

# BOOK REVIEW

**Elara Bertho. *Sorcières, tyrans, héros: Mémoires postcoloniales de résistants africains*. Paris: Éditions Honoré Champion, 2019. 520 pp. Bibliography. Index. €50.00. Paper. ISBN: 9782745350459.**

Elara Bertho's book *Sorcières, tyrans, héros: Mémoires postcoloniales de résistants africains* is an inventive study of how three resistance leaders against European colonization have been transformed into important symbolic figures for postcolonial Africa. Samori Toure was a Dyula statebuilder from Kankan who fought French expansion from 1881 until his exile in 1898; Sarraounia Mangou was an Azna queen and animist priestess from Dogondoutchi who led her community in battle in 1899 against the notoriously brutal Voulet-Chanoine Mission; and Nehanda is a Shona ancestral spirit whose medium, Nehanda Charwe Nyakasikana, helped lead the First Chimurenga in 1896 against the British conquest of Mashonaland.

Bertho focuses less on the lives of these individuals and more on their textual afterlives as multivalent cultural heroes. She deploys an interdisciplinary methodology wedding literary criticism to fieldwork and archival research to assemble a corpus that is "irreducibly heterogeneous" in which the "literary is faced with its peripheries [...] the 'paraliterary'" (41). Placing novels, poems, and plays in conversation with music, film, and dance, this intertextual dialogue is impressively multilingual, with quotations from texts in Malinke, Hausa, Shona, French, and English. From this variety, Bertho argues that "it is precisely variation that was at the foundation of what the figure was: always re-interpretable, subject to multiplication, the figure is nourished by the resonances between the different texts that stage it" (459). Detached from the historical person, this textualized figure becomes a malleable force that can be harnessed for many purposes.

Despite the synchronicity of these case studies, one is struck by their apparent lopsidedness; two of them are from predominantly Muslim regions of francophone West Africa, and one is from anglophone southern Africa. Yet, Bertho deftly uses this to her advantage, constantly realigning the figures to highlight intriguing comparisons. For example, Samori was a Muslim, but his memorialization among Muslims is deeply ambivalent. He is remembered as much for destruction as for creation. Sarraounia was chosen by Abdoulaye

Mamani, whose novel *Sarraounia* (Harmattan, 1980) is responsible for her revival in Niger, in part to critique the influence of Islam. Likewise, Nehanda was associated with pre-Christian religion and largely forgotten until Terence Ranger's *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896–97* (Heinemann, 1967) restored her relevance during the Second Chimurenga. The long silence on Sarraounia and Nehanda leads Bertho to stress the role of African elites in fabricating cultural heroes for their own ends, which she notes did not include any broader “revalorization of the feminine” in Niger or Zimbabwe (307).

Bertho wisely eschews the common tendency to view such figures solely in national terms. This dimension is important, as demonstrated by their shared path from transgressiveness to institutionalization in the emerging states of their respective lands. Indeed, political movements were projected as their incarnations, metaphorically for ZANU and Sawaba and genealogically in the case of Sekou Toure's relationship to Samori Toure. However, Bertho is also attuned to their many internationalist renderings: socialist, Pan-African, and cosmopolitan. Furthermore, she observes that the “figure can regain its worrying potential [...] to become ex-centric again” (220). This spectrum of relationships to power reflects a key commonality; these were prophetic figures with a “Cassandra complex” who possessed foresight about colonialism but lacked the power to stop it (281). Bertho argues that defeat is what made them reliable vessels for the enigmas and anxieties of decolonization while at the same time they became such potent figures of hope for a coming victory.

*Sorcières, tyrans, héros* concludes with an argument concerning the relationship between literature and history. For Bertho, literature is neither opposed to history nor a mere witness to it; rather, literature is an essential participant in history, since it is through texts that sociopolitical communities are imagined. Samori's dichotomous, often contradictory, literary treatment is a testament to the endlessly contested nature of history. If in Guinea he was the hero, in Ivory Coast he was the tyrant. This is representative of what Bertho calls “the war of memory” that is particularly intense in societies immersed in turmoil (409). Historical literature revolving around such figures is one way societies think through crises. Bertho demonstrates how figures of resistance to colonialism were critical “as a prism to read independence” and inscribe possibilities for the future (414).

Though the symbolic importance of African historical heroes during independence has long been studied, the unusual juxtaposition of such disparate and compelling figures and the consistently nuanced interpretations offered in Bertho's close readings of diverse texts make this a major contribution to the field. While there is much to praise in this intelligent and densely interwoven book, there are several shortcomings. The argument about the role of elites seems logical to me but also tautological, in that it rests on a definition so capacious that it seems anyone producing texts registers as elite. It also could have been useful to contextualize these figures somewhat more within their own societies' circle of salient cultural heroes to better assess whether they are outliers in certain respects. Nevertheless, what

Bertho has produced is a richly detailed, fascinating, and intricately argued work that will be essential reading for anyone interested in the intersections of literature and history in Africa and memory and colonial resistance in the African freedom struggle.

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