name of ethnic differences.

Predicament of identity-based violence

While Africa has experienced internecine and hegemonic wars between kingdoms throughout its history, civil and regional wars in modern Africa have consistently dominated discussions of social, economic and political crises on the continent (Habeeb, 2007; Williams, 2016; Verhoeven and Roessler, 2016; Gasbarri, 2020; Derrick, 2022). For several years, many African countries have gone through and are still experiencing very devastating situations of political instability, triggered by or leading to armed conflicts. By way of illustration, we can mention the identity-induced wars that have marked the years of violence in modern Africa:

- Mali: Tuareg rebellion of 1962–1964 and then in the 1990s
- Senegal: the Casamance conflict since 1982
- Liberia: civil war of 1989-97
- Sierra Leone: civil war of 1991-2002

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- Ivory Coast: civil wars of 2002-2007 and 2010-2011
 - DRD: multiple wars of 1960-65, 1996-97, 1998-2002 (9 countries) and ongoing wars
 - Congo Brazzaville: civil war of 1993-2002
 - Burundi: ethnic violence of 1972 (government-led massacres), the civil war of 1993-2002
 - Rwanda: civil war of 1990 -1994 and subsequent genocide of 1994
 - Chad: multiple rebellions from independence to 1990s
 - Central African Republic: civil wars of 2004-2007 and ongoing war since 2012
 - Ethiopia: civil war of 1974-1991 and the ongoing Tigray war since 3 November 2020
 - Sudan: civil war of 1983 to 2005
 - South Sudan: civil war since December 2013
 - Somalia: civil war since 2009
 - Angola: civil war of 1975–2002
 - Mozambique: civil war since 2021

This situation of violence has not escaped the critical eye of African writers. Since literature is perceived as one of the channels of social communication, the literary creativity has borrowed fictional narratological schemes for a representation inspired by socio-political reality.

Rhetoric of representation

Various approaches of literary representation contribute to and reinforce the establishment of the correlation between the writer and the readership. It is through these perspectives that the literary and social universes are often in dynamic associations that lead to perceptions and the conceptualisation of engagement, both on the side of the writer and that of the reader. African literature, which has traditionally relied on orality, has made storytelling a mechanism and channel for the transfer of the social and cultural knowledge. The colonial and postcolonial African novel has particularly used fiction as an instrument of denunciation, the awakening of consciences and collective mobilisation. In this regard, the following texts may serve as a relevant illustration that highlights the dichotomy of fiction/reality in African literature:

- *Things Fall Apart* (1950) by Chinua Achebe
- *Les Soleils des indépendances* (1960) by Ahmadou Kourouma
- *The River Between* (1965) by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o
- *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) by Ayi Kwei Armah
- *Kin-la-Joie, Kin-la-Folie* (1993) by Achille Ngoye
- *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2002) by Ahmadou Kourouma
- *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* (2018) by Eugène Nzamboung
- *Le prostitué politique* (2021) by Jean-Marie Mbailao
- *Le pousse-pousse de Makélékélé* (2021) by Bernard N'Kaloulou
- *Umurinzi, le gardien du rituel, un livre du Rwanda* (2022) by Lili Moreno
- *Les travestis du désert* (2022) by Kane Ismaila Demba

The above texts make a strong case for perceiving an obvious connection between socio-political experiences and the fictional discourse. It is this interactive interpretation that bridges the two distinct universes which enhances the conceptualisation of the writer's engagement in Africa, where writing is often perceived as a community, social and national responsibility.

Writing as social responsibility

The concept of engagement in literature occupies a prominent place within the literary criticism. The writing enterprise puts its purpose within and beyond the writer's literary creativity and considers active reading as an integral part of the creative activity. In his essay on literature, Sartre (1973) argues that « Il n'est donc pas vrai qu'on écrive pour soi-même; ce serait le pire échec. [...] L'acte créateur n'est qu'un moment incomplet et abstrait de la production d'une œuvre. [...] L'opération d'écrire implique celle de lire comme son corrélatif dialectique et ces deux actes connexes nécessitent deux agents distincts. C'est l'effort conjugué de l'auteur et du lecteur qui fera surgir cet objet concret et imaginaire qu'est l'ouvrage de l'esprit » (pp. 49-50).

It is not true that one can write for oneself. That would be the worst failure [...] The creative act is an abstract concept and an incomplete task. [...] The writing enterprise involves reading as its correlative dialectic, and both interconnected acts require the two distinct agents. It is the effective interaction between the author and the reader that ensures both the imaginary creativity and the reality intersect in the great literary masterpiece.

In his essay, Jean Paul Sartre raises the issue of the act of writing by establishing the direct relationship between the writer and the reader. In his opinion, the writing enterprise begins with the author seeking to answer relevant questions, because writing is revealing, unveiling and informing. Unlike painters and musicians who produce their masterpieces and let the public bring their own appreciations, writers can rather guide readers in their interpretations of signs. From the back cover of *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature ?* by Sartre (ibid.) one can read that « Écriture et lecture sont les deux faces d'un même fait d'histoire et la liberté à laquelle l'écrivain nous convie, ce n'est pas une pure conscience abstraite d'être libre. Elle n'est pas, à proprement parler, elle se conquiert dans une situation historique [...]. Et puisque les libertés de l'auteur et du lecteur se cherchent et s'affectent à travers un monde, on peut dire aussi bien que c'est le choix fait par l'auteur d'un certain aspect du monde qui décide du lecteur, et réciproquement que c'est en choisissant son lecteur que l'écrivain décide de son sujet. Ainsi tous les ouvrages de l'esprit contiennent en eux-mêmes l'image du lecteur auquel ils sont destinés. »

Writing and reading are two faces of the same historical fact and the writer's freedom to invite readers as consumers. Writing does not reflect the writer's simplistic and abstractive awareness of being free. Strictly speaking, it is embedded into a historical situation. [...]. And since the author's and the reader's freedoms intersect and affect each other in a specific world, we can also say that it is the author's choice of a certain aspect of the world which targets the reader. It is equally by choosing the reader that the writer decides on the subject matter. Thus, all intelligible writings reflect the kind of the reader for whom they are intended.

Sartre makes it clear that the circumstances of any literary production influence the subject matter; and both prompt the writer to identify the best ways and means of expression, including the language and style. The stylistic processes then can only support the content and the substance, which take precedence in the act of writing. By considering Sartre's opinions and argument that he shares with many other critics on the relationship between writing and reading, we could rightly say that the conceptualisation of the author's engagement is an integral part of the interpretative logic of the intersection between the literary and the social.

Conceptualisation of engagement in literature

The correlation between writing and reading in the interpretation of signs and the transfer of meaning having been established. It is then necessary to revisit the concept of engagement in literature. Following Sartre's opinions on the integration of reading into writing, Burnier (1982) follows the same analytical direction. He asserts that « L'écrivain 'engagé' sait que la parole est action : il sait que dévoiler, c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer encore. Et encore, il sait que les mots, comme dit Brice Parain sont des 'pistolets chargés'. S'il parle, il a choisi de tirer, il faut que ce soit comme un homme, en visant des cibles et non pas comme un enfant au hasard, en fermant les yeux et pour le seul plaisir d'entendre des detonations » (p. 15).

The engaged writer is aware of the power of the words. He knows that unveiling generates change that one can only grasp by seeking further changes. As Brice Parain says, he also knows that words are loaded pistols. Whenever he writes, he aims to shoot. This should be compared to an adult shooter who steadily hits the target instead of acting like a child who shoots with closed eyes for the sole purpose of listening to detonations.

The writer's engagement has therefore become a normalised concept that critics refer to when reflecting on the socio-political role attached to the various literary productions in general and particularly in African literature.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this analysis is informed by two case studies. The texts of the corpus have been chosen for their narratological orientation, which reflects the identity perspectives relating to the well-defined African environment and context.

Corpus: case studies

The novels that constitute the corpus of this study were published in the context of the engaged literature that reflects the African social and political changes of what is often referred to as the democratic renewal of post 1990s and its consequences. This is the period following the end of the Cold War and the enthusiasm for pluralistic politics resulting from France's policy of conditionality. The major references to this policy are placed in the speech of *La Baule Conference* of 20 June 1990 that was given by French President François Mitterrand. According to Munyangayo (2010), France through François Mitterrand imposed on the Heads of States attending the 16th Franco-African summit the democratisation of their institutions as a sine qua non condition for a sustainable bilateral partnership and a meaningful development aid.

Throughout this period to the present days, Francophone African countries have gone through political changes and endured the subsequent violence. By way of illustration, Gango-Oyiba (2015) has very well documented the political violence and civil wars in Congo Brazzaville, triggered by what Gibson (2011) calls 'political intolerance' by political stakeholders. This research analyses and highlights the strategies used for and the consequences of manipulating and instrumentalising ethnic identities to access to and keep power under the sham banners of democratic processes.

The novelists did not miss this call either. One can mention the case of M'Fouillou whose five of his novels published since 1995 depict the bloody violence in Congo Brazzaville (M'Fouillou, 1995, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2006). His rhetoric of disenchantment reflects an epistemological autopsy of the perennial social and political instability in francophone Africa through the literary discourse. Thus, the novels of this corpus seem to propose a new perspective of the Africa renaissance, which calls for accepting the differences of opinions and identities as the cherished richness of a constructive diversity.

Ondongo (Dominique M'Fouillou, 2000)

The plot of this novel revolves around a big statue, called Ondongo erected in the Revolution Square. For some passers-by, its architectural appearance makes it shapeless, ugly and henceforth unpopular. Yet its symbolic value brings to life memories of the real history of Congo Brazzaville, a country's history that is equally painful and glorious. The statue was erected in memory of the real events that took place in Congo Brazzaville on 13, 14 and 15 August 1963 when the mass movements composed of trade unionists, members of the opposition, youth unions, as well as the army led a revolution that put an end to the President Abbé Fulbert Youlou rule. Known as *Trois Glorieuses* for *Three Glorious Days*, the historic events are part of the national consciousness, and Dominique M'Fouillou invites the passers-by to be aware of its historical dimension.

Inspired by the historical events, the author makes this seemingly ugly statue a tool and a means of testimony, through visual channels, of an incredible national solidarity which embodied in the history of the country the great friendship between the people, despite their socio-professional and identity differences.

L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales (Eugène Nzamboung, 2018)

The issue of socio-political tensions based on identity differences has constantly attracted the critics' attention. Cheuzeville and Braeckman have analysed this situation, considering Central Africa for their case studies. De Villiers (2005) has also made a good diachronic evaluation of tribal wars in Africa, and Moyen (2022) has presented national cultural identities as major factors that contribute to the fragmentation of the social fabrics. In any case, Africa has been going through fateful events for a long time where community conflicts often turn into real tribal wars.

In *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales*, the plot is not built around the traditional lenses, where ethnic groups stand against each other in a vicious cycle of perennial violence. It is rather centred around the tribal wars between the Mabi and the Bonua, in the Cameroonian town of Kribi but with a happy ending. The couple of Bapite (a Bonua) and Nabvuna (a Mabi) are caught up in tribal tensions. But the fact of being united in love gives hopes of the interethnic unity for future social cohesion between communities, which traditionally were in open conflicts for generations.

Unlike other novels written on interethnic relations in Africa, which adopted a pessimistic tone about the future of the peaceful coexistence of communities, the narratological scope of this novel facilitates a new perspective of the interpretation of the existential optimism. It portrays universal values such as love triumphing over communitarianism. It advocates for building ethnic bridges rather than identity barriers. The reading of this novel offers an immersion in

the Cameroonian multiculturalism, reflecting on equal footing the issues of clash of identities, social cohesion and the construction of a peaceful nation.

Critical approach

Since this study analyses the dynamics of the conceptualisation, the perceptions, and the perspectives of identities within their multipolarity; the best critical approach to use is the identity framework that is underpinned by the anthropological and ontological orientations. The framework helps with analysing key factors that shape identities in African contexts, as well as their functional effects in various domains.

In terms of anthropological considerations, Handwerker (2002) states that “Cultural anthropologists study how people who share a common cultural system organize and shape the physical and social world around them, and are in turn shaped by those ideas, behaviors, and physical environments.” (p.106). In this study, we consider identity to be part of the social-cultural anthropology. This is about looking at how people interact through space and time, considering the physical and sociological characteristics, the social, cultural and environmental patterns that define the societal relations. In relation to the ontological consideration, we see identities in Africa as part of a holistic approach of being, existing, living, and interacting in social contexts in both synchronic and diachronic manners. It is in this context that the ontology is defined by Crotty (2003) as “the study of being”, as study which is concerned with the “kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such” (p.10). From the universality to the contiguity of African identities, this concept is problematised through a framework that allows to capture the complexity of its definition and its applicability in various contexts. This is where the paradigm of characteristics of identities that were traditionally only mutually exclusive and currently intersecting at the same time signal what could be seen an ontological perspective of an African renaissance.

FINDINGS

As the author points out in the title of the novel *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* (2018), Eugène Nzamboung paints a portrait of an autarkic fictional universe that one can locate within several African communities where tribal identities straddle the crossroad of violence and love, with the end-result of making inter-ethnic marriage possible. The novel portrays a picture of a society in which love and violence intersect.

The plot of this novel is built around the tribal wars between the Mabi and the Bonua, in the Cameroonian town of Kribi. On the one hand, tribal consciousness is presented, in a way, as an anthropological factor that allows members of a community to form an impermeable and impenetrable identity bubble. In this case, identity contiguity excludes any significant interethnic interaction. On the other hand, the narratological structure of the novel follows an ontological perspective where the existential reasoning reinforced by the adventures of love is able to break down ethnic barriers in the search for the social cohesion within multiple identities.

In the prologue of the novel, the author asserts that « Le premier objectif de ce travail est de pérenniser par des écrits, à travers un style qui se veut romanesque, les deux principaux piliers

de la culture mabi qui sont : le mariage et les obsèques. Ces fondamentaux du peuple mabi qui partage le centre de la ville de Kribi (Cameroun) avec les Batanga » (p.5)

The primary objective of the novel is to embody, through fictional written narratives, the two main pillars of the Mabi culture, which are: the marriage and the funeral. These are the fundamentals of the Mabi people who live side by side with the Batanga in the centre of the Kribi City (Cameroon).

In the city of Kribi, these cultural fundamentals have formed peacefully the social fabrics of the Batanga and Mabi communities for ages. The author argues that “[ils] se trouvent subitement perturbées par les égoïsmes politiques des temps modernes qui vont malheureusement tacher la quiétude de ces paisibles populations avec du sang vif »(p.5)

It is the selfishness of modern-day politicians which is suddenly disturbing and unfortunately staining the tranquillity of these peaceful populations with real blood.

The novel demonstrates that the construction of tribal identities takes the same demographic formula in Africa. Whilst we can identify the presence of indigenous people who are often excluded from the management of the modern societal benefits, we can equally have the migratory narrative that facilitates the establishment of the dichotomy of us/them. In this novel, we have « le mythe de l’histoire des kwassio, partis du Sud-Soudan depuis des temps immémoriaux, jusqu’à leur arrivée sur la côte de l’Océan Atlantique par l’île de Dipikar et l’éparpillement de la cohorte dans les pays de l’Afrique centrale » (p.30).

the mythical history of the kwassio, who left South Sudan centuries ago, arrived on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean by the island of Dipikar and then scattered across the Central African countries. We also have the Bishio, « sous-ensemble de la population Kwashio, aujourd’hui principalement installée en Guinée Équatoriale » (p31)

a subset of the Kwashio population, who have today mainly settled in Equatorial Guinea and « s’étaient ainsi dirigés vers le sud, à savoir, le Gabon, la Guinée Équatoriale, l’Angola... et les Mabi vers le nord, en suivant la plage, accompagnés des BVOUMBO qui s’étaient repliés vers l’intérieur du continent » (p33),

had thus headed south, including Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Angola... with the Mabi heading to the north, following the beach, accompanied by the BVOUMBO who had opted for the mainland across the continent.

The existence of these community and communitarian identities did not escape the novelist’s critical observation. The text underlines the quarrels and tensions between two tribes living within the same vicinity and yet whose interactional relations are characterised by the absence of intercommunity cooperation. « Certains se rappellent même encore les moments embarrassants qu’ils avaient vécus quand des Mabi leur refusaient leurs pirogues, les empêchant ainsi d’aller travailler en ville ou de rentrer dormir chez eux » (p.44)

People still remember the embarrassing moments they had experienced when the Mabi refused them their canoes, thus preventing them from going to work in town or going back home.

Beyond this lack of cooperation, the author also presents interpersonal relationships based on love as a fundamental ontological factor capable of challenging the tribalism that plagues many African societies. The introduction of the marital relations into the narrative begins with the description of the angelic beauty of Nabvuna, a young girl from the Mabi, which caught a particular attention of Bapite, a young man from the Bonua ethnic community that has always been in perpetual conflicts with the Mabi people. « Sa compagne était une fille mabi, simplement belle, fine par ses traits, élégante par sa démarche pesante ponctuée par des hanches rebondies juchées sur deux jambes longues et charnues. Sa voix, naturellement enrouée, dégageait un timbre ensorcelant. Ses yeux sombres qui projetaient des éclairs électriques par intermittences avaient certainement déterminé le solide Bapite à désertir la maison familiale à Koke pour s'installer à Papah depuis plusieurs années » (pp.35-36)

His companion was a Mabi girl, absolutely beautiful, slim by all features, walking elegantly in her in plump hips perched on two long and fleshy legs. Her voice, naturally hoarse, gave off a bewitching timbre. Her dark eyes that intermittently flashed electric constellations had certainly been the motive of the strong Bapite to leave his family home in Koke and settle in Papah for several years.

And to underline the objective of the novel whose tone and plot reflect skilfully inspiring and educational words, the author concludes, through the plea of the character of Kamga, that the importance of inter-ethnic marriage in the fight against tribalism is and should be unequivocal. « Les mariages intertribaux sont la solution idoine au fléau de tribalisme qui étouffe notre pays, car d'après vous, les enfants de parents venant des tribus différentes ne peuvent pas facilement développer de regrettables replis identitaires. Ils vont constituer du fait des croisements une population purifiée de cette peste qu'est le tribalisme » (p.144)

Intertribal marriages are the ideal solution to the scourge of tribalism that is suffocating our country, since as you say, children of parents from different tribes will not easily develop regrettable and exclusive contiguous identities. Because of the intermarriages, they will rather constitute a generation of people who are free from this plague of tribalism.

If Eugène Nzamboung uses in *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* the interethnic marriage as an ontological factor that facilitates dialogue and cooperation between different ethnic communities, Dominique M'Fouillou in Ondongo (2000) refers to the anthropological aspects by which sharing history and therefore the same destiny, contributes to the strengthening of solidarity between peoples.

In the novel Ondongo (2000), Dominique M'Fouillou recalls the historical events that occurred in Congo Brazzaville in 1963, which put an end to the President Fulbert Youlou regime. Throughout the novel, these historical events are meticulously described as real facts as inscribed in space and time of Congo Brazzaville. This gives the fictional text a social and political tone and reading. « Nous sommes en 1963, à Brazzaville. Oui. Ça s'est passé dans la capitale du Congo Brazzaville. Cela signifie immédiatement pour moi : sous le régime de YOULOU, premier président de l'État indépendant, avec toute l'atmosphère d'un si tumultueux départ de la première République » (pp.61-62).

It happened in 1963, in Brazzaville. Yes. It took place in the capital of Congo Brazzaville. What I actually mean by this is: under the regime of YOULOU, the first president of the independent Congo, with all the atmosphere of such a tumultuous fall of the first Republic. The narration mainly revolves around the Ondongo statue which is erected in the middle of the Revolution Square in the capital Brazzaville. « Qui est Ondongo de la statue ? Que représentait-il ? Tout simplement les journées des 13-14-15 août 1963. Il personnifie les trois glorieuses. [...] Le seul but de son œuvre a été de glorifier le courage de tout un peuple. Il l'a façonnée avec amour, avec l'esprit révolutionnaire, même si le résultat a de quoi décevant » p.51

Who does Ondongo statue portray? What does it represent? Quite simply the days of 13-14-15 August 1963. It personifies the three glorious days. [...] The sole purpose of the artist's masterpiece was to glorify the courage of an entire nation. He shaped it with love, with the revolutionary spirit, even though some of its results are in a way disappointing. The author recalls the disappointments that the Congolese people faced after the country gained its independence. « L'institution du pouvoir tribal a, depuis lors, mis à rude épreuve cette vertu de la morale tombée dans une dégradation sans nom » (p.125). Access to power has been driven by tribal identities and has since then put the morality virtue to the test, leading it to a despicable degradation.

For the author, the spirit of the mass movement is the revival of the consciousness and the determination of different communities united by a revolutionary ideal. People « ont cru à la société congolaise. A quoi n'ont-ils pas cru, tous ces Mochis, ces Kongos, ces Tékés, ces Vilis et ces Bembés ? » (p. 126)

[They] believed in a Congolese society. What did they not believe, all these Mochis, these Kongos, these Tékés, these Vilis and these Bembés?

Through a solemn speech by the new president, the text recognises the urgency in the creation of social cohesion which, for a long time has been undermined by divisions and intercommunity violence. « Il prêche au peuple le courage et la persévérance dans son action. Il le conjure d'abandonner l'entretien de la haine, des divisions intestines en son sein pour se consacrer à jamais à l'instauration d'une entente durable et de paix » (pp.97-98). He praises his people's courage and perseverance in their action. He urges them to stop fuelling hatred, their internal divisions and forever devote their energy to seek a long-lasting mutual understanding and peace.

However, the existence of different communities with multiple identities is no longer presented in the novel as a bone of contention in the common struggle for the revolutionary ideal. « Les gens étaient divers, mais tous étaient des manifestants. Ce mouvement des foules multicolores avait quelque chose de martial, de redoutable, peut-être parce que tous avançaient dans la même direction, comme unis par un accord tacite, par une même volonté et un but unique » (p.80). People reflected a clear diversity, but all were protesters. This movement of multiple identity crowds had something powerful, impressive, perhaps because all of them were marching to the same direction, as if they were united by a tacit pact, by the same will and a single goal.

All things considered, the two texts of the corpus allow a sociological reading, which is open to interpretations in terms of the literature of engagement. As a result, the question of whether

writing in Africa can be perceived as a response to moral or social responsibilities deserves to be explored through a critical reading.

DISCUSSION

In these two novels, the conceptualisation and the problematization of identity in Africa undergoes definitional and functional shifts in terms of anthropological and ontological interpretations. The illustrative texts highlight that interactions, which are supported by social and existential practices, including marriage, destiny and common cause can contribute to the establishment and harnessing of intersecting identity relationships that have traditionally been based on an exclusive contiguity.

Conceptualisation and problematisation of identity in Africa contexts

Some critics say that the simplistic conception and view of identity are linked to “The way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng, 1995: 1). However, “what if identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject?” (Clifford, 1988: 344).

By reflecting on the anthropological, ethnological and demographic dimensions that are at stake in self-identification in Africa, one can agree that the texts of the corpus reflect the conceptual orientations that are linked to the perceptions of identity. Indeed, if ethnic and tribal affiliations have often been presented as a sociological element related to rigid characteristics and barriers, the texts referred to in this study show that identity factors are rather dynamic. As Hall (1989) said, “Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point”. References to identity are not and should not be only about how people are seen but also and mainly how they see themselves vis-à-vis their attitude, behaviour and actions. Hogg and Abrams (1988: 2) argue that identity should indeed refer to social identifications that take into account “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others”.

In *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales*, Eugène Nzamboung uses the character of Kamga to open anthropological debates around tribes and how interethnic marriages could be legally codified to root out tribalism. For him, there should even be a regulation stipulating that, if you marry in your tribe, you will pay a tax to the government. But if you marry someone from a tribe other than your own, you will get financial benefits. And the country would experience fewer conflicts if all its people were only of multifaceted hybridity, not on the basis of the skin colour, but on the embodiment of ideologies of all kinds (p.145). The texts show that the way identities are conceived and used in Africa for selfish ends is problematic. It is a result of pure and diverse manipulations.

Identity in Africa: a sociocultural anthropology perspective

Understanding the challenges faced whilst attempting to use ethnic and tribal synergies to create and strengthen social cohesion in Africa is important. It requires reflections on the causes and consequences of attitudes and behaviours at the individual and community levels. According to the anthropologist Bourgeot (1995), happy people have no ethnicity. African identities are imbibed into the long history of its societies. However, the identity references relating to Africa have always served as a mask for political, economic and social interests. In

that case, was Samora Machel, head of the FRELIMO in Mozambique right when he coined the motto of "For the nation to live, the tribe must die" as an ideal, a call for a common cause for the rebellion? For other socio-anthropologists (Nkouatchet, 2015), there is a strong case to advocate for the recognition of identities (ethnic, cultural and religious) as positive social synergies that can be used to promote shared values for better interactions in Africa. In *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales*, the character of the priest rightly argues that doubt and common sense must feed our intelligence and, in a rational mind, ask ourselves this painful, but necessary question: where do I really come from? Also, by engaging in the rejection of such insanity-driven tribalism, am I not actually destroying my own root? To that end, a serious reflection on this situation should be an important call for mutual understanding and tolerance (p.168).

Identity within the African Renaissance: an ontological perspective

The concept of ontology can often be perceived as abstract. But it concerns the causes and effects of facts and actions. In simple terms, ontological questions relate to the very essence of existence. They arise in terms of whether, why and how facts and actions manifest themselves. In this study, the ontological perspective concerns the fundamental question of grasping identity dynamics in African contexts in a diachronic way. The issue is not whether multiple identities do exist, - because they do - but rather why and how identity barriers enter into dichotomous interactions of objectivity/subjectivity, reality/construct. Through this perspective, we can analyse the effects of the change in perceptions that the texts of the corpus have portrayed. The authors of both novels have concluded, unambiguously, that ethnicity and tribalism are not the result of the existence of identities but rather of the misplaced attitude and anachronistic behaviour of community members. We can clearly read in the prologue of the novel *L'amour à l'ombre des guerres tribales* that « le second objectif de cet ouvrage s'avère être un questionnement. Aussi, est-il rationnel de pratiquer le rejet des autres par l'intolérance, le tribalisme, l'anti dialogue qui, au lieu d'enrichir tous les peuples qui s'entrechoquent par les éléments positifs des cultures, prône plutôt l'assimilation à la culture dominante ? » (p.5).

The second objective of this work turns out to be seeking the understanding. Is it really rational to advocate for mutual exclusion through intolerance, tribalism and anti-dialogue which, instead of enriching all the peoples who collide with the positive attributes of cultures, rather promotes assimilation to the dominant culture?

It is from this questioning of the rationality of identities on definitional and functional dimensions that the concept of ontology in this study takes shape. To this end, the ontological perspective allows us to glimpse attitudinal changes capable of contributing to the revival of identity perceptions and, consequently, to the African renaissance. For Brener (2008), the African Renaissance is the reconstitution of the African Being. It is very important to begin by being, existing, being aware that we exist, and more clearly, that we exist as us. It is a matter of being nothing else other than ourselves.

CONCLUSION

"It seems that some fictional texts of African literature that reflect the representation of disillusionment could become pedagogical tools for teaching history. Such a shift from fiction to reality in reading literature poses genuine concerns in relation to the definition of genres" (Munyangeyo, 2021, p.576). Through the conceptualisation and interpretation of identity, this

study has highlighted the issue of engagement in African literature. It was clear that Africa is replete with multiple identities which in several cases have contributed to the various crises of violence. Beyond that, we can clearly see that literature can reflect the social, historical and political reality in Africa.

Through discursive structures and features, we have come to understand and demonstrate that the African renaissance devoid of ethnicity and tribalism is not, in fact, a utopia. The dark tunnel of the past can be enlightened by the hope of African renewal. This is a clear shift in portraying positively the African fate. This has allowed us to put the concept of the engaged writer back at the centre of the debates. According to Novikov (1981) For “the engaged writer, the world appears exactly as he has depicted it in his work. The author calls on the reader to see the world and judge events within his own frame of reference, in terms of his own truth. In his work, the writer impresses the reader with the emotional quality of his thoughts and imagery and seeks to influence his thoughts and feelings, subjecting them to his own will and to his own ideals” (p.12). Munyangayo (2000, 2001, 2010, 2012) also point to the same direction. He argues that the critical reading of African literature through the lenses of historical events, practices and experiences is common in postcolonial literature. The history of postcolonial Africa has largely contributed to the inspiration of the novelists in establishing a very strong correlation between novels as a genre and other disciplines such as sociology, history and anthropology. Quoted by Dasylva (2003), Chinua Achebe concludes the debates by writing that frankly speaking, “any African who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames” (p.209).

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