

Occultic Practices in Appolinaire Zodékon-Eleceis' Novel *Mariage Impossible*

Leo Iyanda Balogun, University of Lagos, Nigeria. Email: lbalogun@unilag.edu.ng

Adisa Akinkorede Somana, Babcock University, Nigeria. Email: adisaa@babcock.edu.ng

Abstract

In African tradition, occultic practice is a recurring phenomenon in our different societies. Being conscious of different types of occultic powers in African tradition, the invocation of these spiritual forces by the author of Mariage Impossible could be exploited for different purposes. This paper aims to understand the reasons Africans most often engage in occultic practices and also seeks to analyse the different manifestations and consequences of these practices in Zodékon-Eleceis' Mariage Impossible. To achieve this, we have been inspired by the literary theory of occulticism. Occultism is the belief in the existence of suprasensory realities that could be perceptible through methods of occult sciences; it is the set of occult sciences and practices associated with them. However, the analysis of Zodékon-Eleceis' novel enables the reader to distinguish the merit and demerit of the practices of occultic powers and make a choice as per the perpetuation of these practices in different contemporary African societies.

Keywords: African tradition; divination; occultic power; occultic practices; supernatural forces

1. Introduction

In African tradition, Africans often believe in the existence of a superior Being to whom honour and adoration are given. The identification of this Higher Being largely depends on the provenance of worshippers or religious practitioners. Given the greatness and magnanimity accorded this Higher Being, Africans believe that the superior Being can only be approached through other, subordinate gods. Thus, through supplications and adorations to other spiritual forces subordinate to the first, Africans manage to obtain what they need (being it good or bad) (Ellis & Ter Haar, 1998). Beyond this interaction with the Supreme Being, African tradition allows the use of practices (the so-called occultism) by way of involving certain supernatural forces that can help the worshippers or religious practitioners in their need to achieve a particular goal. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2002) defines occultism as follows:

“Occultism is the various theories and practices involving a belief in and knowledge or the use of supernatural forces or beings. Such beliefs and practices principally magical or divinatory have occurred in all human societies through recorded history with considerable variations both in their nature and in the attitude of societies towards them.”

This practice of occultic power continues today in our various African societies. Although the practice dated back to distant times, the Christian and Islamic religions seemed to slow down its evolution (Mbembe, 1993). Today, the return to the source of African traditions is part of a revival in our different societies and occultic practices to which various people are committed and entrust their believes into mystical practices are demonstrated in Zodékon-Eleceis' (2014) *Marriage Impossible*. In the analysis of this novel, we will examine the various manifestations of occultic practices and their consequences in contemporary human life.

2. Summary of the Novel

The practice of occult power is a recurrent phenomenon in different African societies. Apollinaire Zondékon-Eleceis explores the various occult practices in which the main characters of the novel, *The Impossible Marriage (Le mariage impossible)*, indulged. This novel served as an awakening consciousness for the emancipation of women in traditional African society. To this end, a fierce struggle is revealed between the

young people of Sogo village and the elders. Young people influenced by western education have risen up against the occult practices and the perceptions of life of the elders who want to maintain tradition at all costs. Kolm, the youth leader of the village, paid dearly for standing against the elders. In this regard, he was paralyzed by the sorcerers who were believed to be guided by the same elders. Thus, he becomes ineffective and inefficient in his attempt to live his life.

The novel opens with a curse that has befallen Sogo village: "A shortage of girl births in the village." Magical sacrifices were needed to bring the situation back: "Place a kaolin on the belly of a pregnant woman and implore the manes of the ancestors to give birth to a girl child." The sacrifices were successful for Houévi and her pregnancy resulted in the birth of a girl. The girl was later named Devi and her suitor, Ayi. Devi will soon grow up into a well-educated, beautiful young girl. But as a result of the Western education she received, she unswervingly demanded her emancipation from the man who was to be her husband at the end of her studies. Ayi thus noticed that Devi was no longer interested in him. With the help of his henchmen, he organized the kidnapping of Devi and Kolm, a friend of his fiancé. The two were held in their custody in an undisclosed location for days before they were released. Devi was traumatized. She was no longer able to concentrate in school due to occult practices enacted against her by Ayi, the future husband. The truth has later emerged following consultations with a "boknonon," a charlatan engaged by Houévi, Devi's mother. A "boknonon" is a name given to charlatans, diviners in "Fon," one of the languages spoken in Benin Republic in West Africa. He reveals to Houévi the source of her daughter's misfortune. For the charlatan, as long as Ayi lives, misfortune will never cease to hunt Devi. He promised Devi and her mother to end up with Ayi once and for all. They will, of course, use occult practice to concretise their wishes. A few days later, we learn of Ayi's sudden death, together with all of his friends who collaborated with him in creating Devi's misfortune. At last, Devi freed herself for life away from the yoke of Ayi and started a peaceful life as she deemed fit.

3. Occultism as a Literary Theory

Occultism is the set of theories, practices and ways to realizations derived from occultic science. It is contrasted with science, as it is conceived, which is currently used to study mostly physical phenomena and perceptible, visible parts of Nature and Man. Occultic science, thanks to its preferred method (analogy), strives, starting from the physical facts to rise up to the study of the invisible, occultic parts of Nature and Man. Etymologically, the word occultism comes from the Latin *occultus* (hidden, secret); it refers to 'the knowledge of what is hidden.' Occultism refers to disciplines associated with supernatural, secret notions, considered by rationalist and materialistic science as constructed from a reasoning bias and also qualifies as pseudo-sciences (a falsely scientific approach or belief that does not respect the methods or goals of science) (Bouchet, 2000).

Occultism is a word invented in the 19th century and used for the first time by Eusebe Braconnière de Salverte. The followers of occultism include Stanislas de Guaita, Papus Jesephine Péladan and others. In occultism, there are two important movements: the occultic sciences (speculative) and the occultic arts (practical). Occultism becomes speculative when it is theoretical in nature. It aims to gather a range of knowledge to understand the world around us or the hidden one (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002).

Within the occultic arts, we find alchemy, which is the art of transmutation. Talismania is the art of making a talisman and amulets (protective objects). Magic is formed from ritual techniques to act through invisible forces. Divination includes various techniques to understand and know the past, present and future elements. Astrology, meanwhile, is the science of the interpretation of the motion of the stars.

4. Occultic Power Practices in *Marriage Impossible*

Occultic practices focus first on the alleged skills of the practitioner in manipulating natural laws personally, for personal interest or for the interest of clients. This practice can only be considered bad when it contradicts social morality. Yet some religious practices can be linked to occultism. There are almost the same types of occultism in all human societies: divination, magic, witchcraft and fetishism, for example. We will try in this work to elucidate the different types of occultic practices, their manifestations and consequences in our societies today and, specifically, the novel that is the object of examination (Leistner, 2014).

4.1. Divination

Divination is an occultic practice determining the cause or meaning of events and their future through natural psychological and other techniques. This is a practice that can be found in different societies around the world. In *Marriage Impossible* by Zodékon-Eleceis, which is the subject of this study, we find practices of divination through a fetishist who was consulted and who then disclosed to Dévi the causes of her misfortune and the solutions that should be undertaken. The fetishist begins with preliminary formalities:

Il déposa, de sa main tremblante, le demi-franc sur le dos du canari, y ajouta trois cauris et se mit à promener le tout sur le dos du récipient de terre glaise. Dévi fut médusée. Elle regarda sa mère puis le vieillard concentré sur le canari. Tous deux avaient la bouche fermée. Et bien fermée! elle reporta son regard sur le canari: il était trop petit pour qu'un homme pût s'y cacher. D'où venait donc cette voix lointaine qui l'appelait et même par son nom Dévi? Ou bien, serait-ce un arrangement préalable avec sa mère? (p.261)

With his trembling hand, he placed the half-franc on the canary's back, added three cauris to it, and began to walk the whole thing on the back of the clay container. She looked at her mother and then at the old man concentrating on the canary. Both of them had their mouths closed. And well closed! she looked at the canary: it was too small for a man to hide there. Where did this distant voice that called her and even her name Dévi come from? Or could it be a prior arrangement with her mother? (authors' translation)

Then, the fetishist moves on to serious matters; that of divination. The soothsayer begins his revelation:

Je vois un homme gros, court sur pied, de teint noir ... attends, il s'appelle Ayi! Il jubile en ce moment avec ses acolytes qui lui promettent de te ramener à lui ... attends, je vois deux hommes ... ah, je comprends! Tu devais épouser cet Ayi, mais les deux jeunes hommes ont fait échouer son projet. Il se venge. [---] Tant qu'il vivra, tu n'auras jamais la paix; [---] Les sorciers auxquels il t'a confiée viennent de te travailler à l'instant même avec la musaraigne! Connais-tu l'odeur nauséabonde de ce petit rongeur? Dans quelques jours, cette odeur va t'imprégner et ensuite émaner de ton corps pour faire fuir cet essaim de soupirants qui te court après. (p.262)

I see a big man, short on his feet, black complexion ... wait, his name is Ayi! He is gloating right now with his acolytes who promise to take you back to him... wait, I see two men ... ah, I understand! You were to marry this Ayi, but the two young men failed his project. He takes revenge. [---] As long as he lives, you will never have peace; [---] The sorcerers to whom he has entrusted you to, have just worked you out with the shrew! Do you know what that little rodent smells like? In a few days, this smell will pervade you and then emanate from your body to scare away this swarm of suitors who run after you. (authors' translation)

The soothsayer understood Ayi's malicious intentions against Dévi. Ayi wanted to give Dévi a hard blow for abandoning him. Fortunately, the diviner was able to reveal his bad intentions, so that Dévi could prepare against all eventualities.

4.2. Magic Practices

Magic is a practice based on the belief in the existence of occultic and supernatural beings, powers and forces, allowing the magician to act on the material world through specific rituals. However, each tradition or culture has its own definitions of magical categories. Black magic has negative effects. It is through magical practices that the victim is most often affected. The invocation of supernatural powers, incantations, the appeal to certain deities and the mixing of certain material products are some of the ingredients that magicians use for their own purpose are all elements of magic that can be manipulated by the magician (Thorndike, 1984). Consider one of the cases of magic practices that abound in the novel, *Marriage impossible* by Zodékou-Eleceis. As there was a shortage of girl-birth in Sogo village, the villagers, with the help of a soothsayer proceeded to magical practices. Indeed, it was a question of placing a kaolin (piece of clay) on the belly of a pregnant woman and imploring the forefathers' mast (spiritual ancestor) to give birth to a girl child.

Dans le village Sogo, on aurait cru à une malédiction soudaine. Le beau sexe ne naissait plus qu'à compte-gouttes. [...] La question était devenue obsessionnelle, à telle enseigne que l'idée de «poser de kaolin» sur le ventre d'une femme en état de grossesse germa dans certains esprits. Aussi, le prétendant priait-il ses ancêtres, faisant offrandes sur offrandes pour qu'à la naissance, l'on n'entendit que les vagissements d'une fillette, sa future femme ou celle de son fils. (pp.7-8)

In the village of Sogo, one would have thought it was a sudden curse. The fair sex was only born in dribs and drabs. [...] The question had become obsessive, so much so that the idea of putting kaolin on the belly of a pregnant woman germinated in some minds. Thus, the suppliant prayed to the ancestors, making offerings on offerings so that at birth, only the likeness of a young girl, a future wife or that of a future son could be seen. (authors' translation)

4.3. Witchcraft Practices

Witchcraft is a magical practice carried out with a view to exerting an action, generally harmful, on a human being (ill-fortune, bewitchment, possession) or on animals or plants (livestock diseases, crop failure). Its practices are more or less synonymous with magic. Witchcraft is a belief that prevails in certain societies or social groups to which certain categories of misfortune can be attributed to the malicious and invisible action of certain people or supernatural creatures. Thus, people can turn into animals or birds in order to carry out at will their evil and malicious work towards their enemy. This was the case with Kolm when an owl came to him wanting to hypnotize him. Kolm surely knew that the owl would be nothing more than a metamorphosed man: a form of witchcraft widespread in West Africa and elsewhere.

Un gros hibou fixait sur le jeune homme un regard à la fois effroyable et hypnotisant. L'oiseau clignait à peine des yeux. Que veux-tu? demanda Kolm, persuadé qu'il ne pouvait s'agir là que d'un être humain métamorphosé. [...] Kolm loin de prendre peur, se dirigea vers son lit, tira d'en dessous un colis de toile blanche et en sortit une gousse de poivres. Il extirpa quelques grains ... Il cracha vers l'oiseau. Le hibou recula d'abord ... et prit verticalement son vol. (p.179)

A large owl stared at the young man with a frightening and hypnotising look. The bird barely blinked. "What do you want?" asked Kolm, convinced that this could only be a metamorphosed human being. [...] Kolm, far from becoming frightened, walked to his bed, pulled a parcel of

white canvas from underneath and pulled out a pod of peppers. He chewed a few grains ... He spit towards the bird. The owl retreated first ... and flew away vertically. (authors' translation)

To demonstrate that it is still a matter of witchcraft, Kolm notes the following:

Il ne fut pas complètement remis de sa surprise qu'une forme squelettique humaine se dessina devant lui. De sa main osseuse, la forme épouvantable le saisit au cou. Kolm fit des efforts surhumains pour se libérer de la strangulation. Ses yeux étaient, on eût dit hors leurs orbites et sa langue tirée de sa bouche. Ce fut alors qu'il entendit une voix lointaine:

J'ai toujours refusé de participer à vos festins; le sang de mon fils ne sera pas pour votre banquet. Laissez-le immédiatement ou je vous déclare la guerre. (pp.179-180).

He was not completely recovered from his surprise that a human skeletal form appeared before him. With his bony hand, the dreadful form seized him in the neck. Kolm made superhuman efforts to free himself from strangulation. His eyes were, one would have said, out of their sockets and his tongue was drawn from his mouth. It was then that he heard a distant voice:

I have always refused to attend your feasts; my son's blood will not be for your banquet. Leave him immediately or I will declare war on you. (authors' translation)

As soon as he came back to himself, the skeletal form disappeared. He jumped out of his bed and woke up. It was midnight. The spirit of his parents surely saved his life. This was one of the manifestations of witchcraft in traditional African society. However, recognising this, Kolm was able to free himself from the yoke of those sorcerers who wanted to destroy him at all costs.

Fetishism and witchcraft often go from father to son. The case of the practice of witchcraft demonstrated in the novel is one that is inflicted on Kolm after having serious confrontations with the elders of the village of Sogo based on the allocation of a girl right away from her birth to a man for marriage. Also annoying was the dowry payment that Kolm and his college friends vehemently opposed. As leader of the opposition between the elders and the youth, Kolm received a hard blow through spiritual attacks by Ayi that rendered him paralytic.

Une nuit, un hibou était venu se poser sur le toit de mon dortoir. Il a émis un hululement effroyable. Le lendemain, je n'ai pas pu me lever. Mon corps s'était mis à enfler; j'avais la fièvre; peu après, secoué par des spasmes, j'ai perdu connaissance. On m'a emmené à l'hôpital puis ramené à la maison. [---] Trois jours après, j'ai pu ouvrir les yeux. [---] Mon père, m'a montré unealebasse contenant des dards de scorpion, des aiguilles rouillées, des tessons de bouteille ... Tous ces objets ont été retirés de mon corps par mon père et le guérisseur Bariba. Les sorciers ne m'ont pas pardonné. Par leur fusil occulte, ils m'ont criblé de ces objets hétéroclites espérant m'ôter la vie. C'est ainsi que je ne vais plus retrouver l'usage de mes jambes. (pp.220-221)

One night, an owl came to the roof of my dormitory and gave a terrible hoot. The next day, I couldn't get up. My body began to swell; I had a fever; soon after, shaken by spasms, I lost consciousness. I was taken to the hospital and brought home. [---] Three days later, I was able to open my eyes. [---] My father showed me a calabash containing scorpion darts, rusty needles, bottle shards... All these objects were removed from my body by my father and the Bariba [person from a region of Benin] healer. The sorcerers did not forgive me. By their occultic

*attacks, they have riddled me with these motley objects hoping to take my life.
This is how I will no longer find the use of my legs. (authors' translation)*

This is how Kolm ended up in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He was punished by occultic means for daring to tell the truth in front of the Sogo village elders.

5. Occultic Power and Its Importance in African Tradition

In traditional Africa, the use of occultic power remains a practice that most Africans cannot do without. Despite the obscurantist side attached to this practice, we find many adherents who are proudly involved in it in order to defend themselves or take refuge against any eventuality of life. Occultic power of any kind can be used to harm someone other than yourself. All these practices abound nowadays in our different societies. As the author informed us in his novel, *Marriage Impossible*, we find references made to the effectiveness of the occultic practices in order to defend Ayi against anyone who would want to take away his fiancée Dévi. Equally important was the anger of the Sogo village elders over Kolm when the latter was struck down by a hard blow against him. The result was Kolm's paralysis for the rest of his life.

Despite this negative side of the practices of occultic power, there is still a positive side of the use of these powers. In African tradition, when an individual is attacked by spiritual forces or supposedly by witchcraft, we often witness the imploration of supernatural forces from the occultic power to get rid of the harmful effect inflicted on that individual. This is the case of Dévi who at some points in her life and with the help of her mother begins to look for the main cause of her misadventures. Through the manipulations of occultic powers, Dévi knew that her ex-fiancé, Ayi is at the root of her misfortune. There, we can find the positive side of the occultic power because it is through this power that she finally realises the source of her problem. From this moment, Dévi, accompanied by her mother Houévi, have both embarked on the search for a fair solution through some occultic power.

Bon voilà: derrière ma case, il y a une plante à feuilles dentées. Cueilles une seule feuille et appelle aussitôt le nom d'Ayi sur la sève coulant et de la feuille et de la plante. Une fois arrivée chez toi, achètes une petite cola blanche et un coq tout noir. Un jeudi, à l'aube, sans adresser la parole à quelqu'un, poses la feuille sur le dos du coq, mâches la cola et déversez-y le contenu en fortes aspersions en appelant sept fois le nom d'Ayi. Enterres le tout lorsque le coq sera mort. (p.264).

Well, there we go: behind my hut, there are the toothed leaves of a plant. Pick a single leaf and immediately call the name Ayi on the sap and the leaf and the plant. Once you get home, buy a little white cola [nut] and a black rooster. On a Thursday, at dawn, without speaking to anyone, lay the leaf on the back of the cock, chew the cola and pour out the contents while making strong aspersions calling the name of Ayi seven times. Bury everything when the rooster is dead. (authors' translation)

The fetishist informs Dévi that she should twist the cock's neck and that as many twists of the cock's neck correspond to as many weeks of pain diffused in Ayi's body, starting from the heart, followed by delirium during which the victim confesses any sins or crimes. The victim will suffer as many weeks as there were twists of the neck before he dies. Occultic power can, however, be used for positive purposes and also to save life.

6. The Consequences of Occultic Power

Speaking of occultic power in African tradition, its consequences are enormous. Our analysis will be limited only to the level of events discussed in the novel, *Marriage impossible*. For most parts of African tradition,

the invocation of supernatural power is often done to harm or at least to disrupt the life of one's neighbour. It is then obvious that the consequences of these practices of occultic power are today unbounded in our different societies. So, to get rid of the self imposed ex-fiancé permanently, Dévi opts for Ayi's bewitchment by means of the fetishist through occult practices. Immediately it was orchestrated, Ayi felt the blow set against him from hundreds of kilometres through the mystical powers of the fetishist.

Le soir de ce jour, à deux cent kilomètres de Dévi, Ayi perçut une violente crampe dans le haut du dos au-dessous de son cou. Il s'assit. [...] La douleur revint, vive, fulgurante, se propagea du bas ventre jusqu'aux membres inférieurs, suivie d'une douloureuse contraction du cœur. [...] On fit venir son bôconon; le médium consulta l'oracle et fit entendre que l'esprit de son patient était pris dans un piège. (pp.265-266)

On the evening of that day, two hundred kilometres from Dévi, Ayi felt a violent cramp in his upper back below his neck. He sat down. The pain came back alive and burning, spreading from the lower abdomen to the lower limbs, followed by a painful contraction of the heart. [...] His bokonon was brought; the medium consulted the oracle and made it known that his patient's mind was caught in a trap. (authors' translation)

Among other consequences of occultic practices retained in the analysis of this novel are those of the public denunciation of a bad fate previously cast against a victim. There are occultic practices in African tradition in such a way that once they are uttered against a person, that person is obliged to confess all the evils committed in the past against someone before death strikes. This is the case of Ayi, who, by the time he wanted to die, he has to confess publicly through the mystical power uttered against him all the evils he has done against his relatives as well as Dévi, his former fiancée.

... Je devais donner un de mes pieds mais je l'ai remplacé par le cœur de l'enfant de la cousine Yéwa. J'ai tué mon neveu Lotéi pour avoir une récolte abondante et augmenter ma fortune. Ha.... C'est sur mon ordre que Loukoudjê mê a tué Lako. J'ai tenté de tuer un jeune collégien Komalan; je n'ai pas réussi mais j'ai pu le rendre paralytique ... (pp.266-267)

... I had to give one of my feet but I replaced it with the heart of cousin Yewa's child. I killed my nephew Lotéi to have an abundant harvest and increase my fortune. Ha.... It was on my order that Loukoudjê mê killed Lako. I tried to kill a young Komalan schoolboy; I did not succeed but I was able to make him paralytic ... (authors' translation)

We note in the above quotation the confessions of Ayi before his death. He confesses all the evils he did against Dévi and all other people allied to him. This is the root of the positivity of occultic practices. When a person does something that is hidden and believes nobody can see the commission of the crime, there is often some occultic powers in African tradition when proffered against the person, that person will surely be obliged to confess all the evils committed that were hidden.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of Zodékon-Eleceis' *Marriage impossible* has allowed us to examine the various manifestations of occultic power and their consequences in traditional African society. This practice, which we believe to be forgotten, continues to be rampant, even resurrected today in our various African societies. It is a kind of return to the source for most Africans who seem to forget their origins. So there will be no question of leaving traditional African beliefs in jeopardy. It is obvious that in most of our African societies, imported religions such as Islam and Christianity have taken over in our daily practices. To this effect, we urge Africans to work more in the practice of occultic powers so as not to allow our cultural and heritage to be exterminated. Since the practice of occultic power has its merits and demerits in our societies, it is high time that every African

appropriated these practices as an ancestral inheritance where the good is jealously guarded and the evil consecrated for a personal defense against enemies.

8. References

Bouchet, C. (2000). *B.A.-BA de l'Occultisme*, Puiseaux: Pardès

Ellis, S. & Ter Haar, G. (1998). Religion and politics in Sub-Saharan Africa, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36(2), 175-201.

Encyclopedia Britannica (2002). Available at <https://www.britannica.com>.

Leistner, E. (2014). Witchcraft and African development, *African Security Review*, 23(1), 53-77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2013.875048>

Mbembe, A. (1993). La prolifération du divin en Afrique subsaharienne, in G. Kepel (ed.), *Les Politiques de Dieu*. Paris. Le Seuil, 177-200.

Thorndike, L. (1984). *A history of magic and experimental science*. New York, Columbia University Press. Zodékon-Eleceis, A. (2014): *Mariage impossible*. Abidjan: Les Classiques Ivoiriens.