



TITLE:

From the Culture of "Assimilation" to the Search for a New Order: A Study of Laye's The Radiance of the King and Beti's Mission to Kala

AUTHOR(S):

LOSAMBE, Lokangaka

CITATION:

LOSAMBE, Lokangaka. From the Culture of "Assimilation" to the Search for a New Order: A Study of Laye's The Radiance of the King and Beti's Mission to Kala. African Study Monographs 1993, 14(3): 155-168

ISSUE DATE:

1993-10

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/68109>

RIGHT:

FROM THE CULTURE OF “ASSIMILATION” TO THE SEARCH FOR A NEW ORDER: A STUDY OF LAYE’S *THE RADIANCE OF THE KING* AND BETI’S *MISSION TO KALA*

Lokangaka LOSAMBE

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Fort Hare

ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to show that although written at different times by two writers, who proclaim not to share the same creative vision, *The Radiance of the King* and *Mission to Kala* share certain common features. The novels portray expatriation as dramatised in African fiction, e.g., the passage of a Frenchman from the West to the African city, and that of an African from the Westernized city to the African Village. These passages are necessitated by the main characters’ acute realization of the inadequacy of the culture of “assimilation,” which France is the maker and of which Africa is the victim. The journey into the African hinterland undertaken by these characters becomes a pilgrimage in the course of which they hope to liberate themselves from the French monolithic vision of culture and to find fulfilment in a culture of diversity.

Key Words: Assimilation; Expatriation; Evolve; Pilgrimage; Subjectivity; Mulatto; Mar-ronnage.

In the often quoted review of Laye’s *The African Child* (1955) and *The Radiance of the King* (1965), Beti (1955) deplored what he saw as a lack of political commitment in the novels. Referring particularly to *The Radiance of the King*, he complained that “the novel is too far from political reality, it tries to please the European public with picturesque episodes and glittering surfaces” (King, undated: 101). Following this attack, a number of critics, such as Senghor (1955), Mfizi (1971), Palmer (1972), Soyinka (1976), King (undated) and a host of others, have rightly risen to the defence of Laye’s work, showing its universal dimensions and relevance to man and society both in Africa and Europe. However, none of them has considered the publication of Mongo Beti’s *Mission to Kala* three years later as Beti’s attempt to revise Laye’s ‘exotic’ tradition. This paper attempts to show that in *Mission to Kala* Beti has unconsciously produced a similar discourse advocating a departure from the culture of assimilation and a search for that of multiplicity. In so doing, he has vindicated, rather than refuted, Laye’s art.

The Radiance of the King and *Mission to Kala* display certain common features. For example, both novels portray expatriation as dramatised in African fiction, e.g., a Frenchman’s passage from Europe to the African city and that of an African from the westernized city to the African village (Losambe, 1986). These passages are necessitated when it becomes apparent to the main characters of the two novels, Clarence and Medza, that the culture of “assimilation,” in which France provides the generative cultural model and of which traditional African society is the unfortunate victim, is a totally inadequate response to the cataclysmic

meeting of the two cultures. The journeys into the African hinterland undertaken by these characters become a pilgrimage in the course of which they hope to redeem themselves by dissolving their assimilationist egos and reconstituting their subjectivity.

Owing to a large extent to the myth of superiority of some cultures over others propounded in the mid-nineteenth century by Comte de Gobineau (1853) and Darwin (1885) and perpetuated later by Levy-Bruhl (1910), the French introduced the concept of "assimilation" into their colonial machinery. As Suret-Canale (1971: 83) has remarked, "'assimilation' had only a negative meaning: it suppressed or ignored the political structures that were truly African and the African culture, replacing them by colonial structures and colonial education — which were indeed French." The assimilation policy sought to turn Africans into French men with black skin through the process of education. According to Blair (1976: 11),

... this purely French-oriented education programme was based on two premises: that the Negro was a 'blank page' with no inherited personality, cultural values or institutions; or that what he had were barbarous, primitive or puerile, that, nevertheless, given the same opportunities, the African 'child' could become as 'civilized' as the French themselves, at which stage he should enjoy the same civic rights and advantages, including direct representation in the French Assembly.

However, as seen through the behavior of characters such as Climbie in Dadie's *Climbie* (1971), Medza in *Mission to Kala*, Samba Diallo in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* (1972) or Karim in Soce's *Karim* (1935), the assimilation policy has only succeeded in disorienting Africans. The flight of most of these characters in search of African values, therefore, marks their alienation from, and rejection of this confusing policy of assimilation.

In Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, the reader discovers Clarence, the main character already in Africa. One knows little about Clarence's interaction with the forces which shaped his French society before his arrival in Africa. However, judging from his behavior as he comes into contact with the African milieu, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that Clarence comes from a highly materialistic, individualistic, normative and less humane culture. It is indeed a restrictive and intolerant culture in which a person deprived of material wealth is degraded and deserted by his people. Is Clarence himself not abandoned by his white friends in Africa because of his bankruptcy, after he has lost all his money in gambling? In fact, at the beginning of the novel, Clarence is a true representative of this culture. Immersed in the French racial superiority complex and narrow vision of humanity, he narrow-mindedly thinks that he is entitled to privileges in Africa by the mere fact of being a white man: "I am not 'just anybody' ... I am a white man" (Laye, 1961: 10).

At one level, Clarence's main objective in the novel is to salvage his financial bankruptcy by seeking employment in the service of the King. At another level, his journey to the South, the heart of African culture, should be seen as an escape from the spiritual decadence and monolithic cultural perception of Western society. He hopes to redeem his character by repudiating his inherited tragic vision of

humanity and integrating into his personality humane African values incarnated by the King. By this process Clarence intends to dissolve his inherited ego and reconstitute himself into a freed "vibrant schizo-subject," to use Best & Kellner's words (1991: 92). This would also make him acceptable to other cultural groups. To this extent, his mission to Africa is significantly different from the public and imperialistic mission of other white characters in other African novels. As rightly pointed out by Jahn (1961: 215), in *The Radiance of the King*, "the usual pedagogic relation of Europe and Africa is ... reversed; here the European is the pupil, who must learn justice and pass examinations."

In Africa, Clarence faces a society with a culture totally different from his own. He discovers that in contrast to the Europeans, Africans have, among other things, their own idea of time; their own attitude to life (here even a materially deprived beggar is well respected and fully integrated); their own code of communication, talking drums, which he cannot understand; their own food, the concoctions eaten with meat and fish, which he cannot digest easily; their own drinking habits (palm-wine); and their own naming system, as instructed to him by the boys Nagoa and Noaga, which sounds strange to him. Indeed, before his journey to the South, African culture appears to Clarence's mind as mysterious as the frescoes on the King's palace walls, which he cannot comprehend. It is partly because of these cultural differences between the European and African societies that Clarence feels intensely alone even though he finds himself in the midst of a tightly-packed crowd at Adrame: "Alone Each time I find myself a little more alone" (Laye, 1965: 9). Clarence's loneliness in the midst of a non-hostile crowd is thus caused by his personal introverted character shaped by his society's racial prejudices, his realization of the limitations of the French people's materialistic culture and his own inability to comprehend his present environment.

However, in spite of these cultural obstacles, Clarence decides to "squeeze his way through" the African society. He resolves to take an unknown road to an unknown destination, as he wonders: "what kind of life could it be" (Laye, 1965: 22)? And the symbolic abyss which "opened up under his feet as he thought of it" (Laye, 1965: 22) shows the gap that separates him from that life. Clarence will reach this life only after he has gone through certain steps to rid himself of his Western prejudices.

Like any person undertaking a pilgrimage towards redemption, Clarence has to submit to tests as he progresses. And for this, he must develop and sustain virtues such as courage, humility, patience and a willingness to learn. Each test constitutes for Clarence a step forward in his quest for a cultural system that accepts diversity. It delivers him from some of his prejudices, enables him to positively appreciate humane African values and brings him much closer to his new world. The first test is the crowd on the esplanade in Adrame. It is here that Clarence begins his struggle in an attempt to thrust his way towards the heart of the realities of African society so far degraded by the French. It is from here that his long, painful, decisive and salutary journey begins towards redemption, towards a complete achievement of fulfilment in cultural multiplicity. This crowd that virtually blocks Clarence's way as he tries to advance towards the center of the esplanade is more than an ordinary gathering of people. It stands for a complex society with its inter-

woven cultural forces, presenting itself as a strong barrier to Clarence's aspiration as long as he holds on to the negative stereotypes of his European society. That is the reason why one observes that the harder Clarence pushes his way through the crowd, the more difficult and complicated his task becomes (Laye, 1965).

The "odor of warm wool and oil, a herd-like odor that seemed to dull the senses into a kind of trance" (Laye, 1965: 7), which emanates from the crowd on the esplanade, symbolizes the appealing and purifying force that pulls Clarence into the African world. This force which strips Clarence of his independence can be said to be the hospitable, communal warmth of African spiritual values, which he can benefit from only if he is cleansed of all his people's racial stereotypes. As Palmer (1972: 102-103) has rightly maintained, this odor, "plays a very important part in the dissolution of Clarence's original personality."

However, although he does not reach his goal at this first stage of his odyssey, Clarence is nevertheless cured of some of his blindness. He has learnt that the superiority complex of his race has no foundation whatsoever, and that if he is to persevere and be successful in his search for a new positive subjectivity, he must humble himself, let himself be guided and make himself ready to imitate what he sees before him. Clarence entrusts himself to the care of the beggar, whom he had originally despised, and two small boys, Noaga and Nagoa. As the beggar reassures him, "that is, of course, if you have no objection ... I'll ... yes, that's it. I'll show you the way" (Laye, 1965: 59). Later on, Clarence is seen imitating the beggar as they drink and eat at a caravanserai: "In fact, [Clarence] had already begun to imitate him. The fumes of the wine were mounting to his head. But now he began to imitate every movement" (Laye, 1965: 54).

The second test is Adrame's court of justice. As they set out on their way to the South through the jubilant African crowd, Clarence and the beggar find themselves in front of the royal guards who have come to arrest them over the jacket Clarence had given to the owner of caravanserai as payment for his hotel charge, but which was later stolen by Noaga and Nagoa. Then at the court Clarence learns that Western logic, which has led the French to regard Africans as inferior beings without a culture, has no place in the African world. This is dramatized through the trial judge's comic rendering of justice. Here Clarence also learns that the new world, whose values he wants to integrate into his personality, does not place a special premium on material values represented by his clothes. The judge finds "reasonable" the inn-keeper's proposition that "if the white man would care to give me his shirt and his trousers, I should be willing to overlook the jacket" (Laye, 1965: 79). This sounds altogether odd and nonsensical to Clarence, who wonders: "can you see me walking naked in the streets?" Here again Clarence is helped and taken out of trouble by the beggar, who advises him to run away and meet him at the city gates.

The third test is the forest with its many paths which appear as a single path to Clarence, its wall of thorns and its odor originating from "a subtle combination of flower-perfumes and the exhalations of vegetable moulds" (Laye, 1965: 94). In spite of its role as a purgative to Clarence, this odor is not antagonistic. In fact, "caressing" Clarence like a baby, this odor emanating from nature redirects him gently to remind himself of, and relate to his childhood period of innocence when

any person (black or white) must have appeared to him as a human being like himself and not as an inferior being. It is an odor, "which was all-enveloping rather than repellent, curiously caressing, yes, and — one hardly dares to admit it — alluring, insidiously alluring" (Laye, 1965: 94). Thus, like that of the crowd, this odor also represents humane African dispositions which contrast sharply with Clarence's individualism and negative values.

The meaning of the forest should be sought within the context of the African interpretation of cosmic order. The forest, as also seen in Birago Diop's poetry (in Larson, 1970) and other novels such as Laye's *The African Child* (1955), Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Nzekwu's *Wand of Noble Wood* (1971), or Loba's *Kocoumbo l'Etudiant Noir* (1960), is the domain of the gods, spirits and ancestors. In fact, Laye himself believed in the existence of these spirits, as he once said: "In the past, in the great over-grown village of Kouroussa in Upper Guinea, there is no doubt that the air, water, earth and savannahs were, really and truly, inhabited by genii, who had to be propitiated by prayers and sacrifices" (Laye, 1973: 160). This is how the forest appears to Clarence:

Clarence looked at the immense green wall and the thought entered his mind that it resembled the real wall of the royal palace It was no more accessible: there was a net-work of branches and creepers, but there was not, or did not seem to be, any opening large enough to allow a human being to enter (Laye, 1965: 95).

Luckily for Clarence, the beggar, who knows the ways of the forest and its inhabitants, guides him through and helps him enter into a communion with nature, the spirits and ancestors. This communion between man and nature, the living and the dead is an essential part of the African vision of the cosmos, and Clarence must try to understand and accept it, rather than dismiss it as a pagan, childish or primitive practice as his people had done. Indeed, Clarence dissociates himself from his people's negative attitude towards African beliefs by humbly subjecting himself to the care of the beggar and the two young boys, Nagoa and Noaga, during his journey through the forest, and by letting his former ego be dissolved by the odor of this remarkable environment.

After he has entered into communion with nature, Clarence receives a hero's welcome in the company of the beggar, Noaga and Nagoa in Aziana, where he is to undergo more tests. In Aziana, by ostensibly selling Clarence to the King for a donkey and a woman, the beggar ironically helps Clarence enter into another important relationship with the African society, the blood pact. In the King's court, Clarence is used as a Studanimal, and in making half-caste children with the women in the harem, who sneak into his hut at night disguised as his girlfriend Akissi, Clarence virtually establishes an unseverable blood bond between African society and himself.

In introducing this Senghorian notion of the mulatto into his novel, Laye shows that Clarence is not simply trying to reject the whole of his Western culture for the monolithic African culture. Rather, by stripping himself of French racial prejudices and a false sense of pride, generated mainly by an ignorance of the African personality, Clarence is in quest for a tolerant, multi-dimensional culture of co-

existence made up of positive elements from his original culture (especially its technology) and his newly acquired humane, spiritual values from Africa. Thus, Clarence also enriches African culture by contributing his technological know-how. He does so by introducing a better towelling material and a new showering system, which comes to be widely used in Aziana (Laye, 1965). In fact, Clarence's memory of his childhood shoemsmith's craft while he watches and admires Diallo, the Azianan black smith in Aziana should be seen as his unconscious and conscious attempt to bring the two worlds together. Seen from the point of view of nature, as represented by the flames emanating from the European "shoemsmith's blazing forge" and Diallo's "iron of the blade," the two worlds show no disparity. Clarence now understands that these worlds are seen as *unequal* only when considered from a normative European viewpoint. This memory brings to Clarence's mind the guilt of his sinful European adulthood, which he is trying to redeem by virtually subjecting it to ridicule in Africa. Here, "he was all at once the child who would blush at the sight of the man he had become; he felt himself burn all over with shame, burn as the incandescent iron was burning. For the man he had become no longer existed; that so-called man was now a beast — a cock!" (Laye, 1965: 212).

Thus, by subordinating his conceited European adulthood to his innocent, humane childhood and African values, Clarence becomes a better person and gains acceptance amongst Africans in Aziana, where "everywhere he was joyfully greeted and invited to drink with all cordiality which is extended to any happy companion" (Laye, 1965: 134). As a sign of his repentance, Clarence is seen replacing his western clothing with the African "boubou." He rejects his previously-held feelings of repugnance towards human nudity and shamelessly stays naked in public, as the people of Aziana often do. He has indeed achieved a strong identification with the people of Aziana as he thinks: "I enjoy life ... if I filed my teeth like the people of Aziana, no one could see any difference between me and them It's the soul that matters And in that respect I am exactly as they are" (Laye, 1965: 168).

Clarence's dream of fish-women and his experience with Dioki, the fortune teller, also demonstrate that he has grasped the essence of and accepted the African perception of cosmic order. Since, according to Jung (1961: 18), "dreams give information about the secrets of the inner life and reveal to the dreamer hidden factors of his personality," Clarence's dream of the fish-women must be seen as a manifestation at the unconscious level of the African beliefs that he has deeply internalized. Commenting on the importance of such a dream in an interview with King (undated: 45), Laye has explained that "the dream was among the ancient Manding 'the privileged place for violent fights between the *spirits* of enemies': such a dream normally took place near a body of water before a battle, in order to 'verify if in one's sphere of influence there was another *spirit* as strong as one's own to offer resistance'." In the light of this explanation, it would be more plausible to see Clarence's dream of the fish-women as a means of combatting "his enemy," his European prejudices, rather than see it, "as a way of confronting his enemy, his strong sensuality" (King, undated: 45). Indeed, as Jahn (1967: 213) has maintained, since in the African thinking, "the sensual and the spiritual are one,"

Clarence cannot afford to separate these two tightly-blended aspects of the African personality.

In fact, after Clarence's dream of the fish-women, many readers would hardly be surprised, as Gikandi (1987) is, to see him going to consult Dioki about the King's arrival, just as one would hardly be surprised to see Clarence perceiving the vision of the King's journey to the South at Dioki's shrine. Indeed, the African beliefs have found a cherished place in Clarence's personality.

However, in spite of his deep understanding and acceptance of African values, and his integration into Azanian society, Clarence cannot be said to have been stripped of all the vestiges of his European personality. For example, his pitiful reaction to the Master of Ceremonies' ordeal as decreed by the King's court of justice shows that Clarence has not completely done away with his Western logic. On this point Diallo tells him: "You're too much of a white man for my liking. Yet you must realise that no one has ever wished you any harm" (Laye, 1965: 213). At the end of the novel, Clarence's lack of the courage, audacity and confidence needed to approach the King, which are quintessential African values, also shows that he still holds on to some aspects of his original personality. As the omniscient narrator in the novel says, "it was not just his nakedness, it was not just his vileness which prevented Clarence from going up to him; it was something else — many other things" (Laye, 1965: 281). Among these "many other things" which make Clarence resist assimilation into African society is also his realisation of its limitations. The limitations are manifested for example, by the treacherous treatment he receives at the hands of the beggar and the King, who barter him for a donkey; the sexually exploitative women from the King's harem, and the rascally behavior of Nagoa and Noaga. Clarence is finally accepted and accommodated by the African society, mainly because of the latter's tolerant attitude towards "the other" rather than on the basis of his seemingly complete abandonment of European values. His acceptance of the King's call also shows that he has successfully transformed himself into a new subjectivity free from the restricting French culture that preaches assimilation.

Here Laye seems to conclude that in running away from the intolerant French attitude towards other cultural groups, what Clarence searches for and eventually finds is not another culture of assimilation provided by Africa. He finds an accommodating culture of "marronnage," as proposed by Cesaire. According to this cultural view,

... each ethnic group has its own genius, and therefore something original to offer world civilization, and ... the solution to the world's problems resides more in the creation of a harmonious mosaic of universe cultures than in the attempt to create one monolithic system, which would necessarily be repressive and totalitarian (Wylie, 1985: 48).

Whereas in *The Radiance of the King* Laye uses a Frenchman in order to dramatize the limitations of the French-fashioned concept of assimilation, Beti chooses to portray the same through an African "evolvee," a victim of the assimilation policy, in *Mission to Kala*. Although they belong to different racial groups,

Clarence and Medza act a great deal in the same way as both go through a similar process of self-transformation. Just as Laye adopts a distanced position and mocks his main character's initial condescending and often childish behavior in his interaction with Africans, so does Beti treat with sarcasm and irony Medza's initial "conquistador's" attitude and his eventual conversion in Kala.

In *Mission to Kala*, Medza's society, Vimili, is as spiritually decadent as the world from which Clarence comes. It is a society which has been seduced by the white man's material values and undergone deep transformations in all spheres of life under the French policy of assimilation. It is indeed a society left in a state of anomie as it has not been able to become French after departing from its solid African tradition. Medza summarizes the tragic dilemma faced by his society as follows:

... the tragedy which our nation is suffering today is that of a man left to his own devices in a world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. It is the tragedy of man bereft of any intellectual compass, a man walking blindly through the dark in some hostile city like New York (Beti, 1964: 181).

The failure of Jean-Marie Medza at his baccalaureate examination, organized in "the best tradition," should be seen within this context as the failure of all African "evolues" to comprehend and harmoniously incorporate the European realities imposed on them. It also shows the failure of the assimilation policy to turn Africans into Frenchmen.

Literally, Medza goes to Kala on a public mission, to retrieve his runaway cousin's wife. Despite his initial reluctance to accept the mission, after he has been convinced of its necessity and his apparent ability to carry it out successfully, Medza develops a keen personal interest in it. At this point the mission takes the form of a private adventure, as he says: "something was slowly stirring inside me, a siren voice which I recognized as the love of adventure" (Beti, 1964: 16). At a deeper level, however, this "siren voice" which stirs inside Medza represents his personal, restless search for freedom within a cultural system that allows diversity. For so far he has lived a life of uncertainty, confusion and restrictions in the "evolue" society of Vimili. In other words, Medza's journey through the African jungle to Kala represents his attempt to get out of that artificial world of the "evolues" created by the French. Under the French policy of assimilation, these Africans have been led to despise anything associated with African tradition while they are made to admire everything connected with Europeans. The result of this is what is seen in the Vimilians' condescending attitude towards the Kalans, as shown through Bikokolo's behavior. As he advises Medza, he calls them "bushmen" and narrow-mindedly believes that they are inferior beings who should be exploited by any "evolue." It is with this illusory and naive sense of superiority that Medza embarks on his journey to Kala. His initial arrogant dispositions are indeed similar to those of Clarence at the beginning of *The Radiance of the King*.

However, just as the southern forest in *The Radiance of the King* dampens Clarence's arrogance and leads him to self-discovery, the Kalan forest also cleanses Medza of some of the negative prejudices he holds against his African tradition.

As Medza confesses, "the journey through that hot, dark forest had considerably dampened my enthusiasm and panache — and passed, in fact, almost unnoticed" (Beti, 1964: 21). And like Clarence in *Adrame*, Medza is disillusioned with himself upon his arrival in Kala, as he quickly discovers at the outset, that his sense of superiority and his conquistador's enthusiasm and illusion have no place amongst the Kalans. As he enters Kala, Medza finds the Kalans so seriously and actively engaged in their sporting activities that no one can spare time to pay attention either to his shining bicycle or himself: "I jumped off my bicycle and wheeled it as close as I could without anyone, performer or spectator, even noticing my presence" (Beti, 1964: 22). Humiliated in this manner, Medza, like Clarence, feels an imperative need to humble himself. He then relegates his arrogant behavior to the background, and is seduced by the mood of the festive activity of the day, in which his cousin Zambo distinguishes himself: "The temporary conquistador in me suddenly decided that it was far preferable to be a ploughed student again. All I wanted to do at that moment was get back into my ordinary clothes and put my best suit away in the wardrobe again" (Beti, 1964: 24).

It is only after Zambo has given him a natural, warm and hospitable welcome that other people, Zambo's supporters, also become aware of the presence of their guest and his property. But Medza, who has already assumed a subservient attitude with regard to Kala's tradition and has come to consider his cousin Zambo as the true conquistador, cannot believe Zambo's words when he says to him: "Little cousin ... you can't imagine how delighted and honoured I am to be able to talk to you today. You can have no idea" (Beti, 1964: 26).

Later on, Medza is seen touring the village accompanied by his uncle, Mama, at the invitation of other villagers, who have found in him a reliable source of information on the white man's world. However, although on the surface he lends himself to being treated as "a scholar" by the village folk, inwardly he constantly feels ill at ease and resents this treatment: "If only they wouldn't treat me just as 'scholar' and nothing else! I'd have given all the diplomas in the world to swim like Duckfoot Johnny, or dance like the Boneless Wonder, or have the sexual experience of Petrus son-of-God, or throw an assegai like Zambo" (Beti, 1964: 58). Indeed, as Cartey (1969: 3) has maintained, "Medza, for all his approximate scholarship, longs for the free, rollicking life he sees around him" As time goes by, Medza, like Clarence in *Aziana*, feels a gradual, significant change occur in his personality, linking him closely with Kala. Kala's life alters Medza's "evolue" personality, as he admits that "for ... inexplicable reasons, I was now sure that I would remember my visit to Kala for the rest of my life: I could sense the cause without yet being able to bring it into the daylight" (Beti, 1964: 51).

The invitation extended to Medza by the village folk to swim with them is a call for his initiation into things Kalan. This swim, reluctantly accepted by Medza, should be seen as the baptism that is to revive in him his lost links with his ancestral tradition. And Medza's initial reluctance to strip off at the river, which is, in fact, reminiscent of Clarence's behavior in *Azania*, shows his initial difficulty in doing away with his "evolue" manners. It is precisely because of these habits that Medza shows disgust at his uncle's table manners, as he says:

The table was loaded with food. My uncle was distinctly lacking in table manners: he crammed his mouth so full that a great bulge appeared in each cheek, and I was afraid he might burst. I trained myself not to catch his eye during meals, so as to avoid betraying my astonishment at his feeding habits (Beti, 1964: 57).

This humorous touch successfully contrasts the spontaneous, free and natural manners of the village with the imprisoning restrictions of the city, imported from the white man's world; it contrasts the corrupt, superficial, uncertain city life with that of the village which, in spite of its flaws, is still closer to African tradition than the other.

In Kala, Medza also feels that the closer he gets to the Kalans, the more resentful he becomes of the Western ways, including education which he starts to view as a prison, or, rather, a punishment imposed on his society by the white man. Like Modin in Armah's *Why Are We So Blest?* (1974) and, to some extent, Dele in Omotoso's *The Edifice* (1971), Medza now regards the white man's education as the process whereby Africans are emptied of their substance and become mere puppets: "My resentment against schools and educational systems mounted steadily as the days passed by. I saw a school as a kind of giant ogre, swallowing young boys, digesting them slowly, vomiting them up again sucked dry of all their youthful essence, mere skeleton" (Beti, 1964: 68). Furthermore, his rejection of Eliza, the city girl, and his resentment of the American whiskey (though he later on uses it to stimulate his courage) show the widening gulf that is now separating Medza from the world of the so-called assimilated.

However, Medza's rejection of the proclaimed universality of the Western ways while in Kala by no means leads him to sympathise with, or accept everything that Kala's life offers him. As James (1969: 118) has remarked,

Kala has so much of the genuine warmth and community spirit the European communities lack that one would expect a celebration of the noble peasant in the line of Senghor's poetry. Not at all. The villagers are satirized with the same ebullient wit: they are venally corrupt and naively ignorant.

If Medza is in love with Kala's cultural, social and mental freedom as symbolized by its youth's sexual "laxity," if he longs for such socially unifying traditional activities as dances like "Akissa" and sports like throwing the assegai, and if he shows admiration for the Kalans' sense of hospitality and humility, he strongly resents materialistic and exploitative character exhibited by the old men and the villagers' high opinion of anything associated with the white man. Perhaps one of the most disgusting things for Medza is his uncle's use of the important African custom of blood relationship for material gains. Indeed, Mama's exploitation of Medza in order to get goats and chickens from the Kalans is comparable to Clarence's similar treatment at the hands of the beggar and the King in Aziana in *The Radiance of the King*.

Thus, since neither the "evolve" or "assimilated" society of which Medza is a product, nor the Kalan society into which he has come to look for fulfilment, is perfect, he resolves to look for another "authentic" culture that allows an equal co-

existence of values. His persistent search for this ideal world while in Kala is symbolized by his obsessive quest for a virgin girl. Like Clarence in Laye's *The Radiance of the King* for whom the King becomes a means towards liberation, Medza hopes to achieve through this virgin the much desired freedom from the culture of assimilation. Medza tells Zambo: "What I really want is a nice young girl who doesn't know her way about at all, if you get one. As long as she's young, sweet, and innocent, I don't care a damn about her looks. I'm sick to death of experienced old bags" (Beti, 1964: 76). Finally, Edima comes his way and becomes the symbol of the haunting ideal, as Medza states: "I didn't know a thing about the girl; yet I was already thinking of her as an indispensable part of my existence" (Beti, 1964: 97).

Medza eventually has sexual intercourse with Edima and feels that he has regained a sense of liberty, maturity, responsibility and security that he will soon try to protect against the tyranny of his father, already an "evolue." Commenting on this relationship, however, Biakolo (1986: 78) has remarked that "the sexual act between him and Edima may not truly represent a perfect symbolic initiation into traditional rural purity," because, "Edima happens to be the very daughter of the Chief of Kala whom Jean-Marie dubs the 'old swine' and one of the people's oppressors." This view is indeed limited, for neither Edima nor Medza can be judged by the sins of their fathers. Through the well-dramatized conflict of generations that runs throughout his novel, Mongo Beti has successfully established a distance between Edima, Medza, Zambo and their respective fathers. In fact, while the younger generation appears ill-at-ease with the imported materialistic values and their state of confusion, the older generation (represented by Bikokolo, the Chief of Vimili, the Chief of Kala, Medza's father and Mama) is sinking comfortably into this state of rot. Certainly up to this point Medza does succeed in asserting his independence vis-a-vis Vimili's French-shaped culture of assimilation on one hand and Kala's adulterated African tradition on the other. However, unlike Clarence in *The Radiance of the King*, Medza will not be able to hold on firmly to his reconstituted subjectivity. This, as shown below, is very much due to his personal weakness.

Thus, on his return from Kala, Medza who regards himself as a liberated man, now resolves to confront the tyrannical father so as to preserve his new character and his union with Edima, the symbol of his ideal. Unfortunately, instead of adopting an even-tempered, persuasive attitude, and inducing his father to alter his tyrannical character and to accept the illumination he has brought from Kala, Medza adopts an aggressive disposition which in fact puts him on the same tyrannical level as his father. Indeed, Medza behaves to his father the way Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) reacts to Umuofia Progressive Union on a delicate issue, at a delicate moment. Hence it is clear that, like Obi, he is doomed by virtue of his narrow-mindedness. He is so resolved never to succumb to his father. In spite of his mother's request that he should apologize to his father over his failure at school, Medza refuses to give in, saying: "Apologize for what?" (Beti, 1964: 173).

Because Medza loses his wisdom and temper at such an important moment, his ideal of a new world of order and his newly reconstituted subjectivity are de-

stroyed. Through his prophetic dreams, Medza already visualizes the fading away of his union with Edima, and with it, his true freedom: "I often dreamed of Edima, but they were very odd dreams now. It was as though she had become an unattainable object" (Beti, 1964: 173). Eventually, Edima is brought to Medza's home town, but his father's tyranny makes their union impossible. In the end, Medza leaves his town for ever as he goes into exile while murmuring to himself: "A nous la liberte" (Beti, 1964: 79). However, the reader knows that he will never enjoy the type of liberty he felt when he met Edima. The kind of freedom he is to enjoy now is a superficial one. Indeed, Medza's failure to unite forever with Edima, resulting from his own weakness and his father's tyranny, renders him a useless wanderer, despite his success in the October examination and subsequent employment. He has indeed lost his true independence.

In their rhizomatic analysis of individuals who are in a situation comparable to that of Clarence and Medza, Deleuze & Gatarri (1987) have remarked that they usually adopt one of the following three options. They may either decide to remain in the "rigid segmentary line," which is "a molar line that constructs fixed and normalized identities within various social institutions by way of binary oppositions;" embrace, "the supple segmentary line [which] is a molar movement away from molar rigidity which disturbs its linearity and normalcy, as when cracks occur in the facade of one's identity, or one begins cracking up"; or take the "lines of flight", the full-fledged deterritorializing movements away from molar identity where cracks become ruptures and the subject is shattered in the process of becoming multiple" (Best & Kellner, 1991: 100). Considered according to this method of analysis, Clarence and Medza can be said to have burst out of the rigid line of the culture of assimilation, the movement that rejects the French monolithic vision of culture. However, while Clarence firmly embraces the line of flight and successfully reconstitutes himself into a new subject that values cultural difference, Medza takes and becomes stranded in the supple line. Although he hates the culture of assimilation and tries to break away from it for ever, he does not have enough energy to do this. He remains trapped in the misery. He confesses his failure at the end of *Mission to Kala*: "I quickly realized that she [Edima] could be nothing more than a passing stage in my life. If I had remained permanently at this stage myself, things would certainly have gone better for me" (Beti, 1964: 180). Thus, although Medza's failure is often interpreted as expressing Beti's own pessimism about the future of the so-called "evolues," there is no doubt that, like Laye, he has, through his work, advocated a culture of marronnage in which Africans would be seen by the West as "the other" rather than be treated as an inferior version of "the same" (Mudimbe, 1988, 1992; Bjornson, 1991).

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann, London.
 ——— 1960. *No Longer at Ease*. Heinemann, London.
 Armah, A. 1974. *Why Are We So Blest?* Heinemann, London.
 Best, S & D. Kellner 1991. *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, McMillan, London.

- Beti, M. (E. B.) 1955. Afrique noire, littérature rose. *Presence Africaine*, 1: 133-140.
- 1964. *Mission to Kala*. Heinemann, London. (French original: 1957. *Mission terminée*. Editions Correa, Buchet-Chastel, Paris).
- Biakolo, A. 1986. The novels of Mongo Beti. In (S. O. Asein & A. O. Ashaolu, eds.) *Studies in the African Novel*, pp. 72-85, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan.
- Bjornson, R. 1991. *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.
- Blair, D. 1976. *African Literature in French*. Cambridge University Press, London.
- Cartey, W. 1969. *Whispers from the Continent*. Heinemann, London.
- Dadie, B. 1971. *Climbie*. Heinemann, London (French original: 1956. *Climbie*. Editions Seghers, Paris).
- Darwin, C. 1885. *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. Murray, London.
- Deleuze, G. & F. Guattari 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (French original: 1980. *Mille plateaux, volume 2, capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris).
- Gikandi, S. 1987. *Reading the African Novel*. Heinemann, Portsmouth.
- Gobineau, C. 1853. *Essai sur l'Inégalité des Races Humaines*. Librairie Freres Didot, Paris.
- Jahn, J. 1961. *Muntu: The New African Culture*. Faber & Faber, London (German original: 1958. Eugene Diederichs Verlag, Dusseldorf).
- 1967. Camara Laye: Another Interpretation. In (U. Beier, ed.) *Introduction to African Literature*, pp. 210-214, Longman, London.
- James, L. 1969. The Protest Tradition: "Black Orpheus" and "Transition". In (C. Pieterse & D. Munro, eds.) *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, pp. 109-124, Heinemann, London.
- Jung, C. G. 1961. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Kane, C. H. 1972. *Ambiguous Adventure*. Heinemann, London (French original: 1962. *L'Aventure Ambiguë*. René Julliard, Paris).
- King, A. Undated. *The Writings of Camara Laye*. Heinemann, London.
- Larson, C. R. (ed.) 1970. *African Short Stories*. Collins Books, New York.
- Laye, C. 1955. *The African Child*. Collins, London (French original: 1953. *L'Enfant Noir*. Plon, Paris).
- 1965. *The Radiance of the King*. Fontana, Glasgow (French original: 1954. *Le Regard du Roi*. Plon, Paris).
- 1973. The soul of Africa in Guinea. In (G. D. Killam, ed.) *African Writers on African Writing*, pp. 156-164, Heinemann, London.
- Levy-Bruhl, L. 1910. *Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures*. Alcan, Paris.
- Loba, A. 1960. *Kocoumbo, l'Étudiant Noir*. Flammarion, Paris.
- Losambe, L. 1986. Expatriate characters in the early African fiction. *Phylon*, 47: 148-158.
- Mfizi, C. 1971. Laye Camara vu par un intellectuel rwandais. *Bingo*, 219: 54-60.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- 1992. *The Surreptitious Speech: Presence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947-1987*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- Nzekwu, O. 1971. *Wand of Noble Wood*. Heinemann, London.
- Omotoso, K. 1971. *The Edifice*. Heinemann, London.
- Palmer, E. 1972. *An Introduction to the African Novel*. Heinemann, London.
- Senghor, L. S. 1955. Laye Camara et Lamine Niang, ou l'art doit être incarné. *Condition Humaine*, 22: 35-42.
- Socé, O. 1935. *Karim*. Nouvelles Editions Latines, Paris.

- Soyinka, W. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge University Press, London.
- Suret-Canale, J. 1971. *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa 1900–1945*. C. Hurst and Company. London.
- Wylie, H. 1985. Negritude and beyond: The quest for identity and meaning. In (K. Anyidoho, A. M. Porter, D. Racine & J. Spleth, eds.) *Interdisciplinary Dimensions of African Literature*, pp. 43–51. ALA and Three Continents Press, Washington D.C.

————— Accepted *August 17, 1993*

Author's Name and Address: Lokangaka LOSAMBE, *Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Fort Hare, Private Bag X 1314, Alice 5700, South Africa.*