

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Special Issue on African Literature*

Article 6

1-1-1980

Politics and the New African Novel: A Study of the Fiction of Francis Bebey

W. Curtis Schade
Indiana University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Schade, W. Curtis (1980) "Politics and the New African Novel: A Study of the Fiction of Francis Bebey," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1083>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Politics and the New African Novel: A Study of the Fiction of Francis Bebey

Abstract

From its inception African fiction has been strongly marked by political themes. In the late 1950's the virulent satire of Mongo Béti and Ferdinand Oyono stated the case against the denigration of African values inherent in all aspects of the colonial system. Their style and message subsequently gave way to novels focusing upon the drama of the transition of power at the moment of Independence. Whether optimistic or disillusioned, many of these novels featured real events and people, often thinly disguised, and sought to give an «inside» picture of that historical moment. Other tendencies developed in the late 60's, most notably a strongly autocritical, often radical, body of fiction represented by such writers as Ousmane Sembène and Alioum Fangouré, and the more distant, philosophical study of politics and society of writers like Ahmadou Kourouma. In all of these examples the contemporary political situation, whether viewed globally or as it affected the life of a simple man, was the primary moving force within the novel.

By contrast, this paper will concentrate upon the work of Francis Bebey, exemplary of another current trend, fiction which, while continuing to deal with political concerns, does so in a different light, creating different tones, using different techniques. In the three novels and one short-story studied, politics is subordinated to other concerns and is treated less reverently than heretofore. We see in the work of Bebey a re-assessment of politics and its place in the life of contemporary (African) man.

Keywords

African fiction, Africa, novel, political, Mongo Béti, Ferdinand Oyono, African values, colonialism, Independence, real events, autocritical, radical, Ousmane Sembène, Alioum Fangouré, Ahmadou Kourouma, Francis Bebey, political, short-story, contemporary man, African man, man

**POLITICS AND THE NEW AFRICAN NOVEL:
A STUDY OF THE FICTION OF
FRANCIS BEBEY**

W. CURTIS SCHADE
Indiana University

Abiola Irele, writing ten years ago, characterized the previous two decades of the African novel as «moving in a single direction, that is towards a comprehensive exploration of the implications, social and spiritual, of the African encounter with the West.»¹ One could further narrow the scope of this generalization and consider the question of politics to be of central concern to the majority of African novelists. In doing so I will borrow Irving Howe's definition of a political novel as «a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting.»² While almost tautological, this definition serves to distinguish the approach used here from broader notions, such as that of Camara Laye:

One does not have to talk about specific political problems in order to be political. All literature is, in a sense, «committed» in the way in which it asserts the style of a particular culture and way of life...³

From its inception in the early 1950's, Francophone African fiction has been strongly marked by political themes. During the final years preceding independence the works of Mongo Béti and Ferdinand Oyono sharply stated the case against the denigration of African values inherent in all aspects of the European colonial system. Their works, published in France, were primarily aimed at a European audience and helped to awaken the consciences of French people to the evils being perpetrated by their government.

With the coming of independence their anti-colonialist message and often satirical style gave way to writings reflecting other political themes, focusing upon the drama of the transition of power and subsequent black rule. Whether optimistic or disillusioned, many of these novels featured real events and people, often only thinly disguised, and sought to give an inside view of that historic moment. Other related tendencies developed in the late 1960's, most notably a strongly autocritical, often radical, body of fiction represented by such writers as Sembène Ousmane and Alioum Fantouré, and the more distant, philosophical study of society and politics of a writer such as Ahmadou Kourouma. In all of these examples it is the contemporary political situation, whether viewed globally or as it affects the life of a single, often faceless, individual, which is the primary moving force within the novel.

While political concerns continue to exert strong influence on African fiction today—one thinks of the most recent works by Sembène Ousmane, Mongo Béti (his last two novels are really nothing more than fictionalized versions of his political exposé, *Main basse sur le Cameroun*), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, and of the militant literature coming out of Southern Africa—there is another trend, especially noticeable in African writing of French expression, away from this predominance of political concerns. The fiction published by les Editions CLE, Yaoundé, Cameroon, serves to illustrate this point. Of the twenty novels published between 1966-1977, only two could have been seen as profoundly political, while over half deal primarily with themes of love, sexuality and marriage, three with the «new African woman,» and three with study-related trips to Europe, the remainder defying classification. Political themes are not completely absent from these works, but are subordinated to other aspects of life.⁴

I would like to focus more closely on the fiction of CLE's finest writer, Francis Bebey, in an attempt to explore the ways in which this recent fiction, while continuing to deal with political concerns, does so in a significantly different light than its predecessors. Bebey's literary success makes him an obvious representative of the newer generation of African writers: *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio*, for example, won the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire in 1968, is now in its seventh French-language edition, and has been translated into at least four languages.

The works by Bebey which offer the most interest in this regard are his three novels, *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio* (1967), *La*

Poupée ashanti (1973), and *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi* (1976), and one short-story, «Assisastanas et le commissaire de police,» from the collection of short-stories and poems. *Embarras et Cie*, published in 1968. I propose to look at these four pieces, first noting the political elements in each and then discussing the importance of these elements in Bebey's writing.

The earliest written of these, the short-story «Assisastanas et le commissaire de police,» is the only story from *Embarras et Cie* which portrays in any detail the European occupation of Africa. Not only is it set during the colonial period, but the elements of conflict between Europeans and Africans are sharply drawn. The story in brief is this: Eléna, a white woman, is unfaithful to her Greek husband, Assisastanas, taking as an occasional lover Evindi, the African hairdresser who comes to her house every Thursday to do her hair. Jean Neuf, the much feared police chief, discovers this and has Evindi badly beaten, thrown in prison for a month, and then sent off to forced labor on the rubber plantations at Dizangué for the duration of the Second World War. As the story ends we learn that Eléna has taken another lover, none other than the police chief himself.

Despite the narrator's opening lines, «A person who always amused me in my youth was Monsieur Neuf,» we quickly learn that Jean Neuf is hardly amusing.⁴ Not only is his treatment of Evindi brutal and capricious, but this central incident is merely one example of a structured pattern of political repression. We are told, for example, that «...Evindi certainly would not have been punished if he had had the wisdom to be born white.» (*Embarras et Cie*, p. 85) And we learn of some of the matters, the «crimes,» which fill the police chief's day, as when «...a white had just slapped a black, but instead of respectfully accepting the blow, the black had a discontented air which did not please the white at all.» (*Embarras et Cie*, p. 78) Lastly, M. Neuf drinks heavily and has «...his collection of negresses (who) gave him satisfaction,» this last fact especially important given the nature of Evindi's «crime» and punishment. (*Embarras et Cie*, p. 82).

There is no doubt as to the author's view on all this. And yet it is surprisingly difficult to pin down his position owing to the constant use of irony. All we learn, for example, about Evindi's thoughts during his arrest and punishment is that he had formerly defended the French and the Greeks as being «...incomparable in their goodness and in the friendship which they had for blacks.»

The text continues: «Today, M. Neuf's riding crop, skillfully manipulated by Assisastanas, certainly changed somewhat Evindi's opinion of whites...» (*Embarras et Cie*, p. 91) And even though the narrator tells us of Evindi's release from forced labor, transforming him into a hero for his contribution toward «...our victory over the Nazis...», we learn nothing more of him, of his experience in the labor camp, or of the state of his political consciousness. (*Embarras et Cie*, p. 82) In addition it is important to note that Evindi is not idealized in the story. He has certain flaws in his character which make him more lifelike, but less useful for polemic purposes. To cite but one example, he does only white women's hair since blacks could not afford to pay him as much as the colonialists do. The treatment he receives is still shocking, but Bebey has chosen not to portray him as a completely innocent victim of white villainy.

Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio is the least political of the three novels. Essentially a love story, it focuses on Mbenda, a fisherman, and his love for the scandalous Agatha Moudio. The European presence is little in evidence, although it should be noted that when there is intervention, it is unfailingly linked to trouble for the Africans. For example, the white monkey-hunters have Mbenda thrown in jail for 15 days when he dares to ask them for salt for the villagers, in exchange for the privilege of hunting in their forest. Later in the book, the police chief from Douala intervenes when the men of the village are punishing Uncle Gros-Coeur for what they believe to be his sorcery and killing of Dicky, another villager. Arrested and subsequently sentenced to four years in prison, three of them will die in Mokolo because of the harsh treatment they receive there.

The last colonialist intervention is of a different sort. Agatha is seen being driven to town in the white monkey-hunter's car, and after her marriage to Mbenda, she will deliver a son, who even after the appropriate waiting period, will fail to take on the «local color.» Mbenda is upset by this, but is won over by the wisdom of Salomon who tells him: «...whether it comes from heaven or hell, a child is still a child.»⁶

What is of interest here is that, except for this last example, the role of the Europeans in *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio*, and in most of Bebey's work, is so slight that the plot line would flow just as well without these episodes. The fathering of Agatha Moudio's son is more complicated. It is of course an example of economically and

politically based, racially related, exploitation. Agatha, despite her «loose» life, is not truly promiscuous, and her sexual encounters with the monkey-hunter are undoubtedly motivated, at least in part, by her financial situation. At the same time, it would be a misreading of Bebey's text to raise this to a symbolic level. Agatha is no one's pawn and, if not always a model of her civilization, she is fully conscious of her actions and in charge of her life. The question of Agatha's son will be considered later.

La Poupée ashanti is, at least on the surface, the most conventionally political of Bebey's works. Set in Accra, Ghana, shortly before Le Docteur's (read: Dr. Nkrumah) accession to the presidency of the new republic, it deals with the marketwomen and their political organization, with the country's leader himself, and includes a large political march and demonstration midway through the novel. And yet the main interest does not lie in politics. Despite the political background, it is essentially the love story of Edna, a young marketwoman, and Spio, a young and somewhat idealistic bureaucrat, which moves the plot. The political issue which is intertwined with this personal relationship centers on the marketwoman who has lost her seller's permit because the man to whom her daughter is engaged has been arrested for being a member of the opposition party in Parliament. This issue and, more generally, that of Le Docteur and the principle of his one-party state, are the subject of heated discussion between Edna, her aunt, and her grandmother, Mam, the leader of the Marketwomen's Association. These political issues are of serious interest now, and at the time Le Docteur (Nkrumah) was coming to real power topical as well. But a close reading of the text produces two interesting discoveries: first, these key political issues are downplayed by stylistic means and are thus shown to be of less than central importance; second, the novel never resolves these issues, an unusual situation in the highly polemic world of African fiction.

Bebey's method is ingenious. The main discussion concerning Le Docteur and his government takes place during Sunday lunch. Tante Princess states one side of the case in this exchange with Edna:

—When all is said and done, I don't see what he's done for the country.

—He liberated us, Aunt Princess.

—Were we in prison before he came along?⁷

The discussion is then interrupted when Tante Princess catches a fish bone in her throat and the political talk is delayed. It resumes a page later and Tante Princess is told of the case of Mrs. Amiofi and her seller's permit. During this narration we learn that she once had a small business in the Nima quarter of the city, which then leads to another digression, this time by the narrator who gives a long description of Nima. The story of Mrs. Amiofi is then continued, and we learn the rest of the situation and the crux of the problem facing the marketwomen: will they, who helped bring this government to power, now lead a demonstration against it? But again, just as we are about to learn their intentions, and before any final verdict on the government is delivered by the women at lunch, the report of Edna's fight in a nightclub the evening before comes up. This is followed by the story of Spio's growing interest in Edna and the chapter ends without further political reference.

The same ambiguity is seen in another example. Never during the course of the entire work do we see *Le Docteur* in person, nor do we hear him speak. Rather we are given a quite detailed description of a statue of him, located in front of the Parliament building, facing the sea. The statue is described without comment and then the narration returns to the marketwomen's march on Parliament.

The statue had been placed in the courtyard of the Parliament Building facing the sea. Executed with good taste and simplicity, it represented the Doctor in about one and a half times life size. Placed on a marble plinth, the statue itself was in bronze and depicted the great man standing, dressed in a simply cut traditional Ghanaian costume, and walking, one hand raised to heaven, while in the other hand the «Conductor» was holding a walking stick. This stick had already become legendary and was regarded so much as one of the attributes of the Doctor that the Duke of Edinburgh himself had noted that the Ghanaian Prime Minister was never seen without it.

The man's pose was that of a shepherd leading his flock, or even more that of Moses in the desert, walking ahead of the people of Israel. A noble, confident attitude, that of a man convinced that nothing could stop him reaching the goal he had set for himself, his country, and the rest of Africa.

On the plinth, in metal letters, were written the following sentences, which served to stimulate activity in a whole country that at one point was regarded as the champion of African independence: «For me,» was written on one side of the plinth, «the independence of Ghana has no value by itself if it is not accompanied by the liberation of the rest of Africa.» One another side, one could read: «Seek ye first your political freedom and all the rest will be added unto you.» This parody of the Bible puzzled many clergymen who could not understand that political freedom might also be regarded as something sacred. And finally, on a third side of the plinth: «We prefer poverty as free men to peace and plenty as slaves.»

Opposite the Parliament Building, on the other side of High Street, was an enormous car park. Beyond, there was only the vast sea, gray or blue according to the weather, with its heaving waves and its ships about to sail for Europe. (*The Ashanti Doll*, pp. 75-76).

The passage from *La Poupée ashanti* is remarkably neutral in tone. The conjunction of the observation of the statue's good taste and simplicity with the fact that it is bigger than life-size might be ironic, but that does not seem certain. Likewise, the expression «sa deuxième main» («his second hand») strikes some French readers as odd and possibly humorous, but this reaction is by no means universal. The best evidence of Bebey's intention is, in fact, not internal to this novel but is found rather in an unpublished journalistic piece entitled «Accra,» written by Bebey during his stay there in the fall of 1959. His original intention was to publish this reportage, but he found it too critical. As he said to me, «I told myself that it wasn't up to an African to publish such a piece.»⁹ What is of central importance here is a passage from this 95-page report, equal in length and largely identical to the passage just cited from *La Poupée ashanti*. A comparison of these two passages, a study of the key differences, serves to throw light upon Bebey's intentions in the novel. One important difference is found towards the beginning of the «Accra» passage:

It was the first time I ever saw the statue of a statesman still alive and living in his own country. I don't know why this thought came to me the first day that I saw this monument. I

should certainly have limited myself to noting that this statue had been executed with good taste and simplicity.’

The important fact is that Bebey did limit himself in the novel to observing the taste and simplicity of the statue, leaving out the first five lines of this commentary. The difference is significant and it is not clear whether the reason for the modification is of a political nature. The remark would be inappropriate within its context in the novel, and so it may well have been a primarily stylistic decision. There is, however, another section of the «Accra» text which differs significantly from the parallel passage in *La Poupée ashanti* for which the stylistic justification might be less plausible:

The man’s pose was that of a shepherd leading his flock, or even more that of Moses in the desert, walking ahead of the people of Israel. A noble, confident attitude, that of a man convinced that nothing could stop him reaching the goal he had set for himself, his country, and the rest of Africa. (*The Ashanti Doll*, p. 76).

The man’s pose is that of a shepherd leading his flock, or that of Moses in the desert, walking ahead of the children of Israel. A noble, confident attitude, that of the man who knows that nothing will stop him reaching the goal, for a supernatural, invisible force guides him, a force which must triumph over all obstacles. But what then is this force? ¹⁰

The paragraph from «Accra,» on the right, ends with this question: «Mais quelle est donc cette force?» The lack of any explanation of this supernatural, invisible guiding force, and the abrupt transition to the next part of the description may well be ironic and intended to cast doubts about Nkrumah. While this question would not fit well stylistically into the text of the novel, a pattern does begin to emerge which makes it unlikely that stylistic concern was the only reason for these modifications.

During an interview in November 1974, I told Bebey of my confusion regarding his political position in this novel, saying that I just couldn’t be certain of his attitude towards Le Docteur. He answered my question and then went on to indicate some of the political problems facing the contemporary African writer:

I am delighted that you couldn't determine that. I haven't decided either. But no one in Africa today really knows...I think that the thing...which bothers you, and bothers me too, comes from the real ambiguity which one finds in Africa today. We are in a pretty difficult political situation. We've had the independence of African countries for at least ten years and we had great hope at the start. And then, little by little, we have become more aware that perhaps we have not chosen the best path. But today, in Africa, who is going to open his mouth and say just what he thinks? Who is going to say: «You know, your political party, your one-party state, your government, no, that's not what we want. We don't want all these problems, we want a government which will really help us to develop the country or Africa.» But who is going to say that? This is also one of the reasons I prefer, as a Cameroonian, to situate the action of *La Poupée ashanti* in Ghana. At least I'm in a foreign country and no one will come bother me. If I placed the same action in Cameroon I am not sure that people would say that it's a novel. They might say: there is something there which concerns us.»¹¹

This ambiguity in the text is then clearly intentional and motivated by very real personal considerations. It should be stressed that Bebey's decision to situate this novel in Ghana was not primarily to deter any possible personal repercussions, but because, as the «Accra» manuscript shows, the problem he is discussing and the story he tells are rooted in that country. *La Poupée ashanti* is not then an essentially Cameroonian story transposed out of that country for political reasons. At the same time, we need to remember Bebey's political situation is special because of the role played by his brother in Cameroon before independence and his fate under the French-supported Ahidjo regime. Marcel Bebey Eyidi had led the fight for veterans' benefits for the «volunteers» who had joined the French forces during the Second World War. He subsequently went to Paris to complete his medical studies, becoming the first African M.D. in Central Africa. In the early 1950's he had been an attaché in Dr. Aujoulat's office, at the Colonial Ministry in Paris, but left this post to return to Cameroon, in 1956, to open a clinic. In the first Cameroonian elections after independence (April 10, 1960) he beat a member of Ahidjo's government, Chief Bétoté Akwa, carrying even the latter's home district. *Le Monde* felt that if Ahidjo

were elected President and needed to bring a member of the opposition into his government, Dr. Bebey Eyidi would likely become the Prime Minister.¹² Instead, when he and three other opposition leaders publicly protested Ahidjo's moves to establish a one-party system in Cameroon, they were arrested on charges of conspiracy and sedition, tried and subsequently sentenced to thirty months in prison and a fine of 250,000 CFA.¹³ His health broken by the length and conditions of his imprisonment, Bebey Eyidi died a year after his release, at the age of 52. Needless to say, there was no possibility of Francis Bebey returning to Cameroon during this time. He is not, however, now in exile like his compatriot Mongo Béti and many other African writers. Although Paris has been his base of operation for many years now, he travels regularly to Cameroon and has remained a Cameroonian citizen.

To return to our discussion of *La Poupée ashanti*, following the description of Le Docteur's statue, the demonstration reaches its climax and Edna is wounded by a bullet as the forces of law-and-order try, in a frantic and disorganized manner, to prevent the crowd from entering the Parliament building. The novel contains little else of a political nature, except for the satirical account of the Commission convened to study the Amiofi affair. Spio, who has been demoted to a bush post for his attempt to help the market-women, is recalled to the capital and he and Edna will marry once it has been decided that she will continue to work in the market with Mam.

The last of the three novels, *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*, is the most interesting in terms of its handling of political themes. As in *La Poupée ashanti*, it appears to be a novel deeply concerned with political matters, focusing as it does on the coming of the first elections in Cameroon, the first step on the path to nationhood. As we will see, however, political issues are so deeply enmeshed with others, some of a personal nature and others affecting village life, that it becomes impossible to isolate the political elements and find any kind of clearly polemic thrust.

The first thing that strikes the reader in search of politically related elements is that virtually no mention is made of anything political until the elections are discussed for the first time, some two-thirds of the way through the book. And what is more, when this element finally does appear, the opposing candidates for this first political office are the same people opposed for other, more

personal reasons in the preceding pages of the novel. It is important

to underline this last fact since it detracts from the genuinely political nature of these elections and leads the reader, once again, to recognize Bebey's systematic devaluation of political concerns in his writing.

Le Roi Albert d'Effidi is essentially a novel of conflict: conflict between Albert and the young, impetuous Bikounou for the hand of Nani; conflict between the different villages in the area; conflict between the generations in Effidi; ideological conflict of a sort—Nani's father, Toutouma, sees Albert as a «capitalist»—and finally, with the elections, open political conflict: the three main contenders will be Bikounou, Toutouma and Albert.

In *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio* the fisherman Mbenda says at one point: «I understood: I was at the parting of the ways, the old and the new.»¹⁴ But this is much truer of *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*. Village life is already a hybrid of traditional and European ways: Albert has a shop in town and goes there each day on his bicycle; Bikounou works for the colonial administration; Toutouma is a worker who belongs to a union started by a French technical advisor, and he sees the world in terms of class struggle; the younger generation is often irreverent towards its elders; and, lastly, with the coming of the elections, only one representative will be chosen to speak for all the villagers in the area, thus breaking down their traditional autonomy and mutual distrust. The chief of Effidi, Ndengué, upon hearing of the elections, realizes their full import. He says, in a key passage: «...I have a foreboding of an even greater change than that known by our fathers when the whites came.»¹⁵ Profound changes are taking place and, while their ultimate dimensions are not explored, the chief and others are most uneasy about the future.

A brief look at the book will show some of the complexity which both makes for its richness and clearly removes it from the world of politically committed African literature. The first part of the book centers upon Albert's and Bikounou's competition for Nani. This personal conflict becomes somewhat more generalized since Albert is a member of the generation in power while Bikounou is younger, more modern and, in a Western sense, in love with Nani. Toutouma, Nani's father, dislikes both suitors, Albert for his supposed wealth, and Bikounou for his lack of respect for the traditional ways. Bikounou, realizing that Albert will be chosen to marry Nani, deflowers her one afternoon in a manioc field—with her complete consent, by the way—hoping to be forced

to marry her, as tradition dictates. Despite this tactic Albert marries Nani at the end of the first section.

The second part centers on the elections, and the conflicts already evident in the first part are renewed. The generation conflict, for example, is intensified and rendered more «official» with Bikounou running for office against Albert, Toutouma, and others. The ideological terms «capitalist» and «communist» (as Toutouma is considered by some) are bandied about, and we see scenes of the electoral campaign. But—and this is crucial—the whole political aspect of this section, providing as it does an excellent opportunity to debate opposing ideologies, opposing visions of the new Africa, is undermined. As in *La Poupée ashanti*, the tendency to favor clearly one political view over another is absent. Each of the three main candidates is, as in life, a complex mixture of philosophical, political and personal inconsistencies. Albert is rich by village standards and decides to show this by purchasing an automobile to use during the campaign. Generally wise, his motives and behavior may not have always been pure in taking Nani from Bikounou. His father-in-law, Toutouma, is politically opposed to Albert's «capitalism» and shows himself to be progressive in his attitudes towards women—his wife and daughters eat at the table with him, for example—but he is traditional in many respects, too, including the marriage of his daughter. His union activities and the philosophy behind them are a curious blend of something very foreign with a traditional African emphasis on community and the common good. Bikounou, bitterly disappointed at losing Nani, runs a vindictive campaign, calling Albert a capitalist because of his new car, even though he himself has the area's only other motorized vehicle, a Vespa, and of course works for the colonial administration. Rather than being an authentic spokesman for the younger generation, he behaves in an outrageous and irresponsible manner towards everyone. For example, the «debate» between Bikounou and Albert in the village of Zaabat ends in a fight between their respective supporters, fueled in part by Bikounou's highly non-political announcement that he has continued up to that very day to have sexual relations with Nani. As the elections grew close, the young men of Effidi, in a surprising move, decide to punish Bikounou and his companion Féfé for their unbearable behavior and beat them badly.

The elections themselves are never seen. In another intentional downplaying of the political function, Chapter 12 ends with

Bikounou's punishment and Chapter 14 opens with the drums of Nkool, Toutouma's village, announcing the victory of its son. The intervening chapter, one page in length, is a little essay on laughter. While this is unrelated in any direct way to the plot line, it certainly bears an organic relationship to the text on a thematic plane, and provides another example of the use of humor as a counter-balance to political concerns.

In the remainder of the book we learn that Bikounou has been in the hospital recovering from his beating, and that Albert, arrested along with the young men, although he had no part in his opponent's beating, is just getting out of prison. The elections have come and gone, but the final resolution of the novel remains. Albert has decided, during his month in prison, to return Nani to her parents, thus leaving her free to marry the man she really loves. He says: «The times have changed...We must no longer force our daughters to marry men we have chosen for them» (*Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*, p. 180). That evening Nani returns to Effidi and, in a moving scene, announces her intention to remain forever with Albert.

I would like to close by pointing out common elements in Bebey's writings which best serve to describe his handling of and attitude towards political concerns. Though general, they form a clear contrast with the way in which such concerns have traditionally been treated by African writers.

Politics is not the central concern of Bebey's novels, nor of the vast majority of his individual characters. This does not mean, however, that it is not important. As Bebey writes in *La Poupée ashanti*, «...political freedom might also be regarded as something sacred» (*The Ashanti Doll*, p. 76). Politics is most often subordinated to other aspects of daily life and when that is not the case, it is inextricably bound to these: ideology is never dominant. Politics is more often than not a background element and as such is not central to the unfolding of the plot. For example, it is the fact of the elections, their very existence which is the important thing while Toutouma's victory is almost incidental.

Not only are there no real ideological discussions, but there are almost no examples of any kind of inflated or abstract language. In the few instances where this does occur, the Commission's meeting to close the Amiofi affair, Spio's speech to Edna in which he characterizes her as «the woman of the new Africa,» or *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi's* little chapter on laughter, it is immediately under-

cut by various comic devices.¹⁶ Neither words nor ideas are more important than individual men and women. Related to this is the question of symbols. It would be tempting to see Agatha Moudio's son, for example, as the symbol of the new generation of Africans, born of the merging of African and European elements, of traditional ways and the modern world. But nothing permits such interpretation. In Bebey's works, individuals do not represent anything beyond themselves.

Bebey's distrust of high-flown rhetoric and of ideology is accompanied by a belief in people and in the necessity and efficacy of hard work. Edna is illiterate and yet she is both an economically productive and politically active member of society. The same message is seen in *Trois petits circeurs*, a children's story not treated here. The shoeshine boys are young, poor, and uneducated, and yet they work each day to earn their livelihood. Though their task is hardly glamorous, they do it conscientiously, and that seems to be the key to real economic and political development for Bebey: words, ideologies and leaders are all powerless to solve problems and build nations—only people can.

The question of race and racism, linked inevitably to the European occupation of Africa, is one of the most important in Bebey's work. The European's systematic mistreatment of Africans is acknowledged and portrayed, but not insisted upon. The whites are seldom in view, although their presence and power behind the scenes is made clear from time to time. When they do intervene in the lives of Africans, the effect is often damaging. Yet, even when the nature of the intervention is as troubling as in the fathering of Agatha Moudio's son, Bebey treats the matter in a humorous vein, according reconciliation, here as elsewhere, a major place in his work. It is not a question of cowardice, nor of simply accepting whatever mistreatment the colonial powers chose to inflict, but rather of transcending their evil, at least to the extent that it not continuously poison one's life. John Updike, in an article in *The New Yorker* on Bebey's first novel, writes that *Agatha Moudio's Son* «...gracefully propounds an all but forgotten equation—that between the spirit of comedy and the spirit of forgiveness.»¹⁷ The comic element, as we have seen, is indeed an important one in Bebey's work and one often used in close conjunction with political themes.

ing a series of interviews in June 1978, and dealt with somewhat different aspects of this question than those treated in his fiction. He is opposed to even the gentlest negritude because of its implicit racism. Speaking of his friend Bernard Dadié, he discussed this point.

He wrote this poem which was very famous at one point:

«Je vous remercie mon Dieu, de m'avoir créé Noir...» (I thank you my God, for having made me Black) for having done this, for having done that. I said: No. I thank you my God, for having made me human. I want blacks to be men first.»¹⁸

However innocent Dadié's sentiments may be, even this kind of racial distinction, born though it was in reaction to European racism, displeases Bebey. For, as he said, «...at base, what is racism? It's just human stupidity and this idiocy doesn't have the right to exist.»¹⁹ After making the point that he, too, had experienced European racism and had found it difficult to transcend this terrible evil, he went on to tell of his reaction to these experiences:

I think...that as a person oppressed in times past and even present, and I don't know, maybe future, I have the duty, once I have seen clearly, to point out the path to my oppressor. It's as pretentious as anything, but I live for that. It's the whole point of everything I do.²⁰

We have mentioned white mistreatment of blacks, but we also have the example of Africans being mistreated, and even shot, by their own government in *La Poupée ashanti*, the only one of those works set in an independent country. But whereas numbers of other African novels have treated this kind of situation in terms of neo-colonialism, the plight of Mrs. Amiofi, Spio's demotion, and even Edna's bullet wound, are better seen as examples of bureaucratic incompetence and corruption, and of police confusion. The incidents described here could happen anywhere and, while regrettable in themselves, hardly constitute an indictment of Le Docteur or of his government's underlying political philosophy.

Bebey's universe is not a tragic one. Many politically centered African novels end in the physical or moral destruction of the pro-

tagonist. One thinks of Toundi's pathetic end in Oyono's *Une Vie de boy*, of Okonkwo's self-destruction in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and, in Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances*, of the protagonist's desperate attempt to cross the border to his homeland and of his almost ritual death, being killed by the sacred crocodile as he leaps into the river. Bebey's writings contain episodes of brutality, racism, suffering and death, but these are not the general rule and the resolution of each novel is essentially happy, if not idyllic. The European political adventure in Africa seriously affected every aspect of African life, but in Bebey's works these changes destroyed neither Africa nor the Africans.

While beyond the scope of this paper, there are two other considerations which cannot go unmentioned since they might both be considered legitimately political within the African context. The first of these, the question of the place of publication, and with that the whole question of intended audience, has been discussed at length by many African writers and critics of this literature.²¹ The second, a closely related issue, is that of the language chosen by the author for the creation of his or her work. Bebey has chosen to publish almost all of his fiction at Editions CLE, in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and has in this way both made clear his intended audience and given good support to the cause of indigenous publishing. He has, at the same time, made a very conscious choice to write in French and feels himself in no way compromised in so doing.²² Bebey's situation in this respect is somewhat different from that of many African authors in that he comes from a very small ethno-linguistic group (the Douala) and thus has a small natural audience. If he wrote in Hausa, Yoruba, or Swahili he would not be in quite the same situation. But even so the issue is clearly a philosophical one for him, too. While his primary audience is clearly African it is inconceivable, given his views on racism and his world view, that his message of the dignity of all men, a message more philosophical than political, should reach only that group.

NOTES

1. Abiola Irele, «A New Mood in the African Novel,» *West Africa*, 2729

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/301969>

DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1083

2. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, (New York: Fawcett World Press, 1967), p. 19.
3. «Camara Laye: commitment to timeless values,» (Interview by J. Stephen Rubin), *Africa Report*, 17, 5, p. 22.
4. For a fuller discussion of this literature, see W. Curtis Schade, «A New Popular Fiction in French-Language African Literature: the case of les Editions CLE,» in *When the Drumbeat Changes: Selected Papers from the 1978 Meeting of the African Literature Association*, Washington, D. C.: Three Continent Press, 1981).
5. *Embarras et Cie*, (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1968), p. 75. This, and all subsequent quotations from this work, *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*, the «Accra» manuscript, my interviews with Bebey, and the excerpts from Dadié's poem, will be my own translation unless otherwise noted.
6. *Agatha Moudio's Son*, trans. Joyce A. Hutchinson (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971), p. 153.
7. *The Ashanti Doll*, trans. Joyce A. Hutchinson (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1977), p. 51.
8. Unpublished interview, June 1978, Paris.
9. «Accra» manuscript. p. 10.
10. «Accra» manuscript, p. 10.
11. Unpublished interview, November 1974, Bloomington, IN.
12. *Le Monde*, April 13, 1960, p. 4.
13. *Le Monde*, July 5, 1962, p. 1, and July 13, 1962, p. 16.
14. *Agatha Moudio's Son*, p. 43.
15. *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*, (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1976), p. 127.
16. *The Ashanti Doll*, p. 175; *Le Roi Albert d'Effidi*, pp. 172-173.
17. John Updike, «Shades of Black,» *The New Yorker*, 49, 48 (January 21, 1974), p. 91.
18. Unpublished interview, June 1978, Paris. Dadié's poem is found in his *Légendes et poèmes* (Paris: Seghers, 1966), pp. 239-240.
19. Unpublished interview, June 1978, Paris.
20. Unpublished interview, June 1978, Paris.
21. The Senegalese writer Pathé Giagne has said that «the choice of a place of publication is already the choice of audience,» and this sums up much that has been said on this matter. (Quoted in Phaniel A. Egejura, «The Influence of Audience on West African Novels,» Diss. UCLA 1974, p. 29)
22. But Bebey, at the same time, insists that a profound knowledge of their mother tongue and culture is a prerequisite for Africans who do write in European languages. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Norman Stokle, «Entretien avec Francis Bebey,» *Présence Francophone* 16 (Spring, 1978), pp. 188-189.