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## How seeking for metaphysical answers on God and death impacted my writing

Corinne N'Guessan

Panel: Religion and writing. The author discusses how religious heritage shapes an author's writing.

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## How seeking for metaphysical answers on God and death impacted my writing

By Corrine N'Guessan (Cote D'Ivoire)

I would describe my writing as writing about religion, with a strong Catholic heritage.

Baptized as a Catholic at three years old, I dutifully received the sacraments—communion and confirmation—at the appropriate ages.

As a teenager, I was in a dire need for answers on everything, part of everything being God and death. My brother died when I was 7 and nobody had been able to explain to me why he was dead or what death was. Also, I was bothered by what remained of African religious systems. Did an “African religion or religion(s)” exist? If so, what were its beliefs—difficult to find in the absence of sacred books, with only a tradition of oral transmission? My fiercest preoccupation was that I had no African religious background. For me, this was a loss of a major battle, more subtle than any of the others we fought against colonization—and I was developing a rebellious spirit against any form of colonization.

As a result, I stopped going to the mass (colonial heritage) and prayer (colonial drug). This was the first step of my quest.

The second step was a weird period, when one could find me secluded and isolated, contemplating the roof of my room! A very troubled period indeed! Sometimes, I would attend traditional events (the Yam feast, The Generation feast, N'zikpli, etc...) or ply elders with strange questions. My researches on local religions were made harder by the secrecy inherent to their practices. Moreover, nowadays these beliefs are associated with witchcraft. I discovered a few things, and somehow felt that it was my duty to write down what I was experiencing to stop the solely oral transmission of our culture! This is how *Mad Virgins* came to life. “Mad virgins” are the *Komian*—sacred priestesses who trance for the spirits in the Agni tribe. But they are also the improvident virgins of Jesus parabola.

Many elements of African religions are used in *Mad Virgins*:

- *Amouan* or Fetishism, which includes the mystic association of animals, plant species, natural phenomena, or created objects with tribes or with families;
- Taboos and prohibitions;
- Some form of ancestor reverence;
- The place of the elders;
- The *Kramo* or “shaman” regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirit.

I tried to reveal my approaches to these religious questions by using an initiating format. *Mad Virgins* should therefore be read as an initiation to the mysteries of African *religious beliefs*.

It is a novel, which looks like an essay. Using fiction was the best way to paste together this universe of initiation and secrets. And because it's fiction, I can draw parallels between my main characters and those of the Bible (religious heritage again!), but experiencing a typically African drama.

The essay-part goes at the roots of Africa's under-development. One of these roots is Religion. Not the supremacy of Christianity or the loss of identity, but specifically how African religious beliefs made us contribute so little to modern civilization.

I analyze the impact of African religious beliefs on development—how what or who you believe in influences how you act or think. For example, Tanoe is a river and also a God for the Baoulés. If Tanoe is your God, would you dare to invent a heresy like hydro-electricity, opposing all the taboos associated with Tanoe? How can you suppress water, beyond using sacrifices?

This research nearly drove me mad, especially because I suppose that the mysteries of African beliefs are not to be discovered by non initiates like me. I was like lost between two worlds. In the time of hardship I experienced afterwards, I found peace in God's Love and Mercy. In Jesus Christ, and not in those “natural” gods!

Moreover, what these religions offered was less rewarding. There is no soul and body resurrection like in Christianity, no reincarnation like in Buddhism, nothing. There is merely the eventuality of becoming an “ancestor” or a “strong spirit” for a few initiates. As a result, it didn’t make sense to wish to become “a mad virgin,” considering the promise of soul and body resurrection with the alternative? I could only return to Catholicism.

God is dead. However, I finally ended up telling to myself: “But He resurrected three days later.”