
Queen Pokou By Véronique Tadjo: Deconstruction of A Founding Myth and Critical Dialogue in African Postmodern Literature

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of postmodern literature on social critique, focusing on its application in Africa through an analysis of Véronique Tadjo's novel *Queen Pokou*. Postmodern literature challenges established literary norms and historical and cultural narratives, thereby paving the way for questioning official narratives and authoritarian power structures in Africa. By considering this work as an example of subversion of social discourse, the article offers a critical reflection on the founding legend of the Baoulés in Côte d'Ivoire.

Keywords: Africa, myth, postmodern literature, social critique, subversion.

Résumé : Cet article examine l'influence de la littérature postmoderne sur la critique sociale, en se penchant sur son application en Afrique à travers une analyse du roman *La Reine Pokou* de Véronique Tadjo. La littérature postmoderne remet en question les normes littéraires établies et les récits historiques et culturels, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une remise en question des récits officiels et des structures de pouvoir autoritaires en Afrique. En considérant cette œuvre comme un exemple de subversion du discours social, l'article offre une réflexion critique sur la légende fondatrice des Baoulés en Côte d'Ivoire.

Mots-clés : Afrique, mythe, littérature postmoderne, critique sociale, subversion.

Introduction

Postmodern literature is characterized by a strong influence of deconstructionist critique and a re-evaluation of established literary conventions. As Quayson explains, “*postmodernism can be typified as a vigorously anti-systemic mode of understanding, with pluralism, borders and multiple perspectives being highlighted as a means of disrupting the centralizing impulse of any system*” (Quayson, 649: 2007). Key traits of postmodernism include contradiction, randomness, permutation, excess, and discontinuity. A central aspect of postmodern writing is the questioning of history and the subjects of official culture. According to Sabo and Nielsen (1984), postmodernism can be viewed as an exploration of the inherent truth in literature, legitimizing an attack on form, its subversion, and an attempt to transcend it.

In Africa, the significance of postmodern critique is heightened, especially in light of the atrocities committed by numerous African leaders over the past 30 years under the guise of national sanctity (Olaniyan, 2007). This context underscores the importance of postmodern skepticism toward truth claims, reinforcing a critical awareness that challenges irrefutable assertions. The intersection of postmodernism and postcolonialism in contemporary African literary scholarship offers a critical framework for understanding African literature. Postcolonialism focuses on deconstructing the narratives imposed by colonial powers, revealing how colonialism has shaped social, cultural, and political structures in formerly colonized societies while revalorizing indigenous knowledge and resistance.

In this framework, authors like Véronique Tadjo, in *Queen Pokou*, blend postcolonial concerns—such as reimagining African myths and critiquing neo-colonialism—with postmodern aesthetics that disrupt linear storytelling and challenge fixed identities. This intersection enables a multifaceted reading of the novel, where postmodernism fragments the traditional Baoulé myth, and postcolonialism critiques its appropriation by nationalist narratives. By employing strategies like multiple perspectives and fragmented storytelling, *Queen Pokou* allows for the deconstruction of foundational myths, revealing deeper tensions in Ivorian history and society. This approach positions the novel not merely as a mythological retelling, but as a commentary on the complex legacies of colonization, nation-building, and identity formation in contemporary Africa. How does *Queen Pokou* challenge and reshape traditional narratives of identity and power through its integration of postmodern and postcolonial perspectives?

1. Plural voices and ideological horizons: bakhtinian dialogism

In this study, we will rely on the notion of dialogism as defined by Bakhtine. His dialogical theory highlights the interrelation of voices within the cultural object and social imaginary, integrating reading and the constituent elements of the novel, which he defines as “*la représentation des hommes qui parlent et de leurs univers idéologiques*” (Bakhtine, 182: 1978).

In his seminal work, Bakhtine (1978) eloquently emphasizes that the very foundation of the novelistic genre, which distinguishes it and confers its stylistic originality, resides in the human voice and its speech. He deepens this idea by insisting that in the novel, the speaker is not simply an isolated individual but rather a social being whose words are not merely individual expressions but ideologically charged elements imbued with the complex hues of their era and milieu.

According to Bakhtine (1970), the romantics opened the doors of the work to the premises of the future. This innovative perspective on the future implies an expansion of the boundaries of reality. Thus, reality, once fixed in its naturalism and immobility, sees its dynamics transformed. He asserts that “*La réalité perd son statisme, son naturalisme, sa dispersion [...] le futur commence à y pénétrer sous la forme de tendance de possibilité, d'anticipation*” (Bakhtine, 129: 1970). The dogmas of statism and naturalism, kept alive by abstract and rationalist thought, begin to yield before the entry of the real future, bearer of trends, possibilities, and anticipations. Viewed historically, this mutation of reality grants it a new perspective, liberating its perspectives on freedom, surpassing the narrow constraints of determinism and abstract mechanism.

Lavigne (2011) explains that the dialogical analysis of a work allows understanding not only its content and form but also situating it in its socio-historical context, thus offering an alternative to the universalist ideology where the dominant voice embodies the truth. Dialogical critique seeks to insert itself within the field of possible discourses related to a subject of study, aiming also to be self-critical. It aims to integrate rather than eliminate intervening variables and alternative interpretations to dissolve “*la rigidité de l'objet bloqué*” (Sabo and Nielsen: 1984).

Immanent critique, an essential foundation of Bakhtin's dialogical method, commits to revealing the social multiplicity within cultural works. It analyzes the interactions between the various voices and ideologies present in a text, transforming a monological approach, where a single perspective dominates, into a dialogical understanding that highlights the diversity of perspectives. This method includes a self-reflexive dimension, acknowledging the relativity of its own viewpoint within “*horizon idéologique*” (Sabo and Nielsen, 78: 1984) it critiques. By accepting this relativity, immanent critique enriches its analysis by

situating its discourse within a broader context of ideological dialogues and interactions.

Dialogical critique from a postmodern perspective does not limit itself to a narrow and negative understanding of ideology, which posits that ideology merely masks the interests of a class or social group and is associated with processes of concealment linked to domination, exploitation, and repression. On the contrary, it focuses on the interdiscursivity between what is instituted and what is instituting in the social imaginary. This means it “operationalizes” (Sabo and Nielsen: 1984) according to the positive pole of ideology, considering aspects like mentalities, worldviews, systems of ideas, values, and behaviors, as well as the myths and beliefs of a people. In other words, dialogical critique explores ideologies constructively by analyzing how they are formed and shaped by discursive interactions within a society, thus offering a more nuanced and enriched understanding of social and cultural dynamics.

It is from this perspective that *Queen Pokou*, a rewriting of the founding legend of the Baoulé, lends itself particularly well to a dialogical analysis. The dialogical phenomenon, as defined by Sabo and Nielsen (1984), manifests on many levels, from the meaning of words to the entire text and even beyond, encompassing the socio-discursive context in which the text is anchored. Social discourse includes everything said and written in a given society, encompassing electronic media, narratives, and arguments. In other words, it represents “*la voix du 'ON' ou 'DOXA'*” (Angenot: 1984), the collective opinion and perspectives of the social community. This collective voice includes not only official and media narratives but also proverbs, popular expressions (Nsenga: 2007), and other manifestations of collective wisdom.

In the context of *Queen Pokou*, this means that the text can only be fully understood by considering the multitude of voices and perspectives that exist both within the text and in its broader social context. This dialogical analysis thus reveals how the rewriting of the legend dialogues with the various social, historical, and cultural discourses that surround it, enriching our understanding of the legend and its importance in Baoulé culture.

2. Myth and identity in times of war

Côte d'Ivoire was once a bastion of political stability and economic success in West Africa under the leadership of Houphouët-Boigny. His welcoming policy, symbolized by the term “Akwaba” in Baoulé, favored the arrival of immigrant workers. However, the advent of Henri Konan Bédié marked a division of the country along ethnic and religious lines, leading to the emergence of Ivoirité, a notion questioning the national identity of the primarily Muslim northerners. This situation ultimately degenerated into civil war following the exclusion of

presidential candidate Alassane Ouattara and violence directed against the Dioulas.

In the midst of this tumultuous period appeared *Queen Pokou* by Véronique Tadjo in 2005, an eminent figure in Francophone literature. She was born on July 13, 1955, in the City of Light, Paris. The product of a union between an Ivorian father and a French mother, her roots extend between the two continents. After years of primary and secondary education in Abidjan, she pursued her academic journey at the Sorbonne, immersing herself in the world of French letters. A recognized specialist in Anglo-American literature, she deploys her talent across a range of diverse writings: novels, poetry, plays, and books for young people. Her artistic influence transcends linguistic borders, with her works translated into several languages, including English, Spanish, and Chinese.

In the preamble to *Queen Pokou*, Véronique Tadjo shares these reflections: The legendary story of Abraha Pokou, Baoulé queen, was first told to her when she was about ten years old. She recalls that the tale of this woman sacrificing her only son to save her people had captivated her imagination as a young girl living in Abidjan. In her mind, Pokou then took on the appearance of a Black Madonna. Later, in high school, she encountered the same story, but this time in her history textbooks... Abraha Pokou thus acquired the status of a historical figure, an Amazon heroine leading her people to freedom. The image of Pokou grew within her, taking form, life, and emotions. This highlights the importance of this legend in the collective consciousness and memory in Côte d'Ivoire.

The Ivorian government integrates the legend into high school history textbooks, presenting it as a founding myth of the nation. Given that the Baoulé represent the largest ethnic group in Côte d'Ivoire and that the president of the country for nearly thirty years since its independence was himself Baoulé, this myth is adopted as the founding narrative not only of the Baoulé but also of the Ivorian nation as a whole.

In an interview, the author emphasizes that the legend of Abraha Pokou is deeply rooted in Côte d'Ivoire, constituting an essential part of the cultural heritage and collective imagination (Campbell: 2010). In the preamble to her work, Véronique Tadjo also notes how, decades later, the advent of violence and war suddenly darkened the horizon of the future. It was then that the image of Pokou took on a darker turn that of a queen thirsty for power, engaged in occult consultations, and ready to do anything to consolidate her reign.

In another interview conducted by Brady (Brady et al: 2009), Véronique Tadjo highlighted the importance of remaining constantly vigilant, being fully aware of our environment, and playing an active role as citizens by not allowing government decisions to be made on our behalf. This reflection seems to draw its source from the reinterpretation of the legend of Abraha Pokou. Faced with

national turmoil, ethnic and religious divisions, and civil war, could *Queen Pokou* be considered an attempt to question Ivorian national identity?

We aim to highlight how *Queen Pokou* can be interpreted as embodying a dialogical subversion of Ivorian social discourse, inviting readers to consider various interpretations of national identity and contributing to a re-evaluation of the country's collective identity. To achieve this in-depth analysis, we will examine the different versions of the legend of Abraha Pokou present in Véronique Tadjo's work.

3. The epic tales of Abraha Pokou: an exploration through *The Queen Pokou*

In the ancient Ashanti kingdom, a cradle of legends and intertwined destinies, a young girl with an exceptional destiny was born: Abraha Pokou, princess and niece of King Osei Tutu. The soothsayers, guardians of the secrets of destiny, prophesied that her life would be marked by glory but also by profound suffering. Abraha Pokou grew up exhibiting extraordinary beauty, courage, and intelligence. She sealed her destiny by marrying her childhood friend, but alas, their union was sterile, plunging the kingdom into the shadow of a curse. Amidst the turmoil of tragedies, her uncle the king was brutally assassinated, leaving the kingdom in disarray.

In the absence of the king, while the kingdom was threatened by an enemy invasion, Abraha Pokou proposed a defense plan that was crowned with success but at the cost of her own capture and that of the royal treasure. Her brother Opokou Waré returned in time to free his sister and recover the treasure, restoring hope to the kingdom. Rewarded for her courage, Abraha Pokou became the king's advisor, later marrying one of her brother's warriors. Blessed by the gods, she finally conceived a son, but tragedy struck again when her brother fell gravely ill and died, leaving the kingdom in succession uncertainty. The disunity of the royal council led to a power struggle marked by intrigue and assassinations. Forced to flee to save her life and that of her son, Abraha Pokou crossed the great Comoé River, symbol of their uncertain destiny. To cross the tumultuous waters, she sacrificed her only son, offering his blood to the river in a poignant act of maternal devotion. "*Ba-ou-li! Ba-ou-li! The child is dead.* ", cried Abraha Pokou ceaselessly, head bowed (hence Baoulé, the name of the new nation that was born).

Guided by providence, the fugitives found refuge on the other side of the river, where Abraha Pokou was crowned queen of the Baoulé people in memory of her sacrifice and legendary courage. Thus, this poignant version of Abraha Pokou's story became the founding myth of the Ivorian nation, etched in the marble of its

cultural heritage for eternity. The tale highlights Abraha Pokou's sacrifice, emphasizing that no sacrifice is deemed too great for the nation.

In the second part of the tale, the focus is on Abraha Pokou's intense pain in the face of sacrificing her only son. Although the circumstances leading up to the sacrifice remain the same, she endures indescribable suffering, depicted as a *Mater Dolorosa*. After sacrificing her son, she is overwhelmed with grief, symbolically stripping herself of her dignity and throwing herself into the river with her child, crying "*No kingdom is worth the sacrifice of a child!*" (Tadjo, 45: 2009). However, instead of perishing, she metamorphoses into a creature half-woman, half-fish, becoming a goddess of the oceans: "*She succeeded in conquering a kingdom even more beautiful than the one she had been promised: now, half-woman, half-fish, the undisputed goddess of the underwater world, queen of the oceans.*" (Tadjo, 46: 2009).

In the third part, Abraha Pokou refuses the divine advice and opposes the sacrifice of her only son. As a consequence, the fugitives are captured by the royal army and sold as slaves. After a revolt led by Abraha Pokou's descendants, some manage to escape and establish a maroon slave community in the wooded mountains. In the next part, Abraha Pokou, after yielding to the will of the soothsayer, endures intense emotional suffering in sacrificing her son. The river then parts in two, allowing the fugitives to cross to freedom. However, Abraha Pokou's life is forever shattered: she loses sleep, her mental health deteriorates, and she remains inconsolable. Her emotional instability leads to a bitter neurosis. Despite divine attempts to help her, she never recovers from her pain and is no longer able to lead her people. In the final part, a new character, Karim, the child's father, a Muslim merchant from the north, enters the scene, provoking a religious conflict between animism and Islam. While Karim opposes the sacrifice of his son for religious reasons, Abraha Pokou rejects his prayers, affirming her commitment to her people's traditions: "*Be very careful. Despite what binds us, I will never allow you to defy our traditions. My gratitude towards you ends here. Stay away, I am accountable only to my people!*" (Tadjo, 97: 2009). Unable to resist this pressure, Karim is executed, and the child is sacrificed by being thrown into the river.

4. Exploration of dialogical subversion in ivoirian social discourse

The rewriting of myths constitutes an act of literary emancipation, allowing authors to reclaim the founding narratives of culture while reinterpreting them in light of contemporary issues. Isidore Okpewho's works, such as *African Oral Literature* (1992) and *Myth in Africa* (1983) emphasize that African myths and folklore are more than just traditional stories; they function as essential components of social, cultural, and moral discourse in African communities. These myths explain natural phenomena, historical events, and societal values,

encoding collective experiences and beliefs. Okpewho highlights that African myths evolve alongside changing social and political conditions, making them adaptable and relevant to contemporary society, often serving to critique or justify modern arrangements.

In this context, Véronique Tadjo reinterprets the Baoulé founding myth in *Queen Pokou*, reflecting modern concerns such as national identity, leadership, and the role of women. Okpewho's scholarship aids in understanding this reimagining as part of the broader social discourse, illustrating how the myth transcends local relevance to address universal themes like power, sacrifice, and motherhood. By deconstructing the myth, Tadjo facilitates a dialogue between the past and the present, questioning traditional narratives and their implications for Côte d'Ivoire's current social issues.

Moreover, Okpewho stresses the oral nature of African myths, which makes them fluid and open to multiple interpretations. Tadjo taps into this flexibility by offering various versions of the Abraha Pokou story, reflecting the dynamic and interactive quality of oral traditions. This approach positions the myth not as a fixed narrative but as a cultural tool for exploring contemporary Ivorian society, using myths as frameworks to critique and reflect on modern social and political realities.

In her book *The Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson's psychoanalytic perspective asserts that the fantastic gives free rein to desire, which is essentially a desire for change. According to Jackson, the fantastic represents a mode opposed to the mimetic, breaking with physical laws, and rupturing dominant values to highlight society's taboos and unsaid elements: "*The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over, and made 'absent'*" (Jackson, 4: 1981).

In the preface to the novel, Tadjo writes: "*Several decades later... Pokou then appeared to me in a much more ominous light, as a queen thirsty for power, listening to occult voices and willing to do anything to secure her reign*" (Tadjo, 47: 2009). Pokou, accordingly, presents herself in changing facets through different eras, suggesting that the legend can be constantly revisited and reinterpreted in an attempt to unravel the mystery of this woman, this mother who threw her child into the Comoé River. It is precisely here that the *raison d'être* of the dialogical subversion of Ivorian social discourse surrounding the legend of Queen Pokou lies. How does the writer achieve this dialogical subversion? She embarks on the rewriting of the legend, where each version brings nuances that prompt a reconsideration of the story.

4.1. Between maternal bliss and moral dilemma: the journey of Abraha Pokou

The marital vicissitudes of Abraha Pokou were marked by infertility. The object of ridicule, she made sacrifices to the gods and implored the ancestors: *"Oh benevolent ancestors, you have given children to the other women of the kingdom. But you have ignored me. The healers and the marabouts have achieved nothing. Now, I am asking you. Give me a child."* (Tadjo, 18: 2009). Years later, when she remarries and gives birth to a son, Abraha Pokou solemnly addresses the Ancestors: *"Here is the son you have given me. I thank you for answering my prayers. In return, I promise that he will honor you all his life!"* (Tadjo, 24: 2009). The narrator describes Abraha Pokou's peak of happiness in these terms: *"Pokou's happiness was at its peak. What else could she wish for? She had everything. Luck had finally turned in her favor. Time passed in the sweetness of maternal love. She forgot about politics and its intrigues."* (Tadjo, 26: 2009). This maternal bliss contrasts with the heartbreaking choice she is later called to make: sacrificing her beloved son in obedience to the divine priest.

This decision, which goes against all maternal instinct and social expectations, deeply questions the coherence and credibility of Abraha Pokou's legend. This act of extreme devotion raises fundamental questions about the nature of faith and religious obedience, exploring the limits of human devotion and the moral challenges individuals may face in their quest for piety and salvation.

4.2. Desire for power: the quest of Abraha Pokou

Véronique Tadjo, through this poignant narrative, explores the depths of Abraha Pokou's distress and despair in the face of the moral dilemma imposed on her. By juxtaposing plausible stories, she highlights Pokou's inner torments when faced with the heartbreaking prospect of sacrificing her own son. She vividly depicts Pokou's psychological agony, illustrating her categorical refusal to accept the sacrifice of her child in the name of power or tradition. When she cries out, *"No kingdom is worth the sacrifice of a child."* (Tadjo, 45: 2009), she expresses a cry of despair and revolt against the injustice of her situation. Acts of despair, such as pulling her hair and scratching her skin until it bleeds, testify to her inner torment and inability to accept the cruelty of her fate.

Pokou's ultimate gesture of throwing herself into the tumultuous river waters is both tragic and laden with powerful symbolism. Her final sacrifice, motivated by immeasurable maternal love, underscores the depth of her despair and her resolve to preserve her child's innocence even at the cost of her own life. This poignant scene reveals the strength and dignity of Abraha Pokou, who chooses to die rather than submit to injustice and cruelty. Through this narrative, Véronique Tadjo interrogates the notions of sacrifice, motherhood, and power,

offering a powerful meditation on the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in extreme situations.

Various rewritings of the legend, all imbued with plausibility, propose intriguing alternatives. In one version, confronted with the impassable barrier of the river, the fugitives must deviate from their route, Abraha Pokou categorically refusing the suggested sacrifice. In another version, Abraha Pokou is tormented by deep, inconsolable bitterness after losing her son in the sacrifice. A third rewriting begins with the intervention of the child's father. Unlike previous stories, this version stands out for its more striking realism. It features Karim, the child's father, who firmly opposes the sacrifice, a gesture that costs him his life.

In the final rewriting, Véronique Tadjo deconstructs the traditional moral portrait of Abraha Pokou by emphasizing her greed. Tadjo suggests that the motivation behind the sacrifice could be an insatiable thirst for power. She depicts an Abraha Pokou who, obsessed with ambition, is ready to sacrifice anything to satisfy her desire for domination. Karim, the child's father, firmly opposes the sacrifice and implores "*Abraha, you know well that life is sacred. God gives it to us. How long have you waited for this child? Seers do not always hold the truth. I beg you, do not commit an irreparable mistake.*" (Tadjo, 95: 2009). But determined to achieve her ambition, she responds firmly : "*No matter what you think. One can never give enough. I must make this sacrifice and no one can stop me!*" (Tadjo, 96: 2009).

In this narrative, the narrator delves into the deep aspirations of Abraha Pokou, depicting a once discreet figure now consumed by the ardor for power. With captivating prose, he reveals how Pokou patiently wove her web, advancing with unwavering determination towards her ultimate goal: the throne. Each step, each sacrifice, each choice led her inexorably to this inevitable destiny. Now, the long-awaited moment has finally arrived, the crown extended just before her, a palpable symbol of her imminent conquest.

This version sheds new light on Abraha Pokou's personality, casting a stark light on her ardent desires and devouring ambitions: "*To become queen*" (Tadjo, 99: 2009). It reveals a once-unknown woman now revealed in a darker light, a sovereign in the making, shaped by her own desires, ready to do anything to fulfil her destiny.

4.3. Echoes of subversion: rhetorical questions

The narratives of this rewriting depict a landscape where questions skilfully woven throughout the lines seem to shake the very foundations of the ancestral legend. They unfold along different thematic axes, each questioning a fundamental component of this story.

First, questions emerge that shake the belief in deities, thus endangering the sacredness and influence of supernatural powers at the heart of the events narrated. These uncertainties cause the pillars of faith and spirituality, which often guide mythological tales, to waver. Readers are confronted with poignant reflections: *“To which deity were these sacrifices intended? To whom was the child's life offered? And where were the merciful gods of Africa?”* (Tadjo, 41: 2009), *“Perhaps it was just another ritual, an act of witchcraft, as was common in the powerful Ashanti kingdom?”* (Tadjo, 49: 2009). These questions suggest a critical examination of religious beliefs and practices, questioning the very nature of devotion and transcendence in the narrative context.

Next, the narratives then awaken a series of pointed questions regarding the plausibility of the narrated events. These questions highlight potential inconsistencies or fantastic elements punctuating the tale, thus prompting a deep reflection on the credibility of the legend as a whole. They invite readers to delve into the story, meticulously examining each detail to discern the boundary between the real and the fabulous. These incisive questions cast a critical eye on the internal logic of the legend, doubting the plausibility of the actions and events described. They provoke questions such as: *“But is the story true? Did the Comoé River really open to let the fleeing faithful pass through? Did the waters truly part like they did for Moses and the Jewish people?? ”* (Tadjo, 42-43: 2009); *“But is the legend true? Did the waters truly recede to allow the people to flee?”* (Tadjo, 49: 2009).

These questions, rich in implications, challenge readers to question the reliability of stories passed down through generations. They encourage a thorough exploration of the very nature of historical and mythical truth, opening the way to a more nuanced and critical understanding of the ancestral legend.

Simultaneously, other questions probe the dark corners of the protagonists' morality. They delve into the ethical dilemmas and moral choices faced by the central actors of the legend, thus exposing the complex intricacies of their motivations and actions. These incisive interrogations plunge us into the heart of fundamental ethical issues, inviting us to deep introspection on the very nature of virtue and sin and the moral consequences of our decisions. These questions point to the moral challenges faced by the characters, forcing them to juggle the imperatives of tradition, the demands of honor, and the impulses of the soul. They confront us with troubling reflections: *“Why must women always watch their sons leave? Why is their love never strong enough to stop the war, to prevent death?”* (Tadjo, 49: 2009); *“How can an uncle order the death of his nephew? How can men kill their former ritual companions?”* (Tadjo, 51: 2009). These poignant questions lead us to question our own values and probe the depth of our understanding of human morality. They remind us that behind every choice lies a complex set of motivations and ethical considerations, thus

prompting us to cultivate a critical and empathetic view of the characters' actions and our own decisions.

Finally, questions arise that probe the unexplored horizons of the legend. They clear new territories, deploying alternative paths and proposing divergent interpretations of the narrated events. These bold questions encourage revisiting the legend in a new light, exploring perspectives hitherto unseen, and considering hypotheses that enrich our understanding of this foundational narrative. These questions broaden the horizon of our imagination: “*Was the river truly a river? Were the king's soldiers, ready to overwhelm them, to crush them, that relentless force that would engulf them?... And the child? Was he truly a child?*” (Tadjo, 101-103: 2009).

These examples illustrate the revelatory potential of these questions, which transcend the limits of the established narrative and open new paths towards a deeper understanding of the legend. They invite us to question established certainties, embrace the diversity of interpretations, and continuously explore the mysteries surrounding this foundational story.

All these questions illustrate Véronique Tadjo's skillful subversion of the legend. They transform it into an unstable narrative with blurred and distorted contours where truth hides behind a veil of uncertainty. They thus pave the way for a fruitful dialogue within the novel. In this dialogical approach, the writer endeavors to capture the main currents of thought and the collective imagination of her time, giving voice to a multitude of perspectives. It is in this dynamic interaction between different elements that the richness of the dialogue lies (Sabo and Nielsen: 1984), thus stimulating deep and nuanced reflection on the themes and issues of the revisited legend.

5. Revisiting the past: the deconstructive nature of *Queen Pokou*

Queen Pokou by Véronique Tadjo exhibits a deconstructive approach that fragment traditional narratives and dismantle established cultural and historical assumptions. The novel reinterprets the Baoulé myth, subverting conventional perspectives on key themes such as motherhood, power, and sacrifice. By offering multiple versions of the myth, Tadjo challenges the image of Abraha Pokou as a heroic, unquestioned figure. Each retelling questions the validity of the narrative and the motivations behind her legendary sacrifice, deconstructing the fixed, glorified representation of the myth. This process reveals the complexities and contradictions within the story and highlights how these narratives have been used to shape Ivorian identity.

Tadjo's deconstructive inclination allows the novel to engage with broader social critiques, particularly regarding leadership, gender roles, and national identity. By destabilizing the foundational myth, *Queen Pokou* exposes deeper tensions

within Ivorian society, prompting readers to confront the realities that underlie traditional stories. The multiplicity of perspectives throughout the novel undermines any singular historical or cultural "truth," encouraging readers to question inherited narratives and consider how myths have been employed to maintain power structures. This disruption of established assumptions creates a space for alternative interpretations, reflecting the ongoing struggles of postcolonial societies like Côte d'Ivoire as they navigate the legacies of both colonialism and traditional power dynamics.

Ultimately, *Queen Pokou* invites readers to reflect on the fluidity of identity and the contested nature of historical narratives, prompting a critical examination of the stories we tell and the truths we accept.

Conclusion

In the preface to her novel, Véronique Tadjo re-inscribes the legend in a dialogical framework, suggesting that Pokou reappears in different forms and at different times, as if the legend could be infinitely revisited to try to unravel its mystery. In the context of social upheavals in Côte d'Ivoire, the perpetuation of belief in the legend and respect for the character of Abraha Pokou seem to contribute to the violence in the country. Thus, Véronique Tadjo opens the way to a reconsideration of the social discourse surrounding the legend, transforming it into an unfinished idea likely to spark dialogue within the Ivorian social consciousness. The dialogical subversion of this social discourse then takes on significant importance as it questions the legend in the Ivorian collective consciousness. The textualization of this subversion in the novel testifies to the fundamental role of literature in the evolution of social norms and behaviors. Thus, through her writing, Véronique Tadjo awakens a critical awareness among Ivorians involved in various ways in the socio-political disturbances of their country.

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