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Halqa performance and the fourth stage in Kateb Yacine's *Le cadavre encerclé*

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Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture de la pièce *Le cadavre encerclé* du dramaturge algérien Kateb Yacine en inscrivant sa poétique dans des paradigmes ancrés dans des cultures et identités africaines. Une discussion sur la pratique religieuse et socioculturelle nord-africaine de la *halqa* permet à cet article de replacer la pièce de Yacine dans le paysage théâtral arabe nord-africain. L'exploration de son utilisation métaphysique de la pratique de la *halqa* à travers le protagoniste Lakhdar et le rôle de ce personnage en tant que *goual*, ou conteur, est complétée par l'idée de Wole Soyinka de la quatrième étape, dont l'idée centrale de transformation infinie est explorée à travers des éléments de caractérisation, ainsi que de spatialité et de temporalité circulaires. La manière dont ces idées se rapportent au motif circulaire du sacrifice, de la mort et de la renaissance ancré dans la nature met en avant le projet artistique et politique de Yacine visant à mettre au jour une unité collective précoloniale capable d'apporter des changements durables dans le présent et l'avenir.

Mots-clés : Théâtre algérien ; *halqa* ; *goual* ; quatrième étape ; Kateb Yacine ; Wole Soyinka ; circularité ; conscience collective ; sacrifice

Abstract

This article proposes a reading of the Algerian playwright Kateb Yacine's play *Le cadavre encerclé* by framing its poetics in paradigms rooted in African cultures and identities. A discussion of the North African religious and socio-cultural practice of the *halqa* resituates Yacine's play within the North African Arabic theatrical landscape. The exploration of his metaphysical use of the *halqa* practice through the protagonist of Lakhdar and his character's role as a *goual*, or storyteller, is complemented by Wole Soyinka's idea of the fourth stage, whose core idea of endless transformation is explored through elements of characterization, and circular spatiality and temporality. The way these ideas relate to the circular motif of sacrifice, death and rebirth anchored in nature foregrounds Yacine's artistic and political project to excavate a precolonial collective oneness capable of enacting lasting changes in the present and the future.

Keywords: Algerian theatre; *halqa*; *goual*; fourth stage; Kateb Yacine; Wole Soyinka; circularity; collective consciousness; sacrifice

When Kateb Yacine published his collection of plays titled *Le Cercle des Représailles* in 1959, Algeria had already been deeply marked and traumatized by French

military occupation and political oppression. After more than one hundred years of French colonial rule, initiated in 1830, the Algerian war of Independence (1954-1962) gave Algeria hope for an independent future. In *Le cadavre encerclé* (Encircled cadaver), originally published in 1954-1955, Yacine focuses precisely on this painful past and present in the hope of uncovering a potential future that would transcend the traumas of colonization and war. The play stages the Sétif massacre of May 8, 1945, which Yacine experienced as a teenager and which eventually led to the birth of the Algerian armed independence movement. The narrative “can neither be summarized nor told” due to its fragmented and non-linear narration (Nataf 1958, 132). Lakhdar, the central character, embodies the figure of the sacrificial hero who resuscitates amidst the rubble following an insurrection that has already been stifled by the curtain’s opening. After this opening *in media res*, the play weaves a complex tapestry of characters who, after the turmoil of the insurrection, engage in a constant, and fruitless, search for Lakhdar. For his part, Lakhdar is engaged in a reflective journey; he is in search of his own identity and that of his people throughout a brutal confrontation with the colonizing powers at play. Lakhdar remains on stage for the entirety of the play, and his lengthy, tragic, and lyrical monologues confer on him a significant responsibility, which is that of Algeria’s future. Within this fragmentary narration, Lakhdar’s lover Nedjma, along with Hassan and Mustapha, strives to save Lakhdar from his impending death.

Yacine’s artistic approach in the play does not center on the conflict itself, but rather on the singular and collective experiences shared by his community. His willingness to shed light on Algerian culture and its heritage is akin to a process that seeks to rehabilitate the Algerian nation’s agency and power. In an analysis of the move towards this Algerian agency, this article frames the playwright’s poetics in paradigms rooted in African cultures and identities. A consideration of the North African cultural practice of the *halqa*, or circle, allows this article to resituate Yacine’s play within the socio-cultural landscape of Arabic theater. The exploration of Yacine’s metaphysical use of the *halqa* practice through the character of Lakhdar is complemented by Wole Soyinka’s idea of the fourth stage, whose core idea of endless transformation is explored alongside the elements of spatiality, temporality and characterization, which also relate to the circular motif of sacrifice, death and rebirth anchored in nature. Several scholars have germanely identified the importance of the *halqa* (Amine and Carlson 2008; Goodman 2018; Haddad 2008) and the fourth stage (Konkobo 2011) in Arabic theater, and others have foregrounded themes of collective ontological recovery via death in Yacine’s play (Khadraoui and Boussad 2011; Tlatli 2020). This article builds on such work by using the *halqa* and fourth stage as analytical frameworks for approaching *Le cadavre encerclé*. This play is a pertinent example of Yacine’s recourse to theatrical invention, where traditional forms of performance are reappropriated and experimented with to generate political and cultural change. Through a sustained engagement with socio-cultural and religious African practices and beliefs to analyze Yacine’s work, this article endeavors to rethink his artistic project in the hope of revealing new interpretations of *Le cadavre encerclé*.

Yacine’s metaphysical *halqa*

In 2008, Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson argued that a commonly shared idea among Western scholars was “that whatever significant drama exists or has existed in the Arab world resulted from that world gradually becoming aware of and learning to imitate European models” (2008, 71). They further argue that this assumption forecloses any engagement with North African socio-cultural practices, such as the *halqa* structure, and the impact of such practices on Arabic theater. The *halqa* is a Sufi practice which dates to

the 9th century and was used in religious instruction, when a group of students would sit around a religious teacher in a circle. Over time, this practice shifted to “more secular and playful gatherings, and then public gathering around a person in a public space” (Amine and Carlson, 72-73).

The halqa did not instantly become the main structure for North African theater. Influenced by Egyptian theater, North African theater in the early 20th century still followed the Western tradition. It was in the 1960s and 1970s, to explore lost precolonial North African poetic practices after the Algerian war of Independence, that dramatists such as Fatima Chebchoub, Ahmed Tayeb El-Alej, Zober Benbouchta, and Abdelkader Alloula looked inward and reconnected with more indigenous performance traditions to challenge their dependance on European models. The public use of halqa was thus reappropriated on stage. The turn to this ancestral storytelling tradition spread in the North African theater world and offered an alternative to the so-called “traditional European proscenium stage” (Amine and Carlson 2008, 73). Its use by different North African playwrights attested to the willingness to “decolonize their culture and to restore the value of their heritage” (Goodman 2018, 96). They also sought to reconnect with their past with “the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope” (Fanon 1963, 232). These words, borrowed from Fanon’s psychoanalytical exploration of the dehumanizing impact of colonization and the ways to engage in a decolonization practice, allude to a call to colonized intellectuals to engage with pre-colonial cultures solely to support the present and future liberation of the nation. The notion of “an invitation to action” through the stage could recall a Brechtian approach to theater; however, Jane E. Goodman aptly reminds us, in her anthropological study of the practice of the halqa and its embodied materiality by the Istijmam theater troupe, that “what Brecht began writing about in the 1930s had been part of their halqa for centuries” (95).

Yacine experimented with the halqa between 1971 and 1977 with his theater group which performed in popular Algerian Arabic and presented its work in non-conventional venues like factories or schools (Haddad 2008, 33). Even though he turned to this structure in the 1970’s, *Le cadavre encerclé* illustrated a nascent engagement with this practice. Yet, where his later work conformed to the accepted definition of the halqa, in his construction of an Algerian collective imagery Yacine took a more metaphysical approach to the form in *Le cadavre encerclé*. This article understands and employs the notion of the metaphysical as referring to something “that is above or goes beyond the laws of nature; belonging to an operation or agency which is more than or other than physical or natural; supernatural” (OED). As Jane E. Goodman notes: “As a halqa, a play could hold up a society’s concerns, challenges, troubles, and passions in a way that allowed for dialogical engagement, debate, and critical reflection” (2018, 94). Goodman identifies the inherent political engagement of the halqa as stemming from its role as a performance that not only exposes societal matters but also goes beyond the stage to elicit reactions from its audience in the hope of enacting concrete transformation. This definition of halqa finds its echo within Yacine’s play which dwells on the metaphysical excavation of a lost Algerian imagined identity and the violent oppression faced by Algerians. In this halqa, Lakhdar assumes the role of the *goual*, or *gouwāl*, i.e. a storyteller, in charge of a social performance of storytelling, as his numerous monologues throughout the play make clear (Haddad, 33).

From the onset of the play, Yacine uses the halqa but adapts it to his poetics to create a more metaphysical version that stands at odds with the form’s common use in North African theater. In typical halqa theater, the audience surrounds the stage instead of facing it; breaking the fourth wall is a common practice to rid the performance of the frontier between the play and its audience. However, in Yacine’s halqa, there is a clear

distinction between onstage and offstage. Yet, at the same time, the content of the play invites the audience to become part of the collective that is represented on stage and crystallized in Lakhdar's character. In *Le cadavre encerclé*, Yacine recreates the halqa public form on the stage itself, allowing the audience to at once bear witness and be active agents in it. Indeed, like a conventional halqa, Lakhdar is constantly surrounded, either by cadavers or his friends with whom he shares his personal experiences which are understood as experiences of a collective identity. The first stage directions set up this original form of halqa wherein Lakhdar is surrounded by cadavers while he declares his first monologue as a goul: "*À l'angle de l'impasse et de la rue, une lumière est projetée sur les cadavres qui s'expriment tout d'abord par une plaintive rumeur qui se personnifie peu à peu et devient voix, la voix de Lakhdar blessé*" (At the corner of the dead end and the street, a light is projected onto the corpses, which initially express themselves through a plaintive murmur that gradually takes shape and becomes a voice, the voice of the wounded Lakhdar) (Yacine 1959, 17).¹

This public aspect of halqa performance is also reflected through the motif of the "rue", or street, in the introductory monologue. The "rue" is expressed as a site of identity, culture, and community, three elements that stand at the core of halqa and coalesce in Lakhdar as he declares: "Je ne suis plus corps, mais je suis une rue" (I am no longer a body, but I am a street) (18). Consequently, this identification of Lakhdar with the image of "la rue" brings the halqa space to a new and less material territory. As the street and Lakhdar become one, the performance of halqa is now tied to Lakhdar's spatiality throughout the entire play. It is thus not necessary to situate him in the street, since he now embodies it completely. The coalescence of Lakhdar with this geographical element hints at the central role that the character comes to gradually take on in the play; he becomes the main vector of communication, the main voice of the community that surrounds him.

Towards the end of the play, Yacine tries to recreate a somewhat regular structure of halqa, when the chorus, or more precisely choruses, are surrounding Lakhdar. With this poetic and dramatic device, the canonical halqa structure is inscribed in the diegesis. These choruses are described as such: "*Les personnages du chœur ne sont pas symboliques*" (The characters in the chorus are not symbolic) (47). Lakhdar is thus surrounded by real people in the street. Eventually the main chorus is divided in two choruses, one of men and one of women, who end up surrounding Lakhdar in the street: "*La foule se groupe en un chœur rangé des deux côtés de la rue, femmes et hommes se faisant face pour composer les deux parties du chœur*" (The crowd gathers in a chorus on both sides of the street, women and men facing each other to form the two parts of the chorus) (57). As such, Yacine's choruses are complex, and in the image of Lakhdar's character, can sway between concrete materiality and extreme metaphoricity. It is this transformative attribute that allows the choruses to engage with Lakhdar. These choruses witness and repeat Lakhdar's words in the play, thus restoring the relationship between the goul and the audience. This relationship is also found in the exchange Lakhdar initiates with future members of the chorus, who in the text are referred to in general terms, as "un homme" (a man), "une femme" (a woman). These abstract characters are used to refer to the collective by metonymy, but also paradoxically to highlight the individuality of the different members of this same collective.

Although these elements attest to the inspiration which Yacine draws from the halqa structure, the author nevertheless takes great liberties to deviate from the original form while still respecting its core tenets. These points of departure are also located in the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

characterization of Lakhdar as a goul, and in the physical circularity of halqa transposed into a temporal one in the play.

Lakhdar, a metaphysical goul

In a traditional halqa, be it in the streets or on stage “a single actor (the goul) [gives] voice to a range of characters” (Goodman 2018, 95). Lakhdar is always referred to as Lakhdar in the entire play and never seems to adopt another character’s identity or individuality. Nevertheless, Yacine relies on this idea of multiple characters colliding into one being. Instead of using Lakhdar as a host to retell another character’s story, Yacine expands the scope of the halqa and relocates Lakhdar’s identity into a collective, so much so that his words become everybody’s. This integration of Lakhdar into this collective is constant throughout the play. The audience witnesses his perpetual back and forth between individuality and collectivity to the point that Lakhdar “play(s) all the parts but identifie(s) with none of them” (Goodman, 96). Lakhdar’s role as the spokesperson of his community is a recurring motif throughout the play. This storytelling responsibility is developed through his propensity to repeatedly include himself in a collective: “ici est notre rue” (here is our street) (18), “Nous sommes morts. Nous sommes assassinés” (We are dead. We are killed) (18), but also through his relationship towards the end of the play with the chorus which only seems able to repeat Lakhdar’s words in unison, and finally through numerous metaphors and images that are examined below.

The aforementioned opening stage directions set this scene with the collective sound of the cadavers eventually being conveyed by Lakhdar’s sole voice. Following the same pattern, the recurrent motif of blood flow in the opening monologue is used in a larger extended metaphor of the body, where the blood of the living, the dying and the dead are continually interconnected: “le tas de cadavres demeure en vie, parcouru par une ultime vague de sang” (the pile of corpses remains alive, coursed by a final wave of blood) (18). A body at once individual and collective, exemplified by Lakhdar’s assimilation to the street mentioned earlier, and extended by the idea of blood flow. Soraya Tlatli’s identification of Yacine’s recurrent use of the signifier “blood” as “express[ing] the imbrication of genealogy and history” seems germane in the case of Lakhdar as a character whose eventual disintegration of the self is followed by a reintroduction into a larger ancestral collective (2020, 87). Interestingly, the numerous references to blood only center around colonized bodies and subjectivities and are never associated with the colonizers, who are still present in the play. This connection between the indigenous Algerian collective and the motif of blood is reinforced by the character of Marguerite, a nurse and daughter of a French officer, who says to Lakhdar: “Vous êtes arabe. [...] vous avez le sang” (You are an Arab. [...] you have the blood) (37). The mention of the “artère” (artery) (18) in this blood imagery early in the play can be understood as both the geographical term but also as a particular type of blood vessel that is characterized by its ability to transport blood from the heart throughout the entire body via its ramifications called arterioles and capillaries. These ramifications are what allow Lakhdar to move from the individual to the collective. This circulation of blood across different states of living introduces a dissolution of the clear distinction between life and death and presents in the end an original way of conceptualizing life. With a declaration such as “seule persiste ma voix d’homme pour déclamer la plénitude d’un masculin pluriel” (only my male voice remains to proclaim the fullness of a plural masculine) (17), Lakhdar verbalizes this metaphor and sacrifices his body and identity to a broader cultural collective. Throughout the play, each of his acts amounts to a claiming of a singular “moi” (me) and a plural “je” (I) which aim to reveal an oppressed group and situate it in a new space, the fourth stage.

To understand Lakhdar's journey, Wole Soyinka's concept of the fourth stage provides a culturally relevant African framework. In his work, the Nigerian playwright and essayist shares with Yacine a similar objective of restoring the agency of African peoples and transcribing in writing the socio-cultural and artistic complexity of the African continent. To do so, Soyinka draws his inspiration from Yoruba's myth and folklore. In the appendix to *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka analyzes the origin of the tradition of Yoruba tragedy and relies on metaphysical and cosmogonic elements to propose an African vision of tragedy that offers an alternative to Greek tragedy. His analysis of tragedy in what he calls Yoruba "ritual" focuses on the divinity Ogun, or the god of creation and destruction who was born of the original unique deity Oriṣa-nla. The latter's fragmentation gave birth to human beings and gods alike, who are separated by an uncrossable void.

This ancestral separation leaves both humans and gods trapped in a constant state of incompleteness. It is a state that only the god Ogun can transcend through a process of individual disintegration and reintegration into the collective group, thanks to their willing sacrifice and their capacity of "creativity-destruction" (Konkobo 2011, 57). In the Yoruba understanding of a temporality composed of "the ancestral, the living and the unborn," Ogun's sacrifice allows the deity to cross the bridge between humans and deities (Soyinka 1976, 144). This tripartite system is echoed by the character of Mustapha in *Le cadavre encerclé* with his reference to colonized people as "les victimes, les captifs, les rescapés" (the victims, the prisoners, the survivors) (41). This liminal space of transition is presented by Soyinka as the fourth stage. It is an interstitial space that is not past, present, or future and is central to Yoruba tragedy as it crystalizes at once the anguish of the separation and fragmentation of the self, and the return of the individual into an omnipotent oneness capable of restoring the power of the collective. This journey by way of the fourth stage through the sacrifice of Ogun ultimately leads to the restoration of the lost fullness of the community (Konkobo, 58).

In *Le cadavre encerclé*, Lakhdar's sacrifice for the collective is a fitting example of the fourth stage. This conclusion is shared by Said Khadraoui and Amel Boussad, although they do not frame it in the framework of the fourth stage: "the one who dies does not fully disappear; he dies to give life to life and to be reintegrated in the great oneness with which they constantly commune" (Khadraoui and Boussad 2011, 84).² Death is omnipresent in the play through metaphors, imagery, or direct representations of dead bodies on stage. In the first monologue, Lakhdar makes extensive use of the lexical field of death with expressions such as: "cercueil d'enfants" (children's coffins), "sanglante source" (bloody source), "rendre l'âme" (to expire) (17-18). More importantly, sacrifice and death are also tied to a return to one's past, one's origin, one's birth, notably with the image of the mother with terms such as "blessure ombilicale" (umbilical wound), "je retourne à la sanglante source, à notre mère incorruptible" (I return to the bloody source, to our incorruptible mother) (17). The notion of the fourth stage is relevant in Lakhdar's sacrifice not only for his return to the past into a collective shared fullness, but also for this transitory fourth stage where he seems to be at once dead and alive.

When Lakhdar describes "le tas de cadavres [qui] demeure en vie, parcouru par une ultime vague de sang" (the pile of corpses [which] remains alive, coursed through by a final wave of blood) (16), the frontier between life and death appears thin. This "other-life," distinct from the afterlife, presents death as the beginning of the journey towards the restoration of a collective ancestral identity rather than the end of life altogether. This

² "celui qui meurt ne disparaît pas totalement ; il meurt pour donner vie à la vie et pour être réintégré dans le grand tout avec lequel il communique constamment".

“other-life” finds its place in the transitory space of the fourth stage. The disintegration of Lakhdar’s individuality and its reinsertion into an ancestral collectivity is expressed when Lakhdar declares: “je dis Nous et je descends dans la terre pour ranimer le corps qui m’appartient à jamais [...] je remonte d’outre-tombe prononcer mon oraison funèbre” (I say We, and I descend into the earth to revive the body that belongs to me forever [...] I rise from beyond the grave to deliver my funeral oration) (19). Lakhdar’s individuality becomes one with the collective, so much so that his body proper is detached from his new subjectivity. He is able to experience his old individuality only through the prism of the collective, for whom he now has become the mouthpiece, hence his ability to revive his own body and give his own eulogy. Lakhdar confesses the loss of his individuality in the same monologue as he utters: “Ici je me dénombre et n’attends plus la fin” (Here I count myself and no longer wait for the end) (19). In essence, as he counts his own plurality Lakhdar does not come to represent other characters but an entire collective cultural identity that he discovers in a cosmic journey in the fourth stage, allowing him to enter a realm of endless metamorphosis.

Circularity of time and death & rebirth in the collectivity

“Ici je me dénombre et n’attends plus la fin” (19). The second part of this utterance places the entire play in a circular temporal movement reminiscent of the fourth stage which exists beyond past, present, and future. Lakhdar does not wait for the end as, in this circular understanding of time, it does not exist. This circularity of time and death is the way Yacine can go back to an ancestral Algerian oneness, one that does not claim an historical anchor but emerges as part of Yacine’s poetic imaginings and give it its fullness back. The title itself, with the use of the adjective “encercle”, or “encircled”, is reminiscent of this circular space that carries a significant meaning in Arabo-Islamic culture. Lakhdar, and/or his cadaver, is at the center of that circle. The play either portrays him alone on stage or other characters, such as Nedjma, Mustapha, Tahar, talking with or about him. After Lakhdar’s first monologue, the characters’ dialogues center around his whereabouts and possible death. However, this possibility is quickly dismissed when Hassan utters: “Nous n’avons pas encore décidé de porter Lakhdar disparu” (We have not yet decided to report Lakhdar missing) (25).

The paradox of being always already dead and always already alive is reinforced by the stage directions introducing Lakhdar’s second monologue. Lakhdar is described as alive, or resuscitated, through an allusion to physical effort: “*Il s’est péniblement relevé [...] il titube dans la rue*” (He struggled to his feet [...] he staggers down the street) (27), but in the same movement the use of the word “apparition” to describe him plays with its ghostly understanding. If Lakhdar experienced a process of fragmentation in the first monologue, this second one illustrates a process of re-creation and reinsertion in the group: “Je me retrouve dans notre ville. Elle reprend forme” (I find myself back in our city. It is taking shape again) (27). The transmutation of Lakhdar’s body into the street is then furthered in this monologue. When Lakhdar finds himself back in the city, it is implied that this is from a geographical standpoint but also from the perspective of his identity. The city, just like himself, and the collective he comes to represent “reprend forme” after their death: “Je sors enfin de cette Mort tenace et de la ville morte où me voici enseveli” (I am finally emerging from this persistent death and the dead city where I find myself buried) (27). Moreover, Lakhdar mentions the sacrifice of others, notably that of his father, that he incorporates in a more global economy of death with collective groups such as “statues mutilées” (mutilated statues), or “nos esprits survivants” (our surviving minds) (28).

In the following passages, Yacine relies on a brutal image of death and sacrifice: “mon sang dilapidé ne connaîtra jamais plus de norme, ni de débit” (my squandered blood will never again know normality or flow) (28); “ces cerveaux qui se déchirent en fleurs anachroniques sur leur terre défendue, ô fleur tout agitée près du nectar vomi, gerbes de cerveaux obscurcis que traversèrent par essaims tant d’abeilles de plomb dans nos têtes blotties” (these brains torn apart into anachronistic flowers on their defended land, oh flower all agitated near the vomited nectar, sprays of darkened brains penetrated by swarms of leaden bees in our huddled heads) (31). According to Yacine, the fragmentation of the self through sacrifice must be brutal to lead to its reincorporation into the collective. This brutality ties back to Soyinka’s fourth stage as “in Yoruba ritual drama, [...] suffering must be ritually performed in order that prosperity be restored to the community, fertility to the earth, and the continuum of life maintained” (Wright 1992, 41). Lakhdar exposes this paradoxical relationship between suffering in sacrifice and oneness recovered by the collective with poetic oppositions such as: “la ville toujours jeune en fête au bord des ruines” (the ever-young city celebrating amid the ruins) (29) or “notre ville écroulée n’est plus que joie de vivre avec les murs” (our ruined city is nothing but joy of living with walls) (30). Both examples foreground the contradictory Algerian affective response where the sight of the city in shambles in effect attests to the survival and willingness to fight of the Algerian people.

This joy in destruction is fueled by the hope of a soon-to-come independence. Therefore, this second monologue is the transitional stage in the journey from fragmentation to reintegration experienced by Lakhdar, who now explores the fourth stage. This is a stage where Lakhdar “rampe ni vivant ni mort” (crawls neither alive nor dead) (28), and where the linear concept of time does not exist: “nul horaire ne sera plus le mien” (no time will be mine anymore) (28). After the second monologue, Yacine’s play with temporal linearity is at its height. Past and present are juxtaposed in a non-linear fashion, Lakhdar is dead and alive at the same time, and that which comes before, during and after the rebellion collide, blurring the frontiers between past, present, and future.

When Lakhdar is found by his friends at Marguerite’s, he is still experiencing his rebirth, but this time Yacine emphasizes Lakhdar’s individuality in the collective. Consequently, in his journey, the collective group is not understood as homogenous, but rather as the accumulation of multiple individualities. This is illustrated through a focus on Lakhdar’s individual story, namely the mention of anecdotes about his life and the exploration of his relationships with his mother and stepfather. Marguerite, the only positive representation of a colonial agent in the narrative, as a well-meaning and caring character, plays a significant role in the individuation of Lakhdar within his own community when she tells him: “C’est bizarre... Les autres, je ne peux pas les voir. Ils sont sales. On dirait des poux. Vous n’êtes pas comme eux” (It’s strange... I can’t stand the others. They’re dirty. They look like lice. You’re not like them) (37). Nonetheless, this gap created between Lakhdar and his community does not threaten Yacine’s project of return to a shared identity since it emanates from an outsider, Marguerite. An outsider who is rejected by the group, represented by the chorus in the play. The rejection is even more significant because of the ambivalence displayed by Marguerite, a well-intentioned nurse who is eager to protect Lakhdar and his friends from the police. She is also the daughter of a French military commander. The aspirational return to an ancestral Algerian community is thus reserved for indigenous communities alone and does away with any colonial remnants however benevolent they might be. Lakhdar finally summarizes the final stage of reintegration that takes place in the fourth stage as he declares:

Je ressens mieux l’oppression universelle

Maintenant que le moindre mot
 Pèse plus qu'une larme.
 Je vois notre pays, et je vois qu'il est pauvre.
 Je vois qu'il est plein d'hommes décapités.
 Et ces hommes, je les rencontre un par un dans ma tête,
 Car ils sont devant nous, et le temps nous manque pour les suivre ! (51)

I feel the universal oppression more keenly
 Now that every word
 Weighs more than a tear.
 I see our country, and I see that it is poor.
 I see that it is full of decapitated men.
 And I meet these men one by one in my mind,
 For they are before us, and we do not have time to follow them!

In this excerpt that conveys the weight and violence of the oppression experienced by the Algerian people under colonial rule, the universality Lakhdar refers to is more localized and specific to Algeria. The tragic realization of the current state of the country, which is a result of colonial exploitation, is associated with the omnipresence of death. Lakhdar's encounter with the decapitated men in his own mind is the best way Yacine can describe this process of reintegration into the collective, where the group does not create a new singular subjectivity but composes with a multiplicity of them. The arrest and subsequent torture of Lakhdar by police officials is an attempt to halt the process he has already started in the fourth stage.

This torture cuts him off from his community, and upon his release he must find his way back home both metaphysically and in terms of his own identity. In this scene, Yacine deepens the rift between the Algerian community and its French oppressors. The temporal circularity at play in the passing from disintegration to reintegration does not make sense for outsiders, who must translate it into something concrete like dementia. One of his torturers, "Le chef", declares: "Il est foutu. Il aura des visions toute sa vie. Il criera comme un possédé" (He's done for. He'll have visions for the rest of his life. He'll scream like a possessed man) (53). After this brutal fracture from his community, Lakhdar must experience death once again to "retrouver la raison" (come to his senses) (55). When Tahar, his stepfather, stabs Lakhdar out of anger, he does not understand that this violent act will become the catalyst for his rebirth after death. This final sacrifice is the culmination of Yacine's work on poetics and nature in the play.

A sacrifice anchored in nature

Throughout the play Lakhdar dies, comes back to life under Marguerite's care, then experiences a psychological death after his torture by police officials, and is finally saved by Nedjma who guides him back home. This constant back-and-forth, and oftentimes transitory, period between life and death, locates Lakhdar's process of individual disintegration, as well as his subsequent reinsertion in a collective Algerian consciousness, in Soyinka's idea of the fourth stage. Nevertheless, the audience is left to wonder if Lakhdar willingly sacrifices himself for the betterment of the community or if he is only a victim of this sacrifice. Most of the play does not offer a clear answer to this question. Yet as soon as Lakhdar is stabbed by his stepfather, this willingness becomes blatant, as Soraya Tlatli points out: "Lakhdar desires his death so that he can be reborn as other" (2020, 98). Lakhdar's acceptance of death is revealed as he exhorts the unnamed bystanders not to lament his imminent demise: "Tu pleures parce que la révolte est

brisée? Ne pleure pas” (Are you crying because the rebellion has been crushed? Don't cry) (56), and more interestingly as he hints at the collective rebirth of the entire community after death: “Ensemble nous dormirons, quand l'arbre m'aura laissé choir” (Together we will sleep, when the tree will have let me fall) (57). Even in death, Lakhdar displays agency; he understands the urgency of his own sacrifice as consolidating his community to secure a “future” for his people. As Derek Wright aptly argues about Soyinka's dramatic theory: “The ritual action does not end with the life of the hero but entails a beneficial follow-on effect for the community more pervasive than in the Western individualist tragic tradition” (1992, 42). Lakhdar's sacrifice within the fourth stage, which is more metaphysical than political in nature, allows him to coalesce with an ancestral past consciousness.

In Yacine's poetics, the movement from an individual death in the present to a rebirth in eternity in the collective group is tied to a return to and a fusion with nature, the motherland, and its protean forms. The objective of the sacrifice is to become part of all natural elements in a great movement of self-dispersion. This animist conception of Lakhdar's sacrificial union with nature is illustrated by his final resting place, an orange tree. The choice of an orange tree is anything but accidental considering the central role of the colonial culture and exportation of this fruit in Algeria. More importantly, a symbol of prosperity and sweetness, this specific agrum is not only tied to the land, since “in Algeria, citrus cultivation dates back to the Roman era,” but in effect has become over time a staple aroma in Algerian cuisine and food practices (Kazi-Tani 2024, 61). Lakhdar's final fusion with an orange tree thus metaphorically reinforces Yacine's overall project of a return to a pre-colonial Algerian identity. Lakhdar verbalizes this necessity of fusion between his body and nature to complete his sacrificial ritual, echoing the Yoruba idea of continuity that, according to Soyinka, “operates via both a cyclical conception of time and the animist fusion of all matter and consciousness” (1976, 145).³ Lakhdar's passage from individuality to the collective is reaffirmed by grammatical indicators that blur the line between these two states – e.g. the expression “À mon arbre sacrifié” (To my sacrificed tree) (59) which is uttered by Lakhdar and echoed by the chorus with the now collective expression “À nos arbres sacrifiés” (To our sacrificed trees) (59). This grammatical shift between an “I” to a “We” is representative of Lakhdar's entire journey in the play, where he willingly sacrifices his individuality in this desire of fusion with nature and the collective through death. As he refuses Mustapha and Hassan's help to pull the knife from his body, Lakhdar affirms his willingness to protect the tree, and the collectivity, even at the cost of his own life. Yacine's reliance on natural imagery throughout the play, notably his use of plants and animals, culminates in this final orange tree which comes to represent the vector through which Lakhdar is able to communicate and eventually make one with ancestral generations. Yacine's choice of a tree is not coincidental and echoes in a circular movement Lakhdar's transmutation with the street and the idea of “artère”, or roots, at the beginning of the play.

Lakhdar's final passage through the fourth stage happens precisely when he clings to this orange tree. This idea is expressed by Mustapha as he says: “En vain il lutte contre son cadavre” (In vain he struggles against his corpse) (61). Lakhdar's body will be the last remnant of his disintegration process onstage, while his spirit, by fusing with the tree and nature, will leave the stage, leaving behind the vestige of a corporality that eventually will also fuse with nature through decomposition. When Mustapha's mother enters the stage and looks for her son, Lakhdar reveals his spiritual presence in the fourth stage, since she is unable to hear him when he declares: “Il est toujours là. Il m'attend dans ce

³ “s'opère à la fois par le biais d'une conception cyclique du temps et de la fusion animiste de toute matière et conscience”.

monde et je l'attends dans l'autre. Nous passons notre vie à faire nos adieux" (He is always there. He waits for me in this world, and I wait for him in the next. We spend our lives bidding each other adieu) (62).

Furthermore, now that Lakhdar has successfully become part of this collective entity evolving beyond time in the fourth stage he urges everyone around to join him in his journey: "Rien ne résiste à l'exode" (Nothing can resist the exodus) (63). In a poetic tirade, Lakhdar, who has now joined an ancestral Algerian oneness drawn by Yacine, expresses this process of creation of the collective through death on earth and rebirth in the eternal:

Toutes les peines sont capitales
 Pour celui qui parvient au centre,
 Au centre du destin.
 Ici un souffle me résume, et ma langue enfin corrompue
 Avec les algues va nourrir l'immensité.
 C'est ici qu'il faut tout vomir
 Les peines, les soucis, les chimères, les sciences
 Et comme l'océan il me faut rendre gorge
 Sans retenir ni perle ni cadavre
 Et il me faut passer aux aveux
 Si je veux repartir à vide
 À l'autre bout du destin [...] (65)

All punishments are capital
 For the one who reaches the center,
 To the center of fate.
 Here, a breath resumes me, and my language, at last corrupted
 With the seaweed will nourish the immeasurable.
 It is here that everything must be vomited out
 Sufferings, anxieties, illusions, sciences
 And like the ocean, I must cough it all up
 Down to the last pearl, the last corpse
 And I must confess
 If I want to start again with a clean slate
 At the other end of destiny [...]

Relying on his subjective experience throughout the play, Lakhdar evokes his sacrificial death ("une peine capitale"), and his rebirth thanks to a "souffle" given to him in the fourth stage. This rebirth was allowed by his fusion with nature, which in this tirade takes the form of the ocean in an extended metaphor with mentions of "algues", "océan" and "perle." Finally, for him to be accepted in the fourth stage he must abandon all the adverse parts of his individuality, notably his "cadavre" and "peine, soucis, chimères," to become a spirit capable of entering the collective "à l'autre bout du destin." The end of the play marks the culmination of Lakhdar's embrace by the ancestral collective through one of his childhood memories and the comfort he found as a baby in the arms of "la femme au parfum inconnu" (the woman with the unknown scent) (66). This metaphorical return to the womb, to an unknown collective origin, but most importantly to a foreigner, is here to remind us of the problematic relationship of the collective to its past, at once comforting and traumatic. Considering Soyinka's cosmogonic origins of the fourth stage, this cosmic womb could reach a universal significance. A "great womb" that beyond the Algerian context could also resonate with

other post-colonial nations eager to reconnect with precolonial traditions to actively engage in the redefinition of new collective identities in the present for the future.

Conclusion

In *Le cadavre encerclé*, Kateb Yacine's literary and political project to explore a poetic ancestral collective Algerian identity is deeply anchored in African artistic, cultural, and religious practices. As such, with this play, Yacine breaks away to a certain extent with what Édouard Glissant defines in the introduction to the play as the "fondement éternel de la Tragédie" (eternal foundation of Tragedy) (12), as understood in a classical Western tradition of theater. Yacine's poetic approach to individuality and collectivity and his metaphysical use of the *halqa* allows Lakhdar to portray on stage a process of fragmentation of the self for a reintegration into a collective consciousness in what Soyinka conceptualized as the fourth stage. This destruction of the self, carried out by a willing sacrificial ritual anchored in nature, blurs the temporality of the play, but also more broadly of the Algerian identity, which is depicted as always incomplete and in search of an ancestral oneness. For Kateb Yacine, death is not the culmination of life but rather a step towards rebirth in the other. This death followed by rebirth allows the ancestral collective identity to be restored and find its strength and oneness again. This importation of the past into the present through the fourth stage, where Death appears as Yacine's vehicle towards a utopian futurity, allows the play and its representations to eternally recreate this present moment where change happens on stage and in the audience in each representation. As the play ends with a "*pluie d'oranges*" (a shower of oranges) (67) thrown on the spectators, Yacine introduces the final connection of the play to the *halqa*, as a public performance without frontiers between the actors and the spectators, that not only foregrounds a spiritual and historical journey but resonates as a political act and a perpetually reiterated call for arms.

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