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## ‘Boy!’: The Hinge of Colonial Double Talk

### Abstract

The French colonial enterprise in Africa enforced racial segregation, yet encouraged Africans to assimilate the French language, culture, and religion. The essay questions these contradictory policies through readings of Ferdinand Oyono's novels. It argues that a figure that embodies undecidability—the colonial servant known as the "boy"—is the locus of the denaturalization of the identities that were simultaneously institutionalized and denied by the Manichaeic colonial world.

### Keywords

French colonial, Africa, racial segregation, race, Africans, French language, culture, religion, policies, Ferdinand Oyono, embodies, undecidability, colonial servant, servant, boy, locus, denaturalization of the identities, identity, institutionalized, denied, Manichaeic colonial world, colonial, colonialism, Manichaeic

## “Boy!”: the Hinge of Colonial Double Talk

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Frantz Fanon, in his 1961 book, *Les Damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth), characterized the colonial world as a Manichaeian one. It was a compartmentalized world, one cut in two: there were European towns and native towns, set scrupulously apart by the police station and barracks. As Fanon notes, “what divide[d] the world [wa]s first of all the fact of belonging or not to a certain species, a certain race” (32).

Founding difference on the basis of race is a common gesture that is doomed to failure. Henry Louis Gates has pointed out both the malleability of the concept of race and its inability to connote the very difference it purports to inscribe:

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. (5)

This paper will stage an encounter between this privileged trope of difference and a figure that embodies undecidability: the colonial servant known as the “boy.”

Despite the difficulties inherent in the criterion for distinguishing between races, the European countries that colonized Africa based their enterprise upon it. The races not only lived and were declared separate; one viewed the other(s) as the quintessence of evil. This Manichaeian mentality thus went beyond thinking of native culture as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. It considered the natives themselves inaccessible to ethics, enemies of values (Fanon 33).

This resulted in the coexistence of rigorously enforced segregation amidst urgent evangelical and pedagogical efforts to convert

natives to European religions, languages, and value-systems, which amounted to comprehensive programs to institute Western identities. In the French colonies, this policy of "assimilation" was *de rigueur*. This was true even in the trusteeships of Cameroon and Togoland, where, under French supervision and under the auspices first of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, these territories were to be guided toward self-rule.<sup>1</sup>

Assimilation was usually euphemistically described as a form of cultural exchange or acculturation (Leclerc 89). This formulation was rejected by the anthropologist Alexander Lesser; he reserved the term "acculturation" for reciprocal cultural contact between equals, and defined assimilation as the process of transforming a conquered or dominated culture (x).

The major reason, of course, for this dualist practice of segregation and assimilation was the economic exploitation of the colonies. Exploitation required contact between colonizer and colonized, but contact that was carefully regulated and controlled. This occurred in the fields or mines, the prisons, churches and schools, and in the homes of the commanders and other government officials. In all but the latter, segregation was the rule. Only in the "private" spaces of the colonial representatives, their homes, did the rigorous separation of Europeans from natives prove impossible to maintain, did the contradictory demands of segregation and assimilation become untenable.

Domestic servants were uniquely placed in the colonial world, privy to the most intimate details of the lives of their oppressors, and forced to operate, or at least appear to operate, according to European beliefs and norms. This amounted to an implicit denial of the servants' own beliefs and identities. Yet these same servants were also constantly enjoined to "remember their place," i.e., to maintain their distinctness, to uphold the boundaries between the races.

It is one particular domestic servant, designated in both European and native African languages by the English word "boy," that I would like to examine here. Through readings of Ferdinand Oyono's novels, I will show the "boy" to be the locus of the denaturalization of the identities that were simultaneously institutionalized and denied by the Manichaean colonial world.

In 1956, five years before his native Cameroon gained its independence from France, Oyono published two novels in French about life in his country under colonialism. One, *Le Vieux Nègre et la*

*médaille* (The Old Negro Man and the Medal), is an account of the efforts of Meka, his family, and fellow villagers to interpret the significance of the medal of friendship to be awarded to him by the Chief of the Whites. The second, *Une Vie de boy* (A Boy's Life), takes the form of a journal written by Toundi Ondoua about his life as the "boy" of the missionary priest Father Gilbert and then of the French commander.<sup>2</sup> It is preceded by a frame narrative in which we learn that a young man of unspecified age is dying. On his deathbed, instead of imparting wisdom, he begs the frame narrator, a compatriot, for answers: "My brother, my brother, what are we? What are all the so-called French Negroes?" (BL 12-13).

The fact that Toundi asks what rather than who he is can be interpreted in several ways. It could be a manifestation of the reification (*chosification*) of the colonized that Aimé Césaire insisted was the consequence of colonization (22). *Houseboy*, the title of one English translation of *Une Vie de boy*, points by its similarity to the English word "house dog" to the servant's non-human status and use as household possession: the "boy" is a commodity. By describing himself as a "so-called French Negro," however, Toundi seems to be asking what social group he belongs to, a necessary query formulated by Hannah Arendt in this way: "The point is that in society everybody must answer the question of 'what' he is—as distinct from the question of 'who' he is—[what] is his role and function. . ." (3).

Both novels are narratives of cultural confrontation and of the urgent questioning of identity that inevitably follows an encounter with the other. The setting of both novels—colonized and evangelized Cameroon—lays bare the literally vital stakes of such questions, for it exposes the violence and power struggles inherent in the construction and maintenance of racial, national, religious, and sexual identities in a colonial scene.

The "boy" is the privileged locus of the battle between competing definitions of self, for he lives on the threshold between two quite different world views. "Boy": a word foreign to the native Ewondo as well as to French, neither child nor man, applied to both males and females, a member of neither community, yet present and all-knowing in both. The hinge, as Derrida might say, between oppositions at great pains to maintain their distinctness: Black/White; Child/Adult; Master/Slave; Male/Female; Pagan/Christian; Maka-African/French.

The word "boy" has a long history of this kind of "poly-

morphous perversity.” Its origins are obscure to the point that the *Oxford English Dictionary*, unable to establish a hierarchy of meanings, declared that “the order of senses here observed is only provisional” (1039). What is noteworthy for our purposes is that the gender ambiguity of the term in colonial times had a precedent: on the Restoration stage, “boy” referred to any male representing a female part. A “boy” in both cases is called upon to act a certain role.

What is so significant about the “boy” as a liminal character in these African novels is that Oyono does not use him to compare in any simple way the two sets of identities that are challenging one another. He does not denigrate one while romanticizing the other as good because it is natural—the “boy” is not a noble savage. Moreover, Oyono does not respond to assimilation by celebrating the black race, as did the Negritude movement in African and Caribbean poetry (Kesteloot 18). Although he unambiguously portrays the brutality of colonialism and its fatal consequences for Africans, he also insists on laying bare the coercive and at times violent processes that lead to the establishment of African customs and self-definitions. Toundi, the “boy” in *A Boy's Life*, relates the tyrannical authority of his father, who is angered by Toundi's non-observance of certain preparatory rites and frequenting of the Catholic mission just prior to his initiation. It is in part to escape yet another beating at his father's hands that he runs away from home.

Through the figure of the “boy,” Oyono shows, in a move similar to Roland Barthes' in *Mythologies*, that all identities are the result of coercive processes such as these, all are constructions. The “boy” in both novels sets these processes of self-de- and re-construction in motion. He circulates in and between both worlds and forces them to look anew at what “went without saying,” what seemed “natural.”

The reevaluation imposed by the “boy's” knowledge takes different forms and has different consequences in the two novels, as well as in the two cultures. In *The Old Negro Man*, the title character, Meka, is the very emblem of the French policy of assimilation. He has converted to Christianity, dismissed all but one of his wives, sent his two sons to die fighting for France in World War II, and most importantly, heeded God's calling and “donated” his lands to the Missionary priest Father Vanderlayer. Given his exemplary behavior, it seems quite “natural” to Meka and his fellow villagers that such generosity and cooperation should be rewarded with a medal of friendship. What requires great thought and communal

deliberation, however, is the question of what effect this medal will have on Meka's and all his friends' and relatives' status in the white community.

Group deliberations form a large part of *The Old Negro Man*, and point to a significant difference between the ways in which identities are constructed in European and African communities. Indeed, the on-going and communal character of the transmission of African tradition, the recurring deliberations that take place in the *case à palabres* (the meeting hut) contrast sharply with the imposition without discussion of the Christian faith and Western laws and languages. Differences such as this make it difficult to speak without qualification of the need to "denaturalize" African identities. Like the uneven cultural "exchange" that is assimilation, "naturalizing" culture is largely a one-sided phenomenon.

After much communal discussion of this sort, Meka and his friends become convinced that so great an honor will make a white woman of Kelara, Meka's wife, and that even a friend of a friend of Meka's brother-in-law will have all doors opened to him just by mentioning that he knows Meka—all of which makes perfect sense within their own cultural constructions (OMM 42-43).

The narrative technique of internal focalization ensures that only this interpretation is provided at this point in the novel. Readers of the text in French, however, have other codes at their disposal that enable—or rather impose—an awareness of how inaccurate this reading of colonial motives is, of how mistaken the Africans are about the code needed to analyze the medal as sign in colonial terms.

In fact, a "Western" reading would show the major significance of the medal ceremony to be the production of Meka as sign, as banner of assimilation: Meka becomes, like the black soldier on the cover of *Paris Match*, a myth in the service of the colonial power (Barthes "Myth Today"). The desired end of the elaboration of this second-order semiotic system would be its replication: it would produce an endless series of Mekas, a series that simultaneously enlists and denies semiosis. The production of Meka as sign inserts him into a signifying chain which, as we know from Saussure, is predicated on a system of differences, and, as we know from Kristeva and Lacan, continues through semiosis to reinscribe itself differently each time as it enters and moves along other signifying chains. Yet in order to fulfill its intended role, what Barthes would call its mythic function, the Meka series must remain identical to its original, must produce exact

replicas, must—like the French policy of assimilation—deny difference.

Our access as readers to these Western codes and coding processes places us in a position of greater knowledge than both the African protagonists and the French colonizers. Knowing more than the Africans about the real purpose of the patronizing and self-serving gesture of awarding a medal of friendship to a dominated subject aligns us with the colonizers—a morally suspect position to which we shall return. Knowing more than the colonizers about the unpredictable and uncontrollable functioning of signs works instead to provide us with a margin of moral comfort, if not smugness.

This positioning of ourselves in relation to the colonizers parallels, however, that of the colonizers in relation to the natives. Both positions presuppose the superiority of their own epistemologies, and the static nature of what is deemed inferior. Just as Gates has shown race to be malleable, Homi Bhabha has shown, in his brilliant analysis of the discourses of both the colonizer and colonized, that a constant process of readjustment (indeed recuperation) occurs which results in the *hybridity* of both discourses:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the *production* of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (Bhabha 173)

*The Old Negro Man* underscores this point by showing that neither side in this battle for power fought over and through culture remains locked for long in any single conception of itself or the other. Colonization, like semiosis, is a dynamic process: as signs are proliferated by one side, the other out of necessity sooner or later learns not only to decode them, but to produce in turn other signs.

This de- and re-coding process in *The Old Negro Man* begins during the medal ceremony itself; it is thus contemporaneous with the generation of Meka as sign. The decoding is inaugurated by the commander's "boy," who completely undermines the interpretation according to tribal customs—he who awards a medal of friendship



becomes a friend—by pointing out that one medal can hardly compensate for the loss of Meka's sons, lands, sexual practices, and religious beliefs. His comment, followed by the beating Meka suffers at the hands of the French police, leads to a painful, collective reexamination of all customs.

Perhaps because Meka is an old man in a culture that confers value on its elders, or perhaps because he is an honored member of a community with the very powerful weapon of humor in its possession, he and his friends begin the process of finding their way to a new sense of group identity through a reevaluation of tribal traditions. Meka as sign of assimilation is recoded by the community: the medal of "friendship" becomes a sign of the colonizer's hypocrisy and propaganda and in the process not only does not reproduce assimilation, but leads instead to an open resistance to it. Meka ends up equating Christianity with slavery (OMM 152) and, in a humorous scene that signals a decidedly unchristian attitude toward the sexual, decides that instead of squandering his money on European-style clothes, he would have done better to have the white Chief pin the medal on his *bila* or loincloth (OMM 185).

It is exactly that sense of a community based on tradition that is lacking to the title character in *A Boy's Life*. In this novel, it is the "boy" himself, Toundi, who not only introduces the questioning process, but comes to embody it. This is evident from the very first pages of his journal, written in Ewondo but translated into French for undisclosed reasons by the narrator of the frame narrative, who had come into possession of the notebooks after Toundi's death.

Part of the reason for the change in language may have been Oyono's implicit acknowledgement of the question of audience that these African novels written in French posed: were they directed at the French, who had easy access to them and already were established as avid readers of French colonial novels (Chevrier 7)? Or were they intended for the author's fellow Africans, and if so, how many of them could read (French) and afford to buy books? Oyono seems to displace this polemic brilliantly.

First, Toundi's texts are written in his native language. Given the fact that missionaries were active from the nineteenth century on in elaborating written forms of African languages, and especially in translating the Bible into such languages, one assumes that it was Father Joseph who taught Toundi how to write in Ewondo.<sup>3</sup> Of equal significance is the fact that what Toundi writes in imitation of Father

Gilbert is a private journal; his text gives no indication that he intended it to be read by anyone other than himself.

It is the frame narrator who both translates Toundi's journals into the colonizer's language and delivers them up for consumption. Ironically enough, it is by violating Toundi's privacy—an imported notion—and making his individualistic journals public that the frame narrator turns this Western form—the journal—into something that can be shared by the African community, thus making Toundi's hard-won lessons available to his compatriots.

Although we are here designating the journal as a Western form, Mohamadou Kane has convincingly shown that African novels such as these by Oyono take their structure and motifs from the oral tradition (“*Sur les formes . . .*” 553-65). As our analysis will show, regardless of their “origin,” these novels are necessarily hybrid in the sense Bhabha has given to this term. Whatever Oyono's reasons for raising the question of the text's original language, the effect of the translation is to displace the responsibility for Toundi's assimilation onto the frame narrator and eventually the reader.

Toundi's lifestory, unlike that of many of his Western counterparts, and mindless of the critical debate, is not one of origins. He begins the narrative of his life as a “boy” by explaining how he acquired the position:

In the village, they say I was the cause of my father's death because I took refuge with a white priest on the eve of my initiation when I would have met up with the famous serpent who keeps watch over all those of my race. Father Gilbert thinks that the Holy Spirit led me here to him. To tell the truth, I only came here to get closer to the white man in woman's dresses with corn-silk hair who used to give tasty sugar cubes to the little black children. (BL 16)

As a very young boy, Toundi negotiated these competing Animist and Christian explanatory systems and cultures with ease. He hadn't yet been fully initiated into the belief systems of his own culture, and he had yet to see or experience the penal system, i.e., the underpinnings of the “civilizing” effort of the French churches and schools, and so was still able to keep his distance from each side while observing both with naive candor.

He soon, however, converted to Christianity, was renamed Joseph by Father Gilbert, learned to read and write, and even to keep a journal: all of which amounted to initiatory rites of a different kind. The longer he was in the employ of the Whites the more he came to appreciate those whom he called his benefactors (BL 24) and their way of life. Like Meka, Toundi/Joseph was in the process of assimilating, of becoming a French subject. He exhibited several of the symptoms of the colonized described by Frantz Fanon: individualism and the desire to take the place of the other (Fanon 32, 37).

The problem with assimilation, however, is that, as we saw with Meka, there are limits to the degree to which Africans could become "French," and these limits were neither clearly-established nor consistent. Fanon notes, "The colonized was always on his guard, deciphering with difficulty the multiple signs of the colonial world, and never knowing whether or not he has surpassed some limit" (41). Keeping a journal, i.e. affirming oneself as an individual, while unknown in the native culture, where what counted was the construction and maintenance of a group identity, was a common practice among the Whites—Father Gilbert himself kept one. The adaptation of this aspect of "French" identity went unchallenged—except by white critics, who found it unlikely, especially under circumstances of duress.

Such was the case of one critic, who assured readers that "One can disregard the unlikelihood (*invraisemblance*) of having an illiterate boy keep a journal, even during torture and agony, and his escape through the forest" (Mercier 13). More interesting than this obvious question of realism, however, are the implications of such a question for readers of third world literature. For the unwillingness of readers to believe that a "boy" could read and write, and hide, a journal mirrors the priests' and administrators' inability to realize that the "boy" saw, heard, and understood everything, including their written language.

The implicit racist superiority of such incredulity finds its echo in the obligatory prefaces by white scholars to works by black writers, as was the case with the critic above, whose preface opens Kane's *Roman africain et traditions*. The same phenomenon was known nearly two hundred years earlier when Blacks began to publish in the United States. Phyllis Wheatley's poems were prefaced by an

affidavit from eighteen of the “most respectable [white] characters in Boston” stating that a black slave had indeed written the poems (quoted in Gates 7).

Toundi’s journal may have gone unnoticed by Father Gilbert, the French commander, and the prison officials. This was not the case with the second symptom, wanting to take the place of the colonizer, which, as Fanon again noted, often took the form of desiring the wife of the colonizer. In *A Boy’s Life*, Joseph was a model “boy,” i.e., was assimilating well, until a series of sexual events made his position untenable by reinforcing racial distinctions. The first was when he saw the commander nude and realized he was just like the other white men—uncircumcised—and thus, according to African codes that will once again be called into question, no longer a cause of fear or respect.

As Douglas Alexander has pointed out, this proved to be a fatal misconception on Toundi’s part. For Alexander, the attempts by Oyono’s characters to interpret the significance of circumcision highlight

the problem of contiguous but apparently incompatible social structures. . . . Used to judging psychological aptitudes on the basis of exterior forms, Toundi misjudges the moral resources of a non-circumcised man. . . . He is blinded by his very Africanity and condemned to suffer the consequences of that blindness. (25)

Perhaps if he had been more familiar with Biblical mythology, Toundi/Joseph would have known, as a “descendant of Ham” as Africans were called, to fear the consequences—servitude—of seeing an authority figure naked (for Ham’s story, see Genesis 9:18–27, 10).

The second sexual event was the arrival of the commander’s wife. Toundi/Joseph’s reaction to Madame, while clearly amorous, shows him still positioned liminally yet quite anxious about where his feelings will lead him:

My happiness has no day, my happiness has no night. I wasn’t aware of it, it revealed itself to my being. I will sing of it on my flute, I will sing of it among the marigolds, but no word can translate it. I shook my queen’s hand. I felt that I was alive. From now on, my hand is sacred, it will no longer know the lowly regions of

my body. My hand belongs to my queen of ebony hair, of antelope eyes, of skin pink and white like ivory. A shiver ran up and down my body at the contact of her moist little hand. Her hand trembled like a flower dancing in the wind. My life mingled with hers at the contact of her hand. Her smile is as refreshing as a brook. Her look is warm like a ray of the setting sun. It fills you with its light which enflames you deep in your heart. I'm afraid. I'm afraid of myself. (BL 74)

This love song is a hybrid lyric: it combines elements of the asexual courtly love tradition of praising one's beloved as queen, but describes her in African terms of ebony, ivory, and antelopes. Or, alternatively, it could be seen as an exemplary, Christian response to (illicit) love: the Virgin Mary was also venerated in the same courtly terms, and was even described as a "tower of ivory."<sup>4</sup> It must be remembered, however, that the result of this adaptation of a secular tradition for Christian purposes is itself a hybrid.

This commingling of different poetics of love, so easily realized in Toundi/Joseph's journal, would find no counterpart in life. For unwittingly, he was subject to the forbidden desire, that of black man for white woman. There were, of course, numerous instances of white men taking black women as mistresses, but this was not preceded by courting, and was not openly acknowledged when other Whites were present. The official status of these women was "boy" to the white men with whom they lived and slept.

Toundi/Joseph's renunciation of sexuality, here the response to his love for Madame, is commented upon by Madame (see below) as well as by Sophie and Kelaria, two African women servants with whom he comes in contact. Sophie, the white engineer's mistress/"boy," told Toundi/Joseph she had never met a man like him: "You're locked up all night in a hut with a woman . . . and you say your mouth is tired! No one will ever believe me if I tell them this" (BL 68). Kalisia, the maid Madame hires when she can no longer tolerate Toundi's presence, is surprised that he and Madame aren't lovers as are so many white wives and "boys," and tells him that if she were crazy enough to marry anyone, it would be a man like Toundi (BL 152). Is the loss of sexuality the price the colonized has to pay to be a hero in a Western story/structure? Is celibacy a legacy of bearing the Christian name Joseph? After all, both Joseph of the Old Testament, who while a slave in Egypt, resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife,

and Joseph, the titular husband of the Virgin Mary, were exemplary, asexual men.

The Biblical legacy of celibacy is given an interesting twist in *A Boy's Life*, however, where it is Joseph who desires the commander's [Potiphar's] wife. Perhaps this is an early sign that Toundi/Joseph is after all an African: his desire has not been completely restructured and repressed by Christianity. Madame quickly ascertains Toundi/Joseph's feelings for her, but unlike Potiphar's wife, she just as quickly dismisses them—despite her beguiling smiles—with a cautionary discussion of the difference between his “privileged” position as the commander's “boy” and his father's as a porcupine trapper:

You see, she continued, you're already the commander's boy. . . . She gratified me with a smile that pulled back her upper lip, while her shiny eyes seemed to be trying to discern I don't know what in my face. To hide her embarrassment, she drained her glass and went on:

—Are you married?

—No, Madame.

—Nevertheless you make enough money to buy yourself a wife. . . . And Robert told me that as the commander's boy, you're a good catch. . . . You ought to start a family. . . . She smiled at me.

—A family, even a very large family, ok?

—Perhaps, Madame, but neither my wife nor my children will ever eat or dress like Madame or like the little white children. . . .

—My poor friend, you're having delusions of grandeur (*la folie des grandeurs*), she said guffawing.

—Be serious, she went on. You know that wisdom commends everyone to stay in his place. . . . You're a boy, my husband is a commander—no one can change that. You're a Christian, aren't you?

—Yes, Madame, I'm sort of a Christian. . . .

—What do you mean, sort of?

—Not much of a Christian, Madame. Christian because the priest poured some water on my head while giving me a white person's name. . . .

—But what you're telling me is unbelievable! The commander told me nonetheless that you were a fervent believer?

—And you had best believe white men's stories. . . . (BL 87-88)

This passage, an object-lesson on racial separation, occurs almost exactly at the midpoint of *A Boy's Life*. When Madame makes clear to Toundi/Joseph that he has crossed the fine line of assimilation into forbidden territory, into absolute racial and sexual delineations, he immediately responds by recanting his "conversion" to Christianity, the cornerstone of the assimilation process. This is the first time he has questioned his Western religious identity, and this retreat from Western identities will be played out throughout the rest of the novel. The retreat is linked to Toundi/Joseph's feelings for Madame: the further she falls from the pedestal on which he first placed her, the more African-identified he will become.

Toundi/Joseph's movement toward an afrocentric identity isn't shaped just by his changing response to Madame, that is, by a negative reaction to Western values. African characters and traditions have an increasing presence in his journal, and begin to introduce alternative interpretations of the events Toundi/Joseph recounts. For instance, the lesson of remembering one's place is repeated to him by Baklu, the washman:

Toundi, my brother, my beloved brother, if you knew how much you worry me. . . What exactly are you looking for? Since when does the clay pot rub up against the bludgeon? What do you want? . . . We're here to work, only to work. (BL 98)

Baklu's language is also sexually charged, but unlike Madame, he does not attempt to rechannel Toundi/Joseph's desire into the prescribed form—(monogamous) marriage—or towards the prescribed race—his own. Rather he makes clear the threat of violence behind over-assimilating. Like the two African women, Sophie and Kelaria, Baklu does not object either to sexuality per se, or to inter-racial sexual relations, but is instead concerned with the consequences of unrequited love in a colonial situation of domination. Given the gender reversal of Baklu's imagery—Toundi as vessel, Madame as phallic instrument—it would seem that one such consequence is the "feminization" of the African male.

After these warnings, Toundi/Joseph continues to serve the commander and his wife, but from then on he does so from an increasingly African-identified position that forces him to confront the violent exploitation of his compatriots. His heightened awareness of colonial practice is facilitated when Madame and Moreau, the prison director,

become lovers and force Toundi/Joseph into the dangerous role of go-between. He acquires knowledge of the two areas of colonial life that will prove his undoing. The first is the well-orchestrated affairs that belie the official Western policy of monogamy. This discovery drags Madame from her ivory tower. It is also the occasion for a hilarious lesson about Western sexual practices as the guard and Baklu the washman try to explain to Toundi/Joseph the purpose of the condom he found while sweeping Madame's room under her watchful eye (BL 130-35). The hilarity is short-lived, nonetheless, for once Madame can no longer pretend that her "boy" does not know that she and Moreau are lovers, Toundi/Joseph must be dismissed and punished. This is what precipitates his fatal beating.

The second aspect of colonial life he witnesses is the deadly brutality meted out to native prisoners, and it marks the point of no return for Toundi/Joseph. Once he has seen the torture of his compatriots, he can no longer vacillate between identities and desires: he is African. The two experiences drive home this realization in different ways. The former reminds him of what he cannot share, i.e., sexual intimacy with a white woman, and the latter suggests what may well lie in store for him: imprisonment and death in Mr. Moreau's jail.

The knowledge he gains thus serves to intensify the questioning of Western identities that was instigated by Madame's rejection of him. One critic has insisted that Toundi's knowledge is far from complete and, more importantly, is not acted upon (Alexander 25). The problem is not one of insufficient knowledge but of cultural conflict played out on the level of semiotics. Toundi comes to know only too well both sides of the colonial experience. His tragic end results from his ever-growing identification with African cultural constructions. He is familiar with both, but increasingly interprets colonial signs with African codes that are ruthlessly rejected by those of the Europeans who have power over him.

Toundi/Joseph's increased knowledge and semiotic struggle are represented textually by a narrator of different name and status than the naively candid youth who first emulated Father Gilbert in putting pen to paper. Mr. Toundi, as he is called sardonically by Madame and Moreau subsequent to the commencement of their affair (BL 120), not only relates incidents but comments extensively on them—until he is silenced by death—from a perspective that fully problematizes the impossibility of its liminal position.



From unwitting assimilation to astute resistance punished by death, the boy's relationship to the Manichaeic nature of colonialism stages the problem of positionality. *A Boy's Life* and *The Old Negro Man and the Medal* eloquently speak to the risks for Africans of trying to inhabit a threshold position in a world hell-bent on shoring up impossible oppositions. But they both do so in French, the language of the colonizer, which inevitably raises another, related question of positionality, that of the reader and critic of these texts. This question was broached above in the discussion of the effect of translating Toundi's journal from his native Ewondo into the Commander's tongue.

The critical responses to these and other African novels written in European languages would suggest that the critics' position is largely determined by whether they adopt an euro- or afrocentric perspective, whether they read these texts as failed imitations or translations of Western models, or bold responses to colonialism calling upon and continuing a long tradition of orature or oral literature.<sup>5</sup> Critics can continue to read African novels as examples of inadequate assimilation of Western literary norms only if they persist in a Manichaeic outlook of regarding African culture as absent, as a *tabula rasa*. Oyono's novels shake readers from this Manichaeic perch and thrust them into positions that force them to participate in the colonial enterprise. These texts make us ask Toundi's dying question: what are we?

Where do those of us who are neither African nor of African descent, or those of us, regardless of race, whose institutionalized identities more closely resemble those of the French colonizers than those of the African villagers situate ourselves in this Manichaeic world of anti-colonial African novels in French? Are we in the colonizer's position through a shared—however begrudgingly—tradition? Are we placed in the colonized's position by the process of identification and the narrative technique of internal focalization? Or are we not "boys" because we too are privy to more than we can safely, or at least comfortably, live with, because we too unwittingly eavesdrop like servants by reading the private journal of a dead man?

If we are "boys," if Oyono's narrative techniques do position us liminally in this way, what are the implications? Being a "boy" proved fatal to Toundi, yet the act of reading, even if it does here involve some discomfiting positionality, is more often linked with pleasure than

with death, with eros than with thanatos. We may be positioned momentarily as “boys,” but unlike Toundi, we can easily turn away from this colonial scene.

Is the lesson to be gleaned from Toundi’s example that the colonized should not enlist African codes, a grim reminder that “when in Rome . . .”? That, after all, is the prototypical imperialistic maxim. The fact that the colony is not in Rome—or Paris or London or Washington—is precisely why the maxim exists, why it must be stated. Relearning geography, reconfiguring borders, is just one of the lessons of assimilation.

While the colonial battle is fought out semiotically in this novel, Toundi/Joseph did not die for having failed to heed the dictates of the Manichaean society he doubly inhabited. Indeed, he turned out to be too good a student for his own good. He internalized the either/or bases of doubled colonial discourse, and when he fully realized his liminal status as “boy,” disappeared into the neither/nor.

“What are we? What are all the so-called French Negroes?” Oyono’s question, left unanswered by his protagonist’s death, was put to his compatriots and colonizers while Cameroon was still under French colonial rule. The articulation of Toundi’s question of social and national identity was part of an effort by African and Caribbean writers to galvanize opinion and action in both the colonized and colonizing countries. The debate such questions generated was an integral part of both colonialism’s agonism (Bhabha 171, 175) and the drive toward self-determination on the part of African nations.

This historical fact of textual production is the real reason that Oyono’s protagonist must die, and the urgent message that assimilation is fatal is clear. It proved to be Toundi’s undoing and very nearly resulted in Meka’s death as well. The brutal treatment of both men at the hands of colonial representatives serves as an object lesson for those Africans still engaged in cultural confrontation with Western powers: assimilation is not a viable option.

Oyono’s depiction of the coercive practices involved in the construction of African identity and the limits of African interpretative strategies that ignore Western signifying systems ensures that a simple return to tribal customs is never seriously considered as an alternative to assimilation. What then is offered as a possible response to the urgent and complex situation of African nations in the agonistic moments of colonialism? Neither novel advances a specific plan of action for the anti-colonial struggle. The difference between

the fates of the young Toundi and the elder Meka suggests, nonetheless, that the solution lies in an afrocentric direction. Oyono would seem to be encouraging his fellow Africans to participate actively in an afrocentric community that is alert to the problems and prospects of both cultures, a community that through pride, hard-earned lessons and an invaluable sense of humor can engage in cultural exchange rather than submit to assimilation or cultural annihilation.

## Notes

1. On French colonial policy in Africa, see Mortimer, and Gifford and Louis. On assimilation in Cameroon, see Austen and LeVine.
2. Hereafter referred to as OMM and BL respectively. All translations are mine.
3. See Doke (1945:8) for a chronology of treatises on Ewondo, and Doke and Cole for a history of Bantu linguistics and the central role scripture translations have played in them.
4. I am grateful to Ann Rosalind Jones for pointing out this aspect of Mariology to me.
5. The term "orature" was suggested by Pio Zirimu and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as a means of establishing the oral tradition as an equally-valued counterpart to (written) literature. For a discussion see Chinweizu et al. For other important works discussing the problematic positioning of the critic of African literature see Kane (1974, 1982), Emenyonu, and Mateso. See also the special issues of *Critical Inquiry: "Race," Writing, and Difference* (Gates, ed.) and *Cultural Critique: The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (JanMohamed and Lloyd, eds.).

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