


Africa Speaks?: Black Monsters and Revisionary History in Horror Films

Arlette Hernandez, *Washington and Lee University*

In the Western eye, Africa is more an idea than a physical location. Discussion about the continent is riddled with historically mediated tropes, stereotypes, and misrepresentations. Cultural products, like fashion trends and literature, perpetuate the imagination of an Africa that does not truly exist. In Western culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, film plays a crucial role in shaping people's understanding of Africa. This paper analyzes three films set apart by at least a decade: *The Night of the Sorcerers* (1973), *Panga* (1991), and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* (2005). Each film includes motifs of possession, curses, magic, and monsters. Moreover, each film is shaped by colonialism, for the terror stems from historical fears associated with expansion and an entrance into African spaces. My analysis follows a multi-layered structure. I begin with a discussion of the tropes that dominate the narratives and how each one is influenced by a colonial history. Afterward, I examine how the tropes interact with the genre of horror to create an essentialist "African" entity that is equated with ideas of darkness and monstrosity. Ultimately, this paper argues that the threat in these films is not the mere existence of darkness, but rather the possibility of *contracting* darkness. By virtue of engaging with the horror genre, these films other black bodies to the extremes of monstrosity. Accordingly, the films center

ABSTRACT


This paper analyzes three films, *The Night of the Sorcerers* (1973), *Panga* (1991), and *Dominion: Prequel to the Exorcist* (2005), within the context of postcolonial theory. I examine how the films interweave themes of possession, magic, and monsters with a legacy of colonialism, constructing terror interactions with raced bodies. This paper argues that the threat in these films is not the mere existence of blackness, but rather the possibility of contracting blackness. Moreover, these narratives affect a new reality, practicing a form of revisionary history that provides the other with a form (or at least the opportunity) of agency.



on the idea of transformations, specifically the mutation of *white human* into *black monster*. This article ends with an analysis of African-based horror as a genre, asserting that, while such narratives are influenced by a particular history, they also affect a new reality. These films act as a battleground between the European and African voice, embodied by hero and monster respectively. Inevitably, the narratives practice a revisionary history that provides Africans with a form of (or at least the opportunity for) agency.

To provide a very brief background, the Spanish horror film *The Night of the Sorcerers* begins with the 1910 murder of a female missionary worker by voodoo sorcerers in the (fake) West African country of Bumbasa. Subsequent female explorers are lured to the site of the original murder. Here, the voodoo sorcerers return as African zombies and transform the women into half-leopard, bikini-clad, lesbian vampires, who murder their male explorer counterparts. *Panga* unfolds the fate of a woman who interrupts a sacrificial ceremony near her home in South Africa to save the life of a goat. Her actions incur the wrath of the Nyonga “witchdoctor,” who summons “the vengeful spirit that lives in the sea” (*Panga*), *Umoya Omube*. While the malevolent forces in *The Night of the Sorcerers* and *Panga* are the Africans themselves, the religious overtones of *Dominion* make the African connection slightly subtler. The film follows a Catholic priest, who lost his faith during World War II after a traumatic incident of Nazi brutality. While on sabbatical in British East Africa, Father Merrin performs an archaeological dig and unleashes an ancient demon that he must exorcise by the end of the film.

The two most prevalent tropes in these films are those of a savage and a primitive Africa. Africa as savage implies wildness, an existence where one is not restricted by social standards of morality and normality. Moreover, it is linked to ideas of primitivism and underdevelopment. Historically, this image has been constructed through a process of differentiation whereby the Westerner contrasts his own life and practices with those of African peoples. Such perceptions developed from the juxtaposition of vast natural landscapes and condensed urban settings or collectivistic social groups and individualistic societies. In other words, Western socio-political structures provided a framework for understanding what was “correct,” thereby privileging certain structures or behaviors and relegating to the margins those that did not correspond. In the nineteenth century, difference became immutable as science sought to explain such disparities. This mission resulted in evolutionist rhetoric, and figures like Lewis Henry Morgan “developed a widely used model [that] described three categories of peoples: savage, barbarian, and civilized,” using qualities of social development like “living in cities, using handwriting, and having organized states” as criteria (Keim 53). Evolutionism also




featured a racial undertone that fused together skin color, hierarchy, and culture. Scientific discourse perpetuated the notion that “superior races produced superior cultures, and naturally, the white race and white culture were superior” (Keim 54). Consequently, because of social structures and racial markers of difference, Africans were considered inferior, or “less evolved” (Keim 52), that is to say, primitive.

Colonial discourse is the product of a process. Eurocentric viewpoints and systematic comparison construct and shape the idea of a savage and underdeveloped Africa. Such notions are then perpetuated, often through a dissemination of visual, auditory, and textual materials. In their examination of Victorian travel literature, anthropologists Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow examine the different misperceptions of Africa. They analyze a variety of sources from the colonial period which portray the author’s journey into the African continent, but the texts they cite often focus on ideas of “darkness” and how it consumes the continent (Hammond and Jablow 54). Europeans saw Africa as “hideous and grotesque,” as “a great beast,” or monster (60). Such monstrosity pervades every corner and upon entering the continent, “the traveller might [expect] a corpse to be hidden behind every bush” (60). Authors describe the continent’s inhabitants as the “lower breeds of mankind” (63), products of “a land teeming with horrors and guarded by the foul monsters of disease, of darkness and savagery” (61). Yet, while the African is “a barbarous man,” he also resembles “a child” (64).

All three horror films echo these misperceptions and deviant depictions. The Africans in *The Night of the Sorcerers* practice voodoo and cannibalism, two customs the West considers primitive and savage. *Panga* and *Dominion* feature scenes in which Africans participate in animal sacrifices, another “primitive” custom. In *Dominion*, Chuma, one of the few English-speaking African characters, asks Father Francis, a missionary working alongside Merrin, if he thinks the Turkana are savages because of the sacrifice. Francis replies by saying, “I think you are good people, lost in confusion” (*Dominion*), as if the people are enveloped by darkness that clouds their vision. Moreover, the African characters in these films are dressed in clothing the West considers “traditional,” also feeding into images of a savage and backwards Africa. Lastly, each film recycles Victorian constructs of dangerous landscapes and monstrous men. Whether it is through cannibalism, blood sacrifice, or demonic possession, the films depict African characters as others, as non-humans capable of an evil unfamiliar and contradictory to the Western body.

Africa is often trapped in the fetishizing gaze of the West, effectively sexualizing the continent. The trope of “sexy Africa,” in the already gendered genre of horror, catches the eye. A portion of the trope comes from “a more racist era when black Africans were considered more animalistic and sensual” (Keim 74).




Race was seen as a biological feature, and, at the time, it was thought that people “were different sexually because of their biology” (74). Yet, the trope is about more than sex appeal; it also makes assumptions about sexual behavior and orientation. In his book about gender and sexuality in Africa, historian Marc Epprecht argues that there exists a “hypothetical singular African sexuality, [which] includes. . . purported tendencies toward heterosexual promiscuity” (2). The rhetoric of promiscuous African sexuality is linked to a colonial understanding of Africans as backward and primitive, with Western opinion “oscillat[ing] between notions of the exotic, the noble, and the depraved savage” (Arnfred 7).

The trope of sexualized Africa is most glaring in *The Night of the Sorcerers*, where the women engage in what the West would deem deviant sexual behavior. African women are depicted as primitive sexual figures with uncovered breasts and a hunger for human flesh. They participate in cannibalism, an act of sexualized violence whereby two bodies are integrated, one entering—penetrating, if you will—the other. The white women are dressed conservatively until a whip exposes their breasts. Then, they undergo a ritual that Africanizes them, turning them into half-naked, leopard-human hybrid beasts, ravenous for the (sexual) consumption of other females. This scene accomplishes two things. It aligns blackness with a particular kind of aberrant sexuality. Moreover, the scene posits blackness as the root of monstrosity. The film’s black characters corrupt the white explorers, provoking their transformation into lesbian vampires, into monsters.

Sexuality is subtler in *Panga* and *Dominion*, where Africa does not necessarily turn the white characters into sexual deviants, but rather provides them with a safe space where they can express their sexuality. The wife in *Panga* uses Africa to construct a love story that adds sensuality to her marriage. She tells her husband that she will always love him, even when “Africa becomes the Dark Continent” because she’s always “been a sucker for the sinister and mysterious” (*Panga*). Meanwhile, Father Merrin, who retreats to British East Africa during a crisis of faith, is given freedom on the continent to explore his sexuality, kissing a woman after years of celibacy. Nevertheless, in both of these instances, Africa is antagonized. For the wife in *Panga*, Africa is the big bad wolf her husband must fight, while in *Dominion*, Africa is the source of carnal temptation.


During the nineteenth century, all three of these tropes were implemented in creating “the myth of the Dark Continent” (Keim 45). By this time, ideas about savagery and aberrant sexuality, as well as “racist and evolutionary doctrines in the social sciences . . . combined to give the [colonial] public a widely shared view of Africa that demanded imperialization on moral, religious, and scientific grounds” (Brantlinger 167-168). This framework of darkness and imperialism dominates the



narratives of our African-based horror narratives. In each film, the West justifies its presence in Africa through the pretext of help. The explorers in *Night of the Sorcerers* wish to spread awareness about the endangered species of West Africa, the family in *Panga* wants to bring prosperity to barren African territories, and the British in *Dominion* attempt to help Africa through medicine and political organization. Yet engagement with the rhetoric of aid assumes that (1) there is a problem and (2) it *must* and *can* be fixed. In both a literal and metaphorical sense, Africa contains a darkness that must be illuminated through Western light, or rather, Western superiority.

The Dark Continent myth is the immediate visualization of Africa possessed by a spectator, effectively establishing a pessimistic and one-dimensional identity. Darkness as identity operates in several ways. Firstly, it operates as an essence similar to Toni Morrison's "Africanist presence," a term that illustrates "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (6). Morrison uses the term blackness both racially and metaphorically. Blackness is a literal marker used by the West to differentiate themselves from Africans (i.e. through skin color), but also as a signified, or a concept, with blackness evoking the notions of inferiority and negativity that underlie Western thought and association. As an Africanist presence, darkness shrouds the continent in blackness. That is, the continent is both a space occupied by black bodies but also a space ruled by degradation. Thus, to be African is to be intimately connected to the dark. In addition, within the structure of these genre films, darkness also acts as a malevolent force, or character, that drives the plot—a nemesis figure. Screenwriting professors Marc Blake and Sara Bailey put it best when they wrote, "At the heart of every horror movie is the monster" (57). For these three films, the black body, but more broadly, Africa and the Africanist presence, is the monster. As postcolonial scholar Achille Mbembe asserts, Africa is "deployed in the framework . . . of a meta-text about the animal—to be exact, about the *beast*" (1, emphasis original).

All three films simultaneously use Africa as a space and a character. Each is set in an African country but also represents the continent through essentialist characters that resonate with pre-existing tropes and misperceptions. Furthermore, the characters act as impaired bodies that personify the sinister and attack the West, striking "responses of fear and disgust in [its] viewers" (Smith 25). In *Night of the Sorcerers*, the voodoo zombies and the lesbian vampires embody darkness. They are presented as monsters that evoke fear in the Western characters. Similarly, the witchdoctor in *Panga* is a representation of darkness, but the most menacing presence is that of the vengeful spirit, *Umoya Omube*. Darkness in *Dominion* is not as distinctly African, for the main embodiment is an unknown demon




buried underground and constantly referred to as Satan. Still, through its physical immersion in an African landscape and its possession of an African vessel, the character of the demon can be read as a symbol of the continent and its darkness.

In reading horror films through a lens of postcolonial theory, a dominant theme is that of contagion. Several horror narratives deal with a fear of contamination, for “the idea that an infected person will contaminate us is universal” (Blake and Bailey 53). In addition, during the colonial period, “Africa was seen as the worst of the world’s pathogenic spaces, a plague-ridden climate that prevented its people from rising above nature and developing a culture equivalent to that of Europe” (Bewell 194). These two ideas interact in the films, darkness and monstrosity striking unease in the viewer. Nevertheless, the real fear stems from the possibility of exposure to that presence. History and horror interact as darkness is turned into a disease, colonial fear reverberating throughout the films. Just as nineteenth century colonists feared they would acquire diseases from Africa, the Western characters in the films fear that they will be soiled by darkness. They fear contamination because infection spawns an altered state of being, whereby the West is victimized and then made monster.

When set on the African continent, popular Western-produced narratives of often employ the archetype of the white savior, a figure who redeems or rescues the othered. Yet, horror films subvert this role of the white savior. *The Night of the Sorcerers* presents Professor Jonathan Grant and his safari team as innocent explorers present only to conduct research in hopes of rescuing Africa’s animals. However, once the dark presence is provoked, the Westerners are hunted like prey—women seduced and men killed. *Panga* depicts its central characters as innocent. Elizabeth is an expecting mother, and her sister and brother-in-law are unknowing visitors of the continent. Still, in trying to uphold Eurocentric moral values, they rouse the vengeance of a dark Africanist presence, resulting in their murders. Innocence in *Dominion* is more complex because of the religious element. The monster is not purely African and harms both the Turkana and the British. Nevertheless, Father Merrin, an ex-priest traumatized by Nazi cruelty, respects the indigenous people and seeks nothing more than archaeological discoveries. However, in the process of doing good, he releases an African demon that inflicts harm on the Westerners. He and his peer Father Francis are the two main targets of Satan’s attacks. In each case, the white savior trope gives way to the white victim.

To summarize what we have discussed up until this point, let us consider the structure of the horror film. Marc Blake and Sara Bailey identify the five main components of horror films as “unease, dread, terror, horror, and disgust” (45). The unease in these three films is built by historically mediated tropes that posit Africa




as aberrant. Dread then peaks at the discovery of a malevolent Africanist darkness. Horror is the depiction of death and massacre, while disgust comes from the realization of voyeurism. However, the climax of the story, the terror, comes from the idea of a white victim and, accordingly, the subversion of hegemonic order. As literature professor Kyle Bishop posits in an article about the cultural relevance of zombies, terror stems from “the prospect of a westerner becoming dominated, subjugated, and effectively ‘colonized’” (141).

The Africans who are preserved as voodoo zombies in *The Night of the Sorcerers* threaten the Europeans because they represent the possibility of a “sub-subaltern class . . . [that] are literally silent, enslaved, and unable to connect with the dominant culture through any liminal space of discourse” (Bishop 141). By subaltern, I mean what famous literary theorist Gayatri Spivak defines as “everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism . . . — a space of difference” (qtd. in de Kock 45). The subaltern is not just the oppressed, but the culturally deprived and segregated. Yet, while the zombies in *The Night of the Sorcerers* induce terror because of their position as sub-subaltern, I would argue that the figure of the lesbian vampire is most frightening, for it is a Westerner who has been fully infected by the Africanist presence and reduced to the same subaltern status as the African. They are figures that have truly “gone native.” Though not in the same way, the sea spirit in *Panga* also threatens Western domination. Through murder and death, the creature possesses the power to completely eliminate hierarchy and overthrow the oppressor. Despite being subaltern, *Umoya Omube*, an entity with African origins, possesses uncontainable power, and this reality frightens the Western presence. The threat of possession in *Dominion* imperils Western ideas of godliness, security, and sanitation. The demon can insert itself into any human vessel, consequently polluting it with a darkness that is seen as inherent to the continent. Moreover, Satan possesses the ability to kill and extinguish hierarchy in the same way as *Umoya Omube*.

Horror films grapple with the idea of conflict, often pitting the marginalized against the dominant. In her first book, entitled *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, film professor Carol Clover reads this conflict as a central element of occult theory and horror, terming it the struggle between “White Science and Black Magic” (66). The plots of these three films usually involve some variation of a Western body entering the larger African space and attempting to impose its white science, but inevitably facing opposition from the other’s black magic. The rest of the film then serves as a battleground where one agent tries to control the narrative by directing the spotlight, or rather the camera lens, over to their embodied voice.


In the beginning, the camera emphasizes the European presence, privileging



Western language and dialogue. As the plot unfolds, the Africanist presence enters and attempts to speak, but they are quickly silenced. *The Night of the Sorcerers* is unique in that it begins with Africans. However, their presence is contingent on their relationship to the white female missionary who they convert. Moreover, the ritual is interrupted by a group of armed soldiers that invade and kill the Africans. After that first scene, the film focuses exclusively on the Westerners, dedicating ten minutes of screen time to an arrival that depicts actions inessential to the storyline. Screen time begins to shift between the Europeans and Africans, the alternations demonstrating a tug-of-war for voice and power. Each entity wants to be heard, but the Africans are never permitted to speak. The figures of the dominating civilization use their status as oppressors to fight and stay superior. In *Panga* and *Dominion*, Africans are allowed to speak, but only under certain conditions. There may only be one African character who speaks English, and those that speak the indigenous language are never given subtitles. Though both entities are fighting to be heard, the Africanist presence always falls behind.

Tired of being silenced when pursuing traditional methods of communication, the subaltern turn toward other approaches. Violence and horror are subsequently militarized, converted into tools for garnering attention. The zombified Africans and Africanized white vampires engage in strategic essentialism, a concept promoted by Gayatri Spivak, which means “acting ‘as if’ identities were stable for specific political reasons. For example, one might temporarily accept the category of ‘woman’ as a stable unity for the purpose of mobilizing women for political action” (Spivak qtd. in Ray 110). The African characters in *The Night of the Sorcerers* use their status as monsters to terrorize the West. Similarly, *Umoya Omube* is never given a voice. Instead, he is systematically erased and silenced, causing the vengeful spirit to adopt murder as a mouthpiece. Satan, in *Dominion*, is perhaps the chattiest of the Africanist presences, but all doubt his existence at the beginning of the film. As a result, he beats and murders characters, using violence to be heard and reify his existence. In militarizing violence and practicing strategic essentialism, the subaltern transform from invisible entities to grotesque representations that demand consideration.


Deeply connected to this question of voice is the issue of agency, and in channeling voice, Africans gain a form of agency. Though produced by Europeans, African-based horror films allow for the practice of revisionary history. *The Night of the Sorcerers*, *Dominion*, and *Panga*, while filled with factual inaccuracies and misrepresentations, ultimately allow for a re-writing of the colonial narrative. In the traditional colonial narrative, Westerners enter African spaces, make claims of ownership, and set up systems of hierarchy that oppress the colonized. All too



often, the subaltern are erased and shown as passive recipients of such inferior positions. Yet, in these films, Africans are not completely dominated by the European presence. While they face conflict with and erasure by the West, they are also given the opportunity to fight back against invasion and make themselves known. Thus, the nemesis figure becomes crucial as monsters are mobilized by the Africanist presence to drive out the Western hegemony. The voodoo zombies take revenge against the Europeans that originally extinguished them, invading their sense of security in the same manner their own was once violated. *Umoya Omube* is summoned by the Nyonga witchdoctor to punish the Europeans who disrespected indigenous practice and culture. Satan wreaks havoc on all the characters regardless of their culture, but the British are more keenly affected. The symbolic and topographical origins of his character transform him into a figure that defends the land from European corruption.

Respect plays an important role in the revisionary histories of these films. In traditional colonial narratives, indigenous cultures are frequently disrespected and wiped away. Yet, because they fear African darkness and the possibility of attack at the hands of the Africanist presence, these films also advocate for a toleration of African societies. The voodoo culture in *The Night of the Sorcerers* is not fragmented or deteriorated, but rather kept whole—so much so that it evokes fear. After Elizabeth interrupts the Nyonga sacrificial ceremony, her husband scolds her, telling her she cannot “trample over thousands of years of tradition” (*Panga*). *Dominion*’s Father Merrin treats the Turkana with respect and highlights the hypocrisy of other Western characters. When Father Francis points out there are bloodstains (likely from a sacrifice) in the altar to Satan, Merrin replies by saying, “Yes, it’s almost like a scene out of the inquisition” (*Dominion*), rejecting any conclusion Francis may be drawing about a “savage Africa.” The director, Paul Schrader, also avoids glorifying the British. He parallels the scene of arbitrary Nazi massacre in Holland to the pointless murder of a Turkana woman in British East Africa, indicating that monstrous behavior is not confined to any singular historical moment or culture. In constructing a revised history and subverted colonial narrative, these films reject the image of the passive African. Africans are portrayed as the offenders rather than the offended. Pessimistically, they are presented as monsters. Yet, as the monsters of horror films, Africans also reshape the role of oppressed people through bodies that actively *reject* hegemonic order.


Pop culture artifacts, such as films, are often subject to inaccuracies because, in their efforts to entertain, they often flatten reality into a more easily digestible form. Yet nothing is as simply and wholly problematic as it seems. Are horror films the best generic medium through which to portray Africa? No. Are they



deeply problematic in the perpetuation of African unrealities? Yes. Do these facts completely devalue such films? No, of course not. Like any other cultural artifact, African-based horror films have their own strengths and drawbacks. They construct black bodies as monsters, perpetuating a legacy of Africa as the Dark Continent while also depicting it as an entity that should be feared. However, these same films also provide Africans with the opportunity to rewrite history and exert a form of agency, as violent as it may be. The key is not to find the perfect technique for portraying Africa. Rather, the point is to become deeply reflective about the items that surround us, those items that may appear innocent but, at their cores, are just as sinister if not more so than the monsters that litter bookstore shelves and Netflix queues.

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