

EVEMBE'S *SUR LA TERRE EN PASSANT* AND THE POETICS OF SHAME

RICHARD BJORNSON
The Ohio State University

When François-Borgia Marie Evembe's *Sur la terre en passant* was published in 1966, it received glowing reviews and a prestigious literary prize.¹ The first edition sold out quickly. Since then, this provocative first novel has never been reprinted, and few critics have accorded it much attention.² This neglect is unfortunate, because Evembe has imaginatively depicted a social and psychological phenomenon of enormous significance for Post-Independence Africa. As traditional culture and economic organization lose their hold over village life, thousands of young people flock to overcrowded urban areas, but there are jobs for very few of them, and those who do find work often discover that their new situation demands moral compromise and breeds a different kind of anxiety. This is precisely what happens to Iyoni, the protagonist in Evembe's novel, and to the extent that he is caught in a web of socio-economic forces which shape the destinies of countless individuals in a large number of African countries, his story is a typical one—so mundane that it would hardly merit a mention in the Cameroon newspapers for which Evembe has worked during the past fifteen years. However, by employing a direct, concrete idiom perfectly suited to the hallucinatory qualities and scabrous details of one particular man's experience of life under these circumstances, Evembe shocks readers into an awareness of the intense suffering which is inflicted routinely on young Africans by this process. He also makes the state of consciousness behind this particular man's tragedy come alive. Characterized by vivid sense impressions and a preoccupation with nausea and filth,

Iyoni's thoughts are permeated by an omnipresent sense of shame, and it is this shame that Evembe weaves into a satirical yet philosophical meditation on the vitality of the human spirit under duress and on its yearning for love and truth in an imperfect world. In effect, he has fashioned a poetics of shame from the ordinary experiences of daily life in a large African city.

In the language of his native Kribi, Iyoni's name literally means «shame», and after coming to the Cameroon capital Yaoundé in search of a government job, he finds it impossible to escape the emotion suggested by his name. Near the beginning of his stay in the city, he falls ill. In his weakened condition, he is obliged to depend on the charity of friends for the basic necessities of life. Although he is shy, indecisive and passive, he is also idealistic, sensitive and proud. He never wants to appear ridiculous in the eyes of other people and therefore continually strives to maintain a dignified pose. Despite dizziness and fatigue, he struggles to stand erect. When asked about his failure to keep a doctor's appointment, he claims to have been on a business trip, although he was unemployed at the time. In the flirtatious Marie-Chantal's apartment, he feigns nonchalance to camouflage his nervousness. In each case, he is attempting to make others believe in a masculine dignity he does not actually possess. Nevertheless, he recognizes the insubstantiality of his pretensions and feels ashamed of them. In fact, he is always and everywhere ashamed—ashamed of his dependency, ashamed of a perishable, ridiculous body that refuses to obey his commands to adopt dignified poses, ashamed of clothes that brand him an outsider in respectable society, ashamed of a life in which he has accomplished nothing at an age when Napoleon had conquered half of Europe, but most of all, he is ashamed of being ashamed.

Iyoni's mysterious illness is never specifically identified; it might be chronic diarrhea or dysentery or even the cancer he fears. The crucial point is not the name of the disease, but the fact that something is causing his body to eject clots of blood and horrible chunks of decaying organic matter. Whatever that something might be, it is not only physical; it is also spiritual, and it has been caused by conditions imposed on him by the same forces that are tearing apart the fabric of traditional African society. The two most important of these forces are urbanization and bureaucratization. As Cameroon moved from a subsistence economy rigidly controlled by French colonial authorities to a money economy administered by

an indigenous elite and supported by French financial and political interests, thousands of Iyonis migrated to the cities, where they hoped to achieve respectability and all that it promises—marriage, decent clothes, food, medical care, a home, self-esteem. The largest industry in many of these cities is a government bureaucracy in which positions are allocated on the basis of personal and political connections. Those without jobs have little incentive for performing their tasks conscientiously, because there is no relationship between the work they do and the rewards they receive. Thus, even when Iyoni obtains a well-paying position in one of the ministries, he cannot help but feel ashamed of his own impotence in the face of a pervasive greed, superficiality and corruption. The result is a profound malaise which nothing can dispel. Shortly after obtaining his position and moving into a highly respectable apartment, he suffers a relapse of his earlier illness and dies. Obviously, no amount of individual wealth or political influence could have cured Iyoni's illness, because it was merely one symptom of a larger social disorder.

Against the pressures exerted on him by that disorder, Iyoni struggles to uphold his conviction that people are more than physical bodies and that they can create their own meaning and purpose on this earth. His models of behavior are Christ, the man of love, and Napoleon, the man of action. Although he is incapable of emulating either of them, he dreams of harmonizing their examples by resacralizing day-to-day existence without divorcing himself from physical and political realities. Despite the hypocrisy and corruption of the institutionalized church, he feels drawn toward the cathedral, where the singing, incense and ceremonial magnificence of the Mass rekindle in him a profoundly peaceful sentiment of wonder and awe.³ He knows that contemporary Africans must preserve such sentiments if they hope to survive spiritually. He also knows that a better society could come into being if people oriented their lives around the love and compassion preached by Christ, who also lived and suffered «sur la terre en passant.» The poetic sensitivity and idealism with which he sustains this conviction makes a definite impression upon those who know him. His best friend Abelekongo, his patron Nkilviagah, and even Marie-Chantal sense that Iyoni possesses an extremely valuable human quality that is largely absent from contemporary Cameroon society. Unlike Christ, he offers man no redemption from the sins of the world, but his life does have exemplary significance, because

it demonstrates that living in a state of mind characterized by love and forgiveness can exert an influence over others, reawakening in them hints of human qualities they have been conditioned to repress.

Yet Iyoni realizes that good intentions alone are inadequate. An exercise of Napoleonic will is also necessary. Just to remain alive, he himself must often call upon the utmost self-control. For example, when he collapses on the floor of a toilet stall in the Yaoundé Central Hospital, he becomes covered with vomit and excrement; he pleads for help, but two bystanders rush away, pointedly refusing to notice his suffering. The image is one of the most disgusting in contemporary African literature, and Iyoni himself, overcome by weakness and pain, finds it difficult to believe in anything. Yet he vaguely realizes that he must struggle, and that in his struggle lies the only meaning and purpose he can know at that moment. By extension, it becomes evident to him that a similar effort is necessary, if the country is to pull itself out of the social quagmire into which it has been settling. In this context, the example of Napoleon is relevant. Through political engagement and an exercise of will, he had tried to create a more just society in which careers would be open to all men of talent. This is the path Iyoni desires to follow by seeking a government position, because he dreams of projecting his personal morality of love and compassion onto the larger social fabric.

But he is too weak to attain his dream, and an acute awareness of this weakness heightens his sense of shame, for when his body proves too fragile a vehicle for his message, he can't help but feel unworthy of pursuing his ideal. To believe in the possibility of a more humane social order, Iyoni must remain convinced that he himself is more than a mechanically functioning body that ingests food and expels disgusting particles of blood and excrement. If he were no more than that, his ideas of love, beauty, honesty, and poetry would be illusions, and his vision of a world in which people created their own meanings and purposes would be a mere chimera. For this reason he must constantly struggle against the doubts which challenge an idealistic conception of his own humanity. The scenes where he imagines his body as a disintegrating factory are particularly significant in this respect, because they indicate that Iyoni has begun to define himself as if he were a mechanical object and not a feeling, loving, dreaming human being. When he momentarily acquiesces in this reductionist image of himself, he

becomes susceptible to an intensified sense of shame that has nothing to do with his poverty, his Blackness, his Africanness, or the corruption of Cameroon social institutions. It is the shame of anyone who believes in a transcendent idea, a perfect love, or an ideal beauty and yet feels irrevocably tied to an ugly, impotent, decaying body. If he ever completely surrenders to his shame, he will lose his rationale for being «sur la terre en passant.» In fact, when he dies, his death signifies not only the body's failure to continue functioning, but also a loss of belief in his capacity to live up to his image of himself.

The existing social framework contributes to Iyoni's demoralization in two important ways. It directly exerts pressure on him to regard himself as a non-entity, and it makes him ashamed of having been born in a country where people have become oblivious to the most natural and beautiful aspects of their own lives, rejecting love and compassion, while espousing artificial, materialistic criteria for distinguishing between good and evil. In the early stages of the novel, the structural inequities of chronic unemployment in a neo-colonialist environment impose on him the abject poverty that aggravates his illness. At one point, he can't even find the eight cents he needs each day to still the hunger pangs in his stomach. However, an even greater damage is inflicted on him by the lack of concern with which he is treated by hospital attendants, doctors, doormen, secretaries and others who deny his claims on their common humanity. Iyoni feels superfluous when nearly everyone rebuffs him and implicitly rejects his ideals. His personal sense of shame is further intensified by encounters with this insensitivity, and such experiences are in turn linked with depression and relapses of his physical illness. On one level, the basic injustice of the new social order and the loss of compassion accompanying the breakdown of traditional value systems threaten to annihilate Iyoni physically; on another, they erode his confidence in the possibility that dreams of a better world can ever be realized.

If Evembe were concerned only with the physical dimensions of Iyoni's dilemma, he would have allowed his protagonist to prosper after being appointed to his position in the ministry. After all, he is earning an enormous salary and enjoying all the perquisites of bureaucratic respectability—free housing, an automobile, guaranteed loans. Yet the experiences he undergoes just before he begins to reap the benefits of this position oblige him to recognize the institutional pressures that will continue to frustrate his

spiritual needs. The first of these experiences occurs during a lavish party at his patron's villa. The money spent on such entertainment could have nourished thousands of jobless men—men just like Iyoni. However, as wealth and political influence become dominant symbols of status in contemporary African society, the traditional sense of community (which would have extended to these men) is being replaced by an acquisitive individualism characteristic of Western urban culture. Combined with an arbitrary system of rewards in the bureaucracy, this new value system produces an artificial hierarchy in which people's positions are determined not by what they are or by what they do, but by what they possess and by the titles they hold.

To suppress the fear that there is no real justification for their own status and privilege, the people who procure government jobs, like the guests at Nkilviagah's party, disguise their inadequacies and physical deformities beneath elaborate Western clothes and an exaggerated show of respect for money and titles. The result is a society of masks and lies—a society where something extremely valuable is in danger of being lost forever. The guests at Nkilviagah's party perform the latest European dance steps, which appear mechanical and contrived in comparison with the spontaneous exuberance and communal spirit of traditional African dancing. In such a setting, Iyoni feels excluded. Ashamed of his shabby clothes and lack of status, he refrains from inviting any of the elegantly dressed women to dance and ultimately withdraws to the kitchen, where he eats and drinks in solitude. The scene reveals the degree to which Iyoni is estranged from the ruling elite of the country. He himself has accomplished nothing, but these people, who have so much more power than he does, lack the vision and sensitivity to even conceive of the goals he yearns to achieve. In attempting to preserve their false and fragile self-images, they merely perpetuate a system that threatens to engulf him and everything for which he stands.

Nkilviagah provides an excellent example of what happens to talented, principled individuals who become deeply involved in the webs of intrigue that constitute the exercise of power in newly independent African countries. In the language of the Ngoumba (an ethnic group living east of Yaoundé), his name means «our father-in-law» and connotes a grandiose benefactor.⁴ He is the «great man» with numerous diplomas and a large popular following, but he has not been able to remain morally pure while engaging in

politics. Although Nkilviagah senses a special quality in Iyoni and eventually elevates him to an important position in his own ministry, he is also capable of overlooking his protégé's suffering in times of need. His politician's smile is redolent with false promises, and even his preferential treatment of Iyoni reflects the nepotism so injurious to the cohesiveness of contemporary African society. In short, Nkilviagah is an ambiguous character. Iyoni had responded to his friendship by idealizing him in the hope that his own visions of a more humane society might be realized, if he could work for a man who shared his values. Without Nkilviagah, Iyoni is powerless. He needs to believe in his patron in order to believe in the possibility of his own aspirations. Yet Nkilviagah could never live up to Iyoni's image of him, and the sensitive young man's awareness of that fact is one of the primary reasons behind his eventual loss of hope.

Iyoni's experiences at the party and his dealings with Nkilviagah give him an insight into the workings of government bureaucracy and its perversion of decent human values. The final scenes make him painfully aware that cruelty and hypocrisy characterize the very institutions which purport to uphold the values he cherishes. Near the end of the novel, he attends Mass at the Yaoundé Cathedral. The church is one place where he might expect to be treated with Christian compassion, but when he faints, not one among thousands of worshippers practices the charity being preached from the pulpit. After laboriously wending his way out of the cathedral, he stumbles and falls in the street, where a policeman (the symbolic representative of justice in the state) accuses him of public drunkenness and kicks him mercilessly in the small of the back. This beating and the indifference of the church goers contribute to the breakdown of Iyoni's body and spirit. The result is another relapse. During his illness, friends and colleagues ignore him, but as soon as he has been named departmental attaché in Nkilviagah's ministry, they besiege him with protestations of friendship and expressions of concern for his well-being. He is ashamed for them and for a society in which their subterfuges and compromises prevail over his own ideals of honesty and compassion, thus, despite his success in social terms, he can see little reason for pursuing his mission on this earth. Shame and hopelessness conquer his will to live, and he dies.

Iyoni's proposed synthesis of Napoleonic will and Christian love may be impossible in Post-Independence Africa. The crucial

issue is not whether he lives or dies or succeeds in changing Cameroon society. What is important is that, in the midst of physical and spiritual decay, he discovers within himself the imagination to conceive of a better world and the force of character to work toward its realization. The moral goodness of which he dreams will never be found in institutions or intellectual movements, but only in people. If people would behave honestly, shun artificial distinctions, and commiserate with each other as «brothers» in the African sense of the word, a new order could arise. On several occasions, Iyoni receives the modicum of encouragement he needs to counter the internal doubts and external pressures that continually assail him. As a suffering human being, he offers a choice to everyone whom he encounters. Most choose to ignore him, although some go out of their way to brutalize or humiliate him, and a few actually help him. It is from these few that he imbibes the courage to go on. For example, weakened by a severe attack of his illness and spurned by hospital employees and patients alike, he is staggering through the corridors of the Yaoundé Central Hospital, when he collapses into the arms of a nameless young girl who comes to his aid. A blinding sun beats down on them, and passersby look on indifferently, but she exerts all her strength to hold him up, as she weeps silently in frustration and compassion. Her gesture and tears create in him the impression that a strong bond of human feeling unites them, and the awareness of this bond is as necessary to him as her physical presence, because it reaffirms his belief in an idealistic vision of human potential. Without this belief he would no longer have any desire to live, for he regards his mission on this earth as a duty to help others realize what human life can be, when it is not distorted by hypocrisy, greed and selfish individualism. However, as he recognizes shortly before he dies, urbanization and bureaucratization have fostered the emergence of institutions and attitudes which threaten to prevent the development of a productive, compassionate, self-respecting society in which individuals might relate to each other in morally responsible ways. One of the greatest tragedies in contemporary Africa is the enormous waste of human potential that results from this situation. In his novel, Evembe is attempting to make readers aware of this tragedy and of the fact that it does not have to take place.

The importance of Evembe's subject matter and the power of his style help to explain the initially favorable reception of *Sur la*

terre en passant, but the same qualities also provoked the relative oblivion into which it has subsequently fallen. By identifying the causes of the hero's physical and spiritual malaise, Evembe has called into question the conventional wisdom of three well-established institutions—the church, the state, and the Négritude movement. Because these institutions exercise considerable influence over intellectual life in Cameroon and in francophone West Africa, their neglect or rejection of the novel contributed significantly to the lack of critical attention it has received.⁵ The Catholic Church could hardly be expected to sanction the physically disgusting details by means of which Evembe characterizes his hero's state of consciousness or the implicit charge that most people who proclaim the Christian faith fail to act in Christian ways; in fact, Evembe's novel was severely criticized in the Cameroon press for irreverence and an alleged lack of respect for humane values.⁶ The ruling elites of independent African countries would also feel uncomfortable with Evembe's novel once they understood his satiric portrayals of government bureaucracy or his condemnations of the materialistic assumptions on which their own power and prestige are based. Such a novel could not, for example, have been published in Cameroon. Finally, proponents of Négritude would find it difficult to accept the manner in which Evembe denies the uniqueness and redemptive value of the Black experience. For him, Africans have no special dispensations in confronting pain and death; in fact, they themselves often play a predominant role in the perpetuation of corrupt, dehumanizing social systems. Like Ayi Kwei Armah, Malick Fall, and Ahmadou Kourouma, Evembe emphasizes the underside of contemporary African life as a means of drawing attention to this situation. Although such an emphasis makes them all vulnerable to accusations of pessimism and betrayal of Black solidarity, their message is a crucial one, and Africans who ignore it will do so at their own peril.

There is no natural constituency for the sort of novel Evembe has written, and his anti-establishment stance has cost him the sympathetic attention of many influential readers. When properly understood, however, his writing reflects the attempt to fuse a highly personal sensibility with a universalistic faith in every individual's capacity for love, compassion, and dignity. Evembe himself is convinced that there are no new stories to tell and that, if the old stories are retold in the traditional way, there is no sense in writing them down. What remains worth doing is to forge the con-

ventional elements of language into a voice capable of expressing individual identity in such a way that it can be understood by people as people and not as believers in any specific institutionalized mode of thought. This is what he attempts to do in *Sur la terre en passant*. The very pretext for the existence of the story is an anonymous friend's wish to record Iyoni's life and communicate its unusual quality to others. This fictive narrator is an intelligent, sensitive African who empathizes with another intelligent, sensitive African, contemplating his pathetic fate and trying to find some meaning in it. The result is a tone of overwhelming sadness at the spectacle of a wasted life and an accusatory insistence that people wake up to the hypocrisy, corruption and absence of compassion that torment Iyoni and people like him throughout Africa. This sadness and this anger are direct expressions of the sensibility Evembe desires to communicate.

The surface ugliness of the details registered by this sensibility has undoubtedly prevented many readers from recognizing the profoundly religious thrust of *Sur la terre en passant*. Like Camus and Kafka, Evembe weaves a series of implicit questions into a deceptively simple parable of man's attempt to find meaning and value in the absurd, accidental circumstances of an individual life. What is the point of living when pain and bodily excretions dominate one's consciousness, when identity is defined solely in terms of wealth and rank in arbitrary social hierarchies, when no one cares if a person lives or dies? If there is no inherent purpose in human existence, is any behavior legitimate—lying to one's «brothers,» cheating them, indifferently watching them suffer? The answer to these questions is suggested by Iyoni's humanistic ideal, which is potentially capable of sustaining individuals trapped in revolting, dehumanizing environments. To simply deny the existence of ugly realities would be, in Evembe's eyes, hypocritical and dishonest. His insistence on portraying them does not indicate that he revels in filth and excrement. On the contrary, it suggests that he himself is an idealist who has been deeply hurt by the disparity between the society which exists and the community of love and trust which could exist, if people would stop perverting their own lives and the lives of others whom they ignore or exploit. Out of this hurt has come an angry novel which seeks to provoke readers by directly confronting them with the horror and filth to which they have become accustomed. Yet beneath the anger is a calm awareness that there is a plane on which love and beauty and honesty exist even in

the most debased of worlds. Evembe distances himself from the institutionalized church, its dogma and the injustices perpetrated in its name, but a deeply religious attitude toward life continues to motivate his view of the world. In *Sur la terre en passant*, the scatological details must be seen within the context of a desperate hope that the humiliation and suffering they represent are not inevitable—that a fundamental change in the underlying belief system could bring about a more just and humane society. In conjunction with a belief that the individual human character is inherently worth writing about, this hope defines the positive dimension of Evembe's poetics of shame.

NOTES

1. *Sur la terre en passant* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1966) was awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire in 1967 by the Association des Ecrivains de Langue Française (ADELF) for the best work of African fiction to have appeared during the previous year.
2. Brief discussions of *Sur la terre en passant* have appeared in Robert Cornevin, *Littératures d'Afrique noire de langue française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976) and Dorothy S. Blair, *African Literature in French: A History of Creative Writing in French from West and Equatorial Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). A somewhat more comprehensive treatment is contained in Jean-Pierre Gourdeau, «Quelques mots de *Sur la terre en passant* de François-Borgia Marie Evembe,» *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan, série D*, 7 (1974), pp. 180-84, but like Cornevin and Blair, Gourdeau restricts himself to an appreciative summary of the book's plot.
3. Evembe's attitude toward religion is extremely complex. His father left a Catholic seminary after having been accused of a sin he did not commit. At that time the local bishop swore that, if the elder Evembe ever married and broke his vows of celibacy, he would never have male children. Four years later, he carried his first-born son to the bishop, who christened him François-Borgia Marie in honor of the «divine intercession» which had supposedly made possible the birth of a male child. Although the bishop's arbitrariness and fallibility were obvious, the young boy's father did not renounce his Christian ideals. He sent his son to the Catholic mission school in Kribi, where the kindly Father Carré inspired him with a lasting respect for the life of the mind within a Christian context of love, humility and charity. Later, at the Collège Liebermann in Douala, Evembe studied French literature under the

poet-priest Henri de Julliot, who wakened in him the desire to become a writer. Although moved by de Julliot's love of literature, Evembe felt stifled by his teacher's aesthetic principles, which he considered overly restrictive to permit the expression of an authentic African sensibility. When he wrote *Sur la terre en passant*, he was in part reacting against the education he had received in de Julliot's classroom. As a result of these experiences, Evembe developed a highly ambivalent attitude toward the church. On the one hand, the actions of particular clergymen made him suspicious of institutionalized religion; on the other, he was profoundly influenced by the religious feelings he experienced or saw exemplified in the lives of men like his father and Carré, whom he greatly admired.

4. Throughout *Sur la terre en passant*, Evembe has employed characteristic names from different areas of Cameroon to suggest the heterogeneity of the urban population. The French names of the women at Nkilviagah's party are also significant, for they indicate the degree to which Cameroonians have adopted Westernized ways of identifying themselves.

5. In francophone Africa, the publication and distribution of books are largely under the control of these institutions. Although *Sur la terre en passant* was originally brought out by *Présence Africaine*, which was founded by members of the Négritude movement; the editors decided against publishing a second edition, when the book's anti-Négritude thrust became apparent. The inheritors of the Négritude movement (as well as the governments of Senegal and Ivory Coast) are strongly represented in one of the two other important publishers of francophone African literature, *Nouvelles Editions Africaines* (NEA). The final major publishing house—*Editions CLE* in Yaoundé—is a church-sponsored enterprise which submits to *de facto* governmental censorship.

6. One of the most vociferous critics of Evembe's novel was his former teacher de Julliot, whose critical review in the *Cameroon Tribune* attacked the novel for its lack of style, its emphasis upon the most disgusting aspects of life, and its failure to communicate an edifying image of the human spirit.