

Violent Fathers and Runaway Sons: Colonial Relationships in *Une vie de boy* and *Mission terminée*

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“[W]hat are we? What are we blackmen who are called French?”

—Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy*

“Finally, to be oneself, it is necessary to fight oneself . . .”

—Aimé Césaire, “Nègreries: Jeunesse noire et Assimilation”

Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Beti, the two most internationally well-known Cameroonian writers, have often been compared. Oyono’s works—*Une vie de boy* (1956), *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956), and *Chemin d’Europe* (1960)—and Beti’s earlier works—*Ville cruelle* (1953), *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956), *Mission terminée* (1957), and *Le roi miraculé* (1958)—all show the growing resistance to colonial rule in Cameroon in the decade before Cameroon’s independence in 1960. Among the many ways in which their work is comparable is the ironic view of the pompous and often sadistic colonizers and of the hapless “heroes” who sometimes succeed in, sometimes fail at surviving the wide range of oppressions practiced by the Europeans. My study of two of these novels—*Une vie de boy* by Ferdinand Oyono and *Mission terminée* by Mongo Beti—focuses on the attention given to family structures, particularly to the father-son relationship. I be-

lieve that critical readings of these texts have sometimes too quickly accepted the writers' presentations of their heroes as childishly naïve or self-important and that in fact there is more to be said about Oyono's and Beti's use of these principal characters to represent the situation of the Cameroonian people in the late 1950s. It is necessary when reading texts of this period to remember that as African peoples approached their long-awaited independence there were growing concerns about the situation in which the Europeans were leaving them. In a lecture given in 1979 Beti looks back to this time, speaking of:

The confusion that followed DeGaulle's granting of independence to the former colonies of sub-Saharan Africa set up as sovereign Republics without preparation, without debate, without any information shared with the populations. . . . ("Afrique francophone" 54)

Both Beti's *Mission terminée* and Oyono's *Une vie de boy* can be understood as addressing the problems of these colonies moving toward independence after having been crippled for so many years by foreign domination.

In both *Une vie de boy* and *Mission terminée* the father-son relationship is characterized by the unpredictable and brutal violence of the father, whom the son seemingly must flee to survive. The mother is unable to help her child; although it is clear in each novel that she wants to protect him, if she tries to intervene she is beaten by the father as well. Although these texts give relatively little space to the actual father-son confrontation. In *Une vie de boy* the very beginning details briefly the conflict that led Toundi to leave his home to serve a Catholic priest, while in *Mission terminée* it is only at the end when Medza defies his father and leaves his home never to return that we begin to understand the relationship that has been Medza's preoccupation throughout the entire novel. Both novels are dominated by the failure of these fundamental relationships.

I suggest that this family drama could be significant at several different levels for writers who are facing an end to the French colonial regime: in reference to the impact of colonialism on

family structures, as a metaphor for the “parent-child” relationship of the colonizing and colonized countries, and finally by showing the connection of the father-son conflict to the acquisition of language and power. The first and perhaps most obvious reading would concern the destruction of traditional family and social structures brought about by the presence of the colonizers.¹ In the case of *Une vie de boy* the protagonist is able to flee his father’s brutality by going to work for whites. Unfortunately he only meets a different brutality: he is unfairly imprisoned and dies from his mistreatment. In *Mission terminée* the protagonist is educated by whites and at the end of the story leaves his violent father and his village to wander the world. In each case it is clear from the start that the European presence has changed familial relationships at the very least by offering other choices to young men who are not happy with the lives offered by the traditions of their culture.

Looking back at the impact of colonization it is now more than clear that almost if not all relationships and structures of the indigenous societies—familial, economic, social, and political—were reshaped by the Europeans. The weakening of these systems is shown in many ways in *Une vie de boy* and *Mission terminée*, both in the father-son relationships and in the relationships that are emblematic of the father-son relationship, that is to say, between any type of authority, political or familial, and the protagonist. In *Une vie de boy* Toundi leaves his village just before he would go through the rites of initiation that would mark his passage to adult status; in this way his rejection of his father also becomes a rejection of his culture and of the role of a man in his culture. He does not want to become the kind of man his father is and leaves to seek other models for himself. The father’s violence appears to be due to the undermining of family and social structures that is an inevitable result of colonization: feeling powerless, the man turns the rage that this produces onto weaker family members. Then of course the presence of the colonizers offers these victims the possibility of abandoning their culture for one that seems to promise fairer treatment and a more appealing model of manhood. After Toundi leaves his village his father dies and the

villagers say that his father's death was due to Toundi's departure. It is true that this rejection of the initiation rites of his culture could be seen as a fatal failure of the respect due to one's father. Yet the text does not necessarily suggest that Toundi owes his father any respect; it is significant that even his mother agrees with his decision to leave, telling him that his father is not a proper father to him. "She told me I had done well to leave my father's house and that my father did not love me as a father ought to love his son" (13/22).² What is portrayed in this view of the African family is a breakdown of the ties of mutual responsibility and duty toward each other that are the basis of the traditions of a community.

We must also note that there seems to be no protection for Toundi against the father's malevolence; there is no authority that can or will intervene in this abusive situation. In fact, the chiefs of the villages or tribes, the authority that might be presumed to be intervening in situations of abuse of power, are portrayed as only interested in currying favor with the Europeans in whatever way possible. Later in the text Toundi describes the visit of his second employer, a commandant, to a nearby village:

In the afternoon the Chief came to present in person the chickens, the goat, the basket of eggs and the pawpaws which he intended to sacrifice to the white men. . . . The Chief was visibly proud to sit among Europeans. (42/66)

Oyono uses, no doubt ironically, the word "sacrifice" to suggest that the African gods have been replaced by the Europeans; the sense is that all the old belief systems have been discarded. What in general is seen as the foundation of the existence of any community—the stronger have privileges in return for the protection of the weaker—seems to have degenerated to a vicious pecking order where the weakest are despised and abused and the strongest are adored because of status rather than merit.

Mission terminée shows even more pointedly the effects of European dominance on family and social structures. Medza's father sends him to school very young and keeps him there, insisting on more and more diplomas that don't seem to have any

real purpose or meaning to Medza, whose story begins when he fails a baccalaureat exam and reluctantly goes home to face his father. Fortunately, he is sent on a mission to bring back the straying wife of a man of his village, and begins the adventure that will lead to the defiant confrontation with his father that begins his self-imposed exile. Medza describes his father in a way that addresses the negative power of colonization:

My father was a real shyster. . . . He was a living example of the astonishing results that can occur when Western hypocrisy and commercial materialism are grafted on to a first-rate African intelligence. Some of these results were quite admirable, some disastrous: but my father was the quintessential Westernized native of one generation back. (166/232)

This characterization makes the connection between an unloving father-son relationship and the father's worship of Western standards of wealth and power. Medza's description shows that he neither admires his father nor likes what the Europeans have brought to his culture, and remarks such as this one go against readings of Beti's work as a polarized view of the old who cling to tradition and the young who are eager to become westernized. The underlying message here is that the greed and lack of scruples of the colonizers have thrown African society into an imbalance in which qualities such as selfishness and dishonesty that tend to be held in check in a more healthily functioning society are now prized.³

In *Portrait du colonisé*, published in 1957, the year after *Une vie de boy* and the same year as *Mission terminée*, Albert Memmi addresses the impossibility of the resolution of intergenerational conflict in a colonized society:

Colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structures. Its century-hardened face has become nothing more than a mask under which it slowly smothers and dies. Such a society cannot dissolve the conflicts of generations, for it is unable to be transformed. The revolt of the adolescent colonized, far from resolving into mobility and social progress, can only sink into the morass of colonized society. . . . (98-99/131)

This breakdown of the normal pattern of adolescent revolt followed by acceptance of adult responsibility is due in part to the fact that the male role models are in many ways powerless and therefore not models to be imitated. What we see in both of these texts are young men who do not seem to know how to become men: Toundi is happy to be someone's "boy," Medza never really acts as an adult, but more as a confused or frightened child trying to pretend that he is an adult. In *Mission terminée* it is the older generation, represented not only by the father of the protagonist but also by the chiefs, that is mesmerized by Western capitalism, and the younger generation that has some wariness of the obsession with "progress." Medza's description of the chief of his village emphasizes both the chief's acquisitiveness and his enthusiastic collaboration with colonial authority and oppression.

This local Chief of ours was an ancient lecher with remarkable staying powers. Despite his age, he had got hold of the six prettiest girls in the district and was always on the lookout for more. Like most Chiefs, he occupied an influential position in the community, with all the usual perquisites. He was a rich man by our standards and lived in an imposing villa; his general way of life was luxurious in the extreme. The Colonial Administration (who had nominated him in the first place) buttered him up. In return, he obeyed their commands like a robot and knew they would never throw him out. In the days of the forced labour gangs he had been feared by everyone because he betrayed fugitives to the authorities and acted as an informer. He used our traditional tribal hierarchy as a vehicle for his underhand intrigues, and flouted our laws and customs when he no longer needed them. (18/34)

The chief in Kala, the village that Medza visits, is shown also to be manipulative and greedy, especially in his practice of taking large numbers of young women as wives.⁴ The fact that the young men of Kala cannot afford wives whereas the chief has more than he can possibly satisfy again shows a system where the logic has broken down and all that is left is a celebration of greed that is harmful to the community in many ways. Between chiefs and their subjects, as between fathers and sons, there is no responsibility or trust, but rather greed and betrayal.

In *Mission terminée* Medza is taught a song by his drinking companions which is sung or referred to at various points in the novel: it is called "The Little Orphan's Lament," and each stanza describes bullying treatment by an elder which reminds the singer of his own parents. This song describes a society in which the most fundamental ties between family members are degraded so that all that is expected, especially by the younger and therefore weaker, is lies and curses by elders who are presented as both boastful and powerless. Later, when the girl Medza loves is explaining why she likes this song she gives several reasons ending with this poignant statement: "Besides, we're all of us orphaned of something—or somebody" (138/193). This statement is profoundly true for many of the Africans depicted in these two texts: parentless and homeless they wander looking for security that they will never find. Susan Domowitz points out that the figure of the orphan is very common in Cameroonian oral literature and relates this to anti-colonialist novels:

Orphanhood in the novels, then, becomes a vivid metaphor for colonialism. Bereft of the protection and familiar rules of traditional society, the orphans of the novels stumble determinedly toward ruin. Noting that Africans have become strangers in their own lands, one African commenting on orphan tales calls Africa itself a huge orphanage. (355)

The image of Africa as an orphanage evokes perhaps better than any other the destruction of these societies, in which familial ties and social contracts are either missing or treacherous. By showing the abusiveness of both father-son relationships and the relationships of chiefs to their communities, both of these novels could be read as urgently indicating the loss of the bonds that formed African life in pre-colonial times and asking what is to replace them in the post-colonial era that is in the immediate future.

The second level of signification that can be seen in these texts' presentations of family structures relates these family structures to the relationships between France and its colonies, showing that the lack of protection that can be seen within families

and villages also exists in the treatment of the colonized country by the colonizers. The French often presented themselves as the kindly parents guiding the childlike Africans toward civilization, a view that many European-educated Africans seemed to accept, at least through the Second World War, after which the long-cherished dream of assimilation was increasingly seen as empty promises made by the French. At that time there began a growing resentment of the hypocrisy of French rule, due in part to the realization that despite the deaths of Africans who fought for France during the war, there was never going to be real assimilation. In the two novels that I am discussing, the unpredictable and brutal father could be seen as representing the French, and the helpless and brutalized mother would represent the colonized country. In this way the protagonist is the colonized person who is, in a sense, orphaned by colonialism.

In *Une vie de boy*, Toundi faithfully serves the military commandant but when he is forced to witness the faithlessness of his master's wife and the recriminatory scenes between husband and wife, he is warned that he should flee as these "superiors" will never forgive him for having seen their weaknesses, yet he stays and is finally framed on a trumped up charge and imprisoned and beaten. His death begins the novel, which is in the form of the journals found with him as he is dying. Toundi's inexplicable loyalty is comparable to that of a child: having exchanged his first family for a new home in white culture, he has adopted the values of that culture as much as possible and is unwilling to see that he could be in danger. Yet the commandant, once his weakness is exposed, is comparable to Toundi's father in his brutality. The French, who in much of their colonial-era writings on their colonies, fiction and nonfiction, represent themselves as just and kindly parents, do not offer any real protection to the weak but rather are unjust and vindictive, especially when their view of themselves as superior, and therefore entitled to their power and privilege, is threatened.

I have already noted the lack of protection given the colonized by their own leaders who are only too eager to imitate and fawn over the Europeans; *Une vie de boy* seemingly represents a

world where it is every man for himself and the one at the bottom of the hierarchy can only hope not to be the next victim of an authority that is senselessly savage. Midnight raids are made on the Africans in their shacks for no reason except to keep them continually terrorized; the two most frightening places in the area for Africans are the prison and the hospital. In other words, if an African enters a European institutional building, he or she will probably never escape alive, even if the building is supposedly a place of healing. The end of the novel, when Toundi is taken to the infirmary with a lung punctured by a broken rib, underlines the lack of any real help for the Africans. The African doctor cannot treat Toundi as is needed because the supplies are kept locked in a cabinet to which only the white doctor, who never bothers to come in, has the key.

Another image that shows the abandonment of the colonized peoples by those who have said that they are there to protect them is Medza's description of being sent off to school; this is such a significant description of the treatment of children by this society that I will quote it at length:

They formed a miserable floating population, these kids: lodged with distant relations who happened to live near the school, underfed, scrawny, bullied all day by ignorant monitors. The books in front of them presented a universe which had nothing in common with the one they knew, endlessly fighting, we were those kids, do you remember? . . .

We were catechized, confirmed, herded to Communion like a gaggle of holy-minded ducklings, made to confess at Easter and on Trinity Sunday, to march in procession with banners on the Fourteenth of July; we were militarized, shown off proudly to every national and international commission.

That was us. Remember?

Ragged, rowdy, boastful, nit-infested, cowardly, scab-ridden, scrounging little beasts, feet swollen with jiggers, that was us, wasn't it? . . . What god were we being sacrificed to, I wonder? (165/231-32; translation modified)

There are several aspects of this description to be noted. First we see a world of orphans, hungry, brutalized physically, mentally alienated by being forced to study the colonial version of reality

which in no way matches their experience or knowledge. Brain-washed both by the Church and by the French military, they represent only the lack of future for this country that cannot protect or educate its young. The image of sacrifice recalls the passage quoted from *Une vie de boy* earlier, but there the chief sacrifices eagerly to his gods, the Europeans, and here we see the weak (and maternal) indigenous culture sacrificing its children to the all powerful (paternal) culture. Finally we should note the refrain "That was us" always followed by a question: "Remember?" or "Wasn't it?" This is an interesting moment in this text which is written as an oral narrative with occasional direct addresses made to an imaginary listener who is described in the prologue as having the same background as Medza, the narrator.⁵ While it is not clear who this intradiegetic listener might be, the repetition of the questions reaches out of the text to the reader, insisting on this important point. It is possible that when Mongo Beti describes these sickly and neglected children and insists to his readers "That was us," he is also describing the situation of the African colonies as they approach independent status, either as a warning not to forget the oppressions and lies of colonialism, or to remind fellow Cameroonians that they have not been given very good preparation for facing the world on their own. In fact, it is now commonly acknowledged that the French in many ways tried to subvert the ability of the Cameroonians to govern themselves.⁶ In different ways each of these novels demonstrates the falsity of the colonialist promise to protect, educate, and "civilize" the colonized and that those who have trusted this relationship have only allowed themselves to be abused physically, mentally, and psychologically.

To these two levels of interpretation—the first concerning the family structures damaged by colonialism, and the second showing the parallels between father, mother, child and France, colonized country, colonized person—I would add a third. I believe that it is also useful to read these texts in view of Jacques Lacan's theorization of the accession to the Symbolic order as a result of the Oedipus complex. According to Lacanian theory, the child's understanding of his father's phallic power, the Law of the

Father, leads to his entry into the Symbolic order, and thus his own access to power and language. The father-son relationship in these texts shows the son as emasculated by his father, terrorized by a Law that has no justice or logic in his regard, and defeated by language, in that his own (mother tongue) is useless, but the language of the Father works against him and only makes him more vulnerable to punishment and self-hatred. While I do not think it impossible that these writers would have been aware of Lacan's thinking in the 1950s, it is not my goal here to prove or disprove such a connection.⁷ I would like to show, however, that a reading of the two texts that includes Lacan's conception of the Symbolic can be useful in bringing out another facet of the familial, social, and political issues addressed by Oyono and Beti.

There are several ways in which these fathers could be described as emphasizing a sexual rivalry between themselves and their sons, whether by accusing them of inappropriate desire for female relatives or by attempting to repress any sexual activity. In *Une vie de boy* a beginning scene describes the father brutally beating his son and keeping him from running away from the beating by accusing him of desiring his mother or even his grandmother:

"If you go one more step backwards, that will be an insult to me. I will take it as a sign that you are capable of taking your mother to bed." . . .

"If you dodge again it means you are capable of taking my mother, your grandmother, to bed."

My father always used this blackmail to stop me from getting away and to make me submit to his blows. (11/18-19)

The father's accusation focuses attention on the potential rivalry between father and son for possession of the women of the family as well as attempting to keep the weaker members of the family divided by suggesting that their relationships are perverse. The son is forced to allow his father to beat him in order to prove that he would not dare to challenge his father's ownership of his wife. In fact, the father owns both wife and son and his arbitrary violence could be the result of his continual need to remind his son that he is supposed to have the phallic power and that the son is no

more than a “drop of [his] own liquid.” The son, counting as no more than the semen which issues from his father’s body, is not allowed even to speak: “A drop of my own liquid speaking to me like that!” To further underline the father-son rivalry, the father finishes the beating by telling his son that he will have to find somewhere else to sleep: “Your way back into the house will pass through my anus” (11/19). The reference to anal sex would only seem to make it more clear that this is sexual rivalry rather than a father’s necessary discipline of his son.

After this beating Toundi sees his father deliberately eat the entire dinner that his mother had prepared, refusing to let her put aside a portion for Toundi. Toundi then goes to the priest and offers his services. I believe that when readers accept Toundi’s beginning statement that his love of food had gotten him into trouble, they are ignoring the importance of this beating followed by the father’s cruelty and gluttony and the mother’s helpless tears. Nowhere in this novel do we see examples of Toundi’s greed. It could be said that he is lured by the cubes of sugar that the priest distributes to the children but the sequence of events just described suggests to me that he is simply looking for better treatment, and indeed, with Father Gilbert he finds it.

In *Mission terminée*, while Medza is not accused of desiring his mother, he makes it clear that his father has prevented him from being sexually active. Indeed, it is in part the fact that Medza finally manages to lose his virginity in Kala that gives him the strength and courage to defy his father and refuse to be beaten by him again. In both texts there seems to be a link between the father’s physical violence and the son’s lack of sexual activity: if the son allows himself to be beaten, he is a child rather than a man with a man’s natural rights. Again the reader can see how colonialism has deformed family relations so that there is no solidarity, only tyranny. I am not trying here to generalize about African family life—I know that in many cultures the father has or has had complete power over his wife and children. I suggest however that in these texts the emphasis on the fathers’ greed and cruelty is linked to the greed and cruelty of the colonial power structure. Although Medza explains that his father is afraid that

Medza will follow his older brother's example of laziness and womanizing, it still seems unusual for a father in this culture to deny his son any sexual relationships (this becomes very clear when contrasted to the behavior of the young men of Kala). Medza describes it in this way: "Up till now my father had been at great pains to ensure that I had no sexual experience whatsoever" (173/242).⁸ Although father-son sexual rivalry might be a part of many of the world's cultures, reading these battles as related to the Oedipal conflict can help us to see what is at stake for the sons: this is not simply about access to women but the formation of a stable identity with all that it includes in terms of sexuality, power, a place in one's culture.⁹

In *La plus haute des solitudes*, Tahar Ben Jelloun describes the situation of North African immigrants in France in the 1970s as oppressive in a way that evokes the fear of castration.

The new homeland is the very absence of the mother. . . . This "welcoming" society . . . also presents itself to the immigrant by a perpetual phallic aggression: it is the repressive and foreign father who imposes himself on the immigrant's imaginary in the form of a cop, a boss, a foreman, unreadable instructions, resulting in a lived, endured deculturation. There is not only culture shock, in particular there is a serious absence of cultural reference points. The feeling of being an orphan is accentuated by the hostility of the human and material environment. It is not a coincidence that the speech of Maghrebin patients is often a delirium in which the fear of identity loss (castration anxiety) is constant. (59-60)

Although in the texts that I am examining, the protagonists are not separated from their mother country, I would still suggest that the lack of protection from their native culture puts them into a comparable situation in that they might feel as though they are exiles even in their own land. Medza's description of his home life corresponds alarmingly to Ben Jelloun's assessment of the "phallic aggression" that immigrant men face in France.

My father: the words evoked twenty years of almost continual terror. . . . He was like a bloody policeman—no, worse: a private dictator, a domestic tyrant. There was never any peace or sense of security; nothing but rows, reproaches, and fear. (164/230)

We could say that the Oedipal crisis is unresolved because the mother does not simply become inaccessible, she is effaced. In the two novels we see an absence or effacement of the mother, both at the level of the family of the protagonist and at the level of the motherland. The sons are victims of perpetual phallic aggression—not only from their fathers, but in Medza's case, from the teachers at the school where he is sent, and in Toundi's case, from all the European men that he encounters with the possible exception of the priest whom he initially serves.¹⁰

It seems that Toundi dies because he witnesses the emasculation of the commandant, who is incapable of leaving his wife even though she publicly shames him with her infidelity. In fact, some of this unfaithful wife's increasingly malevolent behavior toward Toundi might be motivated by an unavowed attraction to him. The remarks of a newly hired maid indicate this possibility:

"You rascal, you rogue, you sly devil," she shouted. "Slender hips like you've got are often the nest for a great big snake." She pinched my buttocks. "Don't think Madame doesn't know that as well!"

She made a grab at my sexual parts and gave a little hoarse cry.

"See, I was right," she said. "That's already had a taste of white flesh, I know. It's you. It's you that's Madame's man. I knew right away. You only have to look at her eyes when she talks to you." (95/144)

Yet Toundi is unwilling to discuss this suggestion. Neither denying nor affirming it, he simply tells the maid that she should watch what she says. Both Toundi and Medza are shown to be surprisingly lacking in sexual experience or even desire. Toundi apparently directs all of his attraction to women into his worship of his master's wife, until she shows herself to be faithless. Although it could be suggested that he is not an adult in terms of his sexuality because he was never initiated,¹¹ another possible way of understanding this is that he has attempted to recreate an Oedipal triangle with the commandant and his wife, seeing the commandant as the paternal figure and the commandant's wife as the forbidden and ultimately desirable maternal figure.¹² Although Toundi's values are modeled on the Europeans (several times he

surprises other Africans by accepting European standards of beauty rather than those of his own culture), this does not produce the new family that he is seeking: he trades in the brutal father and helpless mother of his childhood for a cuckolded “father” and a “mother” whose illicit desires include perhaps even him.

In *Mission terminée* Medza does manage to make love with Edima, the girl that he meets in Kala, but even when her father the chief forces him to marry her he is in despair (rather than being relieved that another, perhaps higher, paternal authority has sanctioned a relationship that he apparently wants) because he knows that he cannot live a normal married life with Edima in his father’s house:

He had given me such enormous complexes on the subject that the mere notion of making love to Edima in the same house where he was sleeping was enough to turn me completely impotent. (174/242)

When we learn at the end of the novel that Edima had been given to Medza’s brother, it is clear that his father has maintained control over the sexual life of his sons as much as possible. This would appear to be an unending Oedipal crisis: the father continues to be a threatening figure who puts himself between the child and the object of his desire. It is interesting that it is the older son, whose life of debauchery has been held up to Medza as everything that he must reject, who is rewarded by the father with Edima. Medza is in an impossible situation: when he tries to obey his father he is trapped in the status of a child, when he disobeys he is forced into exile. The older son has escaped this situation perhaps because he has adapted to the new ways: he is greedy, dishonest, and cruel.

If one result of successfully traversing the Oedipal crisis and entering into the Symbolic is the acceptance of the father’s possession of the mother and thus a formation of a stable sexual identity, it is also necessary to see this process in terms of the acquisition of language. Language, particularly what could be described as linguistic travesties, has an important role in these

two texts. In *Une vie de boy*, when Toundi describes his commandant's visit to a village, he states:

The children sang, without any pauses, in a language which was not their own or French but the strange gibberish which village people suppose is French and Frenchmen suppose is the vernacular. (40/63)

This image of a nonlanguage that both groups assume is simply a language that they do not understand is emblematic of the failure of meaning between the colonizers and the colonized. Yet it is ultimately the colonized who have greater need of the French language than do the colonizers of the local languages. Indeed, the commandant understands enough of what the Africans are saying to know that they are making fun of his wife's behavior. Inversely, Toundi does not seem to understand the meaning of many of the things that he is seeing and hearing and this leads to his death. Moreover, when his accusers ask him for explanations he has very little to say. Both his comprehension and his ability to speak for himself appear to be sufficient but in fact are deceptively incomplete. We must remember that the journals that make up this novel have supposedly been translated from Ewondo into French by the African who is led to Toundi as he is dying. Thus the very structure of the novel adds to the illusion that Toundi is competent in the language of the people that he serves.

There are also examples of linguistic confusion in *Mission terminée*: in the scene that describes Medza's welcome to the village where he has been sent he sees a circle of dancers with "A master of ceremonies [who] stands in the middle and calls the steps, with much grotesque pantomime, in a queer gibberish supposed to be English" (32/53). In imitating the language of the dominant culture without being able to use it for communication, the colonized people are pretending to have the father's power. The dance is described as equally grotesque:

The men of Kala executed this dance in a manner peculiar to themselves, which I have seen nowhere else. Their enthusiastic abandon was so marked, they indulged in so many flagrantly obscene gestures and so much comic horseplay that it looked as

though they were parodying someone or something. . . . I became more bewildered every moment. (32/53)

This dance, performed by Africans for Africans, and accompanied by someone giving orders “in a queer gibberish supposed to be English,” can be understood as self-mockery. Medza’s impression that they were making fun of someone is correct, but he does not see that the pretend sexual gestures and the pretend English resemble a game of children who are imitating adults, unconcerned by the fact that they are children and that their imitations can never be convincing. In this scene we have sexual and linguistic power travestied together, by people who, although in a remote village, are aware of the powerlessness brought by colonization. At the end of this description when Medza describes his disorientation, “I became more bewildered every moment” (“J’étais de plus en plus dépaysé”), the word *dépaysé* could be understood as signifying more than “bewildered”: it is significant in that Medza is truly without a country (*pays*). Not only is he alienated from his own culture by French schooling, but he is seeing that even in a village very removed from European contact, the Africans do not seem to own their own country, their own selves. There is no longer a country to return to. This suggests that his choice of exile at the end of the story is in no way a cowardly abandonment of his culture, but, rather, a courageous acceptance of the fact that his homeland is not really a home, and that he might as well roam the world and see if there is any place that is better.

It is also important to note the names of these two protagonists who, as we have seen, are lacking a proper relationship to their fathers or other figures of authority, cannot trust the patriarchal power that is supposed to equitably govern their country, and have been placed in situations of powerlessness in terms of their sexuality and their language. Lacanian theory suggests that the Name of the Father (*nom du père*) signifies both prohibition (*non*) and identity (*nom*). The names of the protagonists of these two novels show their ambiguous relation to their own identity. The “boy” in *Une vie de boy* is baptised “Joseph” by the priest (Father Gilbert) for whom he leaves his father. Thus this new father

renames him as a non-African. Indeed, the juxtaposition between “boy” and “son” is noteworthy in the scene that follows Toundi’s departure:

That is how I became Father Gilbert’s boy. . . . In the afternoon my father came. All he said to me was that I was still his son, the drop of his liquid. . . . (13/21)

Toundi trades his situation as his father’s son to become the boy of the European priest and, in so doing, is renamed. The protagonist of *Mission terminée* also has a European name and an African name—Jean-Marie Medza—without any explanation being made of his European first name. The name shows, however, his division between two cultures, and perhaps his homelessness and his orphanhood in each.¹³ With a first name given by a patriarchal culture which uses and despises him, and a last name given by a father who uses and despises him, Jean-Marie Medza’s only identity is one of self-loathing. Lacking, as does Joseph Toundi, a stable rapport to any paternal figure, his name reflects only his lack.

Finally I should mention the significance of writing in the language of the “father” for the two writers, Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Beti.¹⁴ Obviously the choice for writers of colonized or formerly colonized countries to write in the language of the conqueror is extremely complex and involves many different issues such as the audience that the writer wishes to reach and whether the writer’s “mother tongue” is a written or oral language. Yet in the context of the Lacanian description of the son’s acquisition of language with acceptance of the Law of the Father, the use of the “father’s” language must again be examined. In showing the ways in which language fails, or betrays, or reveals the powerlessness of the speaker, these texts can be read as a confrontation with all of the impossible, almost paralyzing ambiguities of the situation of a colonized person who is left nothing that he can rely on—not community, not language, not self. In this way, the characterizations of these two “heroes” as naïve and greedy (in Toundi’s case) and immature and arrogant (in Medza’s case) seem to be more about the way that Africans are asked to see themselves than about what these writers think of their people. I believe that the role

given to language in these two texts expresses the ambivalence and division that is the situation of someone who has been “assimilated” into a society that will never accept him as an equal but only as an inferior or a child. Albert Memmi describes the tenuous situation of the colonized writer: “The fact is that the role of a colonized writer is too difficult to sustain. He incarnates a magnified vision of all the ambiguities and impossibilities of the colonized” (108/143). Just as we have seen in these texts that the role of the colonized is founded on impossibilities—the son can never become a man, will never know who he is—so Memmi’s description reminds us of the alienation of the writer who must represent all of the loss of his people yet struggle for an identity that allows him to speak. Each of these novels is in some way about exile, both in one’s country and in one’s relationship to language, and the paradox of needing simultaneously to affirm identity through language and finding that language undermines identity.

These novels show the violence done by French colonization at the level of family relationships, at the level of political relationships between countries and their citizens, and at the level of identity formation with a language that seems to turn against the user, a Law of the Father that is corrupt if not diabolical, a phallic power that endlessly terrorizes the son. The writing of a colonized people in the language of the colonizer seems always to express the paradoxes inherent in self-representation when the self that the colonized person is representing is continually being reconstituted as an other by the the colonizer’s language.

Notes

1 Mohamadou Kane’s work *Roman africain et traditions* gives some of the most detailed treatment of this central theme in African fiction. See in particular the sections entitled “La libération des traditions” and “Le conflit de générations.”

2 I have used existing translations for *Une vie de boy*, *Mission terminée*, and *Portrait du colonisé*. The page numbers given are for the English

translation first, then the French text. In several cases I have modified the translation to emphasize nuances of meaning important to my analysis. I indicate "translation modified" when this is the case. Aside from these three works, all translations from French are my own.

3 Thomas Melone, in *Mongo Beti: l'homme et le destin*, describes Beti's depiction of Cameroonian society as "a society without a soul where each man preys on the other, where values of community, communication, solidarity, dignity have given way to false values of domination, hostility, insecurity and submission" (90).

4 In *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity*, Richard Bjornson points out that "the introduction of a money economy had enabled chiefs and other older men to exploit the traditional dowry system by purchasing more wives than they could otherwise have obtained" (91).

5 Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, in "African Discourse and the Autobiographical Novel: Mongo Beti's *Mission terminée*," analyzes the roles of the various *narrateurs* and *narrataires* in this text.

6 Robert Sherrington, in "The Use of Mongo Beti," describes the situation: "[W]hen the time came when it was no longer in France's interest to cling to an overtly imperial form of control in Cameroun, she of course did not just abandon her considerable material and ideological investment—French businessmen really meant it when they coined the slogan *lâchons l'Asie, gardons l'Afrique*. So just before France's official departure there was a careful re-organization of Camerounian power structures, with the aim of ensuring that after independence political control would be in the hands of people generally favourable to the continuing development of French economic, political, and strategic interests: the classic schema of neo-colonialism" (396).

7 Lacan's presentation at the Rome Conference in 1953 deals extensively with his ideas on the Symbolic order.

8 Melone, whose reading of Beti's work does not appear to be influenced by psychoanalytic theory, still notes that Beti's heroes "seem to be both physically and morally castrated" (69).

9 Anika Lemaire, in *Jacques Lacan*, explains it in this way:

The prohibition of incest superimposes the realm of culture, whatever its local forms may be, upon that of nature by means of sexual restrictions and by the creation of links of solidarity.

Accession to the symbolic order of the family (Alliance and Kinship) alone allows everyone to know who he or she is, what his or her exact position is, what limits are placed upon his or her rights in the light of respect for the others; in total promiscuity and in the absence of a minimal organization of the group life, no one can situate himself or herself in relation to everyone else. Name and place are signs of recognition. They give the subject his individuality, his place and his role in the system. (84)

10 Critics are divided on this question: John Erickson sees the priest as the one positive figure but Claire Dehon suggests that his death (being crushed by a falling tree) implies that he is no better than the other Europeans.

11 Claire Dehon suggests this reading, relating Toundi's story to Cameroonian oral literature.

12 Many critics, among them John Erickson and Mohamadou Kane, remark that Toundi's discovery that the commandant has not been circumcised makes the two equal in his eyes. Even if we accept this reading, it does not necessarily invalidate my interpretation. Rather, it is possible that Toundi incorporates this knowledge into his understanding of his adopted culture and even sees himself fitting in because of being uncircumcised.

13 Thomas Melone explains that Medza is derived from the Ewondo verb *dza* which means "to criticize" and describes him as an "évolué au prénom snob" (49). *Evolué* (derived from the verb "to evolve") was a term used to describe the Africans who were given a French education. It is a difficult term to translate since there is so much irony involved in its use in the postcolonial era; perhaps "a highly 'civilized' type with a snobby name" would be close to Melone's meaning.

14 Mongo Beti is a pseudonym meaning "child of the Beti people." The writer's given name is Alexandre Biyidi.

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