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THE MORE IT CHANGES THE MORE IT IS THE SAME: AN EXPLORATION OF FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN DICTATORSHIP NOVEL

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Abstract

The Francophone African novel has been, since independence, a combative oeuvre. Despite the thematic and the aesthetic mutations that have characterized the evolution of this body of work, especially in the so-called postcolonial dispensation, the idea of the writer as "écrivain engagé" remains prevalent. This paper reveals that the oppressive boot (dictatorial regime) is neither black nor white. Drawing its substance from Patrick Ilboudo's Les Vertiges du trône, Ahmadou Kourouma's En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages and Mongo Beti's Trop de soleil tue l'amour and Branle-bas en noir et blanc, these novels portray the banality of power, which has been the most confounding albatross of Francophone African countries since independence.

From the start, modern African literature has been essentially a committed literature. Black men found their voices in the need to protest and demand. African writers often have been and are political leaders and politicians as well. (Nadine Gordimer 7).

Over the last century Africa has experienced a great deal of turmoil, has heard many war-drums and seen lots of battles. Initially these were colonial conflicts; today they tend to be civil wars or struggles between unelected leaders and the peoples they misrule. The story of these turbulent years has not been an easy one to tell, but many writers have taken a stab at it, putting on record at least a small portion of Africa's

contemporary history in fictional terms. (Bernth Lindfors 3).

Introduction

Modern francophone African literature, which originally derived from oral tradition and Negritude, has, right from its inception, been marked by a *revolutionary* seal. It took its provenance from René Maran's protest novel, *Batouala* (1921). French colonial power, having planted seeds of discontentment in its former colonies, machinated a *rapport de force*, a kind of eternal *danse macabre*, between the colonizers and the colonized. Francophone African literature of urgency and agency was born into this context. Having won independence from the former colonial lords, many territories initially ruled through French *diktat* and iron fist, took their destinies in their own hands. Alas, new puppet – comprador leaders, created and 'assimilated' by the same French colonial system emerged to turn their *fellow country* men and women into victims. Consequently, francophone African literature has had to redefine its terms of thematic and aesthetic engagement in a postcolonial, post-Négritude frame. Francophone African literary writing has, in the main, been a combative *oeuvre*. Despite the thematic and the aesthetic mutations that have characterized the evolution of this body of work, especially in the so-called postcolonial dispensation, the idea of the writer as a committed writer, remains prevalent. The majority of francophone African writers, very conscious of their commitment, have, as soon as they appeared on the African literary stage, launched a caustic attack on various forms of injustice reigning within their society or State. After the ambivalent years of colonialism and independence in Africa, the continent and, most especially, Africans have continued to witness another imperial era, this time, controlled by the new lords of the lands, clothed in either *Khaki* or *Agbada*. This set of new lords or

rulers constitutes a greater menace, if not a terror, to the continent, than the colonial lords they replaced. Hence, the plight of the citizenry is not over and their misery seems to start all over. Whether they are called the *subalterns*, the *subjects*, the *oppressed* or the *Wretched of the Earth* as Antonio Gramsci, John Beverley, Homi Bhabha, Paulo Freire and Frantz Fanon labeled them respectively, they seem to be saying the same thing.

This paper, using the ruler and the ruled binary opposition, examines Patrick Ilboudo, Ahmadou Kourouma and Mongo Beti's works to exemplify the afore-stated. It is equally interesting to note that the above-named writers are political and nationalist icons who challenge colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism and corrupt practices in postcolonial Africa.

Literature, Conquest and Domination

The history of conquest and domination has formed not only Africa's social fabric but also determined who Africans are. Michael Howard in his *The Lessons of History*, reminds us that "all nations, even if we consider them as cultural and not political communities, are the result of complex and usually brutal historical processes. All have involved amalgamations and suppressions" (33). In human history, the oppressor conquers not only the oppressed but also inflicts cultural, psychological and emotional wounds on the oppressed besides defining his territorial integrity so as to confine and subordinate him perpetually to his rule.

Suffice it to say here that the theories of Fanon, Cabral, Said, Bhabha, Guha, Prakash, Gautam Badra and Gayatri Spivack among others, made it possible for postcolonialism to be read as what Pius Adesanmi calls a "master narrative of the subalternizing agendas of imperialism and colonialism" (59).

The politics of literature and cultural productions in the marginalized discursive terrains of Africa, Latin America, Asia, non-

White Canada and United States, Aborigine Australia and Maori New Zealand among others are well theorized in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (1990) edited by Abdul Jan Mohammed and Llyod Brown. Today, expressions such as race, empire, colony, postcoloniality, nation, migrancy, centre, periphery, identity, civil wars and refugees among others, easily find their place in literary creations and discourse of colonized territories and peoples. The history of conquest and domination reveals that the rise of a particular nation results in the conquest of the other. This phenomenon is so brilliantly captured in John Stuart Mill's essay entitled "On Liberty". The critic depicts how the rise of a particular society, class, people and ideology results in the domination of another group or race. In the West, Ancient Greece and Imperial Rome are clear examples and this can be extended to Africa itself, Mali, Ghana, Dahomey, Songhai, Oyo, and Benin Empires.

Colonialism in Africa for instance, has not only affected what Biodun Jeyifo calls "the nature of things," but has also determined what being an African means. The ugly event has left behind it dictators and sit-tight presidents that are even worse than the colonial overlords. According to Bernth Lindfors:

Over the last century Africa has experienced a great deal of turmoil, has heard many war-drums and seen lots of battles. Initially these were colonial conflicts; today they tend to be civil wars or struggles between unelected leaders and the peoples they misrule. The story of these turbulent years has not been an easy one to tell, but many writers have taken a stab at it, putting on record at least a small portion of Africa's contemporary history in fictional terms. (3)

Lindfors' "the story of turbulent years" in Africa (conquest and domination) are so well documented that hardly can we engage a

literary text without seeing traces of conquest and domination inflicted on the ruled by their rulers or oppressors in Francophone African literatures or critical works that analyzed them.

Francophone African Literature and the Dictatorship Novel

A close examination of literary production in Francophone black Africa offers a series of narratives and counter-narratives so brilliantly documented by writers at several stages and in various writings. After independence, the oppositional stance taken by African writers was directed against the new African leaders who emerged after the colonialists had left. These new leaders were not different from the colonizers. The majority of Africans who dream of a better life after the colonizers had left, were engulfed in despair and frustration created by the new leadership. It is a situation in which a subalternized colonial subject emerges as a leader, but later becomes a dominant oppressor of the same group to which he formerly belonged. Many Africans expected independence to bring fortune to their homes and farms and provide them with work and food. They thought that their sufferings would be over with the attainment of political independence. All rejoicing, singing and dancing gave way to greater and ubiquitous poverty, famine and hunger. This phenomenon is summarized by one of the characters of *Le cercle des Tropiques*: "Porte Océane est une jungle où l'on crève de travail, de chômage, de faim, de saleté, d'humiliation et du Parti. On y abandonne ses espoirs pour n'être plus qu'une créature qui court après un bol de riz" (169). "Porte Océane is a jungle where one dies of work, unemployment, hunger, dirt, humiliation and of the Party. There, one abandons one's hopes to become a mere creature running after a bowl of rice". (My translation)

Many Africans, soon found out that the new leaders were more terrible than the colonizers. The disappointment of Africans after independence is further summed up in the following words by a

young character in Alioum Fantoure's *Le cercle des Tropiques* (1972) during his conversation with Bohi Di, the novel's protagonist:

- Tu sais, dans nos villages, nous nous demandons ce qu'est l'indépendance. Notre vie n'a pas changé, nos récoltes sont toujours mauvaises, nous travaillons toujours durement comme avant. Les impôts ont augmenté, ce qui est pire qu'avant, et puis les délégués du Parti nous dépouillent lors de leurs tournées et ils en font plusieurs par mois; si ce n'est pas l'un c'est l'autre. Si c'est ça l'indépendance, mieux valait supporter les toubabs [les Blancs], car maintenant nous supportons et les toubabs et les chefs indigènes. (168)

"Do you know that in our villages, we ask ourselves what independence is all about? Our life has not changed, our harvests are still poor and we still work hard as we did in the past. Taxes have increased, a situation which is worse than before, and party delegates milk us dry during their multiple monthly visits; it is either one fellow or the other. If that is what independence means, it would have been better we supported the Whites, because now we are supporting both the indigenous chiefs and the Whites". [My translation]

The situation of things, after the new African leaders had taken over power, described in Fantoure's novel, is not particular referring to Guinea but to the majority of independent countries in Africa. The writers were highly critical of these new leaders for their indifference to the endemic poverty of the masses. They denounced their corruption, their incompetence and their complicity with foreign powers. These writers' novels parade maximum leaders with a single party system, anti-democracy organs and corruption as an established institution. Political leaders were thus criticized for indulging in opulence and for living in an artificial paradise. These leaders, one

must state, got to power without any plan or craft of governance; hence they plunged their countries into social, political and economic chaos. This situation is well illustrated in Beti's *Branle-bas*: "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 (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)

Patrick Ilboudo's, *Les vertiges du trône*, Fantoune's *Le cercle des Tropiques*, Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* and *Branle-bas*, Ahmadou Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, Henri Lopes' *Le pleurer-rire* and Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*, among others examine the political problems plaguing the African scene in their dictatorship novels otherwise referred to as "the power durée novels" (narratives on life-president) by Pius Adesanmi, borrowing from Achille Mbembe's "The Banality of Power and the Esthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony". In the same vein, Ayo Kehinde describes the concern of these novels as "A public parade of crime and social alienation. This is no longer an external oppression, but an internal neocolonization in which certain privileged individuals oppress their compatriots. Thus, pain is a ubiquitous phenomenon in human milieu" (273).

Les vertiges du trône brings to mind the banality of power that has been the most confounding albatross of francophone African countries since independence. Ilboudo's *Les vertiges du trône* tells the story of Benoît Wedraogo, the President of the Republic of *Bogya*, a fictional setting whose capital *Titao* is the center of activities. The very first few lines of the work are instructive: a presumed madman (Gom Nada) errs in the forbidden place (the Presidential palace); he is quickly arrested, brutalized and dehumanized by men in uniform. 'Chef, c'est un vrai fou! lance le

soldat en direction de ses compagnons. Dans ce cas, dégage-le de la voie, de force, réplique celui qui répondait.' [Boss, he is a real madman the soldier said addressing his colleagues. In that case, remove him using force, from the road, the boss replied]. (My translation) This character (Gom Nada) becomes omnipotent in the novel: is he a storyteller, a poet, a philosopher, a prophet, a rebel, a spokesperson of the oppressed? His identity is very complex to define; one thing remains clear he was born sane but the system made him miserable.

The figure of the madman is of course, not a rarity in African fiction. From Chinua Achebe's short story, "The Madman" to Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'aventure ambiguë*, African fiction has occasionally deployed the trope of madness as a paradoxical window into the unfolding of the tragedy at the center of the narrative and *Les vertiges du trône* is no exception.

Because he (Gom Nada) is a hilarious character laughing at everything around him, people presume that he is mad. As the novel progresses, Benoît Wedraogo is portrayed as a typical African tyrant: the commonplace type we find in such famous francophone novels as Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et demie*, Henri Lope's *Le pleurer-rire*, Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil...* and *Branle-bas*, Alioum Fantouré's *Le cercle des Tropiques* and Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. In Ilboudo's text, first the unavoidable megalomania takes the center-stage: an announcement is made on the state television about the President's wife giving birth to a male child (heir apparent?). 'Monsieur le Président, le premier cri de l'enfant doit être diffusé en direct à la radiodiffusion nationale.' (10) [Mr. President, the first cry of the child must be announced live on the national radio and television]. (My translation) This event results in a decreed national celebration. Second, his cohorts burn down *Le républicain*, the people's newspaper. 'La nouvelle de l'incendie du journal a parcouru Titao' (34). [News spread all over Titao that the

headquarters of *Le républicain* was burnt down]. (My translation) Third, the president gives orders to his uniformed men to crack down on the opposition. ‘Sur instruction expresse du Président, le chef des armées, a donné carte blanche au capitaine Zizien Traboulga de tirer sur la foule en cas de nécessité’ (52) [On the President’s order, the Chief of Army Staff gave a green light to Captain Zizien Traboulga to fire at the crowd when necessary]. (My translation) This attitude displayed by Benoît Wedraogo (the President of Bogya), captures Homi Bhabha’s worries about the treatment of the minority class – what is done to the subject, how it is done to him and what the subject can do.

All these aberrations are commonplace in countries ruled with iron fist and Benoît Wedraogo, as a leader, is no exception. The president is surrounded by sycophants: (Ting Bougoum, a funny character, views the president as his ‘God’ and he is ready to do anything for him). The President’s army chiefs and ministers all live in opulence (a sort of ‘artificial paradise’), while the people they govern are nothing but the “wretched of the earth”.

Pushed to the wall by the oppressive regime, the people decide to take their destiny in their own hands and fight back, complying with Antonio Gramsci’s postulate that the oppressed should fight until he gets his “permanent victory”. This first protest comes from the students. Led by Ahmadou Touré, these students defy the authorities and refuse to negotiate with the government. They thus become preys of this system, which does not tolerate any opposition. Like a wild fire, a group labeled by the regime as Marxists or Communists, joined by the populace, engages itself in a fierce fight, to destabilize Benoît Wedraogo’s regime. The once-powerful and feared leader becomes a laughing stock. As he is deserted by his military and police, he eventually falls from power. (His story becomes the allegory of the dragon vanquished by the foot). Ilboudo’s genius like that of his predecessors – Beti, Sony,

Kourouma and Fantouré, lies in his storytelling skill and the way he creates characters that represent beautifully the role he assigns to each of them.

Like Ilboudo, Sembene Ousmane, the Senegalese writer and filmmaker similarly denounces and attacks the political class and leaders of post-independence Africa in his writings. In *Xala* for instance, new African leaders are chastised for abandoning the masses. The author expresses his dismay at African rulers, who, after ascending to power, ride the latest cars, and forget the masses who wallow in poverty. In the same category of writers who castigate post-independence African leaders, Mongo Beti occupies an important place. His last two books *Trop de soleil* and *Branle-bas*, written in the form of detective novels, exemplify the authors' passion for dictatorship novels. In the words of Ramonu Sanusi:

Par sa critique acerbe, enveloppée d'un humour caustique, Mongo Beti présente l'image d'un Cameroun à la dérive. La dérive du pouvoir postcolonial se caractérise essentiellement par les abus du pouvoir, l'incompétence, la corruption d'une administration aux ordres, l'effondrement des valeurs socio-économiques et morales. La verve revendicatrice de ces romans dénote le caractère fondamentalement biaisé des indépendances des nations africaines. *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* et *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* présentent un bilan médiocre du Cameroun postcolonial et font la satire du comportement de ses dirigeants, un comportement fait de félonie, de démission, de compromission et de tyrannie. (1)

Through his criticism, wrapped in a caustic humor, Mongo presents a decadent Cameroon. The decadence of postcolonial is characterized essentially by abuse of power, incompetence,

corruption and the fall of socio-economic and moral values. His novels condemn the independence of African nations. *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* et *Branle-bas en noir et blanc* portray a failed postcolonial Cameroon and at the same time satirize the behavior of its leaders. A behavior made of felony, resignation, compromise and tyranny. (My translation)

Koyoga in Kourouma's *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, shares many attributes with Wedraogo, for the former also suffers from megalomania. In addition, Koyoga is first and foremost a character who derives joy in revenge. His father is brutally murdered by the colonial authority and this scene seems to form the fabric of his life because he crushes whoever crosses his path. For instance, he has a great hatred for the regime of Ficassa Santos who once jailed him. All the experiences turn him into a cruel dictator who has no pity or regard for human life. Suffice to say that Koyoga practices and believes enormously in supernatural powers. The following passage captures it very well, 'Koyoga récite une des prières magiques que le marabout lui a apprises: il se transforme en un coq blanc' (89). [Koyoga recites one of the magical prayers which the marabout taught him: he transforms himself into a white cock. (My translation) The irony of history is that Koyoga, like Wedraogo despite all his mystical powers, is humiliated by people he once massacred.

Gramsci, in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, avers that the only guarantee for the freedom of the oppressed is his determination to secure a "permanent victory." The Italian thinker advocates resistance to oppression. Gramsci calls for rebellion from the part of the oppressed as a result of what is done to him – that subjugation and suffering in the hands of the ruling class. There will come a time, according to the Marxist scholar, when the oppressed person will stand up to fight the system that oppresses him in order for him (the oppressed) to achieve what he refers to as "permanent

victory.” It is, therefore, interesting to note that prior to Koyoga’s fall, he imprisons and tortures at will, his political opponents. Many are killed and others brutalized or subjected to exploitation like the poor peasants. Kourouma’s novel, like that of Ilboudo, relates the rise and fall of blood-thirsty dictators in their works. These novels, to borrow Ramonu Sanusi’s words, are “postcolonial African narratives that successfully depict attitudes of independent African leaders and show them as oppressors of their own people” (118). Ironically, the oppressed people work to end not only the regime that once brutalized and humiliated them, but also succeed in destroying the system erected to subjugate them. It is worthy of note that beyond Kourouma’s epic novel lie thematic and aesthetic engagement characteristic of his debut novel *Les Soleils des indépendances*.

While Ilboudo uses the trope of madman to vituperate African dictators, Kourouma, Lopes and Beti employ humor, irony and sometimes satire to portray the megalomania of these military tyrants and sit-tight presidents. The following quotation drawn from Kourouma’s *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*, illustrates this view: “les animaux sortiront de la brousse, se muniront de bulletins et le plébisciteront” (284). [Animals will come out of the bush with ballot papers to vote for him]. (My translation) All these authors seem to say that Africa can only progress if people get rid of the insane and blood-thirsty dictators who not only empty the coffers of their country, but also destroy able-hands and mortgage the life of future-leaders. By and large, the novels of these writers demonstrate the banality of power in the postcolonial, post-Négritude frames. Their novels also reveal the mechanism of political oppression in postcolonial African countries where leaders are hyenas and the people they misrule, their preys.

Conclusion

Les vertiges du trône, like *Le cercle des Tropiques*, *Trop de soleil...*, *Branle-bas* and *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* are novels of the protest tradition in Francophone African fiction. After more than fifty years of independence of many African countries, the continent has only succeeded in producing politicians, soldiers and police officers among others, who are as corrupt as the criminals they are supposed to arrest and punish. Through their dictatorship or “power durée” novels, Patrick Iiboudo, Sembene Ousmane, Mongo Beti and Ahmadou Kourouma among other writers, paint the ugly picture of postcolonial African nations.

In another world, René Maran’s prize-winning and irreverent novel *Batouala* (1921) foreshadowed the flowering of postcolonial French African protest novel. Although Maran was French Guyanese, his literary achievement in the ambience of an anti-colonial and resurgent black counter-modernity within black internationalism foreshadowed an activism that is now deployed in the contest of a postcolonial state as oppressive as the colonial regime was. Francophone African postcolonial novelists like Patrick Iiboudo, Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma, Alioum Fantouré and Sony Labou Tansi among others are political and nationalist icons who challenge neocolonialism and imperialism and all seem to be saying, with Soyinka, that the oppressive boot is the same, irrespective of the color of the foot that wears it. The lesson of literature here is that in as much as political theorists such as Achille Mbembe, Comi Toulabor, Elikia M’bokolo and Jean-François Bayard among other critics witness the ugliness of the political class and governance in Africa, military dictators and sit-tight presidents will lose their sleep.

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