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Book Review: OBEAH: The God of Voodoo

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In a broader scope, great hopes are also placed in the Pan African Federation of Cinema (Fe Pa Ci), whose aim is to organize filmmakers in an attempt to solve distribution problems.

Senegalese cinema is diversified. However, beyond its various themes, one observes some esthetic and philosophical similarities. Is it relevant to envision the concept of a Senegalese school of cinema? Most Senegalese directors seem to think that such a concept is premature. For them, a larger number of films is necessary to define Senegalese cinema in comparison with other national cinemas. They also underline that no film has been produced in Senegal since 1976 because of lack of adequate financing. Samba Sakho, a young director, states: "I must admit that I am a little worried. Senegal is more advanced in filmmaking than many African countries but in the last three years we have experienced hard times. A filmmaker has to keep making films. He cannot afford to stay idle for a long period of time or else his creativity is going to be affected."

Other filmmakers see the past three years as a period of reflection on what was made and on what will be done. This concluding statement is formulated by Diagne: "Some people have said that Senegalese cinema is stagnating, others have said that it goes backwards. I disagree! If we had the means to make many films during those past three years, what kind of films would we have produced? I think that one must have a time for reflection and time to see what the public thinks of our films. We have to see what their impact has been up to now. Are we on the right track? We have to prepare and organize ourselves and from battle to battle we will win."

Senegalese cinema may need a few more years to expand; its honest and functional approach to filmmaking leaves way for great expectations. □

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Books

OBEAH: The God of Voodoo

By Ted Cooper
Nuclassics and Science Publishing Company
Washington, D. C., 316 pp. \$8.95

Reviewed by Carole W. Singleton

Against the mysterious world of necromancy and rituals, which are both spiritually and sensuously arousing, Ted Cooper creates an intriguing experience of Obeahism—voodoo. "Voodooism: a religion derived from African ancestor worship, practiced chiefly by Negroes of Haiti and characterized by propitiatory rites and communication by trance with animistic deities . . . in other words, the practice of black magic." This is the academic definition provided by Monsieur Oliphant in Cooper's *Obeah: The God of Voodoo*, which reflects the author's respect for voodooism and his personal belief that necromancy is not far from what the Western world calls religion.

This suspenseful novel, set against a backdrop of obscure and exotic cultural beliefs, commands respect for the worship of voodoo and peaks the reader's curiosity. It tells the story of Roman Cass, who travels from Miami to Key West, Florida, to find the evidence to prove that he and his mother are the rightful heirs to his grandmother Beatrice Brown's fortune.

The source of the major conflict is Cass' aunt Olivia, who has contested the will. We later learn that Olivia is a voodoo priestess who has engineered a multitude of evil machinations through Obeah. Upon arrival, Cass becomes

involved with mysterious characters and situations.

His first encounter is with a Mr. Oliphant, whom Cass had met earlier at his grandmother's funeral. No sooner does Cass meet this odd, old gentleman that he disappears through the rear door of his ramshackle herbs and roots shop. As Cass contemplates a wooden wall carving of Obeah, God Loa, a younger Oliphant, DuVal, appears as mysteriously as the elder one had disappeared.

While visiting the mysterious Oliphants, Cass is advised to stay the night and read a "book" which DuVal insists will help him to understand how Obeah—with a little help from Olivia—killed Cass' grandmother. The "book," which seems to hold the key to Cass' mystery, is the story of Frenchie, Master Oliphant's Black, educated ward and chief slave on the island of Martinique. This inner novel becomes Cass' "cross" because it holds the key to the mystery he must solve in order to ascertain the rightful heirs to the fortune. This inner novel, while providing an informative slave history of the Cass family background, also reinforces the efficiency and influence of Obeahism.

Cooper, a playwright as well as novelist, skillfully leads the reader into the "book" much like a play within a play. Written with a keen sense of foreboding, Cooper's novel is provocative enough to prod even the most passive reader into personal research on the art and practice of voodooism. Descriptive passages such as the following from Frenchie's story create graphically in the mind's eye of the reader the ritual of Obeah:

The woman threw her arms in the air, her body continuously moving. The chicken was kicking and the machette shivered while the light from the flames danced off its blade. . . . The chanting was more intense. "Obeah! Obeah! Obeah!" The woman twirled around, letting the chicken

and the machette fly through the air. . . . The woman stopped twirling, held the chicken still at arm's length and cut its head off. . . . She picked up the beat of the drums and continued her malicious dancing. The headless chicken jerked. She turned the dripping neck up to her mouth, she swallowed the squirting blood as if it were a sacred juice. The blood filled her mouth much quicker than she could swallow it. . . . The drums never stopping, the chanting never ceasing; the swaying, weaving, twisting bodies were consumed with the undertaking.

Once into Frenchie's lengthy but interesting story, one almost forgets Roman Cass. Frenchie's story holds the reader's attention. It provides the necessary historical background of Cass' aunt Olivia, who is Frenchie's daughter; and his grandmother, Beatrice Brown, who was Master Oliphant's Black wife. Frenchie's story, if true, would prove to Cass that Olivia was not really a blood relative of Beatrice Brown, consequently, she would have no legal claim to her money. Frenchie's story, however, ends rather abruptly. The reader finds out much later in *Obeah* that the reason for the abrupt ending is some missing pages, the location of which also becomes part of Cass' complicated search.

The "book," which is Cass' source of truth and trouble, is sought after by others, including Olivia's son, who was actually an actor playing the dual roles of the two Oliphants whom Cass encountered at the beginning of Cooper's novel. The novel's complex structure, with Frenchie's story beginning some 20 pages after we meet Cass and lasting for a good portion of *Obeah* (Part II, the "book," is approximately one half of the novel), demands reader insight and concentration. For we don't really get sufficient family background until we have read the "book" along with Roman Cass. But by the time the "book" is

finished and we turn to Cass, we must, together with Cass, try to piece together the puzzle of the family history. But Cass, being a member of the family, already has more information than we. From this point forward, the reader is given this information in installments as each new character is introduced into the complicated plot. Cooper often accomplishes these introductions by use of flashbacks. Although informative, the flashbacks sometimes make the reader temporarily lose his place, as exemplified in Cass' private thoughts about his father while soaking in the bath.

Simultaneously, the reader must remember the preceding events, or he might find himself leafing backwards to verify a relationship or a name. The complex plot and mounting incidents are both intriguing and vexing to the reader who has difficulty keeping up and remembering. In spite of its complexity, Cooper moves with uncanny ease from one story to another, first Cass, then Frenchie, then back to Cass. As Cooper progresses to another story within the story of Frenchie, he presents two novels juxtaposed into one. Frenchie's story, while providing important evidence for Cass, could really stand on its own.

Obeah often reads like a circuitous house of horrors where every turn presents another frustrating and frightening obstacle to overcome. Cass discovers the actor murdered with a bowie knife; himself almost killed while searching for the missing pages in a graveyard; and seems perpetually pursued or watched by somebody.

In addition to its suspense and emphasis on the occult and the powers of conjurement, Cooper's novel also describes realistically the sexual prowess and adventures of the two major protagonists, Cass and Frenchie. That they can find the energy or presence of mind in spite of all other involvements often

seems somewhat astonishing and sometimes distracting. For example, right in the middle of returning to Key West to confront Mr. Cross, whom Cass considers significant in the recent turn of events, Cass stops for a second time at an old girl friend's house:

The bathroom door opened and Thelma stood there naked, drying herself. . . . Roman stared at Thelma's light malted brown body, as if he were seeing her for the first time, and he damn sure wanted her more than he did the first time.

From here, the reader knows that once again, he must endure (or enjoy) at least three diversionary pages of Cass' erotic lovemaking before returning to the mystery and intrigue. Perhaps this is Cooper's way of both sensitizing his protagonist and simultaneously keeping his reader in agonizing suspense.

The reader must assume from the local color provided that the time is contemporary since Cooper never really states it. But there are hints, such as the mention of \$11 for a tank of gas; a house valued at more than \$50,000; the afro hair style and handshake; a reference to Stokely Carmichael; LSD; a 1970 Riviera; and the use of contemporary colloquialisms to ascertain the time setting of *Obeah*. Later, when we reach the trial itself, we come upon many references to the late 1950s as background for the case. Frenchie's story is not dated either, but the reader is expected to know the general time period of slavery in both the United States and the neighboring Nasauvian islands.

During the court hearing, which occurs in the last 28 pages of the novel, Cooper slips out of the novelist's narrative form into the playwright's character-dialogue format. This section reads easily, even for one not accustomed to reading a playscript.

Obeah is exciting, entertaining and provocative; however, the end seems to come too quickly and neatly for the

complicated events which have precluded it. After the complex tales of Roman Cass and Frenchie, the court hearing seems rather tame—somewhat disappointing because the “book,” now ensconced in a safety deposit box, is not even submitted as evidence. Cass subsequently turns over the missing pages to his mother. The court hearing takes an improbable turn when the judge implies the credibility of voodoo rituals by allowing testimony along those lines. After Cass is allowed to question his aunt Olivia and shows her a patch of Beatrice Brown’s hair in a jar, the entire novel is neatly wrapped up in a page or so, with Cass and his mother winning the case. We also learn about the contents of the missing pages of Frenchie’s story. However, the reader and Cass are left with still another unsolved mystery as the novel closes. Even if one does not believe in the power of voodoo rituals, one would experience great difficulty setting *Obeah* aside, simply because it is an interestingly woven story.

Cooper’s background is similar to that of Cass, whom we follow through a seemingly endless quagmire of dangerous complications, thus making the novel convincing. By telling both Cass and Frenchie’s stories, Cooper has artfully intertwined two worlds: yesterday and today. □

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