

Medals, Missions, and Mosques: Unholy Alliances Exposed in Oyono and Sembène

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V.Y. Mudimbe addresses the issue of religious institutions' involvement in the European colonization of Africa in three of his works.¹ In *The Idea of Africa* (1994), especially, he equates missionaries' expropriation of land from the local population with the expansionist project of colonialism (129). Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse is another scholar who, in *Christianity and Hegemony: Religion and Politics on the Frontiers of Social Change* (1992), asserts that the Church and its missions in Central Africa "were regarded as powerful adjuncts to the colonial state, in paving the way for colonial expansion, in pacifying the indigenous population."² The French alleged a "mission civilisatrice"—pun intended—in that the Catholic "mission" had a role in suppressing opposition to colonialism. Likewise, after Islam made its way into West Africa, some of its leaders, too, used Muslim tenets to justify not challenging the colonial system.³ The Cameroonian novelist Ferdinand Oyono and the Senegalese writer Ousmane Sembène do not vilify Christianity and Islam per se, but critique their involvement in the colonial enterprise. In this study, I will examine the representation of this complicity in two of their novels, namely Oyono's *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956) and Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960).

One strategy adopted by both writers is to undermine the sacred order (and its practitioners) so that it loses its status. In Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* the French priest swears and chases beggars away from the church grounds, and the African converts to Christianity are caricatured for aspiring to be awarded medals for loyalty to the colonial system. In Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* the Muslim leaders in Dakar who refuse to support the railroad workers in their strike against management, citing their religion's belief in accepting the status quo, are also demystified. We shall see, for example, that El Hadji Mabigué is feminized and metaphorically sacrificed.

¹ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); *Parables, and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

² Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, *Christianity and Hegemony: Religion and Politics on the Frontiers of Social Change* (New York: Berg, 1992) 3.

³ Myron Echenberg states, for example, that conservative members of the Muslim clergy in Senegal, among them Seydou Nourou Tall, supported the repression following the Thiaroye protest of December 1944 in which many African soldiers were killed. See *Colonial Conscripts: The 'Tirailleurs sénégalais' in French West Africa, 1857-1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991) 102.

The unequal power relations of colonialism are inscribed on the front cover of Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille*, which depicts two men facing away from each other, one white, standing upright, dressed in the uniform of a French colonial administrator.⁴ The other, black, crouching, and wearing a servant's uniform, is the picture of submission. Given that colonialism's complicity with organized religion is invisible on the book's cover, the reader assumes that the medal mentioned in the title refers only to the medal of friendship given by the colonial administration to the protagonist, Meka. Indeed, the cover of the English translation displays a picture of a white-haired, smiling black man encased in a red, white, and blue medal. I propose another reading, one in which the medal can also refer to the Saint Christopher medal that Meka wears around his neck and grips close to his chest during his ordeal. His wearing of the two medals—one around his neck, one newly pinned on his chest—reflects the convergence of church and state on his body. Meka will eventually literally lose the medal of friendship, and, figuratively, lose faith in Catholicism.

Meka is rewarded for his contributions to both domains, both realms—Church and State. He had donated his ancestral land to the Catholic mission, and his sons fought and died for France in World War II. Because of these sacrifices Meka is considered a "good Christian": "Meka was often cited as a model Christian in the Catholic Mission at Doum. He had 'given' his lands to the priests. . . . He had had the special grace to be the owner of a piece of land, which, one fine morning, had proved pleasing to the eye of the Lord. A white priest had revealed his divine destiny to him. How could he go against the will of the Lord-who-giveth? Meka, who in the meanwhile had been reborn in baptism, humbled himself before the messenger of the Almighty. Full of enthusiasm he followed the raising of the house of the Lord on the land of his forefathers" (VN 9–10). Both gifts—that of his land and of his sons—qualify as personal losses; the land, because it no longer provides sustenance for the family, and his sons, because they left no offspring. What renders Meka a "good Christian" in this case, also makes him a good colonial subject.

Not coincidentally, the novel is set in rural Cameroon between July 10 and July 15. July 14, the actual day Meka will be honored for meritorious service, during ceremonies commemorating the French Revolution, is the anniversary of the day Parisians stormed the Bastille prison. Thus, the celebration of French independence coincides with Meka's total and complete acquiescence to colonial rule, and also religious teachings. That fact is illustrated in Meka's choice of clothing to wear to the ceremony. His wife remarks that his outfit makes him look like a Protestant missionary. However, as a result of what Meka experiences

⁴ I am referring specifically to the following editions of the novel: Ferdinand Oyono, *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* (Paris: 10/18, 1986) and *The Old Man and the Medal*, trans. John Reed (London: Heinemann, 1969). All references are to the Heinemann edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation VN.

on the 14th of July, he comes to realize that the day he was baptized was also "The day I became a slave" (VN 137), that is, a slave to Catholicism as well as to French colonialism. That fateful day years ago, when he first converted, he also discarded the trophy of his family's resistance to colonialism, the German skull his grandfather had handed down to him. Meka's conversion to Catholicism symbolized not only a psychological distancing from his ancestors, but also culminated in a loss of identity; he acquired a new name, Laurent, when he was baptized.

In fact, questions of faith are not responsible for some characters in the novel becoming Catholics. Engamba, Meka's brother-in-law, abandoned his African religion, which allowed him to inherit his father's ten wives, so that he would not be ridiculed by his neighbors. Other converts are also derided by the narrator for their lack of sincerity. Bible-toting Mbogsi, who contorts his mouth when pronouncing, or rather mispronouncing, the savior's name, "Yessous Cristo," decides to get married so he will no longer have to confess his "impure thoughts" to the priest. Ignace Obebé, the catechist, is teased by the men about his manhood because of his childlike voice. Other examples of the sacred rendered profane are found in the way people pray with their "behinds . . . up in the air" (VN 79), and in the clothes the faithful wear to church in the village of Zourian: the old overcoats, and especially the pyjamas and bathrobes, symbolize their unconscious/sleeplike state when it comes to recognizing their indoctrination. These parishioners are proud, publicly displaying the symbols of their strong faith, "festooned with holy medals, scapularies, rosaries and sometimes a massive lead cross hanging from their necks by a cord of rattan fibre" (VN 27). After all, when the white priest first came to Zourian, they listened because they had nothing else to do.

The ridiculing of pious and passive characters in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* is also manifested in the way they are compared to animals: Obebé barks and has a neck like a buffalo (VN 14); Kelara, Meka's wife, yelps (VN 3) and sleeps curled up like an antelope (VN 80). Mvondo's skin is wrinkled and coarse like that of an old lizard (VN 18). Nti crawls like a dog (VN 155). Amalia resembles a cat (VN 65), a docile donkey (VN 54), and a beast of burden (VN 55), and has skin like that of an elephant (VN 55). It is not surprising that Meka's anatomy and gestures are targets of Oyono's satire as well. Meka's toes are like a tortoise's paws (VN 76), he opens his mouth like a fish (VN 97), twitches his nose like a rabbit (VN 117), and snores like a young panther (VN 113). While most of the African characters in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* are dehumanized, belittled for their submissiveness to an institution that oppresses them, the colonial administrators and missionaries are condemned in a similar manner. Fouconi's face turns red like that of a chimpanzee (VN 46), Père Vandermayer lets his claws show (VN 98), and Varini is nicknamed by the Africans Gosier d'Oiseau—Gullet—because of his long neck (VN 9).

The Christian colonial coalition is exposed in other ways in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille*. One site of collusion is a five-year-old boy, the son of Binama and Agatha, whom they name DeGaulle; he wears a crucifix. Another site is the pulpit. When the Church forbids the sale and consumption of "arki," the local alcoholic beverage made from bananas and corn, in order to encourage the sale of expensive European wine and liquor, and bar owners, like Mami Titi, ignore the threat of prison by subverting the ban, the government representative, Gosier d'Oiseau, notifies the priest, the Reverend Père Vandermayer. From the pulpit, he declares the consumption of the local drink a mortal sin that "blackened the teeth and the souls" (VN 9). This episode illustrates not only the collaboration of a religious institution with the colonial system, but also exemplifies how the Church stifles African cultural expression and economic development.

The reader does conclude, nevertheless, that the situation will change only when the villagers decide to take action themselves. Meka's disillusionment, brought about by his humiliating treatment by the clergy, colonial administrators, and police, leads to a rebellion, however slight, when he gleefully consumes whiskey reserved for the white guests at the African cultural center. Upon his return to the village, he responds to Mvondo's thanking God for his safe return by roaring, "You shut your mouth, shut your rotten mouth" (VN 147), which prompts the following ironic comment: "How could a good Christian like he was not want to hear talk about the Lord?" (VN 147). Meka has undergone a transformation, a reconversion, so to speak.⁵ His rejection of the injustices of colonialism and Christianity is reproduced by his neighbors, who subvert the local alcohol ban by purchasing and consuming palm wine in Meka's house. In addition, they have the last laugh, imagining where the medal would be attached if Meka had worn a loincloth to the ceremony.

Ousmane Sembène is well known for his condemnation of injustice, targeting, especially, unethical religious leaders and outmoded practices in his film *Ceddo*, as well as in his prose works *Voltaïque* (1961) and *L'Harmattan* (1963).⁶ Moreover, a close reading of *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* reveals Sembène's subtle condemnation of Islam's complicity with French colonialism.⁷

Ramatoulaye and her brother, El Hadji Mabigué, both devoutly religious, represent opposite ends of the spectrum. She rebels against the same system that he supports, accusing him of being in cahoots with the French authorities: "You

⁵ I completely agree with Eloise Brière who believes that the storm erases the mark of the white man as well as Christianity on Meka, in *Roman camerounais et ses discours* (Ivry-sur-Seine: Nouvelles du sud, 1993) 93.

⁶ Mbye B. Cham, "Islam in Senegalese Literature and Film," in *Faces of Islam in African Literature*, ed. Kenneth W. Harrow (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1991) 163–86.

⁷ Ousmane Sembène, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1988); *God's Bits of Wood*, trans. Francis Price (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962). All subsequent references are to the Doubleday edition and appear in the text in parentheses after the abbreviation BB.

are in league with them, Mabigué" (BB 68). In no way denying his collaboration, he cites theological reasons for not supporting the striking railroad workers: "It is not our part in life to resist the will of heaven. I know that life is often hard, but that should not cause us to turn our backs on God. He has assigned a rank, a place, and a certain role to every man, and it is blasphemous to think of changing His design. The 'toubabs' are here because that is the will of God. Strength is a gift of God, and Allah has given it to them. We cannot fight against it" (BB 68).

Not only do colonialism and Islam converge, but their site of intersection in this text is El Hadji Mabigué himself, who is also represented metaphorically through his ram, Vendredi, which Ramatoulaye kills. First, the title "El Hadji" reflects Mabigué's strong faith, indicating that he has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, just as Vendredi's name translates as the Muslim sabbath—Friday. Second, Mabigué's yellow shoes correspond to Vendredi's coat, which is yellowed by the sun. Last, El Hadji is twice referred to as a "goat" (BB 174, 153).⁸

At the same time, El Hadji Mabigué and Vendredi represent a contradiction. With his magnificent horns and well-kept coat, Vendredi is physically imposing, terrorizing the women in the compound. His masculinity and his virility are accentuated, although he has been castrated. El Hadji Mabigué, too, parades around, dressed superbly in two "boubou," a red hat, and yellow "babouches." Conversely, with his delicate hands, light-pink palms, theatrical gestures, and rose-colored parasol, he is represented as somewhat effeminate. Another kind of impotence, psychological castration, is figured in his fatalism.

It is his sister, Ramatoulaye, who assumes a leadership position and challenges the system. She attacks and battles Vendredi after he invades the women's space, overturning utensils, rice, and calabashes in his search for food. Ramatoulaye spots him as he is emerging from Bineta's house, chewing a red and white cloth. Ramatoulaye ostensibly kills the goat in order to feed her neighbors, who have suffered during the strike. Moreover, her courageous act can be interpreted as an attack on French colonialism as well, when we consider the goat's blueish white eyes, together with the red and white striped cloth hanging from its mouth, a symbol of the tricolor. Islam and the French colonial enterprise thus clearly intersect on the figures Vendredi and El Hadji Mabigué.

Ramatoulaye's killing of Vendredi is not only a strike against oppression, but functions also as a sacrifice that is misinterpreted as a crime by her brother and the police. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard provides an analysis that can be used as a framework for interpreting the reaction to Ramatoulaye's deed: "In many rituals the sacrificial act assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort

⁸ The Price translation eliminates the key word, substituting "man." See page 174. The Presses Pocket edition reads: "Ramatoulaye refusa d'adresser la parole à ce bouc" (198).

of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity.”⁹ Girard goes on to say that, “according to Moslem tradition, God delivered to Abraham the ram previously sacrificed by Abel. The ram was to take the place of Abraham’s son Isaac; having already saved one human life, the same animal would now save another.”¹⁰ In Sembène’s text, Ramatoulaye doubles as Abraham who sacrifices the ram, in this case Vendredi, in order to save lives. Ramatoulaye’s role as an exemplary religious character is unquestionably appropriate in that her name conjures up Ramadan, a sacred period on the Muslim calendar. It is she who provides the food that breaks the fast that is practiced from sunup to sundown. Of course, in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, abstaining from food is neither voluntary nor dictated by religious practice, but due to lack of food. In spite of her name, however, Ramatoulaye is not identified as Muslim in the text. While the women pray, she goes in search of food. Most telling is the fact that she wears several amulets around her neck, and her arms are covered with fetish bracelets that reach her elbow, suggesting that she practices instead a traditional African religion.

Whatever her religious affiliation or motivation for killing Vendredi may be, Ramatoulaye is staunchly supported by the community. When the crowd that has gathered outside the police station where she is being questioned refuses to disperse, despite water hoses being turned on them, it is the spiritual leader, the Sérigne N’Dakarou, who is summoned to suppress the opposition. This scene revisits a similar one discussed above in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* in which the government representative seeks the aid of Père Vandermayer, the head of the Catholic mission (VN 9). The Sérigne N’Dakarou makes an entrance, the framing of which recalls the description of El Hadji Mabigué’s ram, Vendredi. The Sérigne, the voice of authority, scolds the women, suggesting that the strikers are infidels, manipulated by communists. With medals around his neck (which the reader can assume are similar to the one given to Meka in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* as a reward for his cooperation with the French), he proposes to his patrons a sermon reminding the strikers that it is God’s will that they not defy French authority. So eager to please his “masters” and to demonstrate his complete subservience, the Sérigne insists that Ramatoulaye apologize to her brother, although El Hadji has withdrawn his complaint.

Another manifestation of the Sérigne’s complicity occurs at a rally at the Dakar hippodrome where he gives a speech combining an elegy to the visiting “gouverneur” along with verses from the Koran. Bakayoko responds to the Sérigne’s betrayal of his own people when he addresses the strikers and their supporters, noting that “The Imam spoke to you of God. Does that mean he doesn’t know that people who are hungry and thirsty are likely to forget the way to the mosque?” (BB 297). He then asks the dignitaries present at the rally to take

⁹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 1.

¹⁰ Girard 4.

back the worthless military medals Fatou Wade was awarded upon the death of husband and eldest son, killed in two separate French wars, in exchange for the release of her youngest son, a striker who is in prison.

The Sérigne is not the only spiritual leader who tries to stifle opposition: a general “campagne de démoralisation,” which appropriates colonial discourse, is launched: “After the prayers and religious services all over the city, there would be a sermon whose theme was always the same: ‘By ourselves, we are incapable of creating any sort of useful object, not even a needle, and yet you want to strike against the toubabs who have brought us all of these things! It is madness! You would do better to be thanking God for having brought them among us and bettered our lives with the benefits of their civilization and their science’” (BB 279). These collaborators, rendered furious when the community defies their warnings, then target the strike committee members in particular, holding them responsible for sins such as alcoholism, atheism, prostitution, infant mortality, even predicting that their deeds would lead to the end of the world.

Sembène is no less severe illustrating Christian institutions’ complicity with French colonialism in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*. The European section of Thies is nicknamed the “Vatican,” thus transforming the spiritual center of Catholicism into a center of political and economic power in Senegal. Isolated from the rest of the town, the Vatican is the neighborhood where the villas of white employees of the railroad company are located. Surrounded by sculpted gardens, where children play with water hoses, it provides a stark contrast to the dry faucets in the African neighborhoods. Leblanc is one resident, however, who has attempted, although unsuccessfully, to transgress the barriers constructed between the two communities by colonial domination. His disillusionment is figured in his alcoholism.

In conclusion, Ferdinand Oyono and Ousmane Sembène demystify Christian and Muslim leaders and their followers in Cameroon and Senegal, respectively, by not only exposing, but condemning as well, their complicity with French colonialism. Subverting this alliance involves profaning the sacred as illustrated by these words spoken by Alioune in *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*: “Oh shut up with your talk of the will of God” (BB 281).

Whether it is a question of military medals, Christian medals, or medals of friendship, they signify complicity, loss, and oppression, and are equally worthless. This particular intersection of the secular and the sacred in the form of an unholy alliance between religious institutions and French colonialism is unquestionably maligned in *Le Vieux nègre et la médaille* and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*.