

# The Cultural and Historical Heritage of Colonialism



# The Cultural and Historical Heritage of Colonialism:

*Interrogating the Postcolony*

Edited by

Kenneth Usongo

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# CHAPTER 1

## RETRACING AND RECONCEIVING COLONIALISM

KENNETH USONGO

“Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (141). This colloquy between Obierika and Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* captures the essence and consequences of European colonialism in Africa. Obierika’s words also interrogate the colluding attitude of the natives towards the British assault on the Igbo culture as well as the dominating and invasive posture of the colonialists towards the indigenous culture. His opinion appears to retrace Western colonialism of other peoples. However, paying attention to the Berlin Conference of 1885, for example, the colonised of Africa seem to have had no influence on their fate, which was decided upon by the European colonial powers.

Aside from the transatlantic slave trade that was one of the most profound events in human history, colonialism was equally significant in that it tremendously shaped human values and the landscape. Both practices were the products of Western civilisation and were begun by the Portuguese and later championed by other Western powers like Spain, Britain, France, and the United States. The transatlantic slave trade and colonialism were nurtured and sustained by the spirit of the Renaissance, the desire to explore, discover, and stretch the Western mind. The slave trade, for example, created one of the most significant planned accumulations of wealth the world has ever seen, precisely in Europe. It also perpetuated racism, where the slave merchants (Europeans) were regarded as superior to the African enslaved. The idea of racial hierarchy was a social and political construct by Westerners to valorise themselves and their culture and dehumanise blacks/non-whites.

While Prince Henry the Navigator can be considered the trigger of the transatlantic slave trade in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century as the Portuguese raided the African coast for slaves, Christopher Columbus's explorations in the Americas arguably crystallised colonialism. Both historical events were the products of Western capitalism or the commercial revolution. They flourished mainly because of the European voracious craving for sugar, the need for raw materials from the colonies, and markets for European manufactured goods.

Colonialism is such an expansive concept that it can be challenging to schematise it, which might lead to the charge of reductionism. Additionally, the study of colonialism is also daunting to localise because it was experienced differently in various regions across the globe. Nevertheless, colonialism can be considered "the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism, or that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism could not have taken place in Europe" (Loomba 23). This understanding does not justify the basis of colonialism that often negatively impacted the colonised. Given that cultural mingling usually results in the cross-pollination of ideas from which humankind may benefit, Aimé Césaire, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, perceives Western forays into other regions of the world differently. According to him, European colonialism did not have any human value because of its baneful consequences to the colonised. He argues that colonialism merely served to decivilise the coloniser, awakening his or her "buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism" (12-13). This negative posture was often manifested by the Europeans towards the natives of Africa, Asia, and other regions of the world.

The birth of colonialism can also be attributed to the West's superciliousness towards non-Western peoples and cultures, notably African, Caribbean, and Asian. With the abolition of the slave trade and slavery, the Europeans embraced colonialism as an alternative method of accumulating wealth. The West has always assumed a superiority complex towards non-Western things; it has also derided the religions, peoples, and cultures that are different from their European and North American counterparts. Therefore, upon embarking on colonialism, Western powers sought to exploit other regions and impose their cultural systems such as Christian, administrative, economic, and educational values on the colonised. Paradoxically, as colonialism sought to "civilise" the non-European, it continued to discriminate against the Westernised native, referring to him or her as the other. After all, from the Western lens, non-Western cultures and peoples

are othered and provincialised, with scant attention, by Westerners, to the peculiarities that pertain to each people, country, and region.

Colonised people across the world were impelled to negotiate their identities between their cultures, on the one hand, and those of the colonialists, on the other. This concept of cultural hybridity is related to what Paul Gilroy qualifies in *The Black Atlantic* as double consciousness, a term that he uses to describe the connection among the three modes of thinking, being, and seeing of people of African descent in the Americas and Europe. According to him, while the first mode is racially conditioned, the second devolves from a nationalistic feeling as the ex-slaves reminisce their previous identities. The third way of viewing the world is derived from diasporic or global contact (127), which is increasingly the norm nowadays. W.E.B. Du Bois earlier explored the idea of double consciousness when he discussed the challenges faced by enslaved blacks in a segregated and racist America that pushed them to envision things in a pluralistic perspective: “Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism” (108).

One of the most noticeable differences between the Western society and its non-Western counterparts is the individual’s perception. Whereas in Europe and North America, for example, individualism flourishes without necessarily subordinating it to societal norms, this is not often the situation, for instance, in Africa and Asia. In other words, individualism, from the Western perspective, has often been associated with capitalism, materialism, alienation, and self-centredness. According to Richard Bjornson, individualism and its ancillaries of knowledge of Western values and European languages, from an African lens, “provide the impetus for the formation of a privileged class that increasingly enjoys the wealth, power, and status separating it from the majority of the population” (10). Such privileged persons often connive with Western powers by embracing corrupt or unethical practices that subvert the interest of the masses and the state. As a result, most of what passes for democratic elections in the developing world is merely coordinated selection. This phenomenon explains the political longevity of leaders such as Paul Biya of Cameroon, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, the Bongos of Gabon, and the Eyademas of Togo.

Rather than attempting to indigenise Western cultural values, most postcolonies appear to ape or replicate certain practices that are at variance

with their local realities. This inclination towards cultural homogeneity undercuts Antonio Gramsci's argument about a historical moment being heterogeneous and contradictory as colonised people are expected to resist the hierarchy of value systems imposed on them by the powerful and privileged (93). The interface of colonisation and decolonisation appears opaque as both systems intersect. A salient example is the failure of most French-speaking African states to collectively create a domestic currency that can increase their purchasing and bargaining power faced with the West's totalising influence. Instead, these countries continuously use the Franc as legal tender, a colonial relic that obliges them to deposit huge quotas of their national reserves in the Bank of France. Unfortunately, these African countries go back to France to borrow their own money at exorbitant interest rates. This despicable reality retards economic development on the continent while growing European economies.

As a result of their egocentricity and quest for political survival, African leaders, for example, can hardly come to a consensus about intra-African cooperation, the lifting or reduction of trade and travel barriers, and creating robust economic zones. And when they sporadically convene at the African Union's headquarters in Addis Ababa, it is merely business as usual, a gathering where each dictator is guarded and would hardly say anything that might hurt the ego of one another. The pan-Africanist ideology of forging common political and economic platforms on the continent, for example, as championed by the likes of Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, is considered moribund. However, at the snap of their fingers, Presidents Emmanuel Macron and Xi Jinping of France and China can summon African presidents to Paris and Beijing, respectively, for peace and environmental summits. This scenario is telling in that the leaders' priorities are elsewhere rather than in Africa. While some people think that the colonial masters left their colonies decades ago, others argue that they simply reincarnated themselves in the contemporary black leaders, who are the custodians of the postcolonies.

The postcolony implies that there is a negligible break between the periods of colonisation and independence. For most of the independent countries in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, the end of colonisation merely marked the beginning of neocolonialism. In other words, the former colonies are still considerably politically, economically, and culturally dependent on or reordered by the ex-colonisers to the extent that these new nations can be loosely referred to as postcolonies. This qualification calls into perspective the time and duration of the colonial experience, both facets of which, according to Achille Mbembe, enclose

“multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another” (14). Therefore, postcolonial, in the context of this study, connotes, according to Ania Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, “not just coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (31). Stated differently, the postcolony occupies the liminal space between dependence and independence.

Moreover, the appellation postcolony refers to not only a locale or geographical region but also a historical time frame during when colonialism was practised. Broadly speaking, the postcolony, as Mbembe defines it, is characterised by a familiar style of political improvisation, an inclination to excess, and unique ways in which identities are parodied or transformed. He further states that the postcolony entails an era of embedding, “a space of proliferation that is not solely disorder, chance, and madness, but emerges from a sort of violent gust, with its languages, its beauty and ugliness, its ways of summing up the world” (242). Put differently, from the colonial contact with the West, the colonised have emerged strong and weak, daring and subdued, assertive and assimilationist. While some of the colonised people have made meaningful contributions to the human spirit, others are still groping in the shadows of colonialism or are lacking in ideation. Their presence can merely be felt in the absence of any tangible impact that they make in the world. It is time that these new nations grow out of the economic and political diapers provided by the West.

It is indisputable that the interactions between the colonialists and the colonised resulted in the transformations of cultures both in the metropolis and the periphery. These changes have often been felt in the periphery, especially with the West’s totalising influence as it seeks to remodel other cultures along the Western template. Through its economic power, military dominance, educational, political, and cultural paradigms, the West has sought to impose its values as mainstream and as the barometer on which other cultures are judged regarding success or failure. Therefore, even though colonialism appears as a thing of the distant past, ironically, it is, as Nicholas Dirks affirms, returning “to haunt “new nations,” where shifting identities and precarious polities are anchored against the modern by the reinvention of forms of tradition that too often clearly betray the traces of a colonial past” (23-24). This new pattern is seemingly entrenched, for example, in French Africa, where a group like the Francophonie is tailored more to serve the interest of France rather than that of African countries.

Another grouping that shares similar characteristics like the Francophonie is the Commonwealth, whose symbolic role is arguably to rekindle the defunct image of Britain as a global empire.

In a sense, contemporary cultures can be said to be products of both transnational and translational experiences. As Homi Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture*, the transnational component of culture grows out of postcolonial discourses that are rooted in the histories of cultural displacement (the slave trade, the middle passage, and colonialism) whereas translational culture emanates from the spatial histories of displacement, which is enhanced by “global” media technologies (172). This latter trend involves migration, relocation, and diaspora, creating a new and complex culture that defies binary postulations such as the First World and Third World. The intermixing of cultures leads ultimately to what Bhabha refers to as cultural hybridity or the third space, which eludes polarity.

For his part, Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, envisions culture as a theatre where different political and ideological causes confront each other. He further argues that the battle is often partisan because of the sense of uncritical nationalism that it ignites in people who tend to denigrate what is alien to them. Both Western imperialism and Third World nationalism, Said states, feed off each other. Because of the force of the empire, Said asseverates that “all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic” (xxv). Therefore, this assumption blunts the supposed cultural arrogance or superiority often displayed by the West towards other cultures or peoples.

In *The Cultural and Historical Heritage of Colonialism: Interrogating the Postcolony*, the authors contend that since most of the countries in notably Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America secured their independence from European and American colonial powers, it appears that these nations are still politically, economically, and socially reordered by their ex-colonisers. The postcolony remains more a laboratory for Western ideology rather than an autonomous identity that aligns with its reality.

Generally, the contributors seek to deconstruct some of the Western myths of cultural superiority compared with non-Western societies or subvert stereotypes by one group against another. The essays also explore the multifaceted relationships between the former colonial powers like France, Britain, Portugal, the U.S.A., and their ex-colonies. Given that the West

has affirmed its political and cultural influence globally, the contributors seek to make a case for minority cultures, convinced that the struggle for minority rights “is a contribution to humankind for a world in which all are accepted and treated equally, ensuring social justice” (Ojaide and Ashuntantang 6). Among the different themes foregrounded in this book are assimilation, hybridity, displacement, identity, feminism, dependency versus interdependency, oppression, neocolonialism, political abuse, racism, exploitation, discrimination, nationalism, (under)development, and others.

### Signposting (post)colonialism

Although colonialism crested at least sixty years ago, giving way to the birth of new nations across the globe, its effects are still felt today overtly and covertly. The contact between the West and non-West was an epochal event that continues to rock and reshape the world regarding history, politics, economics, and culture. This book retraces the aspirations and frustrations, the strengths and weaknesses, the metropolis and periphery, and the differences and similarities of people along both sides of the ideological divide between the West and the Other. Regardless of which side one stands, it is undeniable that the destinies of the colonialist and colonised have been mediated and reworked by history and culture. New concepts like multiculturalism, neocolonialism, and hybridity occupy spaces that were once the monopoly of colonialism. In other words, put metaphorically, even though the chalices might have replaced wine glasses, it is still the same wine being served. As the postcolony seeks its identity, it seems that the relics of the past stymie this identity.

Ferdinand Oyono’s novels—*The Old Man and the Medal*, *Houseboy*, and *Road to Europe*—explore the relationship between colonialist France and colonial Cameroon exposing how the former colonial power embraced oppression, exploitation, and discrimination in the administration of its former colony. Espousing a postcolonial theoretical framework, Kenneth Usongo demonstrates how Oyono draws upon animal and bird analogy, derived mainly from his native culture, to characterise the colonialists as ruthless, segregationist, and exploitative while also depicting the colonised as humble and somehow naïve. However, these qualifiers are progressively revised in the course of the interactions between these two races as blacks begin to manifest some of the vices of their oppressors. The change in Black mentality is marked by a corresponding decline in the use of animal and bird imagery, especially in Oyono’s last novel, *Road to Europe*.

The contention in “Reimagining Cameroon’s History and Politics in Mongo Beti’s *Cruel City*” is that Beti’s novel is topical because of its allegorical representation of the current sociopolitical crisis confronting the central African nation of Cameroon. Among other concerns, Usongo persuasively argues that Beti’s story interrogates and bridges the interstices between colonial and postcolonial Cameroon regarding several abuses like corruption, discrimination, marginalisation, exploitation, and injustice. More importantly, Beti’s novel reimagines a new form of indigenous or internal colonisation, that is, black on black oppression with La République du Cameroun (La RC) subjugating Southern Cameroonians. The novel’s title of *Cruel City* is symbolic of the barbarisms of wanton killings and political and economic abuses exerted on Southern Cameroonians by the repressive regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya of La RC. Put differently, the marital predicaments of Beti’s protagonist, Banda, analogise the repudiation by Southern Cameroonians of the political, military, and economic dictate of La RC.

In their essay, “Partners in Ecological Degradation and Female Resistance in Tanure Ojaide’s *The Activist*,” Lami Adama and Juliana Daniels draw on contemporary postcolonial and eco-critical theories to analyse Ojaide’s construction of the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and to address the lack of scholarship on the role that women play in the protest against the Western oil companies like Shell and Total and the Nigerian national government. Adama and Daniels employ the theory of social movement to discuss moving from colonialism to political, socio-economic, and environmentally related matters such as different multinational corporations exploiting the indigenous peoples. This exploitation negatively affects the Nigerian women’s historical and contemporary situations, specifically the indigenous women of the Niger Delta.

The period of apartheid in South Africa was characterised by brutal injustices against non-white races. To a large extent, political and racial oppression has been curbed. In its place is the thriving gender oppression where the female body is often at the receiving end in most cases of gender-based violence in the new and rapidly changing post-apartheid South Africa. Both Daniels and Adama compellingly discuss in their essay “The ‘Self’ and Despotism: Objectification of the Female Body in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” how the male “self,” driven by ego and racially motivated chauvinism in Coetzee’s novel, influences the practice of commodification and objectification of the female body. Daniels and Adama posit that irrespective of the efforts by the fictional post-apartheid nation-state to ensure the true emancipation of women, gender relations



are still problematic due to male despotism and the battle against the “self.”

The ambiguity of identity is a postcolonial conundrum evident through characterisation as literary writers attempt to explore this precarious state of being. Employing Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space” and feminist theory, Vivian Ntemgwa Nkongmenec seeks to unveil the ambivalent nature of characters navigating physical and psychological spaces in search of belonging. Buchi Emechetta’s *Kehinde* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* dwell on the protagonists’ incessant quest for a more accommodating space or a double identity/double consciousness as a result of unappealing circumstances. The characters find themselves in a hybrid position that is conditioned by the excesses of postcolonialism. Therefore, discontentment propels individuals to embark on an exodus that complicates the identity discourse because of the various barriers they confront in unfamiliar spaces.

Daniels envisions Ayi Kwei Armah as an artist who not only positions himself as a male writer in a predominantly patriarchal Africa but also explores the meaningful contribution of women to the African society. Unlike previous studies on him that have mainly focused on politics, Daniels’s argument centres on the female projection in *Osiris Rising*, which casts women positively in Armah’s fictional postcolony. From a Black Womanist and Althusserian Marxist lens, her study portrays the contribution of women to nation-building, the challenges they face, and how they successfully navigate difficulties. It is revealed that Armah’s notable women (Ast and Tete) are outstanding because they are knowledgeable, persevering, and progressive-minded. Their tenacity and assertiveness enable them to overcome subjugation and become a beacon of hope in the society.

Mohammed Umar’s *Amina* focuses on women as agents of change in a Northern Nigerian community by interrogating the female characters in the novel. Aisha M. Mohammed argues that *Amina* offers a realistic image of women who stand up to society’s challenges, in tandem with time and postcolonial social dynamism; educated, bold, assertive, and modern in all sense of it. This image in a postcolonial Northern Nigerian society enhances a positive view of women as equal members of the community. Despite their living in a patriarchal and chauvinistic society, they accept their social roles as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, in-laws, co-wives, and co-workers, with a firm grip on their aspirations and self-worth. Concomitantly, they attempt to be educationally and economically

equipped to tackle the peculiar forces against them in a male-dominated society to find their voices and negotiate their existence and survival from girlhood to womanhood. This chapter hypothesises that the women in postcolonial Northern Nigeria can change the society, which the men's activities under the influence of postcolonialism have disrupted. Overall, *Amina* is deduced as a conscious call to the Northern Nigerian women to be actively engaged in society and not watch from behind the veil if they must be relevant. Through *Amina*, the novel asserts that the struggle for societal transformation can be achieved through women's active participation in society, primarily through their roles in the lives of other less privileged women around them.

Jerry Ambanasom discusses lost identity and development from a literary perspective, focusing on persistent European domination of Africa despite its independence. In this chapter, Ambanasom's contention is that development (emergence) is a problematic concept to achieve in Africa because the ruling class in Africa has not given adequate attention to the past, which ought to illuminate the present and orient the future for effective development. His argument is guided by the following topical questions: What is the relationship between culture and development? Is development to Africa the provision of infrastructural improvement only? Why is development challenging to realise in Africa? Through a critical analysis of Shadrach Ambanasom's *Son of the Native Soil* and Protus Tah's *The Immortal Seed*, Ambanasom argues and demonstrates using themes, style (paralinguistic affective devices), and ecological consciousness how development is a challenging concept to achieve in Africa because of continuous European domination of the continent. He asserts that there is a correlation between identity and development and insists that development is not only material provisions; it is also a psychological issue and an African way of life.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon combines psychoanalysis with psychoanalytical theory to explain the feelings of dependency and inadequacy that the African descent community experiences in a "European World." Among other concerns, he argues about the self-divided perception of the African descent person who has lost the native culture to embrace that of the colonising country. As a result of the inferiority complex embedded in the mind, Fanon shows what happens when the cultural code of the coloniser is indoctrinated into the collective colonised community, which results in an inferiority complex implanted in the group's self-perception. This mutual dependency leads to a deep yearning for acceptance which then denotes belonging on the part of the

colonised African, in hopes of finally becoming recognised by the European collective. In *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Wole Soyinka discusses the African essence, specifically prerevolutionary Africa, during the colonial clash of cultures. Of his many expositions, he refers specifically to the African world perceiving cultural identity based on their interaction with the Western European world. Using Fanon and Soyinka's theoretical lens, Mingle Moore Jr. demonstrates how Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*, Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*, and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* constitute a tapestry of European colonial heritage.

Immigration changes can have adverse effects and bring about cultural changes that are detrimental to livelihood among diverse populations. Rolande Dathis examines the social, political, and economic consequences of immigration in the United States and how enacted Naturalization and Immigration laws reinforced by other laws, such as the Miscegenation and Jim Crow laws, have enabled racial stratification of groups with solidifying strategies to preserve social inequalities. She identifies a two-group immigration platform (in-group and out-group) formed since the founding of the United States, divided between whiteness and blackness or people of colour, in a broader sense, to perpetuate white privileges and pave the way for specific laws and behaviours. Immigrants are identified by geographic areas in order to facilitate assimilation. This factor has created social and legal loopholes that open doors to racial injustice.

The critical thrust in this scholarly collection is not primarily to challenge the non-West for embracing Western values but, fundamentally, for often uncritically emulating everything Western to the detriment of indigenous values. At the least, external values should be nativised. As demonstrated in most of the discussion in this book, women play a crucial role in generating the much-needed change in the society. In this regard, the postcolony should first ground itself in direct experience before integrating or grafting foreign values. This approach to acculturation would lend the postcolony an identity rather than presenting itself as a clone of the West. As the editor of this volume, I have not interfered with or influenced the opinions expressed in the chapters, which are those of the contributors. I am merely the midwife, the facilitator on the palaver of the cultural and historical heritage of colonialism.

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## CHAPTER 2

### “I CAN’T BREATHE”: THE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL CROSSROADS IN THE WRITINGS OF FERDINAND OYONO

#### KENNETH USONGO

Ferdinand Oyono’s (1929-2010) novels—*The Old Man and the Medal*, *Houseboy*, and *Road to Europe*—plumb the relationship between colonialist France and colonial Cameroon, the conqueror and the conquered, whites and blacks, the dominator and the dominated demonstrating how the former colonial power, rather than embracing a win-win relationship with its former colony, instead pursued a policy of exploitation, oppression, and discrimination against the colonised. The novelist portrays the colonialists as oppressive, conceited, and hypocritical and the colonised as submissive, tolerant, and somehow naïve. These behavioural traits of both groups are depicted in compelling imagery derived from animals and birds. Oyono draws primarily from his local fauna (chimpanzees, pigs, gorillas, etc.) and occasionally from birds to foreground the character of French colonialists and native Cameroonians. My endeavour in this chapter is not to appraise the argument about any possible merit of colonialism but this issue is moderated by the satirical tone in Oyono’s fiction, particularly the critical views of his characters that bear the yoke of colonialism. The idea of clothing his thoughts on human behaviour in animal and bird imagery not only makes Oyono’s narrative refreshing—indigenising his language—but it also gives the reader a graphic description of some of his characters and accentuates their mannerisms. The phrase “I can’t breathe” is allegorically significant. Although this sentence was the last utterance of George Floyd, an African American who was asphyxiated by a white American policeman in 2020, within the context of Oyono’s imaginative universe, Floyd’s words connote the political, economic, and social oppression of

Africans by their European colonisers. Unfortunately, Africans in positions of power employ the same obnoxious tactics on fellow blacks.

Oyono’s careful appropriation of the French language underpins pride in his native culture and language. Oyono’s primary audience, his native Pahouin people and Cameroonians, would find his language exciting, but other readers of his novels might have difficulty to make connections between animals and birds and human wisdom. He seems to be challenging the French, as Bill Ashcroft would observe, that: “I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience” (75). Oyono’s embrace of animal imagery as a satirical frame is pointed: it reflects how close the colonialists were to animals in their monstrous attitude towards the colonised. Like beasts, the colonialists plundered the local economy; like predators, they were sadistic in their relationship with Africans; and like the progenitors of humankind, they lacked morality. As represented in his fiction, like marauding hawks, the colonialists swarmed the skies and shores of Africa, swooping intermittently to despoil the natural and human wealth of the continent.

In his novels, Oyono condemns abuses, especially the oppression, exploitation, and hypocrisy of the French colonialists and the greed and naiveté of native Cameroonians. His criticism is manifest through irony, wit, humour, imagery, and sarcasm that he incorporates into his narrative. Oyono draws attention to these injustices in the belief that these have to be addressed. As a tool of conscientisation, satire is intended to jostle individuals into consciousness, to remind them about the abuses in society. Satirists usually envision their works as therapeutic and justify their criticism of society because of the assumption that there are norms to which people should adhere. Although Oyono’s narrative is mainly concerned with the situation in colonial Cameroon, his works are topical in that they also speak to the current abuse of power, exploitation, and oppression that are rife in postcolonial Cameroon.

The novel *The Old Man and the Medal* is the story of Meka, an elderly man who gives up his land to the Catholic Church and loses two sons in a war on behalf of France. Because of these sacrifices, Meka is awarded a medal of honour by the French colonial administration. He and his compatriots erroneously believe that the medal would accord them social, political, and economic privileges such as marrying white women and tax exemption. As blacks and whites celebrate Meka’s award of a medal at the African Community Centre, he becomes drunk and loses it in a violent

storm that destroys the building. While he walks home in the night, Meka is caught and detained by the colonial police even though he identifies himself as the recipient of a French medal. He is humiliated and tortured in prison and, then, released with the fake promise of replacing his lost medal. Meka returns home disillusioned, enlightened about the hypocritical, discriminatory, and exploitative practices of the French colonial administration.

Toundi, the hero of *Houseboy*, is first a mass servant to Father Gilbert and, later, a domestic servant to the Commandant. Through Toundi's experiences, Oyono exposes the cruelty, discrimination, and exploitation of the French colonial administration towards Africans. Toundi is wrongly incarcerated at the instigation of the Commandant, his wife, and the agricultural engineer because of Toundi's awareness of the injustices inflicted on the natives by the French colonial administrators. He dies in despicable conditions as a result of the torture that he receives in prison.

Oyono's third novel, *Road to Europe*, discusses Africans and the French in a (post)colonial setting as they compete with each other in reprehensible practices. Through Barnabas and Madame Gruchet, for instance, Oyono brings to the fore the exploitative and calculating practices of both Africans and Europeans. Although Barnabas plays to the same crooked rules as the French colonialists, he loses touch with his African compatriots and the whites. His dream to study in France does not materialise because he is dissuaded by another African that it is a waste of time given that university graduates are often unemployed. Barnabas also fails in his attempt to become a priest, as he is dismissed from a seminary on suspicion of being too friendly with another seminarian.

## French Colonial Ideology

From 1884 to 1885, European colonial powers—Britain, Germany, France, and others—convened in Berlin, under the initiative of King Leopold II of Belgium, to lay the groundwork for the Balkanisation of Africa. In pursuing their objective of colonialism, the colonialists created myths of superiority to legitimise the partitioning of Africa. This idea led to the painful process of the colonisation, or the scramble for Africa, a period during which these colonial powers extended their hegemony across the Black continent, politically and economically crippling the nations of Africa and subjugating and disenfranchising its peoples. According to Raymond Betts, sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, provided the European powers with a diplomatic *champs de manoeuvre*, an area of fast acquisition



of economic resources (xi). During World War I, “200,000 soldiers were recruited in French West Africa, through the use of methods reminiscent of slave hunting” (Rodney 187) and, by 1939, the humiliating German occupation of France during World War II prompted France to seek military assistance from its colonies. As a result, French colonial Africa was seen as not only a colony but also a supplier of workforce and resources needed by France to defeat Germany and rekindle the shattered image of France following its crushing defeat by Germany at the onset of World War II.

The French colonial policy in Africa was primarily guided by assimilation, a process whereby French culture, language, and institutions were replicated on the continent. Paulo Freire looks at this process as a form of cultural invasion which he relates to the French colonial mission in Africa, which was to accentuate French culture in colonised territories. The French were convinced that the invaded people would feel more alienated from their native culture and instead adopt the manners of the invaders—“walk like them, dress like them, talk like them” (134). However, the French were also wary about the possibility of inadvertently developing a critical consciousness in the colonised. As a result, the policy of assimilation was slightly modified to that of association, which, by taking into account some of the sociological peculiarities of the colonies, would enable the colonialists to reaffirm discipline among the African *évolués* (Western-educated Africans)—who were increasingly critical of French colonial authority. Their criticism of French colonial ideology stemmed partly from the fact that although the Black elite were intellectually and culturally assimilated, they were still discriminated against socially and “they could not become involved in and identify with the culture of their masters” (Irele 26).

Nevertheless, the French colonial administration prided itself in its so-called *mission civilisatrice* (civilising mission) in its dealing with Africans. In the same orbit of M.E. Chamberlain’s explanation about British justification for imperialism, the French, as mentioned earlier, probably defended their colonisation of parts of Africa in that because Western societies were supposedly more advanced than those of Africa or Asia, it was inevitable and proper that the “more” advanced should subdue and rule the “less” advanced (98). Commenting on the issue of superiority, Freire states that “the oppressors [used] science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression” (42). In this

regard and as pointed out before, Africans were forced to think and act like the French.

Even in designing curricula and texts, the French were preoccupied with convincing Africans about their inherent inferiority, their lack of achievement, and the barbarity of their ancestors. At the same time, the French emphasised the greatness and goodness of Europeans (Sarvan 333). It was an attempt to “de-Africanise” blacks and “Frenchify” them. Although French colonial education aimed at encouraging pupils to reason and behave like French people, there was also the fear, nursed by colonial administrators, of alienating these pupils from their local environment by unconsciously making them consider themselves completely French. French colonial education discouraged “critical spirit and independent thinking among pupils” (Ginio 48) to prevent any conflict of interest. Regrettably, the popular image of Africa among colonialists, according to Emmanuel Obiechina in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, was “a place with primitive institutions, inhabited by primitive, irrational people on whom the civilizing will of Europe needed to be imposed” (15). Colonialists also saw Africans as “no more makers of history than were beetles—objects to be looked at under a microscope and examined for unusual features” (Rodney 225).

Attempting to implement its colonial policy in West Africa, the French embraced oppression and ruthlessness in their administration of the colonies. Most of the inhabitants of French West Africa were subjected to harsh colonial rule, forced labour, and to the *indigénat*, “a legal system that enabled any French official to inflict limited punishments on Africans without trying them” (Ginio 4). After all, Africans were usually regarded as French subjects, without political rights. In fact, Russell Linnemann appropriately describes the French colonial administration thus: “Devoid of compassion, understanding, and even a modicum of human decency, the workings of the French colonial system unfold as a never ending, methodical nightmare of horrors for those Africans who are subjected to it” (71). Regardless of social status, almost all the whites in Oyono’s fiction are portrayed as agents of pervasive French authoritarianism. These insecure colonialists insist on “maintaining the myth of their own superiority to justify their exploitation of Africa” (Bjornson 71).

## Postcolonial Theory

All these unhealthy relationships between the French colonised and the French colonial administrators inevitably crept into postcolonial African writing. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin argue that postcolonial literature emphasises the tense relationship between the colonies, on the one hand, and the imperial powers, on the other, while stressing the differences between these two groups (2). According to Anshuman Prasad, postcolonial theory represents an attempt to explore “the complex and deeply fraught dynamics of modern Western colonialism and anticolonial resistance, and the ongoing significance of the colonial encounter for people’s lives both in the West and the non-West” (5).

For his part, Ato Quayson holds that postcolonialism involves a discussion of several experiences like “slavery, migration, suppression, and resistance, difference, race, gender, place, and the responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics” (94). In other words, it is concerned with the decolonisation of representation, which is debunking the false image of the non-West that is perpetuated by the West. It involves the questioning of Western systems of knowledge and progress by presenting the “Other” as viable alternatives to those proffered by the West. This critique is necessary because imperialists, in the words of Barbara Bush, “had remapped and ordered the world to fit in with their own consciousness, creating forms of knowledge (epistemology) that had the power to consolidate difference and uphold the power of the West” (54). In its avid desire to present its culture as superior, the West engages in the cultural oppression of the non-West, debasing and even negating its values.

The basis of what constitutes a cultural community has to be redefined to accommodate issues that are different from Western ones. Far from being regarded as initiators of a superior moral order, unfortunately, colonialists are seen as harbingers of immorality, brutality, and materialism, and they are perceived, in the words of Obiechina in *Language and Theme*, as “barbaric destroyers of a flourishing African civilization” (77). Evidently, one of the most repugnant effects of colonialism was its determination to devalue African culture by alienating, especially educated blacks, from their traditions. To combat this tendency, African novelists use their art to discredit the colonial system and extol African values. Hence, the colonial administrators, missionaries, and business people are ridiculed in literature and portrayed as purveyors of anarchy and a sense of inferiority among blacks.

## Discrimination, Oppression, and Exploitation

Oyono's novels are often set in equatorial Africa, precisely south Cameroon, a region characterised by dense rain forests that are inhabited by monkeys, gorillas, chimpanzees, and other animals. This setting enables Oyono to cast his characters against a sociological canvas that facilitates the playing out of their world views on colonialism. The novelist anchors his imagery primarily in the rich fauna and bird life of equatorial Africa while also using this backdrop to satirise the behaviours and actions of both the colonised and the colonialists. Moreover, the unique setting of his novels gives a representative cultural and historical account of the natives while also taking critical aim at the French colonial policy in Africa, especially its Manichean view of life that associated blackness with backwardness and whiteness with progress. Oyono also incorporates humour in his criticism of the French colonial authorities, a practice that is reflective of the discourse of his Pahouin compatriots.

The stylistic technique of using animals to criticise human behaviour and action is not unprecedented in African literature, having been admirably adopted by African writers like Chinua Achebe. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, Achebe uses the folktale involving the tortoise and birds to condemn human greed, which often results in unpleasant consequences for the perpetrator. Although we laugh at the tortoise's guile of assuming the name "All of You" to selfishly consume the food and drinks reserved for the birds, its cupidity culminates in the breaking apart of its back when the birds angrily retrieve the feathers that were unselfishly given to the tortoise. The difference between Oyono and Achebe is that rather than incorporating folktales in his narrative, Oyono draws his imagery from the local fauna to critique European colonisers and the native enablers.

As an ethnic group, the Pahouin usually believe that there is a correlation between what happens in the physical world and what obtains in their lives. Put differently, realms of sign and social practices bind these people to social structures, compelling some of them to regard societal beliefs as inviolate. For example, Martin, the head catechist in *Houseboy*, intimates that there is a connection between the howling of monkeys throughout the night and the death of Father Gilbert in an accident. And this knowledge is not only limited to African cosmology but is almost universal as we find the same relationship in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where nature reacts to the murder of King Duncan in Macbeth's castle. The following words by Ross, a Scottish thane, describe the scene: "And Duncan's horses—a thing most strange and certain! —/ Beauteous and swift, the minions of their

race,/ Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,/ Contending  
‘gainst obedience, as they would/ Make war with mankind” (2.4. 14-18).

Furthermore, the Pahouin subscribe to certain cultural beliefs, which they perceive as governing their society. In Doum, for instance, only a person of mature years is allowed to eat the entrails of a sheep. This belief explains why Mvondo in *The Old Man and the Medal* is taunted by elders for his admission to having eaten the entrails of a sheep. According to Nti, Mvondo’s behaviour manifests greed. Because of his misconduct, Mvondo is instructed to pay the fine of a ram to the elders (152). Regarding figurative use of language, Nkolo, in *The Old Man and the Medal*, is anxious to break the legs of the antelope for the sixth time (37), implying his consummation of marriage to the sixth wife.

Like George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, who uses animals to make allegorical representations of Russia’s politicians such as Joseph Stalin (Napoleon) and Leon Trotsky (Snowball), Oyono associates human behavioural traits with those of certain animals in south Cameroon. However, whereas Orwell’s novel makes direct correlations between humans and animals concerning characterisation, Oyono’s use of animals in his works is essentially metonymic. In other words, while Orwell foregrounds animals, turning them into protagonists in his fiction, Oyono, the Cameroonian novelist, employs animals as background to characterisation or subordinates them to character portrayal. Regardless of their stylistic differences in perceiving human behaviour from an animalistic perspective, the common denominator between both authors is their use of animals to satirise humans in positions of authority.

Oyono’s flair for animal imagery is also seen in Meka’s description of his wife, Kelara, in *The Old Man and the Medal*, as always snoring like a pig (3). This metaphor hints at her complaining attitude towards Meka, particularly when she criticises his *zazou* jacket for being ugly. She refuses to stitch buttons on the jacket knowing that it is this special outfit that Meka has to wear to impress the Chief of the whites, who is coming to award him a medal. The news of this medal, according to Binama, makes Meka a camel that will pass through the eye of a needle (59). Put differently, Meka, in the eyes of the natives, would break through all the political, social, and economic restrictions imposed by the French, including even getting married to a white woman. However, Oyono himself, as a student in France, was stabbed on the streets of Paris for walking with his white girlfriend.

When Meka puts on the *zazou* jacket, cockroaches and centipedes jump out of it, foreshadowing his humiliation by the French colonial administration, especially when he is tortured and incarcerated immediately after he loses his medal. According to Kelara, Meka's appearance in the jacket is like a fish swimming in the water, alluding to the cultural gap between the French and the natives. Upon examining the jacket, she adds that Meka looks like a dog listening to a gramophone (74), a subtle representation of the miscommunication or social barrier between Meka, on the one hand, and the white colonial administration, on the other.

The social divide between blacks and whites is also suggested in the symbolism of Meka's toes. Being not used to wearing shoes, Meka finds it painful to put on the ones that he bought from Pipiniakis, the Greek merchant. We are told that Meka's little toes hang "on each side of his feet like the front legs of a tortoise" (76). Meka's suspended little toes, like those of a tortoise, symbolise how peripheral blacks are in the eyes of whites; the latter are only interested in the former regarding the contribution of the colonised to the colonisers' welfare.

In a display of contempt towards the jackets worn by whites and in a bid to show off his tailoring skills to Meka, Ela criticises the dressing of whites in animal imagery. Ela insists that their jackets are "a bit like the coat of a baboon that does not cover its behind. They've got their buttocks showing" (49). In other words, hard as the colonialists may attempt to camouflage their exploitation of and discrimination against blacks, the latter are still able to see through colonialist hypocrisy. The remark of another onlooker captures this idea when he says that Meka ought to be rewarded with something superior to a mere medal for sacrificing two sons for the French cause. For his part, Meka finds Ela strange. Ela's manner of smiling, according to Meka, is weird, like that of a goat. He sees in Ela's mannerisms some of the greed and cunning of the French, given the way that he convinces Meka to pay five hundred francs for a jacket that Meka does not fancy.

On another occasion, Meka is shocked by the discriminatory attitude of the white priest, Father Vandermayer, who transports him instead at the back of a van even though the front seat is vacant. So surprised is Meka by the behaviour of the so-called man of God that Meka opened his mouth like a fish, or like that of a strangled animal (97). It should be recalled that Meka is cajoled by a priest to give up his land for the construction of a church because God has so desired: "He had had the special grace to be the owner