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Abstract

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Keywords

French identity, memory, Vichy period, French-African memory, obscure, French memory

Unveiling French-African Memory

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Translated from the French by Sarah A. Hutchison

Memory is selective, and that is why it belongs to the realm of enchantment. History is more prosaic and disenchanting. The path that leads from memory to history represents the process of secularization specific to political modernity. That is why our defense is not in a memory which constructs, deconstructs, forgets or decorates, but in history alone.

—Georges Bensoussan, *Auschwitz en héritage? D'un bon usage de la mémoire*¹

Whereas the question of memory has become central to French identity, notably in regards to the Vichy period, French-African memory has been systematically obscured. Yet, the period of French-African colonization lasted, as Todorov emphasizes in *L'Homme dépaycé* (131), much longer than the Vichy period. Algerian colonization, for example, stretched from 1830 until 1962. Of course, colonization and decolonization are the focus of specialized study, but these investigations are suppressed by the collective French consciousness, as Benjamin Stora demonstrates in *La Gangrène et l'oubli*.

Written in 1991, on the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the Evian accords, Stora's book reveals the mechanisms of the oblivion of the Algerian War. The author invites the French, as well as the Algerians, to accept the history of what was one of the bloodiest conflicts related to French decolonization. Stora's attempt to set the record straight comes at a time when some essayists, instead of focusing on the work of mourning and remembering, use the failures of several African independence movements as an opportunity to reopen the case which was originally brought against the West by Third-Worldist theorists. In this vein, the case of Pascal Bruckner merits our attention.

In a famous pamphlet published in 1983, entitled *Le Sanglot de l'homme blanc*, Bruckner denounces the motives of Third-Worldist intellectuals who hold the West responsible for all the ills of the Southern countries. In opposition to this self-hate of Third-Worldists, Bruckner pleads for a strong and confident West. To a certain extent, Bruckner's point was necessary in that it destroyed the guilt complex of Third-Worldist intellectuals with regard to the formerly colonized who frequently resort to paternalism. But, at the same time, Bruckner's ideas invited "revisionism" of colonial history to the extent that some historians currently demonstrate a tendency to justify certain dark moments in the history of colonization, most notably during the Fourth Republic.

In her second volume of *L'Histoire de la colonisation française*, published in 1991 by Fayard, Denise Bouche attributes the 1944 massacre of Senegalese sharpshooters at Camp Thiaroye to an insurrection, which degenerated, according to her, into mutiny; yet, in fact, it was a claim for service pay owed to the soldiers. At the same time, Bouche considers colonial repression in the Ivory Coast between 1949 and 1950 to be a matter of simple bloody incidents.² In addition to this "revisionism," another tendency emerges. Colonial history remains a negligible component of French identity. In their work *Histoire de l'Europe* (prefaced by R. Remond), Jean Carpentier and François Lebrun devote only four pages to European expansion, primarily attributed to "un trop-plein de dynamisme" 'a surplus of vitality' (385).³ In *L'Histoire de*

la civilisation française by Georges Duby and Robert Mandrou, nineteenth-century colonial expansion is summed up in a single sentence. Recently, in the seven volumes of *Des Lieux de mémoires* by Pierre Nora, only a small chapter written by Robert Ageron focuses on France as a colonizer.⁴

If, for those in France, colonial memory is obscured, for the colonized, on the other hand, notably for African writers, colonization emerges as a focal point worthy of reexamination. Contrary to the 1950s, when colonization was evoked in Manichaeian terms, African novelists now treat the issue with much lucidity: one no longer encounters the bad Whites on one side versus the gentle Blacks on the other. To illustrate this colonial memory, three novels have been selected: *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* (1979) by Mongo Beti,⁵ *Les Phalènes* (1994) by Tchicaya U Tam'si, and *Monné, outrages et défis* (1990) by Ahmadou Kourouma.

Mongo Beti: the Obsession of Memory

Among all African writers, Mongo Beti is without a doubt the one who has provided the most in-depth investigation of colonialism and its socio-historical consequences in Africa. Though in his novels written in and around the 1950s,⁶ he described colonization from an ideological perspective, and depicted its evils in Africa, in *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle*, published in 1979, Beti analyzed colonialism more closely. In order to grasp this author's change in perspective regarding colonialism, one must examine his well-known pamphlet, *Main basse sur le Cameroun* (1972), which served as the basis for *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle*. Published for the first time in 1972, *Main basse sur le Cameroun* reveals how the decolonization efforts undertaken by France in Africa, more specifically in Cameroon, constitute a type of recolonization. The author finds this process objectionable not simply because independence was granted to African politicians who were already collaborating with France, but above all because decolonization was, according to Beti, a process of modernization which permitted France to pass easily from the stage of colonialism to that of neo-colonialism. The

result is well known. As soon as it was published, *Main basse sur le Cameroun* was banned by an order from the French Interior Minister. Having gained valuable insight in the process of writing his pamphlet, Beti avoided future censure by giving the ideas he expressed in the pamphlet a fictional form. This progression from essay to novel was accomplished by way of a trilogy: *Remember Ruben I* (1974) which employs an epic tone to portray the Cameroonian nationalists' struggle for independence while, in the background, the emblematic figure of Ruben Um Nyobe, hero of the anticolonialist fight, is killed in the bush by the French; *Perpétue ou l'habitude du malheur* (1974) which depicts, in the form of a tragic investigation of Essola, the disillusion of independence; finally, *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* or *Remember Ruben II*, which presents the efforts of three young people, faithful to Um Nyobe, to liberate the town of Ekoudoum from the dictatorship of an old, corrupt, and bed-ridden French ally. In contrast to *Remember Ruben I*, praising the nationalism of Um Nyobe, *Remember Ruben II* or *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* is a picaresque novel in which the emblematic figure of Um Nyobe disappears and cedes his place to three young vagabonds. In substituting the figure of Um Nyobe with these three youths, Beti puts an end to the period of heroic stories in which Um Nyobe, the great Cameroonian nationalist, appeared as the Che Guevara of Africa.⁷ Of importance to Beti is less the personal and tragic destiny of Um Nyobe as one who fought against colonialism, but rather the historic period involving the nationalists' fight against French colonization in the Cameroonian consciousness. Beti's entire investigation here consists in discovering what would have become of Cameroon had The Union of the Populations of Cameroon (*L'Union des Populations du Cameroun* or U.P.C.) led by Um Nyobe welcomed the independence of its country. In relegating the figure of Um Nyobe to the background of his novel, Beti indicates that the goal of *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* is to reveal more about history than about memory, which participates generally in enchantment in Georges Bensoussan's sense of the word.

Tchicaya U Tam'si: Memory and Identity

Like Beti, Tchicaya U Tam'si has also focused on the nature of colonization and its social impact on Africa. In fact, in the mid 1980s when the denunciation of dictators seemed to be the predominant theme among African writers, Tchicaya U Tam'si chose to "rewrite" the history of the Congo from colonization to today. This step, which may seem anachronistic, became a real avant-garde fight for him because it aimed at the reappropriation of a history that had been denied and violated by colonization. In this sense, the truism that the author places in the mouth of one of his characters in *Les Phalènes*, "Hier [est] dans les pas de demain" 'Yesterday [is] in the footsteps of tomorrow, (117) can be read as the illustration of a poetic choice that defines the present as a site of germination where yesterday sows the seed that will bloom tomorrow. In other words, the present is devoid of meaning if it fails to anchor itself in the past. Seen in this light, Tchicaya U Tam'si's fiction reveals itself to be a heritage of memory.

While *Les Cancrelats* (1980) covers the period of Congolese history stretching from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s, *Les Méduses* (1982), set in early 1944, focuses on the pervading atmosphere in Pointe-Noire (Congo) at the time of the war effort imposed on the indigenous peoples by the colonizers. In *Les Phalènes*, daily life in Brazzaville is presented from the day following the end of the Second World War up until the moment when a new era, marked by the establishment of the French Union, dawned for the Congolese, as it did for all Africans. The status of the native changed as the colonized went from being subjects of the French Empire to citizens of the French Union, and, as a result, they could partake in the same system of education as the Europeans and participate in the political life of the French Union. It is in this context that Prosper, the hero of *Les Phalènes*, leaves Pointe-Noire for Brazzaville to participate in the political organization known as The Party of Congolese Progressivists (*Parti Progressiste Congolais* or PPC) and to oversee the application of the principles of the French Union: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. From this point of view, Prosper's itinerary can be consid-

ered as, to use Achille Mbembe's expression, the implementation of reason in the colony.

Inspired by Michel Foucault's work on power, notably *Surveiller et Punir* (1975), Achille Mbembe defines the colonial relationship as one of constraint in which the objective is to control and use people. For him, from no matter which angle one examines the situation, colonialism is an enterprise which aims at disciplining the conquered societies and reshaping them. To the prejudiced West, these colonized societies are "disordered, irrational and primitive" (29). In this context, the colonized individual who makes use of reason serves as proof of indocility. And Prosper realizes just this in fighting for progress and the adherence to the principles of the French colonies: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. It is important to remember that, in the combat that he wages against the colonial administration, Prosper is secretly aided by a French woman, Marie Volange. Energetic and eccentric, the woman represents the French Left and wants, in her way, to see the French Union succeed: "Si l'union n'est pas de corps, comment peut-elle être d'esprit?" "If the Union has no physical life, how can it have a spiritual one?" (95). So goes her slogan. Marie Volange puts her motto into practice when she becomes Prosper's mistress and gives birth to their bi-racial daughter. By making of Marie Volange Prosper's fellow fighter in a combat for the dignity and the liberty of the formerly colonized, Tchicaya U Tam'si relegates the classic opposition between colonized and colonizer to the background, to the point that one comes across in the novels of Ferdinand Oyono. Tam'si thus highlights the strictly citizen-led combat, in which men and women of different races unite in an effort to gain civil rights.

Conscious of the role played by colonization to the benefit or detriment of African identity, Tchicaya U Tam'si defined himself as a Congalois.⁸ Invited one day to speak as a witness at a symposium in Paris devoted to cultural European identity, Tam'si endorsed the advent of a new humanity resulting from the interaction between cultures:

It may seem, he said, that I am the usual barbarian, but I do not consider myself as such. After all, I am a partner of Europe and in
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this capacity I accepted the invitation to come here. The French colonized me, so I will colonize the French. . . . When one defines or seeks out the cultural identity of Europe, I wonder: Could it be that the interactions with other cultures that you have had have brought nothing to your own culture or cultures? I believe that, for me, Europe symbolizes or vocalizes a new humanity. Where is it? In a very small province where the communication must be established. For how can such a new humanity be established, if not through the crossing of identities? (qtd. in Remy 23)⁹

The Case of Ahmadou Kourouma: Memory and Humiliation

In contrast to the majority of African novelists who situate their works in relation to the historical and social context of Africa, Kourouma takes another approach. He enters, as Madeleine Borgomano puts it, into history backwards (236). In 1968, his first novel, *Les Soleils des indépendances*, was devoted to African independence movements; in 1990, he revisited the colonial past with *Monné, outrages et défis*. In Kourouma's work, one finds a true desire to save colonial history from oblivion. During an interview with Dominique Mataillet, Kourouma emphasized the obligation of memory:

The inhabitants of this country (France) lived for four years under German domination. They have never forgotten this experience. They have never stopped denouncing the crimes committed by Eastern European regimes. African colonization? They do not talk about it. I have wanted to tell them: "what! You had four years of occupation and you make a huge fuss. Have you forgotten that for decades we experienced forced labor and all other forms of slavery?" ("Interview" 22)¹⁰

Let us examine Kourouma's remarks. Contrary to what he affirms, *Monné, outrages et défis* is not a simple denunciation of colonial crimes. It is rather a baroque novel, in Joëlle Gardes-Tamine's sense of the word (25). Here is the situation: disobeying the Emperor Samory, who had commanded him to raze his kingdom so as to deny the French the allegiance of his people, Djigui Keita, King of Soba, built a thick, high wall to hold back the French troops; yet, ultimately the troops seized power without resistance from Soba. Then began a long and murderous collaboration between Soba and the occupying army. During this time, the *griots*

sang the praises of their fallen king, while the King solely devoted himself to prayer and sacrifices intended to get rid of the evil victimizing his kingdom.

More than a novel which denounces colonial crimes, *Monné, outrages et défis* reveals several problems, among them the issue of communication during interaction between cultures. This subject had already been the focus of an interesting reflection by Todorov in *La Conquête de l'Amérique* (1982), in which he describes two radically different ways of communicating employed by Cortez and the Aztecs. According to Todorov, communication for the latter is subjected to ritual: this communication takes place between people and the world in which they live. In this type of communication, religious representations play an important role. Thus, the Aztecs perceive the Spaniards' arrival as a bad omen. On the other hand, for Cortez, communication takes place between people, and it is regulated by secular law. In this situation, achieving the final goal is what matters because in each instance Cortez is prepared to take all the liberties he can with the existing social codes. In Kourouma's novel one finds this very opposition between communication strategies employed by Djigui and Captain Moreau, the commander of the French troops at Soba.

While Djigui endeavors to sacrifice animals and human lives to the ancestors and to Allah to expel the evil omens announcing the fall of his kingdom, Captain Moreau, due to his methods of communication, strikes the King as a true disciple of Machiavelli. Moreau organizes his communication in four stages. In the first part, he treats King Djigui as a partner of France up until the end of the conquest of the Kingdom of Soba. While the French troops pursue the Africans, Captain Moreau refrains from humiliating Djigui; yet, once the conquest is achieved, Captain Moreau proceeds to the second phase of his communication strategy and imposes his rules on Djigui: the King of Soba will not be dethroned, but he must promise to report to the French representative, in this case Captain Moreau, each Friday in order to affirm his allegiance to France. With this agreement negotiated, Captain Moreau enters the third stage in which he requisitions forced

labor. Once the inhabitants of Soba resign themselves to this forced work and the King himself begins to show signs of exasperation, Captain Moreau proceeds on to the fourth stage of his communication: he promises King Djigui his own personal train. This action induces Djigui to collaborate further with the French occupant. The complexity of the colonial relationship between a collaborating king, a people worn down by forced labor and a French representative, leads Kourouma to adopt a narrative structure in his novel which blends three distinctive voices: that of an omniscient narrator who retraces step by step the one hundred years of French colonization in the country of Soba, that of a collective “we” subjected to colonial violence, and finally, an interior monologue which evokes the numerous meditations of King Djigui on the meaning and consequences of his encounter with the White man. This very adept manner of constructing his tale allows Kourouma to treat King Djigui with subtle irony and derision. Ultimately, this novel can be read at the surface level as an epic, however the work is really an anti-epic in the sense that throughout the entire tale, King Djigui’s subjects sing the praises of an anti-hero, Djigui, and of a non-event, the humiliation of the entire population by a young French strategist. Thus, in Kourouma’s work, contrary to the African novelists of the first generation (of the 1950s), one encounters a desire to bring a case against colonization.

Finally, whether one deals with Ahmadou Kourouma, Tchicaya U Tam’si, or Mongo Beti, this need on the part of African writers to revisit the French-African colonial memory has more to do with a desire to know than a need to celebrate the “heroic struggles” of Africans against colonialism. For these writers, the time of legends and of stereotypes is definitively over; yet, the moment is ripe for history.

Notes

1. Translations of quoted material were provided by the article’s translator. The French reads:

La mémoire est sélective, et c'est pourquoi elle participe de l'enchantement. L'histoire est plus prosaïque et désenchantée. Le chemin qui mène de la mémoire à l'histoire résume le processus de sécularisation propre à la modernité politique. C'est pourquoi notre arme n'est pas la mémoire qui construit, déconstruit, oublie ou enjolive, mais l'histoire seule. (17)

2. For more on this point, see Yves Benot's *Massacres coloniaux* (1994).

3. See Benot for more on this point as well.

4. This tendency to marginalize the role of colonization in French history is not shared by all. In 1944, Robert Delavignette judged colonial history to be essential to the understanding of French universalism. See Robert Delavignette and Charles André Julien's *Les Constructeurs de la France d'Outre-Mer* (1946). Further, Marc Ferro refuses to disassociate colonial history from French national history. He writes: "Il nous est apparu urgent de sortir l'histoire de la colonisation du ghetto dans lequel la tradition l'a enfermée. N'est-il pas symptomatique, que dans les grandes œuvres de la réflexion sur la mémoire ou sur le passé de la France, il n'est jamais question des sociétés coloniales: est-ce une omission, un acte manqué, ou un tabou?" 'It struck us as an urgent task to rescue the history of colonization from the ghetto in which tradition had imprisoned it. Is it not symptomatic that in the great works devoted to reflexions on memory or on France's past, the question of colonial societies is never raised: is this an omission, an error or a tabou?' (12-13).

5. It must be noted here that, contrary to *Ville cruelle* (1954) and *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956), which tackle the topic of colonization head on, *La Ruine presque cocasse d'un polichinelle* is not directly focused on colonization; in this case, colonization is merely suggested and remains in the background of the novel.

6. See, for instance, *Ville Cruelle* (1954) and *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956).

7. This expression is borrowed from Andréas Eckert, who uses it in his article "Mémoires anticolonialistes au Cameroun: La recherche

8. A play on words is used here since the term is comprised of both the words “Congolais” and “Gaulois.”

9. Quoted in Remy 23. The French reads: “Il est évident, dit-il, que je suis le barbare de service, mais je ne me considère pas comme tel. Après tout, je suis un partenaire de l’Europe et c’est à ce titre que j’ai accepté de venir. Le Français m’a colonisé, eh bien je colonise le français. . . . Quant ici, il s’est agi de définir l’identité ou de chercher l’identité culturelle de l’Europe, je me pose la question: Est-ce que tous ces rapports que vous avez eus avec les autres mondes n’ont rien apporté à votre culture, à vos cultures? Je crois que cette Europe pour moi symbolise ou vocalise la nouvelle humanité. Où est-elle? Une petite, toute petite province où la communication doit s’établir. Or, comment pourrait-elle s’établir, sinon peut-être par la rencontre des identités?”

10. The French reads: “Les habitants de ce pays (la France) ont vécu quatre ans sous la domination allemande. Ils ne l’ont jamais oubliée. Ils n’arrêtaient pas non plus de dénoncer les crimes commis par les régimes de l’est. La colonisation de l’Afrique? Ils n’en parlaient pas. Je voulais leur dire: “quoi! Vous avez eu quatre ans d’occupation et vous en faites un plat. Vous oubliez que nous avons vécu cela des décennies durant, que nous avons connu les travaux forcés et toutes les autres formes de servitudes?”

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