

## **Facing irrationality in the crime fiction of Africa and the Americas**

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### **Resumo**

O artigo oferece uma visão comparativa dos romances policiais no sul globalizado, no qual, apesar de seus diferentes orígenes geográficos, estes escritores, além de certas características literárias, têm uma base comum nas suas sociedades: Um universo imaginário no qual a irracionalidade existe lado a lado com o mágico religioso. Esta constante ajuda aos escritores, no primeiro lugar, oferece uma simbólica interpretação do funcionamento do significado, assim como da estrutura social e política das sociedades caribenha, africana e latino-americana nas quais o fenômeno da religião sincrética e as práticas mágicas aparecem como única expressão de uma compartilhada espiritualidade. Esta invariável serve também para ajudar aos escritores a reproduzir a imagem dum certo caos social, resultado de um histórico cataclismo, o qual implica a impossibilidade de que, a realidade proceda com a mesma lógica dos países ocidentais. Nos locais onde a prática mágico religiosa simboliza a relação do povo com a violência, expressada mediante a história, esta é assimilada pela sociedade como um meio de vida. Deste modo, estabeleço um paralelo entre o universo dos romances e o destino histórico dos povos caribenhos, latino-americanos e africanos, usando a irracionalidade como um elemento unificador. Ao longo dos temas da bruxaria e da religião sincrética, elementos da irracionalidade, outro

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constante tópico será a modificação de certos ingredientes os quais procedem da tradição da ficção policial, dando a esta um sabor local por trazer a irracionalidade ao centro da estrutura da história criminal.

**Palavras-chave:** Crime ficção, autores brasileiros, autores caribenhos, autores africanos, religião mágica, religião sincrética.

**Abstract**

A comparative view of Southern World crime fiction novels will demonstrate how, despite their different geographical origins, all these writers go beyond certain literary characteristics, to explore a basic foundation common to their societies: an imaginary universe in which irrationality exists side by side with the magico-religious. This constant feature allows them, first of all, to give a symbolic rendering of the functioning of the mind, as well as of the social and political structure of African, Caribbean and Latin American societies in which the phenomenon of syncretic religions and magic practices appears as the sole expression of a shared spirituality. This invariable trait also allows writers to reproduce the image of a certain social chaos, the result of historical cataclysms, which implies the impossibility of giving reality the same logic as in Western countries. Where the practice of the magico-religious is concerned, it symbolizes people's relationship with the violence expressed throughout history as well as the way such violence is assimilated into a society's way of life. Thus, we will establish a parallel between the universe of the novels and historical fates of peoples of the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, using irrationality as the unifying element. Along with the theme of witchcraft and syncretic religion, motif of the invasion of irrationality, another constant topic will be the modification of certain ingredients which recur in the tradition of detective fiction, giving it a local flavor by bringing irrationality at the center of the structure of crime story.

**Keywords:** Crime fiction, brazilian's authors, caribbean's authors, African author's, magico-religious, syncretic religions.

## **Resumen**

El artículo ofrece una visión comparativa de las novelas policíacas en el Sur globalizado, en el cual, a pesar de sus diferentes orígenes geográficos, estos escritores, más allá de ciertas características literarias, tienen una base común en sus sociedades: Un universo imaginario en el cual la irracionalidad existe lado a lado con lo mágico religioso. Esta constante ayuda a los escritores, en primer lugar, a ofrecer una simbólica interpretación del funcionamiento del significado, así como de la estructura social y política de las sociedades caribeña, africana y latinoamericana en las cuales el fenómeno de la religión sincrética y las prácticas mágicas aparecen como única expresión de una compartida espiritualidad. Esta invariable sirve también para ayudar a los escritores a reproducir la imagen de un cierto caos social, resultado de un histórico cataclismo, el cual implica la imposibilidad de que, la realidad proceda con la misma lógica de los países occidentales. Los lugares donde la práctica mágico religiosa simboliza relaciones del pueblo con la violencia, expresada a través de la historia, ésta es asimilada por la sociedad como un medio de vida. De este modo, establezco un paralelo entre el universo de las novelas y el destino histórico de los pueblos caribeños, latinoamericanos y africanos, usando la irracionalidad como un elemento unificador. A lo largo del tema de la brujería y la religión sincrética, elementos de la irracionalidad, otro constante tópico será la modificación de ciertos ingredientes los cuales proceden de la tradición de la ficción policial, dando a esta un sabor local por traer la irracionalidad al centro de la estructura de la historia criminal.

**Palabras claves:** Crimen ficción, autores brasileños, autores caribeños, autores africanos, religión mágica, religión sincrética.

A comparative view of Southern World crime fiction novels will demonstrate how, despite their different geographical origins, all these writers go beyond certain literary characteristics, to explore a basic foundation common to their societies: an imaginary universe in which irrationality exists side by side with magico-religious.

This constant feature allows them, first of all, to give a symbolic rendering of the functioning of the mind, as well as of the social and political structure of African, Caribbean and Latin American societies in which the phenomenon of syncretic religions and magic practices appears as the sole expression of a shared spirituality. This invariable trait also allows writers to reproduce the image of a certain social chaos, the result of historical cataclysms, which implies the impossibility of giving reality the same logic as in Western countries. Where magico-religious practices are concerned, it symbolizes people's relationship with the violence expressed throughout history as well as the way such violence is assimilated into a society's way of life. Thus, we will establish a parallel between the universe of the novels and historical fates of peoples of the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, using irrationality as the unifying element. Along with the motif of the invasion of irrationality, another constant topic will be the modification of certain ingredients which recur in the tradition of detective fiction, giving it a local flavor by bringing irrationality at the center of the structure of crime story.

With its origins in the northern hemisphere at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the detective novel was, at first, the product of western imagination. It was only in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that crime fiction began to develop in the works of authors from the southern hemisphere, Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, writers who would rethink the peculiar features of their respective societies and adapt the genre to their social reality. Indeed, the unique nature of their works is owed to the special importance they ascribe to an understanding of societies in the southern hemisphere and the way they choose to portray communities and their destiny. A comparative view of Southern World crime fiction novels will demonstrate how, despite their geographical origins, these writers go beyond certain literary

characteristics, to explore a basic foundation common to their societies: an imaginary universe in which irrationality exists side by side with witchcraft and religion. This constant feature allows them, first of all, to give a symbolic rendering of the functioning of the mind, as well as of the social and political structure of African, Caribbean and Latin American societies in which the phenomenon of syncretic religions and magic practices appears as the sole expression of a shared spirituality. This invariable trait also allows writers to reproduce the image of a certain social chaos, the result of historical cataclysms, which implies the impossibility of giving reality the same logic than in Western countries. Where the practice of witchcraft and religions is concerned, it symbolizes people's relationship with the violence expressed throughout history as well as the way such violence is assimilated into a society's way of life. Thus, we will establish a parallel between the universe of the novels and historical fates of peoples of the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, using irrationality as the unifying element<sup>1</sup>.

Besides, this article aims to bring out the original interpretation of magico-religious thought in the popular imagination, by analyzing the complicated interplay of adaptations of the detective novel within the national and regional realities of countries of the southern hemisphere. Along with the theme of witchcraft and religion, another constant topic will be the modification of certain ingredients which recur in the tradition of detective fiction, giving it a local flavor by bringing irrationality at the center of the structure of crime story. Thus, adapted as it is to a social framework quite different from the context of

the western model, the story leads to original scriptural choices which, although marginalizing the authors works in crime fiction worldwide, still address the logic of institutions and the automatism displayed in the collective unconscious of the southern hemisphere.

Anastasil Delarose Makambo's<sup>2</sup> » and Pius Ngandu Nkashama's<sup>3</sup> works will be used as references. In this article, Makambo demonstrate a common perspective between Haitian and African literatures which both use magical realism in the Romanesque universe to express the extreme deterioration of their societies. Pius Ngandu Nkashama shows how African crime fiction novels permit a view of incoherent power structures, entering irrationality in the structure of the crime fiction story itself. Our aim will be to show how those two scriptural choices also emerge in the crime fiction novels from the Americas to express the failure of societies who also have experienced historical commotions.

Several novels will provide a point of departure for the study of Americas and African societies and the privileged relationship enjoyed by them by means of irrational phenomena and magico-religious thought. Among these works will be included: *The Killing of the Saints* (1991) and *Final Acts* (2000) by the Cuban novelist, Alex Abella; *El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro* (2002) by Daniel Chavarria of Uruguay; *Hotel Brasil* (1999) by the Brazilian, Frei Betto; *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) by the Martinican, Patrick Chamoiseau; *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne* (2006) by the Haitian, Gary Victor, *Les Cocus Posthumes* by the Zairian, Bolya, *Sorcellerie àBout Portant* by his compatriot, Achille F NGoye; and *L'Empreinte du Renard* (2006) by the Malian, Moussa Konaté.

According to Marc Lits, the necessary ingredients of a detective novel are: ‘a detective; a mysterious and unexplained crime; a victim; the deductive hypothesis on which reasoning is based; the making-up of the story the other way around from the crime to its resolution; and a final solution with the effect it should produce<sup>4</sup>.’ (LITS, 1999: 28). Therefore, with such a start, it is possible to see how crime fiction from the southern hemisphere, by adapting to a peculiar social context in which irrationality is also an inevitable ingredient, necessarily introduces certain generic variables. To start with, the detective is usually a police officer from the South who will carry out his investigation in a relatively familiar environment. Consequently, in order to solve the mystery, he must combine his knowledge of western police procedure with that of the tropical society to which he belongs. Indeed, together with the skills of observation and deduction that he will often display, such a detective will also demonstrate his ability to negotiate with specific contexts and cultural behaviors.

So it is his knowledge of African customs which permits Inspector Robert Nègre to move his investigation forward (*Les Cocus Posthumes*); it is his familiarity with using the ‘appropriate expression’ which will determine the expertise of Commissioner Habib, aka ‘the Philosopher’ (LITS, 1999:56), in his verbal sparring with the Dogon chiefs and his interpretation of the hidden meaning of the world (*L’Empreinte du Renard*); finally, thanks to his mastery of the creole language, Brigadier-in-Chief Bouafesse will communicate perfectly with the witness-suspects,

unlike his senior officer, Inspector Pilon (*Solibo Magnifique*). Furthermore, versed as they are in the surrounding irrationality and the superstitions which totally engulf the local culture, such cops are able to function in an atmosphere of irrationality, choosing assistants who are who are, to say the least, far from orthodox for crime fiction novels. The marabout (*Les Cocus Posthumes*), the sorcerer (*El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro*) and the obeahman (*Solibo Magnifique*) are therefore consulted in order to discover the truth. It must be said that here the detective novel, seen as ‘an inquiry conducted in a rational, even a scientific, manner’ (BOILEAU-NARCEJAC, 1964: 8) fails to keep step with the natural biotype.

At first, in these countries the cops from the south do not have at their disposal the technical support available to western police. In their case, the police hardly have the most basic of support systems to carry out an investigation (*L’Empreinte*), and both financial and technical deficiency precludes the possibility of sophisticated laboratory analysis. Under these circumstances, the investigation must be carried out ‘barehanded’ and the detective must rely only on his deductive faculties and his knowledge of the local culture. His work becomes all the more difficult when, faced with irrationality and magico-religious practices, Cartesian methods fail miserably. In *Solibo Magnifique*, as long as Pilon, the ‘brainy’ cop, refuses to demean himself by resorting to strict observance of Cartesian methods, a solution continues to evade him. It is only by confronting irrationality that he will begin to make headway in the case. In *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, Inspector Azémar appears at once skeptical and distraught, unable to totally reject all supernatural phenomena.

In fact, his investigation hardly progresses, for he is unable to see any logical sense in the phenomena and finds himself more and more bogged down in 'tough superstitions that [latch on] to his mind like leeches.' (GARY,2006:70). He will consequently begin to adapt more and more to the voodoo environment, abandoning his Cartesian methods in an attempt to solve the mystery of the bells. Indeed, in both these detective stories from the Caribbean, the solution of the mystery will depend on the detective's ability to challenge Cartesian tactics, and instead to adjust himself to the local environment and raise doubts about its popular religious tenets. In the Brazilian novel, *Hotel Brasil*, it is because Del Bosco underestimates the power of popular beliefs that he will fail to unmask Dona Dino, the fervent follower of Afro-Brazilian cults and divination practices, guilty of ritual crimes. On the other hand, in *Final Acts*, his deep knowledge of the beliefs and rites of santería will assist Charles Morel, a lawyer of Cuban origin, to find out who is really guilty of the crimes committed. It must also be added that, in many cases, what one sees is a gradual 'drift from the police inquest to the establishment of identity'. (PINÇONNAT,1998: 50). In such works as *Final Acts*, *Solibo Magnifique*, *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne* and, to a lesser extent, *Les Cocus Posthumes*, in the course of the inquiry, it is in facing irrationality that the cop will rediscover his culture and begin to accept his repressed self. Here, the police investigation, exposing as it does the character of the investigator to irrationality as a necessary component of local culture, often gives to the detective story and to the solving of the mystery an equivalent to that of an authentic initiation experience which will lead directly to the rediscovery of identity.

So far as the mythical detective is concerned, it must be pointed out that the stereotype of the European policeman inspired by such characters as Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and even Gaston Leroux, is almost entirely absent from the crime fiction of the South. However, in *L'Empreinte du Renard*, Police Commissioner Habib, with his great knowledge of men and matters and with his extraordinary faculties of analysis, does in some way recall those famous detectives. Always accompanied by police inspector Sosso Traore, replica of Watson or Hastings, Habib comes over as methodical, thoughtful and perceptive. Indeed, the main characters of the crime fiction from South often come out to be the products of several literary traditions, even if the writers generally favor not detectives working at home ('armchair detectives') but investigators on the ground, 'losers' more like the traditional American crime fiction detectives. The latter go rushing in pursuit of the truth and of the real guilty parties, refusing to be carried away by corruption (Azémar Dieuswalwé in *Les Cloches*, Inspector Nègre in *Cocus Posthumes*, Bastidas in *El Rojo* and, to some extent, Habib also in *L'Empreinte*). Yet in many novels in our corpus, these virtuous and solitary detectives are replaced by corrupt civil servants and bloodthirsty army officers, by hordes of rotten policemen of the Tonton Macoute type, who all end up wreaking havoc and chaos, using methods that smack of the system of oppression and repression of which they are the representatives. In *Sorcellerie à Bout Portant*, Kizito, coming back from Zaire to investigate the circumstances of his brother's death, finds a corrupt national

police force that will seize his passport and extort money from him the moment he steps off the airplane. In these novels, certain members of the force are so violent and cruel that, even when working on the side of the law, they are like assassins who appear legitimate because they are defending the rights of the state. It is members of the local police force, torturers and militiamen who, with sadistic pleasure, wield the truncheon and arbitrary power. In *Solibo Magnifique*, Brigadier-in-Chief Bouafesse abuses the humiliations of a neocolonial society, terrorizing the people as he asserts his authority. He tortures using the language of Molière and the French dictionary; assisted by others as carnivorous as he is, terrorizes witnesses, not in the quest for truth, but purely in an effort to ensure that he is respected. In *El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro*, Alberto Rios, unjustly accused of having caused the death of a man in a road accident, is in fact Orlando Ortega Ortiz, aka ‘the horror lieutenant’, a former torturer in the pay of Uruguayan and Argentinean dictators. In the story of the suffering of Aldo Bianchi, a victim of imprisonment and torture, one learns of Rio’s horrible obscenities and of his sophisticated ways of torturing people. Finally, in *Hotel Brasil*, Commissioner of Police Del Bosco also takes a morbid pleasure in inspiring fear and humiliation. As a student at the police school during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985), he learnt, to his detriment, how to impose torture and to carry out secret interrogations, and he still applying the ‘Interrogation Manual’ which he has carefully kept. References to death squads<sup>5</sup> and military juntas appear often in the text which tells the story, punctuated with violence and death.

The police, usually expected to ensure calm, order and security in countries of the northern hemisphere, here symbolize violence. Someone with dirty hands is almost always a member of the police; it may be Brigadier-in-Chief Bouafesse, in his connection with several deaths (*Solibo*); Robert Nègre (*Cocus Posthumes*) who has carried with him from childhood the secret of having caused an unintentional death; or simply some unnamed person in uniform, living by corruption and by the power of a violence that only knows the language of money (SBP). Indeed the corrupt cop is a familiar character in the classical spy novel or the crime fiction novel. It is not so much that every structure of the system is tainted by corruption and enforced cruelty. Thus, in the literature of the South, the representative of state law is a complex character, often shady, always unpredictable and, therefore, to be feared by the people who see in him nothing but a person in whom they can place no trust.

Faced with such a degree of deterioration in the police force, one may readily understand why there should be some hesitation in clearly identifying who are victims and who criminals. Yves Reuter gives the following definition of the detective novel:

The detective novel may be characterized by its focus on a serious crime, one which is, (or should be), considered reprehensible within the law. What is at stake, depending on the case, is to know who has committed the crime and how (mystery novel); to put a stop to it and/or to deal with its perpetrator (Gothic novel); and to prevent its happening (suspense novel). (REUTER, 1997: 9-10)

One may say, therefore, that detective novels written in the southern hemisphere often endanger the laws of certainty present in the classical mystery story in which usually a cop, a victim and a guilty party, are all clearly identifiable the one from the other. Here, the individual crime committed at the start generally serves as a pretext for the expression of an organized state violence, which may well be a great deal more pernicious and murderous. Such a crime is offered like bait in the story, a drop in the ocean, as the social context becomes clear to the mind of the reader. Besides, the associated violence gives a new meaning to events, setting the individual off as blameless and making the judicial system and, consequently, the government authorities, appear guilty. Sometimes the emphasis is placed exclusively on serious crimes carried out by officials and white-collar workers, thus nullifying, so to speak, the original crime. For example, in *Solibo Magnifique*, one learns from the very start that the mystery which the police are pouring all their energy into solving does not even exist. No crime has taken place, at least not yet, for it is the barbaric action of the police that will cause the death of several victims in the course of the inquiry. In *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, the original crime is insignificant, absolutely zany in fact, since it involves the theft of the chimes of the bells at the village church! Apparently benign as it is, the mystery, nevertheless, plunges the entire village community into a torment on the eve of the annual celebration of the patron saint's day, an event which is expected to draw thousands of people. Azémar will never quite solve the mystery of the bells as he has

been required to, but he will expose the corrupt and bloodthirsty officials and unscrupulous members of congregations and will bring to light some local dirty business, leaving behind him a village drained of its real hoodlums.

The specific nature of the framework of the story will also interfere with the principles of the literary genre by introducing guilty parties who are not necessarily responsible for their actions, who may be the instruments of a cult or a religious group (*The Killing of the Saints*, *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*), or may defend traditional values required to ensure the community's harmonious existence. Thus, in *L'Empreinte du Renard*, the one who commits the murders, 'the cat', embodies the will of the gods and his individual nature has nothing whatever to do with the drama that unfolds. Better yet, the idea of blame is, in this case, altogether questionable, in that 'the cat' is acting in the interests of the community. In fact, the young Dogons who have gone against the taboos must be punished, otherwise the beliefs of their religious traditions will have been proven to be false, resulting in the collapse of the Dogon world. Similarly, in *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, the little beggar girl who steals the chimes of the bells acts on behalf of the community since, by so doing, she reflects the hidden anxieties of all. Besides, this little girl is a witch, someone 'possessed of an inner magical power which may work independently of her and do away completely with rituals.' (GARNIER, 1999: 84). As she renders the bells soundless, she simultaneously loses consciousness and cognizance of what she has done. Thus the notion of criminal responsibility may not be applied to her. Finally, in *Hotel Brasil*,

it is Dona Dino who, although the perpetrator of several ritual crimes, is portrayed as a devout and saintly woman, living more in heaven than on earth (GARNIER, 1999:99). Indeed, existing as she does in an esoteric world not subject to the human law, she also does not know what it is to feel guilty.

In fact, in some of the stories, social reality observes practices which are clearly more cruel and more repulsive than the precepts of worlds traditionally based on magico-religious beliefs, and their heroes are like straw criminals beside the true masters of crime who violate, torture and murder constantly and with complete impunity (*Final Acts, Les Cocus Posthumes*), sometimes even under the banner of state law (*Solibo Magnifique, El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro*). Another brand of originality in these detective stories is to be found in the fact that the really guilty parties are never punished. While aberrant powers and severe capitalism establish a new world order, legitimizing social injustice and a horrific global ‘rascalocracy’ – “vyoucratie” (BOLYA, 2001:196), the principle of immunity is firmly established. *El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro* thus tells the story of frustration and hatred brought about by the fact that the executioners at the helm of military dictatorships in Latin American countries are allowed to walk free and go unpunished. This novel clearly recalls, as does *Les Cocus Posthumes*, the horrors concealed by legal state power or those carried out by highly placed officials: trafficking in young girls or children shamefully sold through channels under the watch of the most senior officers and military bosses; trade in corpses or organs removed from patients for the benefit of important western clinics, with the rowdy complicity

of political bosses and suitably highly placed government officials; massacres carried out with immunity, in a kind of mad frenzy, by army officers... (*vide* NGANDU NKASHAMA, 1989:195). It is Bolya who will denounce with the greatest of cynicism this impunity which confers on those who commit such acts the status of untouchables, a kind of immortality. By this means, even when dead these 'posthumous cuckolds' (ces "cocus phostumes") 'continue to live on, continue to exist, to haunt the imagination' (NGANDU NKASHAMA, 1989:172). In all the novels studied, can be seen an 'officialisation' and an 'oligarchisation' of the crime, in that those capable for the worst are, in fact, the untouchables associated with state power or with international trusts and organizations working in opposition to the interests of the people.

Indeed, the objective of these detective stories is to seek to give meaning to social reality and to reveal the incoherence of political systems. Rather than being content to ascertain who committed a particular crime, the novels show the wide margin between moral and traditional values and the social behaviors introduced by absurd power systems (*El Rojo, Solibo*) and a fast-moving capitalism (*Cocus Posthumes, Final Acts, L'Empreinte*). Thus, the last-named feature calls into question the purpose of the inquest as 'an attempt to move from a position of disorder to one of order, to erase the crime committed at the beginning' (LITS, 1999: 80). Indeed, in the crime fiction of the southern hemisphere, a return to order is usually portrayed as being quite out of the question. First of all, with truncheon blows delivered by devilish police personnel and Tonton Macoutes, 'order'

becomes synonymous with disorder, symbol of totalitarian governments and crazy powers in which either state law or the law and interests of the other/s holds sway in situations where prohibition, violence and terror prevail (*El Rojo, Brasil Hotel, Sorcellerie*). Yet in some countries, the breakdown of institutions is such that central power is non-existent, and as a result, some wonder what is the meaning of the state<sup>6</sup>, while others are happy it is no more. This is what happens in *Les Cocus Posthumes* when His African Excellency refers to Africa as a Garden of Eden for crooks of all kinds:

What do you expect? I keep forgetting that you are from a country where people believe in human rights [he says to Sangsexe, an international merchant involved in shady business in France]. So far as I am concerned, I am in no danger. Here [in Africa], I do as I please. Ha, ha! Here the State does not exist. Here, no-one even knows what it means. Here, there is simply nothing. (BOLYA, 2001:84)

And so, the policeman, the representative here of ‘established order’, that is, very often the person who ensures the existence of an imperious external force in the local environment, meets with a situation in which it is impossible to end the chaos. Moreover, refusing to take any notice of the communities and of their milieu, he disturbs the ‘natural social order’ which he is supposed to maintain, thus creating a ‘*confusing energy*’ at once as demanding as heedless of the effects it produces.’ (BONARDEL, 1996:14).

In the crime fiction novels of the South, the intensity of the effects of local culture means that no element which would normally constitute the mystery story appears normal: the police inquiry is conducted in keeping with extraordinary methods and sometimes in an atmosphere of fantasy, crimes almost always maintain a link with irrationality by means or with magico-religious beliefs, political and legal systems reflect a pronounced state of moral decay, and government officials and the police become the real criminals. In fact, what distinguishes these works from others is the subtle combination of the classical features of police intrigue with the peculiarities of local cultures.

At this point we are already beginning to see that the symbolic pursuit in these stories is not to solve a crime, but to give it “meaning” in the local setting. In fact, the detective mystery serves here as a much more basic kind of inquiry, in terms of metaphysics and identity, into societies and their history, in which irrationality plays a fundamental role. Indeed, a deeper analysis of the procedures of the appearance of irrationality permits us to see that these stories undoubtedly reflect one of the axes of the new shape of crime fiction as described by André Vanoncini (1993 : 104-105):

[...] very many of these novels do not follow the model of the detective novel in which the investigation story organizes the text, instead they use it as a bridge to find their way to widely different aspects and problems of today’s world: a sociological study of a milieu; an ideological analysis of modern lifestyles; an exposure of repression of a community’s historical awareness; a psychopathological portrait of an alienated society.

In fact, there is no question whatever; the novels studied take us back to all these issues using the invasive presence of irrationality in the story. First, we see the extent to which irrationality is a special feature of countries of the southern hemisphere and how much it determines the way they are to be understood. An almost constant reference to witchcraft and sorcery, to superstition or syncretic religions and their occult practices pervades the crime fiction of Africa and the Americas, revealing behaviors and beliefs very similar and recalling the spiritual heritage common to both continents, which came over from Africa with the slaves. Through Haitian voodoo in *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, Cuban santería in *The Killing of the Saints*, *Final Acts* and *El Rojo en la Pluma del Loro*, candomblé in *Hotel Brasil*, sorcery in *Les Cocus Posthumes* and *Sorcellerie à Bout Portant*, and the religious conviction of the Dogons in *L'Empreinte du Renard*, magico-religious traditions are forever present and reveal a real connection between the traditions of the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa, reaffirming the vital power of popular beliefs which today show a fresh upsurge. By means of different versions and indications, irrationality is always seen as in charge of the imaginary world; it is also irrationality which seems to shape the real universe of societies.

First of all, in these novels in which rationality has surrendered to all kinds of irrational symptoms, wild cock-and-bull stories and unorthodox practices, irrationality becomes that “invisible power, alarming and mysterious, with the unfailing ability to interfere in the lives of humans.”<sup>7</sup> (LAËNNEC, 1993: 13).

In *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, voodoo, a sort of natural Haitian biotype, completely takes over the description of the investigation. In *Final Acts* or *Hotel Brasil* in which the murders committed are ritual crimes, reality is suffused with religious beliefs and practices. Among the novels being studied, only *Solibo Magnifique* is different, for in it irrationality manifests itself through paranormal events unassociated with religion and by means of a privileged relationship between Martinican “Djobers” and the creole universe rearranged by a kind of “magic realism<sup>8</sup>” evidenced throughout the stories. Nonetheless irrationality, which here symbolizes the popular imagination, works like leaven on the traditional endogenous culture, to ensure that the community may be identified and even sometimes also be the expression of the universe. In *Solibo Magnifique* or *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, only creoles who can enter into subtle communication with the environment can see beyond reality to discern the magic power which enlivens the Antillean universe. In *L’Empreinte du Renard*, for reality to retain its meaning, an irrational explanation must be found for the murders. Without an irrational explanation to guarantee traditional values, the world lacks meaning. Thus, it is magic that confers logic on reality.

In fact, it is as though, in these southern countries, it is no longer possible to tell reality from irrationality. First, in societies ruled by imagination and religious beliefs, a global impression of unreality prevails. Besides, the irrational world is somehow differently aroused by the violence of the real world. “It is not by chance, [writes Pius Ngandu-Nkashama of African countries] that these places are destined to be in a state of persistent poverty and

an unlikely kind of survival because of the actions of their cruel masters; that they should have religious mystics springing up with “messianic churches”, an infinite number of “visions”, inhumane cannibalistic practices, black magic séances, unbelievable sorcery pervading all levels of politics, even in the organization of educational programs.” (NGANDU NKASHAMA,1989:171). Therefore, in those southern countries where “zombification”<sup>9</sup> is rife, religious practices and beliefs will show the connection between people’s lives and the madness of the environment.

Indeed, for most of those who are shut out of the society, blacks or creoles communities, exiles, the poor and marginalized, the world is a place of disenchantment and horror where crimes of all types combine with cruel and despotic police and powerful officials. In the lives of such people there is no room for chance but only perhaps for divine intervention, and religious beliefs play a crucial role, serving as a refuge from the surrounding madness and an escape from absurd reality. Thus in *Hotel Brasil*, for example, within the daily dismay of the Carioca people, we find all kinds of saints, gods and popular religious beliefs, symbolizing not only the complexity and vitality of Afro-Brazilian religious perspectives, but also their need to give some meaning to life. In this novel, religious superstition and spirituality have expanded into a sanctuary, providing a means of social injustice and oppression from within.

Furthermore, in many cases, irrationality appears, reacting to a context of oppression imposed by an ideological system, whether associated to politics or the police. *Solibo Magnifique* tells the story of an inquiry that plunges the creole universe into

an incoherent state by imposing upon it the Cartesian values through the actions of the police. The creole “Djobers”, in a bid to regain their creole space, oppose western imperialism with marvelous magic. Together with that, the bells miraculously disappear because they recall the arrogance of the catholic religion and disfigure the amazing ritual of the Haitian twilight. Nonetheless, separated from the steeple, the bells correct the wrongful seizure and contribute to the cleansing of the original place by the Haitian populace. Finally, in *El Rojo*, it is divine law over profane law that decides of Rios’ fate before the courts. Similarly, it is the orisha Yémaya<sup>10</sup> who blesses Bini, the santa<sup>11</sup>, so that she wrongly accuses Rios in an effort to set right the course of history and punish the really guilty parties. In all three cases, irrationality takes on a revolutionary scope in that it aims to bring about the annihilation of instruments of oppression. In these stories, therefore, irrationality is the “spokesman of another reality that had failed, been ignored and spurned” (BONARDEL, 1996:6), that of victims of social injustice and discrimination (*Killing of the Saints, Final Acts*) which at times can be seen as the creole reality (*Solibo, Les Cloches*), and, at others, that of the innumerable victims of South American military dictatorships (*El Rojo*).

In fact, in these stories, it is impossible to consider the invasion of irrationality without establishing a parallel with the history of these societies, in the sense that irrationality here permits a coming together of the historical awareness of the societies of the southern hemisphere with the humiliation suffered. Haiti, Cuba, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina (mentioned in *El Rojo*) have all experienced very different historical cataclysms,

but all so violent that they seem to have caused the same impact on whole societies and on the minds of individual persons. Indeed, social and psychological chaos turns out to be an essential effect of the dictatorships endured, whatever their nature: ideological in Cuba, militaristic in South America, “macoutic” in Haiti, or colonial and postcolonial in Africa and the Caribbean. Mention of tragic historical episodes in these countries calls to mind the evocation of disrupted societies in which irrationality and magico-religious practices not only affect the immediate present but also reflect a reaction to indelible historical inhibitions. If Solibo dies of a “cut-throat word” (“une égorgette de la parole”), whether “from having had too much to say and to little to listen to” (LAGARDE,2001:166), it is because the traditional Martinican world is foundering beneath the weight of acculturation and assimilation, the logical consequence of colonization and departmentalization respectively. Similarly, in *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, the act of witchcraft that occurs when the village is threatened by corrupt, bloodthirsty officials and unscrupulous clerics, is to be seen as a symbolic act, calling to mind not only the importance of the role of the church and of priests in Haitian history, through very close links with totalitarian regimes<sup>12</sup> (especially of Jean-Claude Duvalier and Jean-Baptiste Aristide), but also the ever present influence of the West on Haitian destiny. At the same time, in *L’Empreinte*, a magico-religious interpretation appears when modernity comes to challenge traditional values. Besides in *El Rojo*, through the intervention of the santa, Bini, Aldo uses santería and its practices

in order to torment more effectively his former executioner and thus, avenge himself of the torture inflicted on him at the time of the military dictatorships. In these novels, where “witchcraft is used as a means of correcting destiny” (GARNIER, 1999:VIII), irrationality first shows, to some degree, a force whose purpose is to correct the injustices of history, as a source of energy contrary to “nihilation”.

Alongside the expression of the ridding of all these communities of occult obstacles, irrationality appears in the literary universe as the evocation of a barbaric world in which violence, moral decay and injustice have all overstepped the bounds of reality and understanding, and firmly place the daily routine of people in a kind of fantasy hell, where nothing seems to make sense. *Solibo Magnifique* brings together western demon forces, face to face with a magical creole realism to express the inhumanity of the process of assimilation and the resulting psychological alienation. *Les cloches* produces a Haitian reality in which lies and fabrication, voodoo beliefs, bloodthirsty crimes of government officials, ruinous plots by external forces, all clash in a strange savagery. In *El Rojo* and *Hotel Brasil*, towards the end of South American military dictatorships, Latin American countries have become places made by generals, unsettled universes in which irrationality lies in inconceivable cruelty, reducing human beings to the status of either debris or monsters: countries where torture and crime of unspeakable bestiality are still carried out on the part of the State, and corruption and sadistic acts are committed by “defenders of the public order”. In *Les Cocus Posthumes* and *Sorcellerie à Bout Portant*, annihilation gets the

better of all the structures of power and communities are placed at the mercy of men guided solely by bloodthirsty instincts and by the get-rich-quick impulse: corruption at all levels; various forms of perversion; murder of innocents; trafficking in bodies and organs; human sacrifice; and cannibalism.

In these novels, irrationality appears as the symptom of abnormality in a social setting. It translates the illogical nature of real situations and evokes collective tragedies. Nonetheless, in this state of extreme destabilization, irrationality, sometimes not content to reflect the daily monstrous acts connected to dehumanization, shows itself as another destructive force, randomly indispensable to the process of “zombification”. Thus, in *Les Cloches de la Brésilienne*, corrupt administrators and political leaders and shameless clerics manipulate rumor and superstition in a bid to seize power. The influence of voodoo then becomes terribly dangerous and destructive and contributes to widespread chaos. In *Hotel Brasil* as well, superstition and interpretation of religious beliefs appear to strengthen fear and restraint imposed on the people. For instance, Rosaura’s mother’s explanation of an apparition reinforces forbidden behavior. On the other hand, Dona Dino, the obeah woman, contributes to the deterioration of the world, for, in order to keep her special gift, she must perpetrate horrible crimes, sacrificing humans to give thanks to the gods. In *Les Cocus Posthumes* and *Sorcellerie à Bout Portant*, marabout practices and ritual sacrifice are a part of the chaos and reflect the adaptation of people to the ways of their society. As in some novels, magic might be seen as a form of resistance to universal chaos and a way of giving outcasts some real

power to defy social injustice. It sometimes also appears as being unproductive and dangerous when used to manipulate ordinary people and for selfish purposes by a bunch of ambitious fools. Thus, while the benign forces of voodoo or santería speak up in favor of protecting the marginalized masses from social injustice and for opposing societal absurdities, evil magical forces serve the cause of those greedy for power. Therefore, in novels like *Les Cocus Posthumes* and *Sorcellerie à Bout Portant*, which project an Africa at the final stage of annihilation, “maraboutism” and human sacrifice guarantee the holding of power with immunity by Excellencies, the impenitent scum of lofty social spheres, even as they assure initiation to these “Great Lords of the forest” (“Les grands seigneurs de la forêt”) (BOLYA,2001:210) into the most unbelievable horrors and perversions. In these detective novels of the South, where sorcery is very often a symbol of power, one sees irrational forces come face to face, as harbingers of evil as well as of good, either facilitating zombification or working against it.” (MAKAMBO, 2005:91).

Thus, the persistent presence of irrationality in all these stories is linked to several characteristics of the societies they analyze. First, inherent in the folklore and local traditions, irrationality expresses the lively popular imagination always adapted to national realities. Besides, in New World detective novels, if magico-religious beliefs and practices usually retain their historical function as a collective resistance to oppressive forces, in African literature, on the other hand, they appear rather as an act designed to improve material conditions in the lives of isolated individuals, or to increase their power.

This alternating between the original liberating inspiration of syncretic religions in the Caribbean and Latin America and the empirical use of “maraboutic” practice with its often strictly personal objectives, in all cases shows magico-religious practice to be the tool of symbolic power in countries where political and social systems seem to be based on strangeness and immorality. In such a context, a person’s adherence to magico-religious thoughts and practices causes his integration into a decadent social setting to which he reacts either by protecting himself against it, or by contributing to it.

Detective novels from Africa and the Americas assert themselves both as an echo of, and a resistance to, the original manifestation of crime fiction. In the case of the former, it is because these novels take on the classical rules of the genre by being assimilated straightaway to “crime fiction”. In the latter, it is the fact that it is not the elements of the inquiry which seem, as a matter of priority, to determine the strategies used in their writing, but rather the presence of a particular framework, a most unusual one when compared to the occidental societies of the classical crime fiction of the West. Here societal introspection gets the better of the police investigation whose axis is not neglected<sup>7</sup> yet it deviates from the investigation of the crime and moves towards an inquiry into the behavior of a particular society, evoking basic features of the national consciousness.

The literatures of Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America all share a common feature, that of giving a special importance to irrationality in its various forms: magical realism, syncretic religions, and “maraboutic” and magico-religious practices.

The detective novel does not depart from such practice, on the contrary, irrationality becomes a constant feature of the genre and is to be found at all levels of the telling of the story. In this “popular” genre, a critical place is assured for irrationality as the engine of the collective imagination and the mirror of the social landscape. As far as the writing is concerned, irrationality is to be found at the very heart of the structure of crime story, ensuring the modification of the traditional principles of the detective novel. To start with, religious crimes or beliefs and occult practices usually engulf the presentation of the inquiry. In addition, its procedure, far from being simply a means of exposing precise facts, reinforces the impression of unreality, for even as it diagnoses the unsettling of the judicial and police systems in countries of the South, it also disqualifies, to some extent, the Cartesian and western setting of the classical detective novel. Finally, irrationality also claims to be an essential element to express “zombification” of some Caribbean and African countries. Indeed the magical manipulation of the Romanesque universe by southern writers is based on the invasive power of irrationality to denounce moral decay in these societies and to present zombification on the move. Seen from this viewpoint, such stories proceed from the investigation of a specific crime to that of a foul deed of much larger proportions on the historical scale, perpetrated by imperialistic states legalizing violence and the violation of people’s most basic rights, thus laying the foundations for the creation of an alienated society. In fact, the specific nature of novels of crime fiction in which unusual types of crimes and criminals appear, is a symbolic expression of history

in the Americas and in Africa, where violence finds its origins in slavery, colonization, imperialism, dictatorship, racial and religious discrimination, and where acts of aggression are often legitimized by established institutions and imperialistic forces. Eventually, in the case of all these writers who are products of societies that have undergone periods of historical trauma, the detective novel presents itself as a supreme literary example capable of reviving the climate of violence which results from the experience of domination and failure. In such a setting, a pervasive irrationality is a basic scriptural strategy for translating the appearance of the incomprehensible and the unexpected surfacing of original chaos, bringing in its train schizophrenic collective imaginations and pathological behaviors which invariably continue to encourage calling for those old military firebrands or those fresh out of the exotic universal “rascalocracy” described by Bolya (190) as forever in search of other lands “where [for them] the word infinite takes on a meaning all its own”<sup>13</sup>.

#### Notas

<sup>1</sup> This is by no means an exhaustive list and includes crime fiction novels published in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. Others from where these languages are spoken and similar geographical regions must also be mentioned: for Haiti, Nick Stone *Mr Clarinet* (2006) and Stanley Pean *Zombie Blues* (1996); for Latin America the detective fiction by Ramon Illan Bacca (Colombia); and for Africa Pepetela (Angola) *Jaime Burda Agente Secreto* (2001).

<sup>2</sup> « Réalisme merveilleux et rire macabre contre la zombification », *Présence Francophone*, n° 64, 87-100, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> *Écritures et discours littéraires: études sur le roman africain*, Paris, l’Harmattan, 1989.

<sup>4</sup>All quotations written by Francophone's authors have been translated by us.

<sup>5</sup>There were small armed gangs who usually secretly organized the summary execution or capture of activists and dissidents belonging to rival political parties. Well-known in South America in the 1980s, they were mainly responsible for 'Operation Condor', the name given to organized groups of assassins and anti-guerrilla warfare engaged in by the secret service in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay in the mid-1970s.

<sup>6</sup>"The State, what is it? Does it even exist?", Mongo Beti (2000: 55)

<sup>7</sup>Definition that applies to the origin of voodoo, extended for the purpose of this study to all syncretic religions.

<sup>8</sup>Durix, Jean-Pierre (1998 : 9): Term now used to designate specifically those novels in which there appears an unrestrained imagination akin to fantasy.

<sup>9</sup>Term created by René Dépestre borrowed from voodoo terminology:

"...zombification is a form of decay so pronounced and generalized that it is close to a miracle when people survive in such circumstances." Anastasil Delarose Makambo, "Réalisme merveilleux et rire macabre contre la zombification", *Présence Francophone* n° 64, 2005, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup>Afro-Cuban divinity

<sup>11</sup>name by which adherents of Afro-Cuban religions are known

<sup>12</sup>Vide article by William Smarth.

<sup>13</sup>"Rosemonde followed him closely as he travelled before the map of Africa. It was their shared passion: for him because of money and for her the traditions of marriage. They felt it as they walked in the streets of Lomé, Cotonou or Porto-Novo, Abidjan or Brazzaville, "the capital of Free France", a physical feeling of freedom nowhere else experienced.

For them, Africa was the continent where the word infinite took on a meaning of its own", Bolya, *Les Cocus Posthumes*, p. 196.

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