

## Chronotopic Play and Shuffle Oral Narrative in Veronique Tadjou's *Queen Pokou: Concerto for a Sacrifice*

دمج الكرونوتوبية و السرد العشوائي الشفوي في رواية " الملكة بوكو: كونشيرتو لتضحية" للكاتبة  
"فيرونيك تادجو"

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Received: 03/07/2022

Accepted: 21/09/2022

Published:22/01/2023

**Abstract:** In *Queen Pokou: Concerto for a Sacrifice* (2009), Véronique Tadjou re-writes the legend of Pokou of Cote d'Ivoire, a West African queen who orchestrates a mythic exodus and builds her own kingdom. This article deals with Tadjou's special restructuring of the black national narrative. Through her postmodern re-writing of the ancient Ashante myth of Pokou and her reversal of the ordinary chronotopic dynamics of narrative, Tadjou employs the Bakhtinian dialogic play between space and time. Ergo, the vertical axis of phenomenological and transcendental perceptions permeates the horizontal line of history. *Queen Pokou* is an oral text in which the story is retold in circles and in the fashion of the griots. The chapters are 'aleatory' and the plot is shufflable within a multiplicity of narrative possibilities.

**Keywords:** Chronotope; shuffle narrative; oral narrative; dialogism; postmodernism; Tadjou.

**المخلص :** عبر رواية " الملكة بوكو: كونشيرتو لتضحية" تعيد الكاتبة "فيرونيك تادجو" كتابة أسطورة ملكة غرب إفريقيا التي تنظم نزوحًا أسطوريًا وتبني مملكتها الخاصة. تتناول هذه المقالة إعادة هيكلة أسطورة "الاشانتي" القديمة لبوكو من خلال تغيير و إعادة صياغة ديناميكيات السرد القومي الأسود. باستعمال تقنيات ما بعد الحداثة و الابتعاد عن السرد العادي للظواهر الزمنية و المكانية (الكرونوتوبية) تعمل "تادجو" على دمج المحور الرأسي للتصورات الظاهرية والمتجاوزة ضمن الخط الأفقي للتاريخ. " الملكة بوكو" هو نص شفهي يتم فيه إعادة سرد القصة في دوائر وبطريقة الرواة الافارقة حيث كل الفصول "منقلبة" و عشوائية والحبكة قابلة للتبديل داخل مجموعة متعددة من الاحتمالات السردية.

**الكلمات مفتاحية:** الكرونوتوبية؛ السرد العشوائي؛ السرد الشفوي؛ الديالوجية؛ ما بعد الحداثة؛ تادجو.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Véronique Tadjo's *Queen Pokou: Concerto for a Sacrifice* (2009) is a postmodern text informed by the poetics of orature. It is a national narrative of a nation enunciated and mediated through the dynamics of the spoken word and the parameters of epic legends. The narrative takes the vast space of the wilderness and the temporality of its protagonist's 'woman time' as the story is told, retold, shuffled, and left without a sense of closure in the most non-teleological postmodern way. On the structure of black national narrative, Homi Bhabha (1990) states:

The transgressive, invasive structure of the black 'national' text, which thrives on rhetorical strategies of hybridity, deformation, masking, and inversion, is developed through an extended analogy with the guerilla warfare that became a way of life for the maroon communities of runaway slaves and fugitives who lived dangerously, and insubordinately, 'on the frontiers or margins of all American promise, profit and modes of production' (p. 296).

The narrative of *Queen Pokou* is a guerilla story and a narrative of an exodus guided by a black woman. The narrative takes the shape of multiple writings and rewritings as the story moves from one teller to another, presenting different tales around the single story of the queen who throws her son in the river to save her people and facilitate their exodus. The climax of the story is the mark of circularity as the multiple renderings of the story tell the moment of Pokou's decision to throw her only child differently. Bhabha (1990) clarifies that "there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (p. 297). This gap explains the multiple retelling of the story despite the fatality of Pokou's actions. Her cry: "Ba-ou-li: The child is dead!" remains a constant cry within the variations of the narrative line and the multiple narratives about the child's father. The doubling of the 'many in one' appears in the way this one story is retold in many ways and performed with alterations that yet preserve the double aspect of the river banks, Pokou's sacrifice, and her incommensurable double consciousness.

## 2. Performative Oral Narrative and Chronotopic Play

The Bakhtinian chronotopic game is employed within the performative nature of *Queen Pokou*. The concerto-like narrative is made into a 'petit récit' which is

embedded in tragedy. The tragic load of the mother who sacrifices her child is alleviated by the mythic and the performative aesthetics of the text. Time and space are dialogized; vertical and horizontal axes are engaged in an endless play.

## 2.1 *Queen Pokou*: An Episodic 'Petit Récit' of Performative Tragedy

The world of Queen Pokou and her exodus display the outer space of the sublime nature in its outrage and repetitive encounters with natural elements. *Queen Pokou* is 'un petit récit' of tragedy. It is episodic, performative, and repetitive. The story is a rewriting of an Ashanti legend—a grand narrative made into a multiplicity of singular stories with different open endings. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha claims that "translation is the performative nature of cultural communication" (p. 228) and uses Rodolphe Gasché's distinction between two types of narrative 'performativity' within the translational reality of the discourse. According to Bhabha, performance is rather an *actu*: "enunciation/positionality" and not a *situ*: "énoncé/propositionality" (1994, p. 228). In *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhabha explains the flexible aspect of native narratives as they are processed with various spatiotemporal specificities. He states:

The present of the people's history, then, is a practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture that attempt to hark back to a 'true' national past, which is often represented in the reified forms of realism and stereotype. Such pedagogical knowledges and continuist national narratives miss the 'zone of occult instability where the people dwell' (Fanon's phrase). It is from this instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities — modern, colonial, postcolonial, 'native' — that cannot be a knowledge that is stabilized in its enunciation (p. 303).

The advantage of contemporaneity and renewal is due to the act of recitation which follows the unstable occult practices and, thus, results in a multiplicity of adaptable narratives to a plurality of spatiotemporal settings. Bhabha (1990) further argues that differences in spatiotemporal dynamics emerge from the liminal and hybrid space of the national culture. This ambivalent status leads to a circularity of time within the cultural space creating new temporalities

along the continuous multiplying and splintering of the narrative space. Therefore, routes are created between past and present, myth, legend and reality (p. 304). Ergo, the teleological meets the archaic and departs from it in a ‘communal’ and ‘communicative’ process within the discourse of plurality as singularity and singularity as plurality—the many as one and the one as many. By analogy, Pokou becomes every mother and one mother in the ambivalent nature of her child-sacrifice.

Bhabha emphasizes Kristeva’s idea of ‘loss of identity’ and Fanon’s idea of ‘cultural undecidability’. These two axes can be applied to the narrative of *Queen Pokou* in that the female protagonist’s time and space are played along this liminality within the multiple versions of her story. As the queen is faced with the ancestral and divine call to the child-sacrifice, she faces a moment of torment moved by her mother instinct and her attachment to her son. Pokou is torn between appeasing the spirits of the Comoé River and protecting her only child. At the same time, sacrificing her child strips her of her motherhood and thus she loses her identity as a mother. This slippage between Pokou’s singular identity and her social character within the communality of the cultural practice and divine sacrifice displaces Pokou’s self from its initial stability to a new state of instability. The story is told in three different times and time frameworks: The Time of Legend, The Time of Questioning, and The Time of the Bird-Child. As the title suggests, the text is a concerto of solo stories orchestrated into the background of the multiple versions of the same story.

## 2.2 Dialogizing Vertical and Horizontal Axes of Time and Space

This interplay of time and space within these moments of singularity, presentism and causality create what M.M. Bakhtin calls chronotopes within the narrative. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981), Bakhtin uses the mathematical chronotopic conception for the time-space connectedness in the narrative. By chronotope, Bakhtin defines “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (p. 84). This interconnection between time and space operates within the double axes of horizontal and vertical movements into time, which results in a double perspective vis-à-vis the different parameters of the text. This dimension covers the multiple sub-narratives within Tadjó’s text. Every version of the legend is

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presented with its specific intrinsically connected spatial and temporal paradigms. The narrative expresses this special time-space connection in yet a special oral telling. The orality of the narrative is captured in the textual realm with its varying chronotopes. The legendary and miraculous happenings of *Queen Pokou* fit within what Northrop Frye terms as the double vertical perspective, which encompasses Manichean characterizations and dualities between idyllic and demonic, an “inferior phenomenological” world and a “superior transcendental” world (Puyal, 2012). This vertical access permeates the horizontal axis of ordinary experience, which moves forward from past to present to future.

Bakhtin dialogizes the relation between time and space and within the vertical axis of perception along the low and high vertical movements within the horizontal line of history. These dynamic permeations help build “a superstructure of reality” within the present. Bakhtin explains this process as follows:

Should these vertical structurings turn out as well to be other-worldly, idealistic, eternal, outside time, then this extratemporal and eternal quality is perceived as something contemporaneous, and that which already exists is perceived as better than the future (which does not yet exist and which never did exist) (p. 148).

This vertical crossing into time, therefore, locates any idealistic quality into the mythic past. This ‘historical inversion’ in Bakhtin’s terms is what allows the mythical thinking to present itself as part of the contemporaneous experiences. This is, in fact, what endows mythopoesis with plausibility within the present of the narrative. In *Queen Pokou*, Tadjo creates multiple superstructures with both higher transcendental faculties and lower phenomenological experiences. These instances are expressed as ‘suddenlys’ that breach into the vertical line of the plot, which seems to be disallowed from ‘becoming’ something and forced into multiple sudden intervals.

The most apparent vertical crossings into time necessitate the insertion of miraculous events as totally normalized experiences within the ordinary backdrop of the narrative. Queen Pokou is born a normal child in a normal,

named, locatable setting only to be transformed by invisible powers into an extraordinary child, who still lives among ordinary people. This ‘sudden’ miraculous metamorphosis happens within the real time sequence of the narrative. It does not cut the flow of the “Time of Beginnings” during which Pokou’s growth is followed into a logical temporal sequence. What Tadjó inserts in her narrative are some extratemporal intervals in the meantime of the story. These extratemporalities are ‘hyperbolized’ and linked to their very spatial extensions; these chronotopic gaps remain plausible to the reader/listener of the legendary adventurous tale. Bakhtin insists that this play within the real horizontal line is totally subjective. He states that the “chronotope of the miraculous world, which is characterized by this subjective playing with time, this violation of elementary temporal relationships and perspectives, has a corresponding subjective playing with space, in which spatial relationships and perspectives are violated” (p. 155).

Tadjó’s subjective and repetitive play with time renders the realistic setting of the Comoé River rather symbolic and mythological within the ‘hiatus’ of the miraculous interval. She installs different narrative spaces to stimulate the oral processes of enunciating traditional stories by the griots. Frederic Jameson (“The Aesthetics of Singularity”, 2015) insists on distinguishing singularities from particularities. He names ‘one-time’ events as the effect of postmodernism and calls any multiple ‘state’ problematic. He explains: “multiple determinants in constant transformation, at different rates of speed, henceforth make any stable structure problematic, unless it is simply a pastiche of forms of the past” (p. 122). Jameson emphasizes the singular effect over the general and the universal, which in Tadjó’s case is portrayed in her text’s recreation of the pre-modern poetics of orality and giving the Ashanti legend its specific locality. This pastiche of the forms of the past within the ‘presentism’ of multiple events around a single story, create the disconnected and ‘disjunctive spaces’, in Bhabha’s terminology (1994, p. 217)

### **3. Postmodernity and the Causality of the Sacred**

Orality, being on the side of the archaic, tends to be aligned with the non-teleological narratives of postmodernism. The subjective world of the protagonist in *Queen Pokou* is perceived within the parameters of causality and the different dynamics of the postmodern parameters ranging from magical realism, music,

parody, pastiche, rewriting, open ending, shuffle narrative, and intertextuality, among others. Singularity is equally juxtaposed to the multiplicity of the spatiotemporal dynamics and their play within the narrative.

### 3.1 Spatiotemporal Multiplicity vs. Subjective Singularity

The disjunctive unconventional narrative of *Queen Pokou* enforces the primacy of tragedy. The tragic effect persists throughout the sub-narratives emphasizing the shocking event of child-sacrifice and the subsequent tragic consequences that Pokou endures. Pokou falls terribly ill, loses her mind, metamorphoses into a siren, turns into a ghost, becomes monstrous, or practices psychic maroonage. The different tellings with their different open endings can be related to the power of rumors and theories drawn around 'spoken-word' stories. As the story travels from mouth to mouth and the tellers move from one place to another, the tale gets reshaped into different versions, which makes the original story as mysterious as ever. This continuous disintegration of the tale makes up for the absence of the comic effect that alleviates tragedy. The anguish that follows every version of the ritual performance is deferred into a new space of enunciation. This postponed emotion creates yet another gap between the storyteller and the listener, but within the realm of postmodern discursivity. In the actual setting of immediate enunciation, the listener reacts to the 'present' tale, to the version that is told. In this text, however, Tadjo creates a certain distance between the immediacy of utterances, the tragic effect, and the multiple possibilities of the story.

Therefore, the story becomes over-determined. The various transformations within the structure of the legend and the multiple stretching of events create some redundancy and repetitive affirmations that make Pokou's exodus frivolous. This frivolity is postmodern in essence in that the spatial wilderness and the homelessness Pokou and her companions inhabit constantly fluxes and shifts. Applying Jameson's terminology one can claim that Pokou's rightful home is foreclosed (2015, p. 132). She is dispossessed of her right to her native home's crown and chased into homelessness and borderline existence.

In *The Hegel Variations: On The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2010), Jameson explains the teleological, cyclical, and speculative characters of postmodern

‘cynical reason’. Through the Hegelian phenomenologies, Jameson links the immanent with the transcendental. He advances the Hegelian dialectic of the esoteric world of self-consciousness which surrenders to the powers of the exoteric ‘beyond’ as the latter gets manifested in the former interchangeably. This synthesis is never stable and definite as it leads to further divisions and the emergence of the antithesis of the universal and the individual (p. 73). These dynamics of the individual and the divine powers apply to Pokou’s dilemma in that her motherly instinct is juxtaposed with the call of the oracle and the divine spirit. Jameson explains this speculative disjunction by quoting Hegel at length:

It [self-consciousness] thus splits itself up into distinct ethical substances, into a human and a divine law. Similarly, the self-consciousness confronting the substance assigns to itself according to its nature one of these powers, and as a knowing, is on the one hand ignorant of what it does, and on the other knows what it does, a knowledge which for that reason is a deceptive knowledge. It learns through its own act the contradiction of those powers into which the substance divided itself and their mutual downfall, as well as the contradiction between its knowledge of the ethical character of its action, and what is in its own proper nature ethical, and thus finds its own downfall (Jameson, 2010, p. 81)(emphasis added).

By analogy and in the multiple times she sacrifices her child, Pokou is both aware and unaware of the gravity of her sacrifice. Between the obedience of the divine law and the deception of motherhood, Pokou’s self-consciousness is split open, divided and reversed into a passage towards death. Through this ethical dilemma of the mother who has to choose between appeasing the spirits of her ancestors, saving her people, becoming sovereign, and losing her only child, the narrative suggests an interval in which the antithesis is propagated into a different ethical choice. In the un-succumbing choice of not accepting to sacrifice her child, a bigger ‘malheur’ befalls the queen and her people. Their freedom is exchanged for slavery and their space is dislocated into foreign cross-Atlantic lands. Even when Pokou’s child survives and grows into a man, the sacrifice eventually happens when he is captured and killed by slave masters. This proves what Jameson calls the necessity of encounter between nature, human beings, and duty (2010, p. 72).

### 3.2 *Queen Pokou's* Non-teleological Narrative Circularity and Self-reflexive Mythopoesis

The outrageous Comoé River with its multiple renderings keeps the singularity of its sublime outrage. The grandiose supernatural catastrophic effect it projects endows it with the pivotal aspect of juxtaposing the individual with the divine law. The sublime effect is rendered through the duality of the river's banks and the decisive choice that needs to be made between either choosing death by its borderline or diving into its fatal waves. The third space, which is a safe passage through the river, is only possible by the mediation of a sacred sacrifice. A certain déchirement of unity persists as the only permeable solution to cross over. In Pokou's case, there is the déchirement of the mother-child union and the tearing apart of the self.

Postmodernism is not anti-religious nor is it anti-teleological. The postmodern devices applied in *Queen Pokou* portray the unavoidable link between the narrative and its form. The splintering of the protagonist's self is closely linked to the tearing apart of the narrative structure. Between teleology, non-teleology, and the causality of the sacred against the profane, the text takes the form of a postmodern inscription with its circularity, open ending, and the possibility of 'aleatory' arrangement. In "Nonteleological Narration", Mihály Szeged-Maszák argues that the disrupted unity of the narrative with postmodern devices is effective only if it plays with the reader's sense of teleology (Fokkema & Bertens, 1997, p. 275). Maszák means that a successful postmodern text employs both causality and teleology in that the reader's perceptions are fragmented within a certain reading convention.

Maszák defines the circular text as non-teleological as it avoids all progress into a denouement. The events are fragmentary and repetitive and akin to musical compositions. *Queen Pokou's* narrative follows the lyrical style of poetry and the circular rhythm of repetitious notes. The story is retold in circles as the rhythm rises and falls around the line of: "Ba-ou-li: the child is dead!" This refrain, which brings news and alarms of death, lives on in the different parts of the narrative losing its teleological aspect to the open ended causality of its origin.

The repetitive questionings on the existence of the child and the credibility of the sacrifice defers closure. Maszàk claims:

Ontologically different possible worlds are joined together with the apparent aim of making the reader responsible for discovering links between apparently disjointed parts. To make the recuperation of meaning difficult, the hermeneutic code—another of the preconditions of teleology—is neglected (Fokkema & Bertens , 1997, p. 280).

Therefore, the reader is presented with multiple theories and is given the freedom of choosing the most probable version of the legend. Yet the teller reminds the reader that the myth is “disfigured, denatured” (Tadjo, 2009, p. 55) projecting the self-reflexive telling onto a self-reflexive reading. Hence the narrative becomes a telling of tellings and a reading of readings—metafiction merges with meta-telling and meta-reading. The prelude of the text reinforces the self-reflexive transformation of the writer into a narrator with the quality of a female griot: “*Pokou appeared again, in other guises, at other times, as if the legend could be told an infinite number of ways*” (Tadjo, 2009, p. 1).

*Queen Pokou* lends itself to various postmodern stylistic and aesthetic interpretations. Véronique Tadjo rewrites the legend of the Ashanti heritage. This rewriting, however, is informed by structuralist poetics. In “Rewriting”, Matei Calinescu bases his definitions and delineations of re-writing on Gerard Genette’s *Palimpsestes*. Genette calls the transformed text which is textualized a ‘hypotext’ and the text that results a ‘hypertext’ (Fokkema & Bertens , 1997, p. 243). In the case of the West African Heritage that Tadjo is transporting into her text, a venture to call the transformation as a hypo-tale turned into a hyper-tale is more than pressing. In *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel* (2007), Chantal Zabus deals with the translation and relexification of the indigenous structures of the African culture into European structures and languages. Zabus claims that relexification is “tied to the notions of ‘approximation’ and ‘transparence’. Yet it also encompasses those of ‘transposition’, ‘paraphrase’, ‘translation’ (even ‘psychic’), ‘transliteration,’ ‘transference’ and ‘transmutation’ (p. 116).

It is noteworthy to state that *Queen Pokou* is written originally in French and the version under study is an English Translation. Here, the text claims a double relexification within its transposition from the orature state to the written state in

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a European language, and then it undergoes yet another translation into English. Calinescu highlights the dynamics of cultural transposition within the processes of rewriting. He states:

The postmodern critical consciousness is particularly sensitive to the phenomena of textual transformations or rewriting and shows a definite preference for rewriting as a frame for critical discussion ... hunting for secret sources, implied models, secret parodies, and other forms of oblique rewriting” (Fokkema & Bertens , 1997, p. 248).

This critical consciousness figures in the writer's self-referential and self-conscious declaration, aiming at including the singularities and particularities of the original source into the re-written text. A direct transposition may cause the hypertext to lose its psychic and spiritual embedded codes. In “Self-Referentiality”, Marcel Cornis- Pope emphasizes the “either-or” nature of postmodernism within the different devices of metafiction, metapoetry, anti-narrative, pure fiction, parody, and pastiche. According to Cornis-Pope, the logic of postmodernism “opposes deconstruction to articulation and self-referentiality to “true” mimesis (Fokkema & Bertens , 1997, p. 259). The abundance of these devices within postmodern writings, claims, Cornis-Pope, leads to a type of ‘surfiction’ that continually “reformulates its modes of articulation” in an attempt to grasp a closer vicinity to that “true” mimesis (p. 262).

Within and through the technicalities of postmodernism that Tadjo employs in the text of *Queen Pokou*, she embeds a female Afrocentric understanding of the nature of legend. Tadjo does not simply write a self-reflexive mythopoesis, she also creates discursive sites for satirical comments and feminine jouissance. Tadjo displays the subaltern role of women in traditional African communities despite the women's superiority of spirits and intelligence. Pokou is portrayed as an excellent woman-politician who is often ridiculed and opposed by the old men specifically. Fearing her political power and eloquence and her son's rightfulness to the crown, Pokou is chased out of the Kumasi kingdom and condemned to a journey of sacrifice and improbable passages. The magical and marvelous events that take the shape of realistic events further empower the legendary nature of this woman's epic story. When Pokou throws her child in the river in sacrifice, a

miracle is manifested: “The ground began to tremble. Lightning bolts split the air. A gigantic, ancient tree crashed down before them. Its enormous trunk formed a natural bridge” (Tadjo, 2009, p. 16). These sinister and grandiose sublime natural events are juxtaposed to Pokou’s sexuality which takes different bodily renderings with the different faces her child’s father takes. Instances of body politics and writing informed by the body à la Irigaray are abundant in the text. The story teller states:

She thought of the man, his father, the warrior who had freed her from the anguish of the barren woman. She had loved him with a passion that seemed impossible after all the other unions that had lost their savour and withered away over the years without fruit. She still remembered the reawakening of her body, the bliss of her senses, the honey that he made run in her veins, and the creamy milk that wet the inside of her thighs.

Abraha Pokou, the seductress, in love like a little girl as she reached the great turning point of her womanhood! (Tadjo, 2009, p. 25).

This highly bodily and metaphorical language persists as it merges with the natural world. The instinctual pleasures are faced with the powers of nature. Only nature with its rivers and sublime outrages can stop Pokou’s desires: “As a lover her drives were as powerful as her maternal instincts: generous, destructive, haughty like the foaming waves. Only the sun could have stopped her” (Tadjo, 2009, p. 31). Here, Pokou’s motherhood becomes both a force of nature and a force against nature. The Comoé River, with its destructive waves both destroys Pokou’s link with her child and offers a passage into a newly constructed kingdom. Pokou’s womb is contrasted to the river’s belly: “She should never have allowed her son to leave the sheltering world of her womb” (p. 31) because after being swallowed by the river, “He would never grow up; never again leave this aquatic universe [...] the child swam in a wondrous tranquility inspired by his fluid surroundings” (p. 32). This appeal towards non-partum challenges nature. The child cannot stay forever in its mother’s womb, but being swallowed by the river offers the baby the timeless protection of birth fluids to sustain its “unforeseen destiny” (p. 32) in the surreal world.

The magical elements and the surreal images in *Queen Pokou* are highly performative. The narrative follows the techniques of the textualization of speech as Pokou takes the role of the traditional griots and embeds their strategies and

performances into her text. This traditionalist outlook into the lore of legends past does not exclude the contemporary echoes the story projects on the social imaginary of the African continent, and the disintegrating aspects of the past communal life. In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor stresses the 'disenchantment' that occurs through excessive individualism and expressivism. The postmodern departure from the modern search for authentic existence lies in the globalization of individual expressivism. Therefore, the particular individualized quest becomes the quest of the emerging multiplicities with multiple and multiplying individualized quests. Taylor states: "What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon" (p. 473). Tadjo brings to the foreground the individual quest of Pokou with the collectivity and festivity of the narrative. The sacred part of the communal African life is not abandoned for the secular pursuits of power and self-realization. Thus, through the scattered narrative pieces, Tadjo aims to regain a certain lost harmony between the lost sacredness of the animistic side of the African culture and the overpowering threats of secular pursuits and prejudice against women.

This harmonious *mélange* between immanent and transcendental aspects is enhanced by the communicative and ethnographic parameters that Tadjo employs in her text. In *The Oral Epic: From Performance to Interpretation* (2022), Karl Reichl highlights the "primacy of context" in oral epics. The setting, the message, the events, gestures, expressions, songs, speech, shamanic voices are listed by Reichl among the vehicles of orature. The deciphering of these devices leads to better interpretative receptions of the epics. These oratorical devices work along two types of interpretive enterprises. In *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (1991), John Miles Foley identifies a 'receptionalist' theory and a traditional 'referentiality' in deciphering "situations of performance" and "gaps of indeterminacy" in oral texts (p. 246). These referencing situations and indeterminacy gaps necessitate the participation of the reader/audience (p. 43). Foley explains:

[...]oral traditional texts or performances also serve as a liberetti for audience realization, that these "scores" imply readers or listeners are

participants in a process, and the oral performance or oral-derived text also consists of a “map” made up of explicit signals and gaps of indeterminacy that must be bridged in accordance with certain rules and predispositions” (p. 43).

The liberty that the audience is offered is therefore countered with some unknown historical elements that only a learned audience can decipher. In his reading of *Queen Pokou*, Anyidoho confesses to the scarce resources on the legend and the difficulties encountered if one tries to anchor the story under one version. He admits: “I have a bit of homework waiting to be done. I have been referred to a number of sources that *probably* might have something to say about Abraha Pokou. These sources include collections of Asante oral history...” (Tadjo, 2009, p. xix). Therefore, a reader with a little knowledge of the Asante history would not be able to decipher the specific codes of their poetry and ethnography, yet the same reader is given the freedom of using the receptionalist hermeneutics and the immediate experience of the text.

Tadjo remarkably uses an extremely simple phraseology that puts African poetry and orality in an adjacent space with the reader/listener/audience. Foley explains that the ‘immanent poetic tradition’ within oral texts facilitate the interpretative practices due to the balance it creates between “structure and metonymic meaning” (1991, p. 44). In one of the poetic chants in *Queen Pokou*, the peasants sing in fear of Pokou’s wrath: “*Splendid Mother/ Why do you hide your beauty/Under the waves?*” (Tadjo, 2009, p. 30). This is a song of worship because the people no longer could see Pokou in the waters of the river. They try to appeal to her feminine side by invoking her beauty and splendid character and by calling her mother to substitute her lost son. The peasants go on: “*Bring peace back into our hearts/ Give us a bit of hope. Bring back happier times/ By bestowing your forgiveness upon us*” (p. 30). Here, Pokou’s people are lamenting the lost days of peace and happiness; they know that even if Pokou emerges, their happiness will never be restored again. Yet, the people chant and ask for Pokou’s forgiveness because they are the direct beneficiaries of her child-sacrifice and the first to be damned by her now half-siren transfixing charms. Foley explains the deciphering of Oral texts as follows: “The riddle of the oral traditional text or performance is that every version (or instance of a phraseological or narrative

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structure) is both a thing in itself and the same thing" (1991, p. 44). Ignoring this immanent aspect, warns Foley, leads to a "mis-reading" of the text (p. 44).

Foley's explanation is basically built around Wolfgang Iser's theoretical conceptions of reader response dynamics. This approach aligns postmodern methodology with the traditional perspective. The previously discussed techniques of rewriting, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity enhance the hermeneutic field through the "(re-)making and (re-)reading of the traditional verbal art" (1991, p. 45). In *Prospecting from Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989), Iser draws on the indispensable role the reader plays in the recreation of oral narratives and the distinctive feature of performance as opposed to plain mimesis. Iser stresses the double structure of performance between 'fictionality' and 'fictionalizing' within the literary text (p. 236). This double effect is often created along two facts of life (p. 236). Iser names death as inevitable and the urge to go on. Ironically enough, *Queen Pokou* is an epic tale that is shaped by the doubling features of fictionality—in the fictional aspect that the novel takes overall—and fictionalizing—in the distorted events and the over-dramatization of events undertaken by Tadjo. As far as the two highlighted facts of life that Iser relates to most anthropologically inspired performances, *Queen Pokou's* basic structure is built around the unavoidable death of the queen's son and the ensuing going on into the creation of a new post-exodus kingdom.

Iser implies the Derridean notions of play and difference within the literary narrative, yet he does not mention Derrida in the context of his literary 'anthropologizing'. Iser claims to not only deal with the structure of play and end of play and supplementation, he also considers the functional and interpretative dialogues between the author and reader. He conceives of the literary text as "a playground between author and reader", which operates within three levels: 'structural', 'functional', and 'interpretative' (1989, p. 253). Iser casts the make-believe nature of the fictional text and its repetitive patterns that should differentiate it from its "extratextual existence" (1989, p. 251). He opens the playground of the textual game between author-text-reader, which in turn operates within some other sub-parameters that regulate and allow play. At the extratextual level, there's the author's relationship to the outer world, the text's

link to the extratextual world, and the text's relation to other texts. There is also the 'intratextual' realm which incorporates items from the extratextual system with "semantic enclosures" within the text itself. Moreover, there is direct relationship between the reader and the text in which the reader's attitudes and assumptions are related to the repetitive denotations in the text and their performative qualities (p. 251). These relationships in their esoteric and exoteric differences are germane to the movement of play within the performative text.

Iser explains that when the text is set into motion, the movement that results ensures the continuity of play among the differences. This space of play allows transformation, subverting the simple mimetic act into an act of performance (1989, p. 252). This is, in fact, what Tadjó utilizes within the repetitive patterns of *Queen Pokou*. She opens space for play and supplementation by establishing links between the historical world of the legend, its origins in the Asante heritage, its various interpretations, the multiple fragments of the legend (she encountered at different stages of her life), the deformation and the alteration of the story line, the poetics of orature, and the space for reader/listener response. Making sense of the text is open within the free play of meaning and interpretation, which according to Iser becomes "a metastatement about statements, or even a metacommunication about what is supposed to be a communication" (1989, p. 254).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Postmodern aestheticism engulfs Tadjó's *Queen Pokou: Concerto for a Sacrifice* (2009). Tadjó creates a mix between the textual and the musical within the oral narrative's storytelling 'shuffle-able' episodes. *Queen Pokou* is an anthropologically mythologized story that serves as a mnemonic site for historical and ethnographic revisionism. This article deals with Tadjó's multiple re-writings of the African national narrative. The text under study lends itself to a multiplicity of performative play. Bakhtinian chronotopicspatiotemporality and dialogism are fused with Bhabha's notions of culture and national identity. Moreover, Jameson's 'aesthetics of singularity' are employed within the dialectic play of Iser's metacommunicative connection between author, listener, and reader—along with other postmodern critiques and their respective *a priori* notions. Tadjó re-writes the West African Ashanti legend of Pokou in a

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postmodern chronotopic and discursive/subversive fashion, which redefines the African female identity, time-space, and narrative.

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