

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Traditions, Politics, and African Detective Fiction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2892m439>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 18(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Yewah, Emmanuel

Publication Date

1990

DOI

10.5070/F7183016816

Copyright Information

Copyright 1990 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

TRADITIONS, POLITICS, AND AFRICAN DETECTIVE FICTION

Emmanuel Yewah

Why was there no flowering [of detective story] under the Roman Empire when an urban population sought amusement in the butchery of the circus, and might have been more cheaply appeased by stories of law-breaking and discovery?

E. M. Wrong¹

Des systèmes tyranniques ne peuvent en aucun cas donner lieu à un roman policier, car la loi n'est pas une norme, mais une illusion.

Pius Nkashama

E. M. Wrong's question above about the Roman Empire may validly be asked about the African societies today even though the object of amusement seems to have shifted from the butchery of the circus to the movies and the "boucherie humaine" of trumped-up political opponents. The question as to why there is "no flowering of the detective story" in African fiction is pertinent and somewhat overdue, especially since African writers writing both in their local and received languages have explored extensively all the major genres. E. M. Wrong suggests in answer to his question, above, that "perhaps a faulty law of evidence was to blame." In the African context, however, it is not only a faulty or illusory legal system that is to blame for the almost total absence of an African detective fiction but also, and more importantly, certain traditional (cultural), social, economic, and, above all, political factors.

Pius Nkashama has noted in *"Ecritures et fiction dans le roman policier"* that Africans, in particular those from French-speaking countries, are avid consumers of the *roman policier* (detective novel), "*le roman policier est, de tous les tests et de toutes les enquêtes, le livre le plus lu et le plus consommé en Afrique.*" Given such a wide readership and a substantial consumer market, the question then becomes: why has the development of detective fiction as a genre been so slow? One possible explanation for the lack of interest by writers is

that the bulk of the readership of detective fiction are students or young people who cannot afford to buy books on a sustained basis. And the bourgeoisie, if one can call them so, for which this would have been an excellent form of entertainment are either illiterate, or for those who can read, have found alternative forms of entertainment. It is important to point out that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to make a living as a writer, especially of detective fiction, in many Third World countries where the daily struggle for such basic human needs as food, clean water, etc. makes the reading of detective fiction not a necessity but a luxury for the have-nots.

Given the kind of impact that colonialism has had on discourses on African cultures and traditions, it is very tempting to want to make a rapprochement between the apparent lack of interest in the production of detective fiction, especially in the French-speaking countries, and the prejudice of the French against what A. E. Murch calls "the old oversensational *romans policiers* and their fictional descendants."² The French "expect to derive something of value from their reading, some information about life or some commentary upon it." And that explains the attitude towards the genre in some cultured circles (though it has become less in recent decades) who consider detective fiction as purely entertainment and, therefore, not serious literature.

African writers, especially those from French-speaking countries, seem to have inherited that French attitude towards the *roman policier*. But beyond such a highly speculative reason, Nkashama's thought-provoking and provocative essay referred to earlier traces the non-flourishing of detective fiction to the African psyche, which is in turn nurtured by its cultural, traditional, social and political milieu. In the first part of this essay, I shall use Nkashama's essay as a point of reference to discuss those factors that make the production of detective fiction not only a very risky undertaking for the African writer but also an almost impossible task. In the second part I shall examine texts recently published by L'Harmattan under the rubric "*Polars Noirs*," such texts as *Traite au Zaïre* (Nzau, 1984), *Cameroun/Gabon: le D.A.S.S. monte à l'attaque* (Abossolo, 1985) (henceforth *Cameroun/Gabon*) and *No Woman No Cry* (Gueye, 1986) to show what may be a symbiotic relationship between the detective text and its context of production, that is, to show how the text shapes its milieu and how the milieu in turn shapes the text. Such a mutual relationship is evident in the way that the texts above redefine the concept of crime and criminal not only in its narrower sense as murder (that forms the basis of most Western detective fiction) but in terms of an individual, an African viewed as a criminal by the West simply because, as a genius, such an individual has the intellectual capabilities to derive a formula to destroy a group or a race. Crime is also defined

in terms of the trafficking in Third World teenage girls to be used as sexual objects in some European capitals. The texts above seem to be dealing with global themes. I do think, however, that dealing with such broad themes is an attempt to circumvent the realities imposed by the cultural, social and political milieu. But the more pressing question is: why does the African writer, even when he or she decides to write detective or espionage fiction, find it not only necessary but imperative to mask the fiction under universal themes? To answer the question, it will be helpful to examine the idea of the individual in traditional African societies.

In such societies in which one of the ideals is the communal, the individual is not an isolated or a unique entity but rather what Richard Bjornson calls "a vital nexus of well-defined relationships that [extend] through time to the ancestors and through space to the other members of the clan or ethnic group. . . ." ³ Consequently, a crime against an individual does not theoretically warrant police investigation because an individual as such does not exist. As Nkashama points out,

le plus grand crime dans ces pays [africains] n'est pas encore le "meurtre" d'un individu, ni un assassin qui relève du "droit commun," mais l'attentat contre la sécurité de l'Etat. . . Le criminel est inséparable du comploteur. . . Les institutions se confondent indifféremment avec les individus. ⁴

A crime in those societies usually calls for one of the two extreme responses; on the one hand the crime may not be investigated at all; on the other, it may be blown out of proportion or be so manipulated that it becomes a crime against the whole community or the state. The political leader in those societies being the incarnation of the state and all its institutions, such a crime is considered an attempt on the person of the absolute ruler. It is in that way that crime passes from the jurisdiction of the legal to the political institution.

Placed in a larger context of an attempt to destabilize the state, and by extension an attempt on the life of the leader who is the representative of societal gods and deities, the response is, in most cases, a general mobilization of the oppressive machinery, that is, the police and the army. Moreover, a crime in some cases is viewed positively as an "acte de bravoure" against "les institutions elles-mêmes établies sur des bases totalement fausses." ⁵ In the first case, and because of the dramatization of crime, it loses one important element of detective fiction, viz., secrecy. In the second, and because the institutions themselves have not been legitimized by the people, crime is trivialized and as such takes away from it both the fascination and the highly formal investigative method used by the detective.

The subversion of what Nkashama calls "*la logique du crime*" certainly has repercussions on the work of the detective. To add to the difficulty of investigation, Nkashama has raised the question of the lack of logistics for the police who are in most cases underpaid and, since they are civil servants, are constantly transferred. Therefore, they cannot undertake an investigation that stretches over several months or years. He also mentions the fact that in some countries the police have literally been abolished and replaced by the army. Under those circumstances, he concludes that an investigation of a crime as in detective fiction is impossible.

It should be added that the police in most African societies continue to play the kind of role that the police played in France in the early 19th century when, as A. E. Murch reports, "Bonaparte reorganized the French police. . .not so much to protect the public from criminals as to keep close watch on any subversive factions that might threaten the newly established régime."⁶ This, of course, has a lot to do with shaping the negative image of the police in those societies. For instance, the image of the police is that of people who are underpaid, lazy, heavy-set, inefficient, corrupt and corruptible—as is evident in the many police barricades on roads in many French-speaking African countries where they harass, intimidate, and rob innocent citizens. The contempt or the lack of respect for the police is manifest in the way they are jeered at and insulted at official parades where they, for some strange reason, perpetuate the stereotype of the police force by occasionally marching out of step like some elementary school children. They are viewed as an oppressive machinery at the service of the political party and the ethnic group in power. One may contrast that role with the kind of role that the police are called upon to play in, for example, English societies, in which they were, until very recently, "unarmed" and are still "non-political. . .and are not direct servants of the government but are administered locally. . ." They are, in fact, "civilians whose job is to protect and assist their fellow citizens."⁷ Recent incidents involving police use of force to crush those protesting against the new poll tax may indeed dampen that relationship and mar police image.

Given this negative image of the police, it is no surprise that the police have not inspired, and might not inspire, African writers to the point where they can create police heroes in their works. Moreover, the relationship between the writer, or intellectuals in general, and the police is not a particularly cozy one since, in most cases, it is the police force that is charged with, or takes upon itself, the "dirty job" of silencing or banishing the writer, as Plato suggested, from the Republic. It is impossible in that kind of relationship for any writer, no matter his/her relation to the body politic, to create and endow his or her police hero or

heroine with the intellectual, investigative common sense and exceptional abilities required of a detective.

Furthermore, as Haycraft, quoting Lord Hewart of Bury, the Chief Justice of England, who remarked that "the detective story. . . flourishes only in a settled community where the readers' sympathies are on the side of the law and order, and not on the side of the criminal who is trying to escape from justice,"⁸ indicates, where there is no well-established legal institution but simply and illusion of the law, punishment itself becomes arbitrary. When the government is our government, the Chief Justice adds, "our sympathies are on the side of the law we made. When the government is their government, our sympathies are intricately with the lone wretch."⁹ The people in those African societies do feel that the government is not their government and that the law "does not apply uniformly to every member of society" but only to those whom a certain millionaire once called "small people." While those small people are victimized by the oppressive machine, there are those who belong in what Nkashama calls the "*castes d'intouchables*" for whom "*la loi n'est pas une prescription, mais une circonscription.*"¹⁰ One conclusion that could be drawn from the preceding discussion is that the concept of crime, for the few texts of African detective fiction, has been redefined and that the image of the police is too negative to inspire the writing of a detective fiction. How does this re-definition of the concept of crime affect the other stages in the conception and the writing of detective fiction, that is, trial and punishment?

As in the other stages discussed above, the concept of punishment in some African traditional societies presents specific difficulties for the development of detective fiction. To borrow once again from Nkashama, the criminal in traditional societies is left on his or her own to "*interroger sa conscience,*" that is, to question his or her conscience. To have the criminal judged by his or her sick conscience seems to be a more serious punishment than any form (assuming, of course, that a criminal, indeed, has a conscience), especially since he or she is believed to be forever haunted by the spirit of the victim. In addition, punishment for such serious crimes as murder are considered to be beyond the jurisdiction of the world of the living and can only be carried out by the deities of the society and the spirits of the ancestors. Nkashama speaks directly to this point:

la croyance à la vengeance du mort qui revient hanter son meurtrier par delà la tombe, par exemple, suffit à elle seule pour prédisposer à des attitudes non-romanesques et non fictionnelles, "policièrement." Si l'esprit du défunt peut tirer vengeance, s'"accaparer de l'âme de son meurtrier," poursuivre

en fantôme ses rêves, ses hallucinations, éparpiller ses facultés mentales, il devient superflu d'entreprendre une recherche d'indices. . . Celui-ci s'est déjà condamné lui-même sans qu'il soit nécessaire de recourir à une autre juridiction. La purification se fera à un niveau cathartique différent, par des rituels appropriés.¹¹

Therefore, the detective who undertakes an investigation under such conditions, in a sense, usurps the role of the spirit of the victim and that of the ancestors and deities of the society, and may, himself, become the victim of the wrath of those vindictive supernatural forces. Once again the fervent belief in the intricate link between the past and the present, between the world of the living and that of the dead, subverts another important stage, that is, investigation, making it extremely difficult to produce the *roman policier à l'occidental*.

There is also a tendency (in those societies) to look at a criminal more sympathetically because of the belief that he or she did not commit the crime of his or her own free will but was manipulated by some evil force, in which case the criminal is simply a vehicle and a victim of the machinations of that force. Nkashama notes in particular the drama in some courtrooms in which judges are no longer shocked when litigants in murder trials bring in this kind of metaphysical defence:

les juges ne rient plus lorsqu'ils entendent, dans un chœur unanime, les plaignants et les prévenus soutenir avec autant de conviction que de crédulité que l'acte meurtrier a été commis par l'objet présenté, magiquement sans la volonté de l'individu incriminé. Que le couteau est parti tout seul, que le fusil s'est épaulé et s'est mis à lâcher des balles de son propre mouvement, que la corde de strangulation agissait comme si elle avait été maniée par des mains invisibles.¹²

And this leads to the conclusion, "Et donc, que l'accusé n'y est pour rien. Ou plutôt, qu'il n'a été qu'un instrument passif (encore un peu, la 'victime innocente des sorcelleries du défunt')." ¹³ This kind of argument clearly echoes such arguments as insanity or other psychotic problems used by defense counsels in courts of law today to subvert the legal process and the very pertinent final stage in a detective fiction, that is, apprehension and punishment of the criminal.

When Nkashama speaks of a crime against one individual being interpreted as an attempt against the state and its leadership, or when I speak of the police serving as the machinery of oppression, both of which are characteristics of dictatorships (in which the dictator exercises absolute power over all the institutions), we do, indeed, imply that

politics are, in part, responsible for the non-flowering of detective fiction in many African societies. This is, of course, not a phenomenon unique to Africa. There are many examples in world history to support the role of politics in the non-flowering, or actually the suppression, of the detective story. A case in point is the violent objections of Nazi Germany to detective fiction. Howard Haycraft is entirely appropriate here when, in reference to Nazi Germany, he writes, "it is easy to understand why detection. . .has played little part in despotisms of either the ancient or the modern variety."¹⁴ Where civil rights do not exist, where, as Haycraft puts it,

"star chamber methods prevail, where 'justice' is dispensed by self constituted oligarchies, confident of their supreme wisdom and divine rightness on all occasions—even if rules must be changed in the middle of the game!—there is obviously slight need or opportunity for methodical criminal investigation with accuracy and impartiality for its objectives."¹⁵

He concludes with this very poignant remark:

. . . Dictatorships, of course, would be delighted to have us misled by surface similarity of democratic criminal investigation (object: impartial evidence for legal determination of guilt) and their own gestapo and ogpu systems (object: rule by fear and intrigue).¹⁶

In the African context today, the gestapo and the ogpu (the U. S. S. R. secret police, 1922-1935) have taken on local names that spell as much terror and dehumanization as the German and Russian names. Under such political conditions and given the cultural, traditional, social factors mentioned earlier, is African detective fiction doomed forever from its very beginnings? Or is it premature to ask the question, especially at this point when L'Harmattan has, in recent years, shown a strong commitment to the publication of "polars Noirs"?

One of its publications, *Cameroun/Gabon*, is more of the espionage genre than detective per se. Wolf Dietrich, an East German spy whose movements have been closely monitored by secret services of many West African countries, has finally been tracked down in a hotel room in Kribi, a small resort city in the south-west of Cameroon, by agents of D. A. S. S. (Département Action des Services Secrets). After a brief shoot-out, in which some agents of D. A. S. S. are killed, Dietrich escapes. What follows is a fast-paced, action-packed manhunt that reveals all the elements of detective fiction, espionage or thriller—events which follow in quick succession, chases on foot and in cars,

constant shifts in space from enclosed areas, blind alleys, bushes to open spaces on land and at sea, from one country, Cameroon, to another, Gabon, ambushes, escapes, suspense, exchanges of fire, excellent use of all senses, time rushed forward, etc. Dietrich is finally trapped on a spy ship and killed by a bomb blast as he makes his last desperate attempt to escape.

It is an appropriate ending for such a text from the Third World, whose goal is not only to expose the vicious acts of Superpowers (East and West) in Third World countries but also to challenge the actions of those powers that use the countries to spy on each other and also to spy on and destroy development projects (a conspiracy to keep those countries underdeveloped) in those countries which they deem to be a threat (even if fictive) to their security. It seems as if it is only by having the secret service (a branch of the police) in African countries track down and kill a common enemy of the people, that is, a foreign spy, that the police can be portrayed in a positive light. However, dealing with the broader issue of spying rather than the more narrow issue of detection that may deal directly with the immediate context of its production seems to be an escapist strategy. In which case Evina Aboosolo, the writer, is trying to escape from the cultural, traditional, and more importantly political factors, indeed the various forms of censorship which, as indicated earlier, hinder the development of an African detective fiction.

In *No Woman No Cry* it is the western intelligence (the C.I.A. and the French D.G.S.E.) that are on the trail of an African, Bassirou Bèye. His crime is that he is a genius, which, by some supposedly natural law, is the sole property of some hemispheres or some races. Worse of all he has decided to use his exceptional intellectual abilities to retaliate for the many South African Blacks who have been used by White scientist as guinea pigs for their experiments. He has developed a secret formula that would selectively destroy the white population of South Africa. As the narrator states,

il [Bassirou] pouvait désormais faire exploser sa petite bombe parmi ses cobayes Blancs et Noirs. Et immédiatement, on pouvait constater une rapide dégradation de la peau des Blancs, ayant sur leur état de santé des conséquences multiples qui ne pouvaient aboutir qu'à la mort, à plus ou moins long terme. Les Noirs s'en sortiraient à cent pour cent indemnés."¹⁷

The White west, in solidarity with their White brothers and sisters in South Africa, and in response to this serious threat to their continued existence as a race, set up an espionage ring to track down and

"neutralize" Bassirou Bèye. And, to do the dirty job, they use the services of an attractive and very intelligent Black woman.

Women have had to play some not-so-decent roles in detective and spy fictions. *No Woman No Cry* is no exception. To help track down, seduce and capture Bèye, the C.I.A. sends one of their agents, Miss Barbara Jackson, an African-American star, on a publicized concert tour in Africa. The strategy, of course, is that Bèye would be lured, by her beauty, charm, sensational stage performance, and the fact that she is Black, to one of her concerts where he would be arrested. However, after meeting with Bèye's family and Suzy Massakela, a Black South African exile, and learning firsthand about the evils of Apartheid in South Africa, the butchery of innocent Blacks in Sharpeville and Soweto, the dehumanization and the objectification of Africans in slavery, and the subjugation of Africans during the colonial period, Miss Jackson makes an easy connection with the plight of her own people at home. And "No Woman No Cry," the title of a song by the late Jamaican activist-singer, Bob Marley, sums up very aptly the solidarity born from Miss Jackson's becoming conscious of the plight of Blacks in the diaspora. As I have pointed out in my reading of *Cameroun/Gabon*, dealing with the larger issue of race relations or Blacks in the diaspora is to escape dealing with specific issues in the immediate context of production.

In the preceding texts it is not murder that generates the stories as would a traditional detective fiction, but an attempt to defend a space from the invasion of spies or to track down a genius who poses potential threat to one segment of the human race because of his discovery. In *Traite au Zaïre* the story develops from a murder. A young Zaïrean girl imported into Belgium to work as a prostitute for an international ring is murdered in cold blood in the heart of Brussels apparently because she had tried to escape. Horrified by her death and the exploitation of other Third World teenage girls in many Western European capitals, Dr. Mutoko, M. D., a Zaïrean national living in Belgium, turns into a detective. His is not only to apprehend and punish the murderers but also to carry his investigation right to the real source of the crime of trafficking, which is in Zaïre. As the investigation progresses, he is joined by other intellectuals who, like him, have turned into detectives. At some point it seems as if it is the whole community that is involved in the detection, since the people involved in trafficking in teenage girls are the "intouchables," and include both foreigners and highly-placed Zaïrean authorities.

In Zaïrean as well as other African societies in which the communal is the ideal, involving almost the whole community in the investigative process seems to be an attempt to adapt detective fiction to the African world view. However, this takes away the elements of secrecy and accuracy that are characteristic of detection. Frustrated by

the many obstacles—threats on his life, torture, imprisonment, and the fact that a crime such as the one that he is investigating is well entrenched in the whole power structure of the society—Dr. Mutoko is forced to abandon the investigation and flee the country.

What this story shows is the impossibility of detection in those societies, especially by such intellectuals as Dr. Mutoko, who are considered as outsiders by the political leadership and as a threat to the stability of the state and, by extension, the life of the leader. It is also important to note that instead of using the police as detectives or as heroes for reasons developed throughout this essay, the writer would rather create a new breed of detectives—highly educated outsiders to the political machinery and members of very respected professions such as medicine.

Nkashama has noted elsewhere that detective fiction can be used as a paradigm to show the link between detective fiction and the context of its production. As he writes, "*le mécanisme de la fiction romanesque sont liés étroitement au système de socialisation.*"¹⁸ In this essay, I have tried to show how such factors as traditions, politics, the African world view, and the image of the police, portrayed negatively as the machinery of oppression, have helped to shape African writers' attitudes towards detective fiction. Moreover, even the texts discussed in this essay seem all engaged in the process of redefining the concept of crime, the investigative process, and of creating a new breed of detectives, not from the police force as in many Western detective fiction, but from professions that are highly respected for their contribution to the community, not only in Africa but worldwide.

¹E. M. Wrong, *Crime and Detection* (Oxford University Press, 1926); cited in Howard Haycraft (see below, footnote 8).

²A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1958), pp. 251-2.

³Richard Bjornson, "National Identity concepts in Africa: Interplay between European categorization schemes and African realities," in Peter Boerner (ed.), *Concept of National Identity* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1986), p. 125

⁴Pius Nkashama, *Ecritures et discours littéraires: études sur le roman africain* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), p. 189.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶Murch, *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁸Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: the Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1972), p. 316.

⁹*Loc. Cit.*

¹⁰Nkashama, *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 207.

¹³*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁴Haycraft, *Ibid.*, p. 314.

¹⁵*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁶*Loc.Cit.*

¹⁷Asse, Gueye, *No Woman No Cry* (Paris: L'Harmattan ,1986), p. 151.

¹⁸Nkashama, *Ibid.*, p. 185.