

PERCEPTIONS OF COLONIALISM IN WEST AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

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Every colonized people--every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality, finds itself face to face with the language of the civilized nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country.

The quotation is from Fanon's *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* (Black Skin, White Masks) in which he explores the psychological effects of colonialism on colonized people, especially in so far as the problem is further complicated by considerations of color and race. The truth of the matter is that colonialism begins as the imposition of the will of a colonizing group on a formerly independent people for the often explicit or sometimes implicit intention of exploiting them economically, and subsequently finds it necessary, especially if the colonizing group has a strong tradition of freedom, to defend its existence to the internal critics of the system and so, inevitably, to the colonized. It attempts to convince the latter that, on balance, their gains will far outweigh their losses: they are being saved from the "brutality" of their old life and offered the "blessings" of a morally and technologically superior civilization. This psychological propaganda has a way, as Fanon has observed, of working on the mind of the colonized, of destroying confidence in their way of life, in their institutions and in their cultural creative ability.

Every anti-colonial movement therefore necessarily includes an effort by intellectuals, writers and artists to restore confidence in the native culture and tradition, to revive submerged mythologies, to resurrect dead languages and restore old habits of dress and behaviours. In other words, such a movement involves an attempt to destroy the "inferiority complex" spoken of by Fanon, in order to set free the energies formerly emasculated by colonialism and use them freely and uninhibitedly for post-colonial reconstruction. Conversely, there is a determined attempt to devalue or at least de-emphasize the culture of the colonizing group and to cry down the

so-called gains postulated as the validating reasons for colonialism. This phenomenon, which sociologists call cultural nationalism, is well documented in the nationalist movements in 19th-century Europe, in Ireland, in Latin America, and more recently, in the colonized areas of Asia and Africa. Historically, this period of militant anti-colonial cultural assertion is often preceded by a period of some measure of acquiescence by the colonized people in the colonial myths of the colonizers, a period in which the intellectual posture of the colonial subjects is fully dominated by the ideas and insinuations of the proponents of the colonial civilizing mission. Both of these stages are clearly present in the African situation and are amply documented in African literature in English and French.

African writers' response to the colonial situation began with a guarded, if tacit, affirmation of the assumptions made for colonialism. That it conferred a higher order of social organization, a higher civilization and a means of refining and upgrading the cultural life of the subject peoples was believed and was sometimes overtly canvassed in the early works of the colonized intelligentsia during the second half of the nineteenth century. In West Africa, from where the illustrations will be taken, a small core of this indigenous intelligentsia had emerged in both English and French-speaking coastal towns of Freetown, Cape Coast, Lagos and Senegal's Quartre Commune of Dakar, Goree, Rufisque and Saint Louis. Members of this black intelligentsia were formally educated in the Western sense and some of them had post-grammar-school education, while others had risen, especially in the English sector, to the professions of law, medicine and Christian ministry. They were well-read in European literatures and well-grounded in European philosophies. In spite of their high educational attainments, however, all but a few of them found themselves outside the European colonial power structure within these occupied territories.

English-Speaking West Africa

In English-speaking West Africa, the members of the black intelligentsia became increasingly aware of the ambiguity of their position. Many of them were either the children of manumitted and resettled ex-slaves in Freetown and Monrovia or later, black immigrants from Brazil, Cuba and the West Indies. Educated in the European sense, they saw themselves as being in an advantageous position compared with the rest of the subjects, but they also saw themselves as black people and subjects or protected persons under an imperialist white government. The fact that despite their education the degree of

mobility open to them within the power structure was limited brought their predicament emphatically home to them. The need to identify themselves as black people and oppressed people was therefore very strong, but the implications of such identification went much further than most of them would accept, since they were at the same time conscious of themselves in their privileged position as sharers in a "superior civilization". To repudiate colonialism totally might undermine the privileged position they occupied in relation to their unlettered, hinterland kindreds. They were trapped in a many-sided dilemma in which they wished to identify with traditional life and culture but were instinctively repelled by a system they hardly understood. While they recognized the ambivalence of their relationship with Western civilization, their deepest instincts of self-preservation told them that vestigial though their hold on this civilization, it represented their only substantial anchor. To renounce Western life and culture for the traditional way of life would amount to giving up something which they already possessed for something which was only hypothetically theirs, to sacrificing an intellectually satisfying position for a persistent but largely emotional pressure. Overreacting to a threatening situation which confronted them with cultural ostracism, the coastal intelligentsia stigmatized all nationalizing and traditionalizing trends as "going native" or "going Fantee". To say those days that a gentleman of the coastal intelligentsia had gone "Fantee" was to place on him the highest label of disapprobation.

But the early coastal intellectuals were no cowards. They vigorously debated the cultural question in newspapers and journals which flourished all over the coastal towns. A few minor concessions were allowed to cultural nationalism. For example, possessors of the more exotic foreign names were ready to replace them with local names. Even though up till today such names as Craig, Campbell, da Silva, da Rocha and Barbosa still survive as reminders of the foreign connections of the coastal families, it is quite obvious that there would have been more such names had there been no inspired campaign against them. It is true also that there was a reverse trend on the "names" question whereby some people anglicized their traditional names in order to appear "modern" and "civilized". But, on balance, the correspondent who wrote in the *Lagos Standard* of March 25, 1896, seemed to articulate the people's general feeling when he said:

It may be true that there is nothing in a name, but there is something in it when viewed in connection with the history of a nation. It is that by which we distinguish one nation or individual from another. Every nation has its system of names.

Next to names, dress habits came up for discussion, the argument being whether people should drape themselves in the dresses and costumes of the colonizers or go back to wearing indigenous dress. Opinion was radically divided between those who would jettison European manners of dress and for whom, in the words of the *Lagos Record* of March 1896 "the Europeanized African is a non-descript, a libel on his country, and a blot on civilization", and those for whom the advocates of the native dress were "hare-brained patriots [who] would need prate of a recurrence to primitive quasi-nudity" (editorial in *Lagos Observer*, 1882).

A more seriously inhibiting factor to their total identification with cultural nationalism was the philosophical preoccupation the coastal intelligentsia brought from their Western education. Their constant reference to the words "civilization" and "race" in their polemics indicates that they were looking at the question mainly as a by-stream of the same concern in the metropolises of Europe. Their views were heavily colored by the philosophical thoughts of Darwin, Spenser and other evolutionists. The impression is strongly felt from their writings that they accepted the hierarchical definition of races and civilizations and that they felt that African civilization was yet to evolve, with the aid of the European civilization, by absorbing European cultural models rather than by establishing an autonomous existence. In this respect, colonialism became for them part of the evolutionist instrument for raising the qualitative levels of the human and cultural content of the continent. And without actually making common cause with the colonial administration, many of them saw themselves as "middlemen" and "brokers" for the new civilization. Indeed one of them, a John Craig, said so to the Reverend Townsend in a letter in October 1865: "We have always considered ourselves as Middlemen between you and the Egbas," he wrote.

In addition to the broad mass of the intelligentsia, there was a small minority of dedicated nationalists who were less ambiguous on their position and more assertive of the claims of native rights and the native heritage. The most prominent among them was Dr. Edward Wilmot Blyden, a West Indian immigrant from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands who naturalized in Liberia and carried his turbulent intellectual campaigns all over West Africa and as far afield as the United States and England. Others included Dr. Africanus Horton of Sierra Leone, an M.D. out of the University of Edinburgh, and John Casely Hayford and Mensah Sabah of the then Gold Coast. These were convinced that Africans must begin to build modern states on

African traditional foundations. In several learned works they argued cogently for the revival of the submerged cultures, histories and institutions.

Dr. Blyden dominated the later nineteenth century as he levelled his enormous intellectual powers on such questions as the essential unity of the Black Race (composed of Blacks of the diaspora in the Americas and the West Indies and those of the African continent), and advocating what Professor Thomas Hodgkin calls a 'Black Zionism'. (Interestingly enough, Blyden wrote a pamphlet on the *Jewish Question* in 1898). He saw the need for Black nationalism and the necessity for Black people to create modern states and linked this to the restoration of the racial pride of the Blacks.

Projecting the African personality was a major concern of Blyden's. In fact, he first used the term "African Personality" in a lecture in Freetown in 1893. His views on this and related questions were crystallized in *African Life and Customs* in which he enunciated ideas that were to be given great rhetorical and ideological force in the writings of the Negritude poets and intellectuals of French expression. He argued eloquently in favour of the African social and economic system, emphasizing its socialistic, cooperative and humanistic aspects and contrasting it to the European individualistic system which gave rise to 'poverty, criminality and insanity'. He thundered against the Western-educated African middle class which was parasitically living off the cultural heritage of Europe:

From the lessons he every day receives the Negro unconsciously imbibes the conviction that to be a great man he must be like the white man. He is not brought up--however he may desire it--to be the companion, the equal of the white man, but his imitator, his ape, his parasite. To be himself in a country where everything ridicules him is to be nothing--less, worse than nothing. To be as like the white man as possible---to copy his outward appearance, his peculiarities, his manners, the arrangement of his toilet, this is the aim of the Christian Negro---this is his aspiration. The only virtues which under such circumstances he develops are, of course, the parasitic ones.

Among Blyden's prescriptions to meet the problem is the Africanization of the educational system to put an end to the "Europeanizing" trends. Speaking as President of Liberian College in 1881, he told the students and the Congregation:

All our traditions and experiences are connected with a foreign race. We have no poetry or philosophy but that of our taskmasters....Now if we are to make an independent nation—a strong nation—we must listen to the songs of our unsophisticated brethren as they sing of their history...we must lend a ready ear to the ditties of the kroomen who pull our boats, or the Pessahs and Colah men, who till our farms; we must read the compositions, rude as we may think them, of the Mandigoes and the Veys...we shall in this way get back the strength of the race.

Such profoundly good advice fell largely on deaf ears till more than fifty years later when the Negritude poets began to propagate identical views. Sadly enough, when the Negritude poets invoke the precursors of their movement, they are eager to name illustrious Blacks like Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Rene Maran but they forget Blyden who was in many ways closest to them.

At the time Blyden carried on his campaign, the intellectual mood was against all such "nationalizing" tendencies. In fact, just a year after his nationalistic speech, the Lagos *Observer*, an inveterate articulator of the more resistant views to radical nationalism, came out in an editorial of July 20, 1882 with a scathing attack against these tendencies and in support of the dominant colonial myth:

The words run glibly, (it commented polemically) but we confess that we do not understand what they mean. Perhaps some of the learned exponents of Wesleyanism at Lagoes will enlighten us. It cannot mean that the acquisition of one of the noblest of modern languages, the language of Milton and Shakespeare can have any such tendency for they teach it exclusively at their Seminaries. If it is not then the language, is it the costume? Is it the social and domestic habits? Is it the religion or, tell us, ye who know, if know ye do, what denationalizing tendencies are they which you are going to discourage?

And the final damper was thrown over the idea of using African institutions to build an indigenous civilization by the *Observer* of February 1, 1883. A critic asserted as follows in the paper:

The African can develop in his own African way; but what has he of himself to develop? What literature

*has he from which he could develop in his own line?
To develop anything denotes a previous existence of
such a thing, before development could ensure.*

These stringent arguers for the primacy of European civilization and their challengers who vigorously argued for the autonomy of the African native heritage maintained their debate on what was really an abstract level. For, at that stage, the question was understandably handled as an intellectual exercise since the elite was, as mentioned earlier, insufficiently inducted into the native heritage. The vaguely felt need for cultural rehabilitation had to await the arrival of a new breed of intellectuals with roots in the hinterland before it could become a reality.

There was little truly creative writing in this early period of cultural nationalism. It should be observed, however, that the nineteenth-century intellectuals were fully alert to the demands of style and the immense possibilities of rhetoric for the development of argument or the exposition of ideas. Indeed there is no reason why much of their writing cannot be seen as literature of the sort analogous to the eighteenth century essays of Addison and Steele and their contemporaries. The Black Victorians of West Africa composed their essays with great stylistic skills and architectonic finish; their thundering periods and balanced phraseology have far surpassed anything that has been produced by the writers of subsequent generations. The nearest thing to a creative work remains John Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) which carries the cultural and nationalistic debate in a thinly fictionalized but highly discursive would very much in the style of Johnson's *Rasselas* and many other eighteenth century treatises.

When purely creative literature began to develop from the 1930s onward, it was to reflect the nineteenth century evolutionary thinking noted earlier. Typical examples are some of the poems by the first generation of West African creative writers in English. Gladys Casely-Hayford, daughter of the great Africanist, wrote a poem which strongly reflected the evolutionist view as suggested by the following lines:

*Oh Lord! as we pass onward, through evolution rise,
May we retain our vision that truth may light our eyes
That joy and peace and laughter, be ours instead of
tears
Till Africa gains strength and calm, progressing
through the years.*

The Nigerian poet-politician, Denis Osadebay, writing a decade later strikes the identical evolutionist note in the poem "Young Africa's Plea":

*Don't preserve my customs
As some fine curios
To suit some white historian's taste.
There's nothing artificial
That beats the natural way
In culture and ideals of life
Let me play with the whiteman's ways
Let me work with the whiteman's brains
Let my affairs themselves sort out
Then in sweet rebirth
I'll rise a better man
Not ashamed to face the world.*

These and similar poems reflect a state of innocence before the stormy awakening of the independence and nationalistic period. Many of Osadebay's countrymen reading his poems today would feel somewhat embarrassed by his childlike and uncritical eagerness to eat the poisoned apple, but those who were sufficiently grown up in the 1940s will recall the frenzied enthusiasm with which hinterland people all over West Africa struggled to obtain modern knowledge and skills, to acquire what in the cliché of the day was called "the golden fleece". Osadebay only verified a prevailing attitude among his contemporaries. This irrepressible drive for Western education he poignantly recaptures in these lines from "Young Africa's Resolve":

*On library doors
I'll knock aloud and gain entrance;
Of the strength
Of nations past and present I will read
I'll brush the dust from ancient scrolls,
And drinking deep of the Pyrranean stream,
Will go forward and do and dare.*

Osadebay became a lawyer and ultimately the premier of the Mid-Western Region in Nigeria's First Republic. Although his poems seemed to carry echoes of Alexander Pope and Eighteenth-century English verse in expressions like "drinking deep of the Pyrranean stream" (sic), the sentiments were typical of the time antedating the hot and feverish nationalism of the 1950s. As we survey the English-speaking West African scene during this period, we look in vain for works of vigorous protest against colonialism. The dominant sentiment was, if anything, in favour of the blessings that accrue from colonialism.

French-Speaking West Africa

In French-speaking West Africa of the same period, one is aware of similar attitudes among the intelligentsia but in this case expressed more forthrightly in creative literature. The French colonial policy of assimilation had, by the nineteenth century produced a small body of well educated Africans in the favoured Quartre Communes. The policy was meant to skim off among the subject native population the most promising men capable of absorbing French civilization and to give them the best French education and full French citizenship in order to use them as cadres in the service of the French metropolitan and colonial service. At least, this was how the theory of assimilation tended to be defined; and indeed by the 1920s, the Quartre Communes were sending deputies to the French Parliament.

The policy, as may well be imagined, at first produces a pro-French Black intelligentsia full of praise for French culture and colonial policy and critical of indigenous customs and traditions. One of these assimilated French Africans, Ahmadou Mpaté Diagne of Senegal, wrote a juvenile reader in 1920 called *Les Trois Volontés de Malic* which contains much propaganda material in praise of the blessings of French colonialism and the culture of "nos ancêtres les Gaulois" (our ancestors, the Gauls). Malic, the hero, is a great enthusiast for modern education. Having attained it and the skill of a blacksmith, he sets up a workshop in his village much to the chagrin and horror of his caste-ridden neighbors and relatives. As a member of the village aristocracy, it is considered demeaning for him to use his hands for manual labor and to work in iron. But he perseveres, and not only helps his village to recognize the irrationality of the old order but brings them, by example, to see that there is dignity in labor. His bright-eyed, innocent view of French colonialism is well illustrated by his lecture to the "misguided" natives who resist progress and French civilization:

This is no longer the time to speak of origin and race. People are now only distinguished by work, by intelligence and by their virtues. We are governed by France, we belong to this country where all people are born equal. [Ufahamu translation from French]

Diagne was probably taking the French colonial principle of the equality of all citizens too seriously although, coming from the favored Quartre Communes whose legal position accorded him better consideration than "les sujets", this is perfectly understandable.

The glorification of France and her colonial mission of civilization is also a feature of Bakary Diallo's *Force Bonte*, (force of goodness) which appeared six years later. Diallo's tale is an autobiographical exposition of the vast possibilities which the French colonial empire opens to the 'tribal' man in Africa. The hero, a Peuhl shepherd boy from Futa Toro of Senegal, decides to give up the closed life of a cattleman for the adventurous life of the city. His new life takes him into the French army and war campaigns in Morocco and Europe. The emphasis in this book is on the blessings which the French colonial presence has brought to his part of Africa, including saving the 'natives' from inter-tribal squabbles, from revolts of serfs against the landed proprietors, from decimation of rural populations by marauding armies of mercenaries and from the break-up of families by slave raiders. In other words, all the horrors of a barbaric past have been charmed away by the civilizing French presence. Indeed, Bakary Diallo relates his call to the new life in ecstatic and religious terms:

The God of nature calls me...I answer him. I am leaving, I depart, leaving behind as a remembrance this heart I love so. [Ufahamu translation from French]

For Diallo no less than for Diagne, France is destined with "*la mission capitale de la bonne entente humaine*". Both accepted the colonial myth of Black inferiority, that the Black man is a child needing the maternal care of France. This so-called "dependence complex", so well described by Manoni in *Prospero and the Psychology of Colonialism*, is reflected by an incident in *Force Bonte* in which the hero, walking through Parc Monceau in Paris and seeing a pretty young woman feeding pigeons remarks on a parallel with the colonial situation:

That benign woman over there feeding pigeons is Mother France; the birds are ourselves, the Blacks, who crave love and affection from her.

Both Diagne and Diallo are looking at the colonial situation with thoroughly colonized eyes. While recognizing the benefits of colonialism, they are entirely ignorant or oblivious of its veiled and sinister aspects, including the fact that Mother France's beneficent gains are achieved at considerable economic, political and psychological cost to Africans. However, a few better educated French-speaking Africans and Afro-Caribbeans were able, even as early as this, to see through the ruse and to decipher the treachery, and like the militant cultural nationalists of the 19th-century in English-speaking West Africa, to read the signs correctly. One of them, Rene Maran, a French-speaking

Afro-Caribbean who had attained the high office of District Commissioner or Commandant in the French colonial hierarchy, wrote a novel in 1920, regarded as the first true African novel. It was called *Batouala*. In the Preface to this novel which deals with the tragic life of an African prince of that name, trapped and betrayed by the colonialists, he thoroughly denounces the idea of colonialism as a mission of civilization and enlightenment. He sees it as merely a pretext for the exploitation and dehumanization of the African peoples. The bitterness of his indictment is well illustrated by this quotation from the Preface:

Civilization: the European's pride and the charnel-house of innocents. The Hindu poet Rabīnāranāth Tagore, one day in Tokyo, said what you are. You built your kingdom on corpses...

This tone of castigation and militant rejection of the claims made for colonialism by its apologists was to gather strength in the 1930s, among French-speaking African and Caribbean intellectuals, artists and writers based in Paris. Racist theories of Black inferiority and barbarism which the apologists for colonialism played on to support the necessity for a civilizing mission were hotly contested and the exploitative and capitalist bases to colonialism emphasized. The Malagasy poet, Jacques Rabemananjara, articulated this point of view in a paper he read at The First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists when he said

The Negro only became a barbarian the day the white man realized the advantages of this barbarism, the development of capitalism in the XIX century, and its expansion overseas had to have an excuse; the myth was born of the desire for moral elegance, and the fable of the civilizing mission continues to haunt the conscience of noble souls. For the barbarism of the Negro is an irreplaceable gold mine for certain modern midases.

The colonial myths were reversed. From being the carriers of civilization and superior morality, the colonialists were from then on to be regarded as the barbaric destroyers of a flourishing African civilization. Far from being the initiators of a superior moral order, they were portrayed as the harbingers of squalid immorality, hard-grained with all the coarseness of materialism, perfidy, treachery and, worst of all, a brutality, that denied human status to its victims. This total reversal of attitude began with the African and Afro-Caribbean writers and artists who expressed their revolt in

journals by refusing to countenance what they bitterly referred to as "the surrounding ignominy". In 1932, Martiniquan students in Paris started a radical journal, *Legitime Defense* (self-defense) in which they expressed their rejection of the Christian-capitalist assumptions of the colonial metropole in favor of communism and the artistic vision of surrealism. Surrealism offered them a poetic framework for articulating their radical dissent from the official culture, and the opportunity of distorting, dismembering and mutilating it and of creating over the rubble a new revolutionary identity for the oppressed Blacks. This militant journal founded by Etienne Lero, Rene Menil, and Jules Monnerot, among others appeared only once. But it was soon succeeded, in 1934, by *L'Etudiant Noir* (The Black Student) run by a group of African and Caribbean students many of whom were later to become famous. They included Aime Cesaire (Martinique), Leon Damas (French Guyana), Leonard Sainville, Aristide Maugee (West Indies), and Leopold Sedar Senghor, Birago Diop, and Ousmane Soce (Senegal). Even though many of them were professed Marxists, the posture of the paper was not officially Marxist, but rather combative in fostering Black nationalism and cultural interests and in attacking factors such as tribalism and divisive ethnocentrism which undermined Black solidarity and progress. More importantly, the search for African roots was intensified, leading to the cultural ideological formulation which became known as Negritude.

Many reasons have been advanced for this upsurge of militant nationalism, especially on the part of people who by their education (most were products of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne) stood most to gain from the French official colonial policy. Among these factors must be mentioned the West's renewed interest in African cultures since the beginning of the twentieth century, the works of historians and anthropologists (like Leo Frobenius) who were beginning to reveal the wealth and diversity of African civilizations, past and present, the enthusiasm inspired by great Black American and New World thinkers (writers and nationalists like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Claude Mackay and Langston Hughes who were associated with the Negro Renaissance then sweeping through America), and finally, the knowledge that by this time it had become obvious that the policy of real assimilation was a proven fraud and that France was not prepared to extend equality to her Black citizens.

That the movement should develop in Paris when it did is not surprising. Paris had long been the centre of boisterous anticolonial intellectual agitation, with men like Andre Gide making a valiant case for the colonial 'natives'. It was also no accident that the major essay that launched the poetry of

the new movement was by the young leftist, Jean-Paul Sartre. His essay, characteristically called *Orphee Noir* (Black Orpheus) was a prefatorial statement to Senghor's *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poesie negre et malagache* (1948) (Anthology of New Black and Malagasy Poetry) which, apart from putting into sharp focus the significance of the New Black voice, attempted to link the movement to the global pattern of Marxian dialectics and revolution. As for the distinctly primitivistic overtones of Negritude, the involvement of Paris was also probably decisive, since this city, more than any other, had for some time been the centre of philosophical primitivism, the city of Rousseau and the glorifiers of the "noble savage". Even French anti-Negro theoreticians of the late 19th-century (like Count de Gobineau) couched their attacks largely in primitivistic terms.

Negritude at the outset meant many things to different people, until Senghor, its chief theoretician, began to build it into a full philosophical system and artistic ideology, and *Presence Africaine* (1947) became its mouthpiece and theoretical organ. One thing was certain from the beginning: Negritude meant the ability of the Black intellectuals to talk back to the racist theoreticians of the colonial policy of assimilation. More importantly, it enabled them to reverse the very arguments of the oppressor; all those arguments used to prove the cultural inferiority of the Blacks were taken by the Negritude exponents who used them to show that African culture was different from Western culture and had elements which made it superior to Western culture.

The best Negritude poet of this belligerent assertiveness was Césaire who, in his *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays natal*, assailed the white world with accusations of brutality and inhumanity and at the same time, as an act of total dissociation from the white man's cultural values, appropriated for himself all those criticisms and accusations previously flung at the Black man. "Look at the tadpoles of my prodigious ancestry hatched inside me," he intoned:

*Those who invented neither gunpowder nor compass
those who tamed neither steam nor electricity
those who explored neither sea nor sky
but those who know the humblest corners of the country
of suffering
those whose only journeys were uprootings
those who went to sleep on their knees
those who were domesticated and christianized
those who were inoculated with degeneration...*

In contrast to the white man's obsession with reason, calculation and success and the desire to emasculate, control and govern, the Black man is, he said, unselfishly loving of the entire humanity, is simple in his intuitive and integrative nature and exuberant in his expression of joy, with a sense of rhythm and spontaneity. In spite of all his sufferings, the Black man is still a happy creature because of his nearness to nature and vital links with the source of his Being. The white man, because he has cut himself off from these links, is doomed to unhappiness and tragedy. Césaire writes pityingly of the Western world:

*Listen to the white world
appallingly weary from its immense effort
the crack of its joints rebelling under the hardness
of the stars
listen to the proclaimed victories which trumpet their
defeats
listen to their grandiose alibis (stumbling so lamely)
Pity for our conquerors, all-knowing and ndive!*

In 1938 when the *Cahier* appeared, Western civilization seemed at the brink of collapse, seriously threatened by Fascism and Nazism, among other "-isms".

Leopold Senghor's Negritude, even though less rhetorically strident in its denunciation of the West than that of Césaire's *Cahier*, is equally critical of colonialism and the Western worship of reason, of what he refers to as the "Cartesianism" of the West. To this he opposes the intuitive humanism of the Blacks. In his poetry he emphasizes the mystical unity of the world as perceived by the Black consciousness, a unity which derives from an integration with nature and communion with all being, which ennobles and reconciles. Senghor's poetry is studded with symbols of this integrative humanism of the Blacks --the ancestors are constantly invoked through the symbolism of masks, the essential unity of man is suggested through totemic symbols, integration with nature is often expressed through nature images, and integration within African culture through culture artifacts, especially drums and other musical instruments.

In addition to Césaire and Senghor who are the apostles of Negritude there are others, their disciples, who followed in their wake and more or less played the notes composed by the masters. The notes of violent anti-colonialism chosen by Césaire were played by the Senegalese David Diop, especially in *Le Temps du Martyr*, the opening lines of which are full of strident accusations against the colonialists:

*The White man killed my father
My father was proud.
The White man seduced my mother,
My mother was beautiful.
The White man burnt my brother beneath the noonday sun.*

David's brother, Birago, follows more in the line of Senghor, playing on the ancestral theme and the theme of mystical unity of the Black world. In his poem, *Souffles*, he writes:

*Listen more often to things than beings,
Hear the fire's voice
Hear the voice of water.
In the wind hear the sobbing of the trees
It is our forefathers breathing.
The dead are not gone forever.*

Militant selfassertion accompanied by militant denunciation not only formed the anchor points in Negritude poetry but were carried over to the cultural congresses at which Black intellectuals and artists attempted to confront the colonial menace. The most important of these congresses was the First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists which took place at the Sorbonne from 19 to 22 September 1956. It drew together Black writers and artists from French and English-speaking parts of Africa, the U.S.A., the West Indies and the Caribbeans. Speaker after speaker denounced colonialism, analyzed it and put forward suggestions for its overthrow. All were agreed that assimilation had done much to damage the black personality and to convert the African into a being without roots. Some of the new-world participants such as Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon expressed irritation at this obsessive quest for roots and tried to direct the conference towards practical programs for overthrowing the oppressive system by modernizing and industrializing African life as an effective way of challenging the West. But such dissentient voices were easily drowned by rhetorical denunciations of imperialism and assertions of the uniqueness of Black civilizations, including the achievements of these civilizations in the past and their contributions, in music and art especially, to modern Western civilization.

The sins of colonialism were forcefully epitomized by the Malagasy poet, Jacques Rabemananjara, in his paper called "Europe and Ourselves". "By this we can judge the misdeeds of colonialism", he declared.

It arrives, it organizes, it labels. Savage, everything in the land of the Negroes is savage. Contempt for the individual, violation of treaties, lack of

scruple in the choice of means and the use of methods ...But its monstrous character lies in the diabolical art of perfidiously assassinating a culture, a native civilization whose normal development it fears, because that would ruin its argument by destroying all basis for theory of generosity....The sorcery has worked so well that they have succeeded in the dazzling conjuring trick of innoculating us with contempt for ourselves and making us forsake the values which ensured to our fathers the dignity of their lives, and which enriched the source of their originality.

The supreme sin of colonialism was therefore its devaluation of African culture and alienation of educated Blacks from their native traditions and history. The Negritude movement taking up this challenge of restoring Black originality became of necessity a counter-offensive, launched by assimilated intellectuals who were determined to recover the cultural initiative from the colonial racists. It became a kind of intellectual freedom-fighting, a guerilla action in which these Black intellectuals lay in ambush in conference halls and in their poetry and prose, intent on dealing shattering blows on their colonial tormentors. Senghor himself expressed these sentiments in less polemical language when he explained that Negritude was mooted to combat the *tabula rasa* theory behind assimilation:

We had to get rid of our borrowed garments---those of assimilation---and affirm our existence, that is to say our negritude.

Aime Cesaire put it in his usual style: "The older generation say 'Assimilation': we the youths answer: 'Resurrection'."

But attacks on the colonialism and the assimilationist policy behind it went beyond the original ideological mould of Negritude, especially in the prose fictional works of Africans of French expression. These novelists used their art to discredit the colonial system as well as the people who promoted it in their direct line of duty or, indirectly, as conscious or unconscious collaborators. Colonial administrators, missionaries and commercial men, all came under the critical glare of sharp-eyed satirists. The colonial world was x-rayed to expose its barrenness and decadence. Modern towns which are the best specimens of colonial innovation were stripped of their assumptions of sophistication and progress. All their hidden sores and disfigurements were exposed: their slums, prostitution, unemployment, crime, violence and human degradations spotlighted;

the old view that the colonial order brought greater security to the colonized people was easily discredited in view of the major global wars of "civilized" nations which reverberated in the colonial outposts, the mass poverty of the colonized, the diseases (some of which were introduced by the colonialists themselves), the deaths, the hunger and forced labor. Exploitation, brutality and perfidy as features of colonial life were all too often witnessed. The contrast between the serenity of life in the pre-colonial life or village life little touched by the colonial influence and the insecurity and restlessness of life under the new order became a recurrent theme.

From 1947, and especially since the 1950s, the novel emerged as the dominant art form adopted by French-speaking African writers in their crusade to re-establish the authenticity of their traditional life and discredit the colonial system. Works ranged from those which recreated the traditional life such as Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*, to those using the picaresque tradition to show how the false lights of the colonial world led characters astray from the integration of the traditional life to the despair and disintegration of modern life engendered by colonialism. To this group belong Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure Ambigue* (which is a store-house of Negritude in prose), Ousmane Socé's *Karim*, and Ferdinand Oyono's *Chemin d'Europe*. Several others satirized colonial officials, missionaries and European traders. The colonial commandants were portrayed as violent and heartless tyrants as in Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy* and *Le vieux Nègre et la Médaille*, Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* and Beti's *Ville Cruelle*. In some of the novels, misguided missionaries were shown foolishly uprooting traditional institutions without any hope of replacing them with something comprehensible and meaningful as in Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* and *Le Roi Miracule*. "La Situation Coloniale", as the French writers called it, dominated their consciousness, their attention and their works up to colonial independence, and has, rather surprisingly, continued to form one of the major themes of the post-independence French African writing. Not much writing has appeared since the sixties but the little that has, in addition to focusing interest on individual problems of post-independence adjustments, deals with some aspect or other of the colonial question. The theme, as shall be shown later, is far from played out.

Contrasting

In English-speaking West Africa, there was not anything approaching the same concentration on the colonial question. The cultural question was there, of course, so was the feeling that colonialism devalued and undermined traditional life and

brought in changes some of which were detrimental to the African. But in handling these themes there was always an effort towards objectivity and balanced judgement, a desire to see the question dispassionately, to weigh the evidence, to establish the positions and to pin down the causes and effects. There was no attempt to visit all human disasters on some abstract monster called colonialism or on some sinister and monstrous humans called colonialists. The problem was seen in terms of a clash of systems, a clash in which the system supported by superior coercive sanctions and more seductive appeals wins over the other. The conflict, because it signified the imperatives of fundamental differences, generated unhappiness and tragedy. But the note of acerbity and anger which was all too frequently present in French-African writing was absent in writing by English-speaking authors.

The idealization of the past which was part of the attack on colonialism in French-African literature was absent in all but a few works by English-speaking writers. That is not to say that cultural nationalism was not a vital factor in African writing in English, especially up to and leading up to the independence period. The English-speaking novelist, Chinua Achebe, put the case for a writer's use of his medium to further national awareness and revival of national faith and confidence in an essay called "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation", a kind of apologia for his own fictional interest in the past and an answer to those who felt a writer should concern himself with the present rather than with the past. After cataloguing some of the damaging and false views of the Blacks and their world contained in European writing on Africa, Achebe reached the conclusion that a writer was obliged to join in the restoration of the past as a means of strengthening the present. The writer was, in his own words to demonstrate

that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect.... A writer who feels the need to right this wrong cannot escape the conclusion that the past needs to be re-created not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education.

This does not read too differently from many of the Negritude manifestoes. But the difference appears if one compares Achebe's works giving effect to his theoretical formulation to similar works by French-speaking Africans of the Negritude persuasion. In *Things Fall Apart*, in which Achebe successfully recreates a base traditional culture before the colonial attack on it, he attempts to do so without idealization or overt coloring. His Igbo peasants are real people, full of admirable qualities, as well as numerous faults. They are nothing like those saintly little phantoms of Hamidou Kan's *L'Adventure Ambiguë* or Camara Laye's *L'Enfant Noir*. The Igbo society before the falling apart is portrayed with justice. It is a well-ordered society with a deep sense of religion, well organized political and legal systems, rich traditions and colourful ceremonies, complex rhythms and patterns of work and play woven into the regular rhythm of the seasons. But it is not a perfect society. It destroys twins and war hostages and discriminates against caste slaves. Yet with all its imperfections, it is not a barbaric society, nor is it a society to which any reasonable man will feel ashamed to belong. Its people are peasant and humble but they are not contemptible; they have a highly developed sense of personal worth and dignity and immense feeling for propriety of word and action. This society is assailed and broken up by Christian missionaries and the colonial administration in a series of encounters and confrontations. The white colonialist in his drive to set up the imperial order walks over native institutions, tries to supplant them with his own, and shows no sympathy to the traditionalists when they fight for the life of their system.

But Achebe tries to see the situation objectively. The missionaries and the colonial administrators were misguided, but what else could they have been? They were not natives and certainly did not understand the African way of life. They were of course ignorant, conceited full of racial arrogance and generated a lot of suffering but they were often given the benefit of at least being well meaning. The missionaries were eager to bring religion to those they wrongly believed to be in spiritual darkness. As for the administrative officers, their job was not to defend and protect native institutions but to establish the empire and *Pax Britannica*. Achebe approaches a note of censure when, at the end of the story, the Commissioner sees Okonkwo's tragedy and suicide, almost unfeelingly, as just one more incident in his projected anthropological work on *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different

parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about the book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.

In such passages, Achebe's satire assumes teeth and, very much in the manner of the French-African anti-colonial novels of Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Beti, bites deep into the flesh and marrow of the colonial system and its promoters. In *Arrow of God*, obtuse and insensitive colonial administrators are held up for ironic treatment as they ignorantly attempt to supplant a democratic, republican native order with puppet paramountcies. Young Ox-bridge graduates obsessed with their self-approving mission of empire and civilization seize and imprison traditional rulers and inflict grave wounds on the traditional order. They are, however, not explored in the same detail as they are by French-speaking African writers, but simply as catalytic bringers of tragedy to the lives of their subjects.

Other West African writers of English expression see the colonial situation largely in terms of a crisis of choice confronting individuals in a mixed up situation of clashing values. Present values are often contrasted with the values of the pre-colonial past and there is not doubt at all that the weaknesses of the present are decried accompanied by a feeling of regret at the loss of some of the past values. Criticism of the present is persistent and vocal---the scandal cannot be hidden---bulging crime, disgusting slums, pimps and prostitutes, unbridled materialism, shameless hedonism and self-seeking, lack of individual self-discipline and social cohesion. Are these not the veritable products of the colonial order? Yet, it should be observed that these writers, while regarding colonialism as a historical nuisance, do not altogether discountenance its usefulness as a gateway into the present. They do not see it as an unmitigated evil as do their French counterparts. And they are unwilling to blur their vision with an uncritical and romantic attachment to the past in order that they may leave their view clear so as to look critically at the present, to participate fully in its drama and to direct its course. Wole

Soyinka struck the dominant note of English-speaking African writing in an Independence play he called *A Dance of the Forests*. In it he showed that crime, self-seeking and abuse of power are old as well as new. The artist's task in society should therefore be to function at all times as its conscience. English-speaking writers have sought to fulfill this task as keepers of collective conscience in the here and now. They have managed to preserve a sense of proportion in their concern with the colonial situation. They are thus often critical of people, their own countrymen and women, reluctant to identify all their frustrations with colonialism. This is perhaps understandable since English-speaking African intellectuals did not go through the trauma of deliberate assimilation that their French-speaking counterparts experience.

One group of English-speaking writers in West Africa who give wide and enthusiastic treatment to the theme of colonialism are the popular writers who produce pamphlet literature based in the market town of Onitsha in Eastern Nigeria. Onitsha market writing appeared in the late 1940s at the time of the nationalist movement. The pamphlet authors therefore devoted many of their works to the heroes of the struggle. There are works on Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Patrice Lumumba of the then Congo-Leopoldville. These are treated as folk-heroes, vested with supernatural and apocryphal powers, while the colonial persecutors are thoroughly abused. The pamphlets are a store-house of popular sentiments on the struggle. In these popular booklets attacks on colonialism turn up in the most unlikely places and forms, as in this highly entertaining parody on Psalm 23 in Ogali A. Ogali's *Mr. Rabbit Is Dead*. It is called "Government":

*Government is my shepherd, I am in want.
He maketh me to lie down in prison yard.
He leadeth me beside hold of firms.
He restoreth my doubts in the crown colony system...
He leadeth me in the paths of helplessness,
For the sake of his official redtapism.
Yea, though I work (sic) through the shadow
of perpetual economic and political servitude,
I fear all evil for it seems thou art against me.
Thou preparest a reduction in my salary
In the presence of my economics.
Thou anointest my head with income tax.
Thy politicians and profiteers, they frighten me.
My expenses runneth over my income.
Surely oppression and misery shall follow me
All the days of Crown Colony system of administration.*

*And I shall live in misery
In my own God-given home for ever. Amen.*

A study of these anti-colonial popular pamphlets immensely deserve attention for their language and content. For instance, the following words are put in the mouth of Patrice Lumumba, the Saint and martyr par excellence of the popular authors: "We have been ruled and exploited by Belgium for donkey-long years, but now, I am sorry to say that the wind of change will in no time blow across this great nation of ours."

The granting of formal independence to African countries by the imperialist powers during the late 1950s and the early 1960s has not dissolved the interest in colonialism. First, there is the offshoot of colonialism manifesting itself in the new tactics of the ex-colonial powers to hang on to some of the economic concessions enjoyed during the colonial period. This is often referred to by African nationalists as neo-colonialism and is regarded as more insidious because it is more subtle than the old form of blunt domination and exploitation. In African writing by English-speaking authors, this new form of colonialism is seen as a side-line to the central themes of the post-independence novels. In Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), corrupt politicians acting in conspiracy with foreign companies and fake expatriate "experts" swindle and spoliage the new nation; in Okara's *The Voice* (1964), the faceless dictator in the story has a European security chief who helps him to smother opposition and to destroy the progressive nationalists. The new leaders in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) are the spiritual children of the departed colonialists who continue the exploitation of the common people on behalf of themselves and their principals. In Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) political corruption is stimulated by expatriate interests; foreign firms ply the corrupt black politicians with the "ten-percent" bribes. The ultimate responsibility for the state of society however, rests in these novels on the new African rulers; White men, be they neo-colonialists, mercantile thieves or roughish contractors, merely take peripheral, collaborative part. The colonial question has, for these writers, receded to the peripheries.

In French-speaking West Africa, colonialism continues to excite writers to a far greater extent than in English-speaking West Africa. The reason is easy to see. In the first place, anti-colonial militants of the Negritude movement continue to dominate the political as well as the cultural scene in French-speaking African and Caribbean countries, combatants like Senghor (now President of Senegal) and Aime Cesaire in Martinique, for example. The temptation to go on playing old tunes has

become irresistible. In English-speaking West Africa, the alliance between writers and politicians which developed during the nationalist struggle broke down soon after independence and the writers have since become very critical of the politicians in their works. The French-African author-politicians find in anti-colonialism a ready-to-hand alibi and a peg on which to hang their frustrations and failings. Moreover, *Presence Africaine* which was established as the "intellectual clearing house" of Negritude has survived as the centre of negritude orthodoxy, even a decade after formal decolonization. There are indications however that younger Francophone African writers are shifting their viewpoint from the old approach of glorifying the past and censuring European colonialism for all the ills of the present. This shift has become more strenuously ideological and inward-looking since the revolutionary theses of Frantz Fanon became a major stimulus among African intellectuals. In four tautly argued works strung into a ridiculously short life Fanon proffered insights into the problem of colonialism which continue to excite much enthusiasm, especially among French-speaking Africans. These works, *Peau Noire*, *Masques Blancs* (1952), *L'An Cinq de la Revolution Algerienne* (1959), *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961) and the collection of disparate essays published under the title *Towards the African Revolution* (1964), increasingly provide an ideological frame of reference to young French-African writers. The most outstanding illustration is the Malian writer Yambo Ouloguem's *Le Devoir de Violence* (1968).

Although this novel has recently come under a cloud with the discovery that some of its passages have been closely based on some other works, this criticism has not extended to its treatment of the theme of colonialism which shows a refreshingly new approach. The central theses of this novel are that West African colonialism did not begin with the Western Europeans but with the Arabs, that the West African empires of the middle ages were slave empires and that the African personality had suffered a serious emasculation long before the coming of European colonialism.

The story is set in medieval Nagem in Western Sudan (probably Mali), bordering the Sahara Desert and watered by the Yame River (Niger). The empire is ruled from the Middle Ages by a Moslem dynasty, part Arab, part Jewish, the Saifs. Its life is explored in terms of its feudal brutality, blood lust, sadism, and the well-tried feudal techniques of oppression through religion, manipulation of supernatural beliefs and magic, along with underhand methods of stealthy poisonings and assassinations. The novel traces how this medieval empire maintained its powerful

political strangle-hold on Africans (contemptuously referred to as the "niggertrash"), up to and beyond the establishment of the French colonial empire. The book's major contribution to the question of colonialism is in the dramatization of what has been called "internal" or "self-" colonization, the exploitation and brutalization of the masses by their own people or people who have lived for so long with them that they have become a part of the local life. Ouloguem is more scathingly critical of this form of colonial brutalization than of Western colonization. Here is a typical quotation from his novel:

In that age of feudalism, large communities of slaves celebrated the justice of their overlords by forced labor and by looking on inert as multitudes of their brothers, smeared with the blood of butchered children, of disembowelled, expectant mothers, were immured alive... That is what happened at Tillaberi-Bentia, at Granta, at Grosso, at Gagal Gosso, and in many places mentioned in the Tarik al-Petach and Tarik al-Sudan of the Arab historians.

Much of the actual brutalization of the native population resulted from rivalries, palace conspiracies and coup d'etats among the feudal nobles as they jostled one another for imperial control. In the terrible and destructive wars, the common people proved contemptuously expendable. Which more than explains their term "niggertrash". The picture is often explicitly drawn:

Amidst all this turmoil, this dissolute life with its general bastardization, its vice and corruption, the Arab conquest, which had come several centuries earlier, settled over the land like a she-dog baring her white fangs in raucous laughter: more and more often, unfreed slaves and subjugated tribes were herded off to Mecca, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Red Sea, and America at prices as ridiculous as the flea-beaten dignity of the niggertrash.

The Fanonian inspiration of this novel is not in doubt, especially in its theory that colonial-domination is sustained by coercive or implied violence, as graphically expressed by Bishop Henry, the one humane character in the novel:

The crux of the matter is that violence, vibrant in its unconditional submission to the will to power, becomes a prophetic illumination, a manner of questioning and answering, a dialogue, a tension, an oscillation, which from murder to murder makes the possibilities

respond to each other, complete or contradict each other.

The principle derives from Frantz Fanon's thesis in *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Indeed Ouloguem's "niggertrash" are just the same brutalized and dehumanized Blacks that Fanon referred to as "les damnés", the victims of political oppression and violence. Ouloguem does not devote as much attention to the effects of French colonialism on the African personality as he does to the effects of Arab colonialism-cumfeudalism. Perhaps this is because he is reacting to those who have attributed all the Black man's woes to the evils of Western colonialism and feels the necessity to tilt the argument well on the other side. It remains to be seen whether this shift in viewpoint concerning colonialism will continue in French-African literature and the long shadow of Negritude begin to recede at last.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one might well say that the colonial question is a major subject in the literature produced by West African writers using English and French, that the two recognizable postures of pro- and anti-colonialism are present in both writing and that, whether overtly or implicitly, the subject continues to excite writers more than a decade after the formal granting of independence by the imperialist powers. But it should be observed also that the subject generates a certain militancy of outlook and violence of style in French African writing which is absent in works by English-speaking authors. This in return may be traced to certain stylistic traits in French and British literature. For example, if one compares poems by say Baudelaire and the French romantics with those by Eliot and Yeates, one is likely to feel the differing stylistic pulls and temper of the works which might have influenced those who absorbed their models.

Form also dictated different textures to the works. Verse provided different facilities to the writer for making protest against colonialism from prose and each work represented both the possibilities as well as the limitations of the form adopted by the writer. In the final analysis, however, the most important single factor in determining response to colonialism in works by West Africans remains the cultural and economic policies of the colonizing powers. The French policy of assimilation which overtly posited the superiority of the culture of the metropole and demanded that salvation for the colonized must come through emancipation though this culture was more likely to stimulate more militant rejection than the British

approach which while not so much as remotely conceding equality to the cultures of the colonial subjects was, nevertheless, contented to interfere as little as possible over the matter of cultural allegiance. Paradoxically, French policy, which implied that at least some of the subject people could become Frenchmen, elicited greater fury and feeling of outrage from African writers than the British attitude which seemed to deny that the subjects had any such capacity for absorbing the British way of life. Indeed, many British writers on Africa up to the end of the 1920s expended much energy and argument proving the Africans educated in the Western tradition lost their cultural roots and feel between the African and European cultural stools. The tendency in the past few years for the writers to dwell more on the concrete failings of the post-independence African leaders and only residually on the part played by colonial or neo-colonial agents is becoming the pattern in the English-speaking counterparts will come to see the wisdom of a shift that will add vigour, presence, and authenticity to their writing.

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