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Mongo Beti and Jean-Marc Éla: The Literary and Christian Imagination in the Liberation of Cameroon

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In his fascinating study of contemporary African intellectuals and their struggle to set themselves apart from their European educations, Kwame Anthony Appiah describes the intellectual ferment throughout the continent as producing "new, unpredictable fusions" because Africans "have the great advantage of having before [them] the European and American--and the Asian and Latin American--experiments with modernity to ponder as [they] make [their] choices" (134). Appiah uses the example of his own sister's wedding in Ghana to exemplify the hybridized role that religion continues to play in that self-definition. The ceremony followed the Methodist ritual; a Roman Catholic bishop offered the prayers, and Appiah's Oxford-educated relatives poured libations to their ancestors. Such syncretism, he notes, religious and otherwise, is now common.

Such apparently compatible "fusion," if it can be so called, still rankles in many institutional quarters--religious, political, and intellectual--all purists for their respective points of view. The role of Christian missionaries, in particular, has long been a controversial topic in African fiction, generally a target for the criticism that its eurocentricism has demeaned indigenous African culture. Chinua Achebe expressed this position in its simplest form when he wrote: "I can't imagine Igbos traveling four thousand miles to tell anybody their worship was wrong!" (qtd. in Appiah 114).

Though less well-known in the United States than their Latin American counterparts, liberation theologians of the African continent are engaged in a lively response to this criticism. Their attempts at reshaping traditional Christian beliefs and practices in ways that are more clearly rooted in the lives of new believers has frequently drawn criticism from the institutional Church. In this contentious position,

however, both novelist and theologian seek to describe a more humane post-colonial identity and to help bring it into existence. Throughout Africa, neocolonialism in its many guises stands squarely in the path of that new self-definition, and theologian and novelist increasingly find themselves on the same side of the battle lines.

The conference of Third World theologians that met in Accra, Ghana, in December of 1977 concentrated the attention of Africa's religious leaders on the need to re-imagine the potential role for Christianity in the various countries they represented. The subsequent influence of Latin American theologians on Protestant writers throughout Africa has been well-documented in recent studies of the All Africa Conference of Churches (see Wan-Tatah). But of more immediate relevance for the fiction writers of Cameroon is the recent work of Roman Catholic liberation theologians, since so many of the novelists were educated in Catholic schools.

Prominent among these theologians is Jean-Marc Éla, who worked for years among the impoverished Kirdis of north Cameroon following the completion of his two doctorates in Theology and Sociology. His sociological critique, arising after Mongo Beti's early work, serves as a complementary report on the need and prospects for future liberalization and vibrant self-expression among the country's citizens, especially among those who identify themselves as Christians. As Richard Bjornson points out, earlier theologians like Engelbert Mveng and Meinrad Hebga have worked somewhat in the spirit of the Negritude movement: their principal goal was to forge a "culturally appropriate vehicle for the transmission of Christian values in Africa"; but Éla's approach is more radical: "by drawing attention to the historical situatedness of Biblical narratives, [he] strip[s] away the European cultural overlay that ha[s] been imposed on missionary Christianity" (358). The relationship of this renewed Christian message to the political position of Beti's recent novels will be highlighted in what follows.

Along with Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* (1965), Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) is the most famous novel exploring the impact of colonialism on African culture. This novel was followed by *Mission to Kala*, whose central character, Jean-Marie Medza, "discovers himself, realizes the limits of his knowledge and learns to appreciate African rural values hitherto condemned as primitive as a result of colonial influence" (John 29). In both of these novels Beti demonstrates the alienation from Cameroonian culture that results from the imposition of "civilization" from Europe. This point is made almost comically in the next novel, *King Lazarus*, in which the fanatically Christian aunt of an ailing king pours several jugs of water on him, baptizing him in the hope that he will soon enter the kingdom of heaven. His "miraculous" recovery, and reluctant rejection of polygamy, destabilizes not only his kingdom—but that of the colonizers, as well. In all of these novels Christianity is viewed principally as a European institution, a naive or complicit partner of Western economic enterprises.

The Poor Christ of Bomba, told from the viewpoint of a naive 14-year-old Cameroonian male named Denis, focuses on the increasing disillusionment of the mission's director, Father Drumont. So disturbing was such a portrayal that the Roman Catholic Church put the novel on its Index of forbidden books. Beti's decision to tell the story through the eyes of the young Denis implicitly highlights the key role

in the proselytizing process played by indigenous auxiliaries. In Cameroon, the fifteen European missionaries of the order of the Sacred Heart, for example, were helped by 450 local catechists (Wan-Tatah 61). The enlistment of impressionable young men and women in what came to be seen as pacification drew the ire of several of the continent's best novelists, with Beti prominent among them.

Having spent 20 years in Cameroon, Father Drumont's crisis of conscience brings him, by novel's end, to a decision to return to Europe. Somewhat like Conrad's Kurtz, Drumont had come to Cameroon as an idealist who hoped to "save" the simple natives. The crisis reaches a head when the priest asks himself the same sort of question that Achebe, as we have seen above, had pondered:

I've never asked myself this before. Why don't the Chinese devote themselves to converting all Paris to Confucianism or Buddhism or whatever? (151). These good people worshipped God without our help. What matter if they worshipped after their own fashion--by eating one another, or by dancing in the moonlight, or by wearing bark charms around their necks? Why do we insist on imposing our customs upon them? (150)

Father Drumont's questions betray his deep-seated disdain for non-Christian religious customs and a distance from Cameroonians rather remarkable after 20 years in their midst. Nonetheless, the questions also face reality and lead to the Father's rejection of his role as an agent for French capitalism. In his final conversation with Vidal, the local administrator, Father Drumont stakes out a clear position:

"Look," said the Father, "I'd rather not answer to God for colonization; I'd rather not be in your shoes. You tell me that I'm an exception among the missionaries: alas, it's true, and you see how it grieves me. There are only two things I can do now: I can stay in this country along with you, associated with you, and thus assist you to colonize it, with dreadful consequences; softening up the country ahead of you and protecting your rear--for that's how you envisage our role, isn't it? Or else, I can truly Christianize the country; in which case I'd better keep out of the way, as long as you're still here. . . . Rationalist Europe, so full of arrogance, science and self-consciousness, filled me with dismay. I chose the disinherited, or those whom I was pleased to regard as such. How naive I was; for are not we ourselves the truly disinherited?" (152-153)

This notion of the representative of the First World being, in fact, the disinherited who has much to learn from members of the Third World is very close to the hearts of liberation theologians, and is remarkable in the mouth of a long-time missionary like Drumont. He is by no means an ignorant man, and has learned the difficult lesson taught by his parishioners.

"I've also noticed the agreement with the colonials which all the missionaries here seem fated to fall into; this is a real betrayal of the Africans. I say 'fated,' but is it really so inevitable? I just don't know, but I'd dearly like to know. All I know is that you protect us and that we prepare the country for you, softening the people up and making them docile." (155)

The missionaries had a great deal to gain from this complicit arrangement, since the most effective proselytizing took place along the railway lines or the new roads that Vidal proposes (Wan-Tatah 51-61). As though laying the groundwork for the ideas made explicit in Beti's novels of the seventies and eighties, Drumont continues:

The saddest thing is that I'm completely trapped in my European race and my white skin. That's what they're always throwing in my face. Hereabouts, whenever I rebuke the people, they say to me: "Oh! After all, you are just a white man. . . . And Jesus Christ, was he not also a white?" meaning: "You wear a soutane only to impose on us more effectively." (155-56)

The disappearance of the mission does not, however, return the district to *status quo ante*. Among the innovations brought from Europe was something known as the *sixa*, whereby engaged young women spent two to six months away from their intended, living on the parish compound as a group, receiving Christian instruction in marriage, and providing free labor. As it becomes clear to the novel's naive narrator (and eventually to Father Drumont as well), the various Cameroonian administrators of the *sixa* have turned it into something not far from a brothel. Thus, when the mission dissolves, the young women return, disgraced and syphilitic, to their villages. The *sixa* serves for Beta as an appropriate symbol for the inadvertent corruption of indigenous Cameroonians by European institutions that care little about the culture they are compromising. The young narrator, gung ho for the mission's ideals in the novel's opening, now decides to work for the Greek merchants, somehow concluding that this form of capitalism is not much worse than what he now sees to have been misguided idealism. He senses, as well, that he can never really return to his own people. He has been contaminated like the women of the *sixa*, though on a different plane.

Father Drumont is not an avaricious villain for Beti; he is simply not needed. What is more, because he is complicit with the colonizing powers, he is pig-headedly destructive. His Christianity shares the same condemnation. Jean-Marc Éla, on the other hand, situates himself as a committed Roman Catholic who fully shares the sense of outrage evident in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. Like Gustavo Gutierrez and the others in South America, his central tenet is that theology must arise from *praxis*--that is, theology must be reflection on some activity ongoing among people. Within Africa, this demands consideration not only of the actual cultic experience of Christians, but also of their daily struggle in poverty and, increasingly, in exile as refugees (Wan-Tatah 184-89). The focus of such theology, therefore, is not on imposed dogmas from a

central authority, but on the building up of a just and human community that shares its faith in a God who views all individuals as loved equally.

In an unjust world, liberation theology works to change institutional structures that make such a faith more difficult. In Éla's words,

Ecclesiastical institutions within these communities must undergo radical changes. They are still branded by a form of clerical imperialism that has inhibited their ability to innovate and stunted the growth of the laity. The vision of a Christian community incarnate in the life of a people requires that the community have full autonomy in organizing itself. From now on, instead of imposing more rules, we need to let each community work out its own direction. The emergence of such communities calls for a tremendous effort to decentralize. (*My Faith* 60)

This does not simply mean the replacement of European priests by Cameroonian priests. In *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Father Drumont holds out some hope for the future since a local Cameroonian would soon be returning as a priest. But Éla rejects indigenized clerisy as the answer, since in many cases they have become more obviously European than Christian. In his view, the new emphasis must be on a declericalizing of the Church, and a re-empowering of the laity. "In reality," he writes, "our biggest problem is not getting more ordained priests. Rather, it is a question of having the whole church be a servant. . ." (63).

In one sense the agenda of such theologians is more radical than that of the novelists. On the one hand, Éla and others like him (Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga, for example) demand an indigenized re-imagining of Christianity:

Lived in a Western style, the Christian mystery can disorient Africans in their relationship with God, with their brothers and sisters and with the universe. Yet whenever the Christian faith incorporates and lives the African values of communion and solidarity, with their specific requirements and implications, this enlarged community has a positive impact on the health of human relationships. In fact, it is precisely this option for community that governs all the contemporary questions about evangelization in Africa today. (146)

On the other hand, however, Éla broadens the question beyond some version of Negritude by insisting that faith maintain its transcendent, meta-cultural element: "Faith lived in an African setting is a dangerous mystification if the church is closed in on itself, and confronts only the problems of its cultural identity" (147). It may appear that a Marxist tinge informs such theology, but the revolutionary demands that Éla makes would not sit well with most Marxists. He demands an actual solidarity that cuts across class divisions:

A liturgy using indigenous music might cause Africans to forget that they are human beings under domination. . . . We must not expend all our strength wondering if we need to think like Descartes to be a theologian. Instead, we must feel the need to leave libraries and offices, and move toward a type of society where the intellectual works among planters, the university student among illiterates, the physician among bush people, and the theologian or pastor among villagers--there where hunger, misery and despair become a future leading nowhere but to the road of revolution. Most often Africans who seek to adapt Christianity are those who have become strangers to their villages, in the same way that uprooted intellectuals seek "negritude." (147-48)

Ultimately, what is demanded by Éla and by those like him who have not given up on Christianity is a re-invention of the religion itself:

In our environment, our faith does not ask questions about the sex of the angels or the infallibility of the pope; instead we question the lack of any genuine application of the critical function inherent in the Christian faith. How can we show that the African church is blocked by an ecclesiastical praxis that is, in fact, a kind of museum of a narrow moralism, a ritualistic sacramentalism, a disembodied spirituality, and a withering dogmatics? If God is revealed through history, those who are absent from the history of our time are also the recipients of the revelation of the living God. How can God intervene in our world when young people throw the few resources they have into education, and end up learning in a system that ensures the continuation of social classes and social inequities? The increasing marginalization of vast groups of people is where the church should manifest and define its creativity and its mission in Africa. (153-54)

Had such questions been asked by the various Father Drumonts of 40 years ago, Mongo Beti's current politics might find a welcome support in the theology of Jean-Marc Éla. After a long pause in Beti's novel-writing, he returned with a more explicitly political message, one not as persistently engaged with Christianity (perhaps finding oneself on the Index has this effect?). So explicit have the politics of Beti's novels become, in fact, that some have described the artistry of this latter half of his career as "vastly inferior . . . unsatisfactory by most standards and certainly disappointing" (Blair 281-85). Some have noted that his criticism of post-colonial Cameroon is offered from afar, since he moved to France on the eve of his country's independence (John 106). What cannot be denied is that his work in the seventies and eighties has focused on the dangers of neocolonialism and the intransigence of the country's problems, regardless of the color of the overlord's skin. While disparaging many of the new black politicians, he proposes an ideal leader, "honest, tolerant,

intelligent, conscious of his duties, guided by the politics of participation, and who is always aware that at no time during his tenure of office can he substitute himself for the popular will" (John 110). The sort of leader he has in mind would be Reuben Um Nyobé, the first leader of the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC), killed in 1958. In the view of one critic, Beti's latest writing treats resistance to acculturation with pessimism (Brière 181), but another finds that "the pessimism and cynicism of his early phase appear to have been exorcised in his recent work" (Arnold 111). This amounts to saying that he has become more pragmatic, since the same critic describes these newer novels as "a handbook-guide for revolutionary activity" (Arnold 113).

In either case, Beti's recent work shares with the pre-independence novels a protest against any alliance of oppressors. The need for such a guide springs from the history of neocolonialism in the nation. As Wan-Tatah notes,

Before WWI, the French followed a policy of assimilation throughout the French colonial empire. The so-called subject people of the colonies were to be steeped in French culture through hierarchical and bureaucratic structures. . . . However, after WWI, when the cultural gap between France and her African colonies became obvious, the policy of assimilation was changed to "association." The policy proclaimed respect for African customs, religion, etc., but in reality it meant economic development and political cooperation between the *metropole* and the colonies. Indigenous elites were expected to maintain close connections with France. (57)

In Beti's early work, Christianity played a powerful political role as a pacifying institution. In the later work this role has generally been replaced by the silent alliance between the Cameroonian privileged class and the French. A conspicuous exception to this "mercy" in his treatment of missionaries is *Remember Reuben* (1973), in which the white priest Van den Rietter shares power in a neocolonial alliance with the sick chief Mor-Bita and his evil son Zoabekwe. But Van den Rietter is far removed from *The Poor Christ of Bomba's* Father Drumont. Where Drumont had been a well-meaning and hard-working Christian missionary who gradually acknowledges the negative effect of the institution on native Cameroonians, Van den Rietter and his helper, Brother Nicholas, are practically caricatures of corrupted clergy who have long ago replaced their faith with their desire to control. Less credible as representatives of true Christianity, which had by that time established itself in the hearts of many indigenous Cameroonians, Van den Rietter and Brother Nicholas seem, instead, to stand for any European with whom neocolonial Cameroonians might rise to unfair positions of domination over their own people. As Richard Bjornson points out in his introduction to *Lament for an African Pol* (1979), the sequel to *Remember Reuben*, "the real strength of the two clergymen lies not in their technical knowledge or in their intellectual superiority or even in their local monopoly on firearms, but in their ability to brainwash the people into accepting the racist myth of black dependency" (*Lament* xx). Whereas Drumont chose to withdraw from Cameroon when he saw that his version of Christianity was coercive, Van den Rietter goes mad, unable to square reality with

his mistaken notion of white superiority.

It would be simplistic to describe Beti's subsequent "neglect" of sincere religious fervor like Drumont's as praise for the institutional Church. In *Foul Play on Cameroon* (1972), the political treatise that preceded *Remember Reuben*, Beti explicitly praises Msgr. Albert Ndongmo, the Bishop of Nkongsamba who was arrested in 1970 along with Ernest Ouandie (then the leader of the UPC), condemned for complicity in a plot against Ahmadou Ahidjo (the Head of State) and sentenced to imprisonment for life (he was released in 1975). Given the vigor of Christianity in Africa today, its obvious impact in the lives of various enlightened leaders throughout the continent, and the role of unusual clerics like Albert Ndongmo, one might at least conclude that Beti had now found more formidably oppressive targets: principally, "cooperation" with neocolonial interests because of tribal self-interest (*Foul Play* 74).

The closing scenes of *Lament* offer a startling image of what liberation theologians might consider the early rumblings of a "base community" taking responsibility for its own religious development and expression. Éla describes what the term implies:

We must root the centers of decision-making in the local communities if they are going to truly express their faith in terms of their culture. If we want to liberate the gospel so that it can give rise to new forms in each socio-cultural context, we must start with communities that want to be responsible and self-sufficient. Research on ministries is tightly linked to reflection on these communities, which must be freed from rigid forms of organization with no roots in indigenous traditions. (61)

Thus, in *Lament*, during Christmas Midnight Mass, in which Van den Rietter hopes once again to cow his rebellious flock by invoking their piety, a group of women shout from the back of the Church during the consecration: "This is the blood of our ancestors. Let us drink together, brothers and sisters; let their strength return and be amongst us" (328). When Van den Rietter proceeds to the distribution of communion, he trips and scatters the consecrated hosts over the floor. The people shout "This was a sign from God. It is all over now, and all you have to do is leave. . . . Defiled from now on, your wafers are only good for pigs and those who resemble them" (329). The ones who were to receive communion are ridiculed as employees of the mission, complicit in neocolonialism.

Somewhat reminiscent of Beti's earlier descriptions of Drumont, the stricken Van den Rietter is compared to Jesus on Golgotha: "he finally offered the disquieting spectacle (a bit late perhaps) of sublime self-sacrifice and flesh subdued through mortification--an image that would have won him the hearts of the city in perpetuity, if he had not for so many years remained content to play the role of ally to cruel and brutal tyrants" (330). Then Jo the Juggler, a leader of the rebels, takes over the priest's pulpit and turns it into an agency for rebellion. In words that cast Abena in the role of Christ about to begin his public ministry, Jo refers to himself as hardly deserving the honor of unlacing the sandal on the left foot of the approaching rebel Commander

Abena. Then Jo launches into an exhortation, described by Beti explicitly as a homily, that denounces those who make claims for white superiority. He encourages the crowd to take their reform into their own hands: abrogating polygamy, distributing land and resources to all.

Significantly, however, his place in the pulpit is next taken by an old woman, who first acknowledges the inherent truth in the central core of Van den Rietter's Christian message: "When he told us about the sufferings of Jesus Christ, abandoned by everyone and nailed to a cross for the salvation of mankind, I sensed . . . I knew he was telling the truth." Then she goes on to speak the message Éla and others are attempting: "a white prophet can only proclaim a white messiah; let the black messiah be proclaimed by a black prophet then. . . . From now on, both of you, both you and Van den Rietter, should climb into the pulpit every Sunday and, one after the other, proclaim your messiah and your part of the truth" (334). The speech has a great impact. Whether it is from madness, guile, or conversion, Van den Rietter "shed all his haughtiness . . . his gestures bespoke peace, goodness, friendship, and all the other virtues which had been so absent from his behavior during the twenty years that had now come to an end" (335).

That domination by European institutions has not, in fact, come to an end. Nonetheless, novelists like Mongo Beti and theologians like Jean-Marc Éla are helping demonstrate that Cameroonians themselves may yet climb down from the pulpit and reshape the institutions to their own ends.

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