

FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN FERDINAND OYONO'S HOUSEBOY: A RE-ENACTMENT OF COLONIAL HEGEMONY.

Mamadou Gorgui BA

Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar

Études Africaines et Postcoloniales

mamadougorguiba2009@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This paper aims at putting emphasis on the collided relations between colonizers and colonized in Africa during the colonial period in Houseboy. It also aims at exploring the different policies highlighted by the colonizer to spread his religious beliefs, language and culture in Africa. In other words, the colonizer was unlikely to seek the extinction of African cultural values in order to set his own values which he considered to be the good, if not the best ones. The analysis will also focus on the impacts of colonization in Africa.

Key words: *relationship, re-enactment, hegemony, policies, impacts.*

Résumé

Cet article vise à mettre l'accent sur les relations heurtées entre les colonisés et colonisateurs en Afrique durant la période coloniale dans une vie de Boy. Il cherche aussi à explorer les différentes méthodes mises en relief par le colonisateur pour vulgariser ses croyances religieuses, sa langue and sa culture en Afrique. En d'autres termes, le colon cherchait invraisemblablement l'extinction des valeurs culturelles africaines pour pouvoir imposer les siennes qu'il considérait les bonnes, voire les meilleures. L'analyse porta également sur les méfaits de la colonisation en Afrique.

Mots clés : *relation, reconstitution, hégémonie, méthodes, impacts.*

Introduction

Literature is often defined as the reflection of the society. This definition is in the same wavelength with Stendhal's famous quotation according to which the novel is a mirror that you walk along a road. This means that writers in general and novelists in particular point out the wrongdoings that gain ground in the societies in which they live. Ferdinand Oyono belongs unquestionably to this category of African novelists. In his novel, *Houseboy*, he satirizes the abuse of power and turpitude of colonialists in Africa, especially in rural areas. Such behavior resulted in the use of violence, the conversion to Christianity and split of many African families. Hence the choice of the following topic: *Father-son relationship in Ferdinand Oyono's Houseboy: A re-enactment of colonial hegemony.*

The above mentioned novel is chosen because, not only does it allow the reader to remember the actions undertaken by colonialists during the colonial period but it also lets him know about the reasons why white men came in Africa. In so doing, the choice of this topic is motivated by a firm will to re-enact the practices of colonialists in indigenous land and the misdemeanor of colonization in Africa. In this work, it will be of paramount importance to lay a particular emphasis on the attention given to the father-son relationship. Then, we express the hypothesis according to which colonization has hindered the economic, social and human development of the African continent.

So, the study which is going to focus on a thematic approach will be built around two subtitles. In the first one, the stress will be laid on the policies undertaken by colonialists in order to achieve their goals. In the second subtitle, we are going to tackle the impacts of colonization pointed out by Ferdinand Oyono.

1-Policies of conquest

Africa which, some people consider the youngest continent, was the target of many colonial powers such France, Germany, England,...to name but a few. The above mentioned European countries came in Africa in search of labor force and raw materials so as to develop their industries. The white colonizers conquered as many colonies as they could and dominated them, obliterating the cultural heritage of African people and denying them the existence of any identity. These conquerors claimed that African people were deprived of culture and civilization. Such a belief is strengthened by Nicolas Sarkozy who declared: This was a widespread belief among the colonizers who used to put forward arguments according to which they had come in Africa in order to allow Africans to be civilized. So, to realize their dreams, they resorted to many policies to convince indigenous people to become Christians. For this to happen, they did not delay to build churches and schools to spread their language, culture and civilization. In this regard, Fanfunwa writes:

The primary objective of the early Christian missionaries was to convert the heathen or the benighted Africans to Christianity via education, knowledge of the Bible, the ability to sing hymns and recite catechisms as well as the ability to communicate both orally and in writing, were considered essential for a good Christian. (A. B. Fanfunwa, 1978, p. 81)

This means that the aim of the French colonial policy was the assimilation of African people to their language, culture. Such a policy of assimilation created two categories of people in Africa: the civilized or cultured and the indigenous people. Those civilized people were considered the French citizens who had to speak French fluently, reject polygamy, possess a skill or job and

were willing to serve in the French armed forces. As for the other category of people, they were denied rights and lived under the code of indigénat where they benefitted from no trial. The indigénat system led to flagrant abuses of power. In this regard, Le Vine says: “*The obvious defect of the system lay in its arbitrariness; any colonial administrator might inflict summary, extrajudicial punishment for a list of offenses, vaguely defined and poorly differentiated.*” (V. T. Le Vine, 1964, p. 101).

This is to say that colonialists looked for converting African people to Christianity and the latter were deeply affected by the Christian missionary activities. That is the reason why, French authorities relied on the missions and their schools more heavily in Cameroon than in any of their other colonies. Le vine adds:

It cannot be stressed torn the white man’s skills, and, with them, find work that would provide economic rewards and a measure of deference from both the Africans and Europeans. Thus, in many instances, the mission schools produced Africans with literacy and manual skills, but with only a thin veneer of Christianity. (V. T. Le Vine, 1964, p. 70)

Thus, Oyono has written a satirical novel relating to the colonization of his country, Cameroon, which suffered a lot from the direct rule imposed by France over its colonies. In the above mentioned novel, he deals with many themes but the policies colonizers used in order to get as many converts as possible have drawn our attention. *Houseboy* which is written in the first person and in the form of diary entries in two exercise books talks about the relationship that existed between the French colonialists and native Cameroonians. In fact, the story is about a young boy named Toundi who grows up in a small village. Since life in the village is tough, Toundi who is renamed Joseph flees his village and goes unconsciously to work for a mission led by father Gilbert as his houseboy. This collaboration results in developing a close relationship between Toundi and

the white priest. Then, the novel takes place during the colonial period that witnesses the arrival of Christian missionaries who worked closely with Cameroon local authorities so as to get the maximum of converted people. At the time, many representatives of catholic churches delivered speeches that aimed at rejecting local people's beliefs and at inviting local people to embrace the new religion: Christianity. The commandant's question and Toundi's answers can be put within this framework.

What is it like, hell?

Well, Sir, it is flames and snakes and the Devil with horns...

...if you steal, I shan't wait till you go to hell.

...If you steal from me, I shall skin you alive. (F.

Oyon, 1956, pp. 21-22)

In fact, Toundi's run away to father Gilbert is not a random. The white priest resorts to a Machiavellian trap in order to convince the young boy. To realize his dreams, Gilbert used to throw lumps of sugar, which one day, created a fight between Toundi's mother and his friend, Tinati's mother. This means that Toundi is a greedy boy who used to go to Fia to pay recurrent visits to Father Gilbert. His mother often warns about his greediness which will lead him to death and Toundi to say: « *My mother always used to say what my greediness would bring me in the end.... If I had known it would bring me to my grave..... She was right, my poor mother.* » (F. Oyono, 1956, p. 4).

Such a greedy behavior urges Toundi's father to beat him. His parents refused to give him food so as to punish him but to fill his belly, Toundi used to run away to the white priest who often offered him delicious dishes. This is how he became Gilbert's boy who gave him a pair of kaki shorts and red jersey. Toundi used to go to Saint Peter's catholic mission located at Dangan. Father Gilbert taught him to read and to write and Toundi, to express his gratefulness to his benefactor, did all jobs without

being paid. Unfortunately, father Gilbert died in a motor accident and was replaced by a new commandant Vandermayer who became Toundi's master and the young boy to say unintentionally: « *I shall be the Chief European's boy. The dog of the king is the king of dogs.* » (F. Oyono, 1956, p. 20)

Such a statement shows a real complex of inferiority of some back people towards the colonialists who were worshipped despite the brutality, violence and ill-treatments of which they are the victims. Toundi who is so submissive and obedient often serves him beer and other things. Paradoxically, what he refuses to do for his biological father, he is doing for the white man for fear of being tortured.

Apart from the trap used by father Gilbert in order to convince Toundi to become his boy, white missionaries resorted to other policies to get a maximum of converted people. Such strategies have drawn the attention of many African writers. Abdou Ngom, in *Au Diable vos Totems*, has laid a specific focus on some traps so as to convince people of Ngassou to be converted in Christianity. Père Bonnet, the white priest, builds a school in Ngassou and local children are sent to that school and the aim is to get a maximum of converts seeing that they are Pagans. The author says : « *ils (Jean Paul et Alphonse) avaient fréquenté la petite école catholique fondée par père Bonnet pour convertir les païens de la contrée.* » (A. Ngom, 2020, pp. 12-13).

So, Jean Paul, son of Farah and Siga, is one of the victims of the white man and Siga, the mother, is aware of the fact that his son goes through agonies a lot because of the school built by the white man who, to achieve his goals, targets veterans like Farah, a former soldier who defended France during the world war II. Farah who is renamed François contributes a lot to the building of the chapel. He is even the mainspring of the church and Siga who is rooted in her traditional values fears a lot about problems that could be caused by this chapel. Ngom writes : « *Elle (Siga) savait que la nouvelle chapelle n'avait apporté que des*

tourments et dissensions dans sa famille. » (A. Ngom, 2020, p. 15)

Siga dares not protest against her husband's attitude toward the white man because if she does so, she will be accused of a disobedient woman; which is a curse in the African tradition. Her husband is, then, one of the most committed supporters of the white man's project. This means that Siga is stuck in the middle, meaning that she is between the devil and the deep blue sea. So, Farah's family is split by the white man to spread his religion and language. Hence Siga's question : « *où va-t-on en arriver avec le prêtre Blanc qui se prive apparemment de tout pour vulgariser sa langue et sa religion ?* » (A. Ngom, 2020, p. 17)

To get deeply involved in the rural area and convince people to join his new religion, Père Bonnet chooses the local language he tries to speak in order to exchange with the indigenous people, bearing in mind that communication is one of the best means to achieve his ends. Ngom says : « *Pour mieux remplir sa mission, le Prêtre avait d'abord appris la langue du terroir, qu'il parlait maintenant sans accent.* » (A. Ngom, 2020, p. 17)

In addition, the white missionary gives food and clothes to the local people in order to get their help, support and esteem. This is a Machiavellian strategy he puts forward to captivate many indigenous who seem to be more interested in things than in the conservation of their culture and values. Not only do local people greedily take the food given to them, but they also express their gratefulness to their benefactor by giving him in return land in the centre of the village. In this regard, Ngom writes :

Il (Père Bonnet) avait aussi acquis un grand terrain au centre du village, avec l'appui des chrétiens et de quelques notables du village. Ces derniers savaient qu'en contrepartie ; ils allaient bénéficier de faveurs en nature sous de multiples formes : vêtements

européens, grains de mil, lait en poudre, semoule de maïs, farine de blé et huile végétale. (A. Ngom, 2020, pp. 17-18)

As a result, many local people from Ngassou take the bait; which is a great delight to Père Bonnet whose only intention is to try to convince people to become Christians and, on the spot, destroy their culture, civilization and traditional beliefs and set his. The attitude of African people from Ngassou mirrors that of many other African natives who were only interested in favors and protection. In this perspective, Laurie Corbin says:

In fact, the chiefs of the villages or tribes, the authority that might be presumed to be intervening in situations of abuse of power, are portrayed as only interested in currying favor with the Europeans in whatever way possible. (L. Corbin, 2003, p. 242)

This means that white missionaries were aware of the fact that some African old people's refusal to embrace the new religion was not going to last. On the contrary, they were going to be their real collaborators in order to keep their titles and privileges. Unfortunately, the ones who were expected to fight harshly against the white colonizers minded their interests. This the reason why, Medza, talking about his village chief, says:

This local Chief of ours was an ancient lecher with remarkable staying powers. Despite his age, he had got hold of the six prettiest girls in the district and was always on the lookout for more. Like most Chiefs, he occupied an influential position in the community, with all the usual perquisites. He was a rich man by our standards and lived in an imposing villa; his general way of life was luxurious in the extreme. The Colonial Administration (who had nominated him in the first place) buttered him up. In return, he obeyed their commands like a robot and knew they would never throw him out. In the days of

the forced labour gangs he had been feared by everyone because he betrayed fugitives to the authorities and acted as an informer. He used our traditional tribal hierarchy as a vehicle for his underhand intrigues, and flouted our laws and customs when he no longer needed them. (M. Beti, 1956, p. 34)

Chinua Achébé is in the same wavelength with Abdou Ngom and Ferdinand Oyono regarding the policies undertaken by white missionaries so as to get the maximum of converted people in Africa. In *Things Fall Apart*, the main character's son is among the first victims of white men. Okonkwo, the main character brings honor to his village by defeating Amalinze who is nicknamed the cat because he was unbeaten for 20 years and even more. Contrary to his father who was a coward, a debtor, and a lazy and improvident man, Okonkwo succeeds in building his home and reputation as a precocious wrestler and hard-working man. Unfortunately, white missionaries came during his exile to Mbanta, his motherland and used many policies to convert local people to their religion: Christianity. From Mbanta, Okonkwo learns about the arrival of the white men; which means the division of the Igbo people as they bring Christianity and win over Igbo outcasts. Then, one day, a white man goes to Mbanta and tells them that they are worshipping false gods, gods of wood and stone. As a result, he invites them to join the new religion: Christianity. In so doing, he promises to bring to them many iron houses if they join him.

Furthermore, other missionaries go to Mbanta and build a church on a land given to them by the village leaders. Since this land is part of the evil forest, local people believe that the white men will die because they build on cursed land. After noticing that nothing happens to the missionaries, the people of Mbanta come to the conclusion according to which these missionaries have extraordinary power. Many people begin to join white men's

religion. They also go to Umuofia and start a school. Nwoye, Okonkwo's elder son who is rebaptized Isaac leaves his father's hut and moves to Umuofia so as to attend to the catholic school. Consequently, when Okonkwo finishes his seven-year exile, comes back home, he is upset to notice that many honourable men have renounced their titles and converted to Christianity. He is also frustrated by his son's conversion to Christianity and this fact urges him to disown his son elder son Nwoye whom he beats. Then, he leaves the paternal home without returning.

In addition to the above mentioned traps, white colonizers bring both religion and government court law where people are tried for breaking laws. They also employ natives of Umuofia. Rulers and elders of Mbanta gather together to make a decision. During the meeting, okonkwo asks his compatriots to chase the white men by using whips and other harmful things but they reject his decision. Hence the division sought by white missionaries.

Mr Brown, one of the white missionaries, keeps on paying visits to people and one of the eldest man in the village, Akunna, gives his son to Mr Brown to be schooled. He also builds a hospital and schools and asks people to go to school before being ruled by foreigners who are able to read and write in the future. As the new religion : Christianity gains ground, the number of converts increases from day to day and Mr Brown, the white missionary, encourages them by paying them recurrent visits.

Additionally, one of the most horrible trap catholic missionaries resorted to is the use of violence in order to intimidate local people to follow them blindly. In many novels, such a trap is pointed out. In Houseboy, black characters are not spared by the use of violence. On the contrary, they are real victims without any reason. The commandant's wife uses Toundi as a middleman in her adulterous relationship with Moreau, the prison-director because she gives him letters for Moreau and this relationship happens without the commandant being informed. Toundi sees a lot in the house of his master, especially when his

wife came in the household. Since Toundi is an unaware boy, he cannot shut up his mouth on issues and asks questions relating to what he sees and this puts him in trouble with his master's wife who bears a grudge against him. Kalisia, the chambermaid of Suzy orders Toundi to run away when she tells him: «our ancestors used to say you must escape when the water is still only up to the knees. » (F. Oyono, 1956, p. 100)

Unhappily, Toundi who is accused of complicity with Sophie is arrested for no clear reason. Then, he is handcuffed and sent to prison. He is neither given due justice of the law or an attorney. As a result, he flees to Spanish Guinea where he sadly dies. In *Au Diable vos Totems*, the use of violence by white missionaries is emphasized by Abdou Ngom. In fact, we notice that local authorities are not spared by Père Bonnet who does not respect any black man. He does not care them and breaks the law whenever he feels. The white priest is in conflict with Ndiawar Sall, the Canton chief, who orders the destruction of the chapel which is built without his permission. The white priest accuses Sall of abuse of power and pays him an unfriendly visit during which he uses violence over this local authority. Ngom writes :

Père Bonnet se leva du banc et franchit les deux ou trois pas qui le séparaient de son interlocuteur. Il se baissa pour le prendre au collet, le souleva jusqu'à sa poitrine de ses vigoureux bras et lui donna une gifle qui retentit jusque dans les chaumières voisines. Il le laissa retomber sur son siège dans un immense bruit de cols déchirés et de planches brisées. Les yeux écarquillés et la bave aux lèvres, le Chef se débattait sur sa chaise pliante comme un bouc que l'on vient d'égorger. (A. Ngom, 2020, p. 80)

Roughly speaking, white missionaries came in Africa so as to widespread their beliefs, culture and civilizations and to realize their dreams, they resorted to a variety of policies. A deep

reading of the novel, *Houseboy*, reveals that Europeans' arrival in Africa has total changed the familial relationships insofar as their presence has contributed to the destruction of the familial relationship in general but to the father-son relationship in particular. In a word, colonization has impacted on the social and familial relationships in Africa.

2-Impacts of Colonization

It is an open secret that colonization has created many evils in Africa. This fact urges some writers to point out the wrongdoings white colonizers have brought. In *Houseboy*, the novel under study, Oyono expresses with bitterness the negative impacts of colonization in his country, Cameroon. The most striking drawback is the split of many African families. This is the reason why, in Abdou Ngom's *Au Diable vos Totems*, Ndiawar Fall, Canton chief, says to Père Bonnet : *“Avant votre arrivée dans ce village, les gens vivaient dans la concorde et le respect mutuel. Vous semez la discorde parmi des gens que rien ne devrait séparer. Vous avez même réussi à diviser plusieurs familles.”* (A. Ngom, 2020, p. 78)

Laurie Corbin is in the same wavelength with Abdou Ngom insofar as he is of the opinion according to which, the arrival of white missionaries in Africa has created problems in many families. In fact, colonialists used division as a policy in order to get the maximum of converted. In this respect, Corbin says: *“It is clear from the start that the European presence has changed familial relationships at the very least by offering other choices to young men who are not happy with the lives offered by the traditions of their culture.”* (L. Corbin, 2003, p. 241)

So, without any shadow of doubt, colonization is a byword for division as it is relevantly pointed out in *Houseboy*. In this so-called novel, Oyono shows the strategy used by father Gilbert in order to separate Toundi, the innocent boy, from his biological

father. Unfortunately, Toundi who leaves his biological family and African culture to look for a better life in the white man's house ends up being brutalized, oppressed, laughed at and dehumanized by the people he previously idolized.

In fact, after Gilbert's death in a motor-accident, Toundi is compelled to live with a new commandant and his wife. There, he is able to see the peculiarities of the colonialists. His hope for a better life melts like snow in the sun. Toundi who is renamed Joseph naively falls in love with Suzy, the commandant's wife. The latter, on the contrary, ill-treats him and the reality is that, the more Toundi gets close to the white men, the more he violently suffers. He even learns about racism and lack of respect because one day, Toundi himself, his commandant, Sophie, a black girl and his boyfriend travel together. The two black people were put in the same hut where they spend the night. This mirrors a real lack of respect regarding the African values insofar as it is unacceptable to put together two mature people who are not between husband and wife. As a result, Sophie does everything she can in order to have sexual intercourses with Toundi who refuses and she tells him: « *when I tell people they won't believe me. They'll say, perhaps, it is because his knife is not very sharp he prefers to keep it in its sheath.* » (F. Oyono, 1956, p. 43)

Sophie's behavior is telling because she seems to be no longer a model of a good African girl because in traditional Africa, virginity up to the marriage day is of paramount importance. She is unquestionably perverted by her white boyfriend who is used to sexually exploiting her. This mirrors that African traditional values are jeopardized by colonialists and some native Africans have to be blamed for having chosen the white men to the detriment of their biological father. In this regard, Laurie Corbin says: "*Yet the text does not necessarily suggest that Toundi owes his father any respect.... It is true that this rejection of the*

initiation rites of his culture could be seen as a fatal failure of the respect due to one's father." (L. Corbin, 2003, p. 242)

As a result, colonialists succeed in achieving their goals because African's beliefs, tradition and culture were put aside and replaced by Europeans ones. In this regard, Corbin adds: "*The African gods have been replaced by the Europeans; the sense is that all the old belief systems have been discarded.*" (L. Corbin, 2003, p. 242)

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is also about the tragic fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, that of the Igbo culture and the destruction of indigenous people's traditional beliefs. Okonkwo who is the embodiment of success and respect loses the help of his compatriots who side with white missionaries who, in return, have caused the Igbo people many problems. Some leaders of Umuafio, including Okonkwo, are handcuffed and are imprisoned until they pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries following the destruction of the village church. These people are given neither food nor water and are not allowed to go out so as to urinate and the guards knock their shaven heads. The people of the village collect the required amount of money and pay and Okonkwo and his band are set free. Okonkwo who is on the verge of avenging himself profits from a meeting. During the council, a court messenger, acting under the orders of missionaries, arrives and tells the local men to stop the meeting and Okika to say: « *whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life.* » (A. Chinua, 1958, p. 143)

The attitude of the messenger shocks Okonkwo who shoots him to death and being aware of the fact that his compatriots will not go war against missionaries, he kills himself by hanging in a tree and his death mirrors the destruction of the Igbo culture. This fact mirrors that white missionaries do not respect black people. For them, blacks deserve no respect, esteem and they are worthless. White missionaries' attitude towards Blacks reveals

that the latter needs to be beaten so as to do the job expected from them. This is the reason why Diao Faye says : « *Dans l'esprit des Blancs, le nègre ne fonctionne que sous la contrainte et le châtimeut corporel. Pour les Blancs, raisonner un nègre c'est une perte de temps ; il faut le battre comme l'âne pour qu'il s'exécute sans murmure.* » (D. Faye, 2008, p. 8)

We notice that in some novels such as *Houseboy*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Au Diable vos Totems*, to name but a few; black young people who leave aside their traditional culture, religion and convert to Christianity have poor relationships with their biological fathers. It is as if they are well rooted in their origin. Their dissatisfactions with their ancestral beliefs and cultures lead them to embrace new religion. Hence the complex of inferiority they feel towards white colonizers.

Conclusion

This article aims at showing the selfishness and the authoritarian behavior of colonialists in Africa in general but in Cameroon in particular. *Houseboy* is a real satire of the period of colonization which witnesses the wrongdoings of white missionaries in Africa. It depicts the hard life that some African countries have undergone during the colonial period. What is more, the article points out the oppression, injustice and discrimination practiced by the white colonizers on the pretext of a civilizing mission.

Houseboy is full of fascinating information pertaining to the father-son relationship. The novel is full of lessons because it allows the reader to know that nothing is worth one's culture and origin and that white missionaries had come in Africa for the only purpose of spreading their culture, language and religion. This is the reason why, to achieve their goals, they resorted to many policies among which the learning of the local language, the building of churches, schools and hospitals and the use of violence.

Consequently, the colonization of Africa has resulted in the destruction of familial relationships, the destruction of African traditional beliefs and culture, to name but a few. So it is necessary to wonder if colonialists had not resorted to other Machiavellian policies so as to dominate African people. We also wonder if the harsh conditions experienced by black people during the colonial period have totally disappeared in Africa.

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