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LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL REALITY IN MONGO BETI'S¹
*TROP DE SOLEIL TUE L'AMOUR AND BRANLE-BAS EN
NOIR ET BLANC*

Par

Ramonu Sanusi, PhD
Department of European Studies,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan

Abstract

Mongo Beti occupies a central place in African literary field. His novels are often marked with a revolutionary cachet for political and social situations around him dictate the tone of his writings. This article examines the language and social reality in Mongo Beti's Trop de soleil tue l'amour (1999) and Branle-bas en noir et blanc (2000). In a humorous, ironic and satiric style coloured with an African French, the author openly decries the bitter realities of the social, political and economic situations in Cameroon and concludes by warning the leaders about the dangers awaiting the country should they fail to listen to the voices of minority.

In spite of more than [four decades] of independence in Africa we are still very much a people without direction. Adeola James (1990: 35)

African history, before and after independence, is replete with untold hardships and man's inhumanity to man.

Since the mid-sixties, the continent has groaned under an unprecedented weight of military dictatorship. Mattiu Nnoruka (2000: 196)

Berth Lindfors, Abiola Irele, Ambroise Kom, Andre Djiffack, Thomas Melone, Fame Ndongo, and many other critics recognize the central place Mongo Beti occupies in African literary space and the role he played as a protest writer of the colonial and postcolonial periods (1950-2001). Many critics would agree that one cannot read Beti's texts without having in mind his militant posture or the Marxist tone of his writings. He is no doubt influenced by Antonio Gramsci's subalternist ideology that stipulates that the oppressed should fight to the end to achieve victory in order to be totally free. Hence, Beti does not create in a vacuum; he is often inspired by the events around him. His caustic irony, humour and satire which derived from his reading of Voltaire² and his brilliance of observation are obvious in his works. The political and social situation around him, like some radical African writers, always forces him to be militant. He is not only a chronicler of contemporary political history, but also an advocate of social change; his works project the course of Africa's liberation from colonialism, imperialism and dictatorship. The novel remains his major literary outlet and he uses it as a vehicle of social and political satire. His staunch criticism of Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first Cameroonian President forced him into exile in his early literary career. Beti eventually made a heroic return to Cameroon in 1991 after an exile of almost forty years in France (1951-1991). As soon as this militant and Marxist novelist settled down, he resumed his writing activities and published *La France contre l'Afrique* (1993) *L'Histoire du fou* (1994), *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) and *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000). These writings

like the previous ones he authored have a revolutionary cachet. Beti turns his attention to the ugliness of postcolonial African nations and points the finger of blame at African leaders. The writer's rebellious tone contributed to his popularity as one of Africa's greatest authors.

This article examines the language and politics of Beti in *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000) and *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999); his last novels since he died in Douala on October 7, 2001 after a brief illness. In these two fascinating novels, Beti depicts the disintegration of the postcolonial Cameroonian nation. Saddened by the political and economic failures of post-independent African nations and Cameroon in particular, Beti comes out to openly decry the bitter realities of his time in *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil*. He is no doubt troubled by the situation of his nation crumbling under Paul Biya. Beti's use of irony and humour allows him to surreptitiously attack the state by lashing out at leaders whom he considers to have shied away from socio-political and economic responsibilities of the nations they govern.

In *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* (2000) and *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999) Beti shows how Cameroon in particular is marked by socio-political chaos. His objective is to seek a social, economic and political rebirth of the continent. The despair and frustration of Cameroonians are well illustrated by Beti through the characters of his novels. Through individuals such as Zam, a journalist and the novel's protagonist, Eddie, George, the taximan, Norbert, Moustapha, Bébète, Mère Supérieure, and l'Abbé Batané to mention a few, Beti expresses his unease vis-à-vis the frightening situation in Cameroon.

Beti's literary engagement confirms that no good writer can be indifferent to the realities of his time; and to this end, he makes himself relevant to the society in which he lives. It is not surprising that the author portrays the city of Yaounde and its inhabitants to discredit the Cameroonian ruling class. The choice of Yaounde as the fictional space of *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil*, is deliberate. It is with the intention of presenting the postcolonial regime in its true colours. The writer depicts the postcolonial nation with elements such as dictatorship, corruption, violence and electoral fraud marred by political violence, socio-economic and educational decadence and immorality among others. By and large, through his caustic criticism, he paints an ailing and dying Cameroon whose sinking economy affects people's social life, all of it caused by the political malady, and administrative incompetence of Paul Biya and his cohorts who are mere sycophants. What is captivating in these novels is Beti's style - standard and popular French coexist in the novels, enrich the texts, and at the same time serve as a demystifying tool.

The various characters of different strata of the society who appear in *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil* with their sometimes standard / popular French, depending on their individual educational level, reflect the writer's sorrow. During a discussion between Eddie and Georges for instance, the taxi driver, unable to contain himself while listening to his passengers, interrupts their dialogue to portray the irresponsibility of President Biya and most especially the failure of the country's education, in popular French.

L'État ici c'est quoi? Est-ce que ça existe? Mes frères Africains là, vous êtes forts, hein, très forts. Là où les Blancs ont commencé par le

commencement, vous autres vous commencez par la fin. Vous êtes très forts. (Branle-bas 55)

What is State here? Does it exist? My dear African brothers, you are great, very great. While the Whites started from the beginning, you, you are starting from the end. You are very great. [My translation]

The writer takes his time to reflect on the ills of the present-day Cameroon through his novels' characters, settings and unfolding events to portray the behaviour of the ruling class of the postcolonial nation.

Branle-bas and *Trop de soleil* are without a doubt, postcolonial African narratives that successfully depict attitudes of independent African leaders and show them as oppressors of their own people. The novels are punctuated with references to socio-political and economic events in Cameroon. Problems of corruption, unemployment, strikes and political instability are all highlighted. Both novels denounce vigorously the atrocities committed by Paul Biya in Cameroon and question independent African nations in general and the surprising comportment of African leaders who are not different from Biya. Georges' remark about the Cameroonian president is worth noting here.

Si je raisonne bien poursuivait le toubab, l'activité économique est paralysée pour une journée, parce que le président sort de son palais ou y rentre? (Branle-bas 12-13)

If I reason very well says the toubab [white man], economic activity is

paralyzed for one day, because the President is leaving or entering his palace? [My translation]

If the president's attitude sounds scandalous to Georges, this behavior does not surprise Eddie who observes that:

Et alors, ricana Eddie, en quoi ça vous étonne? Quelque chose vous étonne encore dans ce pays? L'activité économique est paralysée, est-ce le problème du président? Aujourd'hui, c'est lui, demain c'est un autre rigolo, chef d'État de je ne sais quel merdique république bananière [...] Après demain, ce sera la première dame, comme ils disent ici (Branle-bas 12-13)

And then? Eddie sneers, why does it surprise you? Something still surprises you in this country? Economic activity is paralyzed, is that the President's headache? Today, it's him, tomorrow, it's another clown, head of State of whatever banana republic ... The following day, it will be the first lady, as they say here. [My translation]

The novelist watches closely the political, the economic and the social events unfolding in Cameroon and wonders whether there is any hope for this nation under its current leadership. This perhaps, is vividly seen in the nation's crumbling infrastructures with the lack of social amenities such as potable water and electricity among others that

contribute immensely to the falling standard of living in the country. Nothing is seen working as it should be in Cameroon and the writer does not hide this fact.

Dans certains quartiers de cette ville même, notre capitale, qui n'abrite pas moins d'un million d'habitants, l'éclairage public s'allume le jour, mais s'éteint la nuit venue. Et que dire de la coupure d'eau du mois dernier? Totale et universelle: pas une goutte du précieux liquide pour les nouveaux nés des hôpitaux et d'ailleurs, rien pour les maisons individuelles (Trop de soleil 11).

In some areas of this very town our capital, that shelters no less than one million people, electricity is on during the day, but goes off at night. And what do we say about last month water cut off? Total and universal: not even a drop of the precious liquid for the newborn in the hospitals and sadly, nothing for private houses. [My translation]

The author here makes an assessment of the whole situation, the precarious condition under which the Cameroonians live, and denounces at the same time the greed of the ruling class. Beti excels in depicting the greed of African leaders and portrays the selfishness of civil servants all of whom exploit the people of the nation they are supposed to serve. Through the attitude of some mediocre and corrupt civil servants who Beti presents in his novels, he reveals the betrayal of African leaders and their cohorts. Similarly, uniformed men arrest innocent people arbitrarily, abusing their position to exploit the ones they are supposed to protect.

Norbert, a character of the novel can be singled out as a prototype of a corrupt and violent officer. Government functions through its military might and abuse of its power by lording it over the helpless people they rule.

L'État n'existe pas sinon par à coups, et toujours sous la forme policière, quand il envoie ses policiers briser une manifestation de retraités qui sont privés de leur pension depuis six mois. (Branle-bas 134)

Government exists only through its brutality, and always in a police-form. It sends its officers to quell a strike organized by retirees who are deprived of their pension for six months. [My translation]

Beti's genius resides in his brilliant observation of Cameroonian daily life and he depicts with objectivity the social injustice that reigns in his country. He exposes a decadent nation and the immorality of African leaders who loot their countries. Post-independent Cameroon and African nations in general have produced fraudulent political leaders who, in the words of Martin Bestman, "place personal above national interest; leaders who enrich themselves fraudulently and live in an artificial paradise." (144) Beti depicts these leaders as irresponsible and insensitive to the plight of their people; leaders who ride in the latest and most expensive cars manufactured in Europe or America, to testify to their material success. Eddie reminds us of this:

Défilèrent alors, à la queue leu leu et à vive allure, certes, mais sans précipitation excessive, une trame de Mercedes dernier cri, aux vitres teintés également, mais aussi longue et vaste

qu'un wagon-lit de l'Orient-Express ou de la Western Union. C'est celle où le président avait pris place, disait-on, car personne ne l'avait vraiment vu (Branle-bas 25-26).

A number of new brand Mercedes with tinted glasses, were moving slowly one after the other, and long like an oriental train or western-union express. The President, they say, was inside one of them, but no one actually saw him. [My translation]

Beti is angered by the fact that government is not in the hands of righteous leaders. His sorrow is also borne out of the fact that Cameroonian intellectuals do very little to save the nation from its political, economic and social chaos. A majority of African intellectuals who made selfish entrance into politics betrayed their nations by joining the regimes that they had previously qualified as dictatorial, thus enforcing the agenda of the dictators who only need them to consolidate their power. The writer denounces the attitude of these African intellectuals:

L'obstination de nos intellectuels d'ailleurs à singer les moeurs vulgaires des dirigeants de la dictature au lieu de montrer au peuple l'exemple d'une société, d'une existence noble et productive. (Trop de soleil 70)

Our intellectuals copy vulgar habits of the ruling dictators instead of showing to the people a noble and productive living. [My translation]

A majority of African intellectuals are as corrupt as many African leaders and have as a result, failed in their tasks as

correctors of societal ills. Their failure indeed contributes to the tragedy befalling African nations to date and as the Corsican, another character of the novels asserts:

l'Afrique souffre surtout de ne pas sécréter des hommes de caractère. L'Afrique manque de vrais leaders. Voilà le drame. (Branle-bas 141)

Africa is suffering especially for not producing people of good character. Africa lacks real leaders. That is a tragedy. [My translation]

African leaders never for once took their nation's political, economic or social destiny seriously. In the same vein, professional dishonesty pushes individuals such as Norbert, a police officer, to consider corruption as a virtue when he boastfully says that he makes a lot more money at the traffic patrol than his normal salary.

A la circulation, je me fais cent mille par jour. Alors, ici, avec vous, je vais gagner quoi? Moi, je préfère la circulation. (Trop de soleil 27)

At the traffic patrol, I make one hundred thousand per day. Here, with you, what am I going to make? I prefer the traffic patrol. [My translation]

Government's mismanagement of the economy is responsible for many criminal activities taking place in the country. Unable to pay workers' salary, government slashes it, and this consequently leads civil servants to committing unbelievable crimes. Moustapha who could barely make ends

meet after his salary has been reduced finds another means of survival. He quickly turns into a spiritualist and extorts money from his victims such as Bébète and others who are in a desperate need to find a spiritual solution to their problems. Besides, Abbé Batané and Mère Supérieure, with the government's complicity, set up a fraudulent business and embark on illegal activities, which include subjecting young women to their dirty deals.

Zam (the journalist), who, however, could be seen as a virtuous character has no place in the corrupt Cameroonian society infested with violence, hatred and hostility to people like him who refuse to join the bandwagon of corrupt leaders. As it is always the case, such honest and rebellious individuals are treated as prey to serve as a deterrent to others. Zam, a distinguished journalist is pursued and treated like an animal for his refusal to compromise and to reject his ideals. Beti depicts the society as he perceives it and he engages steadfastly in the fight for Africa's liberation from imperialism and dictatorship.

In *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil*, Beti adopts a style which sometime mixes standard French with popular French which he labelled as "français africain." This bastardized or African French noticed in Sony Labou Tansi and Ahmadou Kourouma's works, is used by the taximan and other characters of Beti's *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil*. The author referring to his novels admits this fact:

Dans Trop de soleil [et Branle-bas], je mets en scène pour la première fois peut-être des gens du peuple, mais des citadins. C'est vrai, c'est la première fois. Et j'ai l'impression qu'à Yaounde, il y a peut-être déjà l'amorce d'une langue

collective, un français collectif, qui est très pauvre en ce sens qu'il n'est pas capable d'exprimer des idées très fortes ou des sentiments très profonds mais qui peut aider à la communication des gens de différentes ethnies. (Mongo Beti parle 147)

In Trop de Soleil [and Branle-bas], I put in play for the first time may be, the masses, but city people. It's true; it's the first time. And I have the feeling that in Yaounde, there is already, a collective language, (a collective French), which is very poor in the sense that it cannot express strong ideas or profound emotions but which can help people of different ethnic groups communicate. [My translation]

This deliberate use of popular French or African French by the author in his texts is an attempt to be objective by capturing the nuances of everyday lives of the ordinary Cameroonians of all segments of live in his demystifying task. The taximan who for instance uses African French is not alone. There are many others since it is a rapidly growing form of expression among the different Cameroonian ethnic groups living in Yaounde where the novels are situated. Here is how the taximan expresses himself when a police officer stopped him:

Rien, patron, répondit le taximan. Pas de permis. Pas d'assurance. Rien. On fait comme ça, hein. Tu tombes sur le mange-mille-là, tu donnes deux mille, tu es tranquille pour la

journalée. L'assurance, le permis, tu trouves même l'argent où? C'est trop cher. (Branle-bas 19)

Nothing boss, says the taxi driver. No driver's license. No insurance. Nothing. We all do the same thing. You fall on a money-eater, you give him two thousand, and you are fine for the rest of the day. Insurance, driver's license, where do you even get money for all that? It's too expensive. [My translation]

The taximan might not be educated but he gets his message across. In the same vein, while portraying Paul Biya, the Cameroonian president, as a migrating bird because of his multiple trips around the world, an anonymous young lady in the novel asks the following question in distorted French:

Aka, tu dis seulement Brunei, Brunei, mais ouais, Brunei, c'est même où? Tu connais Brunei, toi? C'est tout près? C'est très loin? C'est où? Qui connaît même ça? (Branle-bas 23)

Aka, you only say Brunei, Brunei, but yeah, where is it? Do you know Brunei, you? Is it close? Is it far away? Who even knows that? [My translation]

Some of Beti's characters use a grammatically poor French but at the same time, they leave a profound message. Thomas Melone, a Cameroonian literary critic affirms:

Mongo Beti aime dans ses œuvres à retranscrire le parler populaire camerounais. Il excelle à mettre dans la bouche de ses divers personnages le style de leur niveau éducatif ou de leur condition sociale, avec de savoureuses intrusions du parler tribal, faisant ainsi de son œuvre un condensé des traits dialectaux, un amalgame de français volontairement maladroit et de langues indigènes, exigence de couleur locale ou variations de sa fantaisie (183).

Mongo Beti likes transcribing the Cameroonian popular language in his novels. He excels in putting in the mouth of his different characters the style of their educational level or social status, with tasty inclusions of tribal language, painting his works with dialectal traits, an amalgam of a voluntarily poor French and indigenous languages or variations of his fantasia. [My translation]

The popular French language used by Beti in his *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil* reveals the linguistic evolution taking place in Cameroon and indeed in a majority of francophone African nations. Is Beti, a product of "l'école coloniale," also turning his back to the language he once enforced as a teacher? André Djiffack comments on the writer's linguistic volte-face:

Pour une fois, l'ancien exilé transcende son respect scrupuleux des règles de la langue française pour incorporer dans ses récits un parler non canonisé. Cette désacréatisation insuffle un esprit nouveau à une écriture qui, pour une fois, intègre sans complexe l'humour caustique du parler local, parler que Mongo Beti appelle, de manière sarcastique, le "français africain," par opposition au "bon français" (92).

For once, the former exiled transcends his scrupulous respect of French language grammatical rules to incorporate in his narrations a non-canonized language. That destruction brings a new spirit to a writing, which for once, integrates without complex caustic humour of local dialect, language which Mongo Beti calls in a sarcastic manner, "African French," in opposition to "good French". [My translation]

There is no doubt that Beti abandons the norms of the French language he taught for several years at the Lycée Cornille in Rouen, France, to write his last novels using African French. It is perhaps telling that a majority of Cameroonians use this bastardized form of French language for communication. If any serious information is to reach the population in a multilingual nation such as Cameroon, popular French becomes pertinent. Reacting further to Beti's "African French," Djiffack notes:

Qu'on le veuille ou non, le français africain apparaît comme l'essence de la civilisation de l'Afrique francophone contemporaine, alors que le français de l'hexagone n'est rien moins qu'un vestige de la colonisation française en Afrique... A défaut d'un programme précis de réhabilitation des langues africaines, le français africain semble se présenter, fort opportunément, comme un abstrat culturel et identitaire, au moins parce qu'il repose sur une solide base populaire (97).

Whether we like it or not, African French appears as essence of civilization of contemporary francophone Africa, while the Hexagon French is nothing but vestiges of French colonization...For lack of a precise program for the rehabilitation of African languages, African French seems to present itself, at least, as a cultural and identity heritage, for it relies solidly on a popular base. [My translation]

With the fast spreading "African French," which amazingly, is adopted by a generality of francophone Africans (irrespective of their social classes), one will agree with Djiffack that the once colonized francophone African, is in search of a new identity.

In conclusion, Beti amuses his readers with this style and at the same time touches their heart in order for them to discover certain postcolonial African realities. The author refused to compromise his ideals and to embrace his *beti* ethnic ruling class, who is misruling the nation and mismanaging the country's wealth instead of alleviating

poverty. Beti is a writer who hates to be a passive observer in the midst of pervading injustice; he is convinced that awareness of social injustice can be gained through the reading of his texts. To him, no good author can be indifferent to the realities of his/her environment in his/her literary creation. Beti's criticism is not limited to Cameroon but to all postcolonial African nations ravaged by dictatorship, corruption, administrative incompetence, violence and carnage that constitute an incredible and disturbing phenomenon. Through *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil*, Beti makes an assessment of postcolonial Africa clouded with uncertainty due to political and economic instability and tribal bigotry. In recent time civil wars have, like a plague, ravaged many parts of Africa—Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire), Congo Brazzaville, Liberia, Somalia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Rwanda, Angola, Chad, Ivory Coast to mention a few. One can rightly say that Beti's *Branle-bas* and *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* are a warning about the dangers awaiting Cameroon should its leaders fail to learn their lessons from the aforementioned war torn African nations. With the exit of Mongo Beti from the African literary scene, do we still have in the continent a brave writer to continue his quest for African freedom?

Notes

² During his interview with André Djiffack (2000), Mongo Beti admitted that he was very much influenced by Voltaire, the 18th C. French writer. For more details, read *Rebelle* I, II, III, Gallimard, Paris 2007/2008.

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