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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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GUILLAUME OYONO-MBIA'S CHRONIQUES DE MVOUTESSI I:

A COMMENTED TRANSLATION

Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies of
the University of Ottawa in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, Applied
Linguistics (Translation).

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1	
Guillaume Oyono Mbia: The Man, The Writer and The Translator of his own works.....	6
1.1 G. Oyono Mbia: The Man.....	7
1.2 G. Oyono Mbia: The Writer.....	7
1.3 G. Oyono Mbia: The Translator of his own Works.....	13
CHAPTER 2	
"Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes": Themes and Signifiers.....	21
2.1 Themes.....	22
2.2 Symbolic Signifiers.....	30
CHAPTER 3	
Oyono Mbia's Idiom and its Mapping from Source to Target Texts.....	32
3.1 At the level of phonology.....	34
3.2 Loan words.....	34
3.3 Proverbs and sayings.....	35
3.4 Regionalisms.....	37
3.5 Metaphor, simile and rhyme.....	42
3.6 Oral literary devices.....	43
3.6.1 Ideophones.....	43
3.6.2 Swearwords.....	47

3.6.3	Enunciative devices.....	47
3.6.3.1	Pauses.....	47
3.6.3.2	Repetitions.....	50
3.6.3.3	Rhetorical Questions.....	51

CHAPTER 4

	Background Information Required to Understand the Culture from which Oyono Mbia's Cultural Allusions in the Stories Emanate.....	54
4.1	Geographical setting of the stories.....	54
4.2	Human setting.....	55
4.2.1	The African component in the stories.....	55
4.2.1.1	Social organization.....	55
4.2.1.2	Religious life.....	65
4.2.2	The imported component.....	70

SOURCE TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

	LE SERMON DE YOHANNES NKATEFOE.....	76
	A CHRISTMAS DAY IN MVOUTESSI.....	77
	LES SEPT FOURCHETTES.....	108
	SEVEN FORKS!.....	109
	NOTES.....	134
	CONCLUSION.....	150
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	155

INTRODUCTION

Chroniques de Mvoutessi I is the first of three volumes of tales published by Guillaume Oyono Mbia. This Cameroonian writer produced all three volumes as a collection of tales from his native village, Mvoutessi. "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes" - the first and third tales, respectively, of Chroniques de Mvoutessi I - are the two stories I have translated.

As a critic of African literature once pointed out,¹ African literature means different things to different writers. For some, it is a political document of protest against colonialism and imperialism in Africa; for others, it is a tool for the literate African to express not only his pride in his culture, but also the essence of his cultural heritage, i.e. to ensure that the content and excellence of black culture do not go forgotten in a white-dominated world. This is the purpose of Oyono Mbia's tales, which describe his fellow villagers confronted with Christianity and imported values which clash with their traditional culture and ways of worship and are finally imposed on them.

Oyono Mbia's objective in writing his short stories is clearly stated in his preface:

Mon voeu, en ... publiant [ces contes] maintenant, est qu'à défaut d'éveiller en vous de nostalgiques échos, elles puissent tout de même vous divertir.²

In other words, he writes to entertain his audience while also reminding them of a nostalgic past which today is no longer in existence, having been partially or wholly replaced by imported values.

¹ Ernest Emenyonu, "African literature: What does it take to be its critic?", in African Literature Today (New York: African Publishing Corporation, 1971), p. 1

² G. Oyono Mbia, Chroniques de Mvoutessi I (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1971), p. 6

With this objective in mind, Oyono Mbia turned to oral African literature as a model for his tales.³ Having chosen the short story as his genre, he could often achieve his objective by making only passing references to the customs and practices of the people he was describing. He did not need to provide his audience with detailed explanations and descriptions of these practices because the audience was an integral part of the background. Such detailed descriptions could only render the stories boring to the public for which he was writing.

However, the communicative situation in which I found myself while translating Oyono Mbia's stories for a North American public is by no means the same. This is because my audience, the readers of my translation, have little or no knowledge of the culture described by the author. Thus, in order to remain faithful to Oyono Mbia's objective of using the stories as a means of entertaining his audience while making them aware of the traditional practices of a nostalgic past, I had to find some way to provide my readers with the cultural background they would need to understand the various practices and cultural aspects mentioned or implied by the author. As an African, I feel I should take it upon myself to introduce my North American readers in particular and non-African English-speaking readers in general to African literature by translating it in such a way as to give them access to the culture presented.

³ Oyono Mbia's literary bent came from the oral literature of his village childhood as he admits in an interview: "We had in our family a tradition of story telling. My mother was and still is a good story-teller. Every evening she used to gather us small children around her and tell stories in a rather humorous fashion. Her stories were usually meant to criticize our bad habits, to educate us. We got into the habit of using stories as a means of showing people what we thought they ought to be doing...." Lee Nichols, Conversations with African Writers (Washington, D.C., V.O.A. Publication, 1981), p. 236

The decision to remain faithful to the intention of my source has inevitably led to the following question: how can I best convey Oyono Mbia's message to my non-African English-speaking readers? In other words, what methods do I have to use to communicate the culture-bound aspects of the original text with which the readers are definitely not familiar?

This crucial question has drawn the attention of some well-known translation theorists such as G. Mounin, E. Nida, P. Newmark and I. Almeida, who have suggested different ways of supplying the background information the target-language audience will need to appreciate texts emanating from a culture very different from its own.⁴ One solution proposed consists of adding footnotes to the translations of such texts so as to explain the cultural words and expressions found in the texts. However, an abundance of footnotes can be as disruptive to the readers as are long explanations within the text itself, because they will mar the flow of the text, forcing the readers to divide their attention between the critical apparatus and the story as such. Another variant of the footnote proposal, suggested by Almeida and Newmark,⁵ is the use of a glossary to explain culture-bound expressions which are transcribed or translated in the text proper. Thus a glossary would be an asset here but, as Almeida points out, African authors do not provide their

⁴ George Mounin, Linguistique et traduction (Bruxelles: Dessert et Mardaga, 1976), p. 82

E. Nida, Towards a Science of Translating (1964), p. 172

P. Newmark, Approaches to Translation (1981), pp. 77, 74, 147

I. A. Almeida, "Literary Translation: The Experience of Translating Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God into French" in META, Vol. 27, No. 3, (1982), pp. 286-294

⁵ P. Newmark, ibid, p. 76

I. A. Almeida, ibid, p. 291

readers with one in the original. And this absence may have been a deliberate choice to kindle the readers' curiosity and thus impel them to find out more about the cultural background of the stories.⁶ It is for this reason that I have decided to leave out a glossary and instead give the background information in a separate chapter.

Another solution could have been for me to integrate supplementary information into the translated text every time I come across a cultural item. This supplementary information could be in the form of translation couplets,⁷ descriptive phrases,⁸ and definitions accompanying borrowed words⁹. But these would inevitably lengthen the text and often render the sentences in which they are found clumsy and unwieldy.

Another drawback in trying to integrate supplementary information into the translation is that not all information that the translator deems necessary can be treated in this way. This has been pointed out by Eugene Nida, who claims that the translator:

... may make explicit in the text only what is linguistically implicit in the immediate context of the problematic passage... [he] may not simply add interesting cultural information which is not actually present in the meaning of the term used in the passage.¹⁰

⁶ I. A. Almeida, ibid., p. 291
⁷ i.e. "transcription" of the source language term (borrowed word) followed by its approximate translation in brackets. See P. Newmark, op cit., p. 76
⁸ E. Nida, op. cit., p. 172
⁹ P. Newmark, op. cit., p. 174
E. Nida, ibid., p. 172
G. Mounin, op. cit., p. 52, 82
¹⁰ E. Nida, The Theory and Practice of Translation (London: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 11

Thus, the disruptive nature of overly numerous footnotes, the inadequacy and artificiality of a glossary, as well as its restriction by I. A. Almeida, and the clumsiness of sentences overloaded with information, coupled with Nida's restriction, make it evident that none of the solutions suggested above is sufficient by itself. The translator must therefore use a judicious blend of them all. Even a combination of these solutions may not be enough to provide a non-African reader with all the information he requires to understand and appreciate a text dealing with African culture. Thus, while defining and explaining some specific terms and expressions in footnotes, I have still decided to provide my readers with bio-bibliographical information about the author and with the general cultural background which I feel they require to better situate in their wider context the various African practices that my author refers to in his tales. This background information will concern the geographical, historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts within which the cultural allusions of my texts acquire relevance.

CHAPTER 1Guillaume Oyono Mbia: The Man, The Writer,
and The Translator of his own works

Guillaume Oyono Mbia, author of Chroniques de Mvoutessi, Volumes I, II, and III is a famous writer from the former French Cameroons. This country was first colonized by the Germans in 1884, then mandated by the League of Nations in 1919 to the French and British governments which had defeated the Germans in the 1st World War, in Cameroon. Following agitation for independence by African countries in general, the French sector became independent on January 1, 1960, under the new name of Cameroon Republic. The following year a plebiscite was held in the English sector of Cameroon on February 11, 1961 under United Nations supervision and the people voted for independence and unification with former East Cameroon. On October 1, 1961 the two independent sectors united to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. A referendum in 1972 changed this name to the United Republic of Cameroon and now the country is simply the Republic of Cameroon, as of August 1983.

This history of Cameroon is important for its writers because they are usually studied and their works classified into two main groups: pre-independence and post-independence writers. While the literary works of pre-independence writers portray anti-colonial struggle and the sufferings of the Cameroonian people, those of post-independence writers describe the old Cameroonian society with its taboos, its close family and tribal ties, its superstitions, and its conflict with the new choices, new freedoms, and new perspectives brought by independence. It is to the latter group of Cameroonian writers that Guillaume Oyono Mbia belongs.

1.1 Oyono Mbia: The Man

A native speaker of Bulu, Guillaume Oyono Mbia was born in 1939 in Mvoutessi, a small village near Sangmelima in the southern part of Cameroon. This village setting was later to inspire both his plays and his short stories. He was the son of a farmer and received his primary education in Mvoutessi, after which he went for secondary education to a seminary, Collège Evangélique de Libamba, near Yaoundé, the country's capital. It was here he began to write, "by mere accident", as he later claims. After passing his Baccalauréate, he was recruited to teach French, English and German in the same college. In 1964 he had a British Council scholarship to prepare a diploma as a translator/interpreter in London, and from 1965 to 1969 he studied English and French at the University of Keele, Staffordshire, England, where he graduated with a B.A. He then returned to Cameroon and since then has been teaching English at the University of Cameroon in Yaoundé. From 1972 to 1975, in addition to his academic duties, he was head of the cultural affairs division of the Ministry of Information and Culture, and in 1977 helped organize a Colloquium on Cameroon literature and literary criticism in the University of Yaoundé.¹

1.2 Oyono Mbia: The Writer

It was during his secondary school years in Libamba that Oyono Mbia began his writing career: "I was preparing for the French baccalauréate", he says, "and this, in fact, led me to write in dramatic dialogue."² For his first

¹ Richard Bjornson, "Colloquium on Cameroon Literature and Literary Criticism", Research in African Literatures, 9, No. 1, (1978), pp. 79-85

² Hans M. Zell, A New Reader's Guide to African Literature, (London: H.E.B. 1983), p. 461

five-act comedy, Trois prétendants...un mari, he took the theme of rival suitors and bargaining parents who want to "sell" their daughters for a bride price to the richest suitor. This play, according to the author's note to the published text, was written when he was a twenty-year old student, to divert his classmates and thank them for having helped him with his math assignments. This work, the first play by a Cameroonian writer, was staged in Libamba and Yaoundé for the first time in 1960, and published four years later by Editions CLE, Yaoundé. Since then, it has been staged in Britain and France with great success. Spurred on by the success of this first literary work in French, Oyono Mbia wrote its English version, Three Suitors: One Husband, which was published in 1968³ in a Methuen play script along with Until Further Notice, a radio play written in English that received first prize in a drama competition organized by the BBC African service. Early in 1970 the latter play was awarded the newly established El Hadj Amadou Ahidjo literary prize, and was issued in a French edition entitled Jusqu'à nouvel avis by Edition CLE. Like the English version of Trois prétendants...un mari, this French edition had been rewritten by Oyono himself. Even before its publication, a stage adaptation of this comedy of manners had been produced at the Edinburgh Festival of 1967. The action of this second play focusses on a group of villagers waiting in vain for the triumphal return of an educated daughter of the village, who has married an important government official. The villagers want to "cash in" on their "investment" as those who paid for the girl's education, but the young couple are reluctant to come to Mvoutessi and share the material rewards of their success.

³ This English version of the play was revised and expanded in a 1969 edition

Oyono Mbia's third play, Notre fille ne se mariera pas! (1971 and reissued 1973) is the only one of his plays that has yet to appear in English. Winner of the 1969 Inter-African theatre competition sponsored by Radio-France Internationale, this play comically reverses the theme of Three Suitors: One Husband, in which the educated daughter had to be married at all costs to the "highest bidder". In Notre fille ne se mariera pas! (Our Daughter must not Marry) the family is concerned to prevent the daughter's marriage in order to make sure that her earnings as an educated person will be channelled directly into the family coffers. Thus both plays examine the rift that separates the old and young generations in Oyono's society, but from opposing viewpoints.

In these plays, Oyono Mbia describes the villagers trying to exploit their educated daughters either by marrying them off to rich suitors or by making sure they remain single so as to share their salaries with the family. However, In "Les sept fourchettes", the second story translated here, we will also read of the exploitation of educated men as the villagers expect Tita-Mongo, a mission-school teacher, to share his riches freely with them.

A fourth play, His Excellency's Special Train (Le train spécial de son Excellence), was published in English and French editions by CLE⁴ in 1978. A radio play in one act, this play had already appeared in the journal "OZILIA; forum littéraire camerounais - Cameroon Literary Workshop,"⁴ 1970, in mimeographed form. The preceding year, 1969, the BBC had broadcast it in London. The comic element in this play centres on the gap between people's

⁴ This journal was founded in the same year by René Philombe, another Cameroonian writer and the issue referred to here is: OZILIA; forum littéraire camerounais - Cameroon Literary Workshop, Supplement to No. 3, Yaoundé April 1970

expectations and their perceptions as they anxiously await the arrival of a very important dignitary, only to be keenly disappointed when he turns out not to look very important at all. This play won the 1971 Inter-African theatre competition organized by Radio-France Internationale, marking another success for Guillaume Oyono Mbia.

After writing successfully as a playwright, Oyono Mbia turned from the dramatic genre to short stories, and between 1971 and 1972 published three collections of short stories entitled Chroniques de Mvoutessi I, II and III, thus adding to his prolific output. In the first of the three volumes, which contains the stories I have translated - none of the others have as yet been translated into English - Oyono Mbia continues the humorous portraits of the inhabitants of Mvoutessi that he had begun in his plays. In this volume, which contains "Le Sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoe", "La petite gare," (whose dramatized version "Le train spécial de son Excellence" had already been published) and "Les Sept fourchettes," we meet the village catechist, the station master, and the village chief. Chroniques de Mvoutessi II, an authentic story, makes gentle fun of a certain type of "emancipated" young woman in Africa. In his short story, Oyono Mbia relates a fortuitous encounter with one of his former students, a Miss Marie-Thérèse Medjo, an astonishing young lady who plans a film career. The third volume, Chroniques de Mvoutessi III (1972), also contains a single story in which we meet Madame Matalina who has managed to climb the social ladder thanks to her inventiveness in exploiting her daughter Charlotte's natural charms and beauty. Since the publication of these short stories, Oyono Mbia, the once prominent and prolific Cameroonian playwright, has published no new works. However, the year of his last publication, 1972, coincides with the year when he took up a second appointment as head of cultural affairs in the Ministry of

Information and Culture.

Of Oyono Mbia's seven publications, four are plays. This essentially comic playwright believes that the theatre is "the only means which can reach illiterate as well as literate people"⁵; he once even expressed the wish to specialize in a kind of participatory theatre where people are "allowed to take part."⁶ Clearly, Oyono Mbia wrote for the Cameroonian and African audience, which contains both illiterate and literate people - who all need his message. In these plays one sees that his peculiar qualities as a comic writer are his ironic verve, his spontaneity, his command of scenic situation and verbal humour, and above all, his ability to infuse into his gallery of village types and his caricature of an African society sufficiently universal aspects to give his works a wide appeal. Through this he succeeds at the same time in combining a grain of moralizing with uninhibited laughter at the burlesque or farcical elements.

Oyono Mbia's works share certain common features. Apart from Le train spécial de son Excellence, "La petite gare", and Chroniques de Mvoutessi II, all his literary works are set in Mvoutessi, his own village. He says he chose his own village as a setting so as not to anger people:

I'm chiefly a satirical writer and it wouldn't have done me any good to do satirical writing about someone else's village. But it would be a mistake to say it concerns only my village. My village is taken as a typical village in southern Cameroon.⁷

Thus the themes and characters in his writings are set in Mvoutessi, but they could be from any African village.

⁵ Interview quoted in Hans M. Zell, op. cit. (p. 461)

⁶ Ibid., p. 461

⁷ "Guillaume Oyono Mbia", transcript of an interview with Lee Nicholas, op. cit., p. 237

The themes that interest Oyono Mbia, such as traditional nepotism, superstition, and the subjection of women, as well as the confrontation of the rural African with his westernized city cousin and with the benefits of modern consumer society, are those that concern contemporary society:

My short stories are concerned with the days after independence. I'm not concerned with the times before. So many good writers have written about those times....It's about time we began looking for what may be wrong in our days or what may be right, why not?⁸

He is thus a realistic writer who wants to describe the contemporary life of his people. Although concerned with social problems, he clearly says: "I don't write about politics, and I'm not a man with slogans. I don't believe in clear-cut solutions to problems. I simply want to show people the (Social) problems we are faced with. I leave it to the audience to suggest the solution."⁹ This refusal to write about politics keeps him out of trouble with the government.

Oyono Mbia does not have an inflated idea as to the role of the writer. For him, the writer is neither a guide nor a messiah but an objective person who can demonstrate intellectual honesty in literary creativity and criticism without trying to involve himself in politics at the same time:

I think a writer is a reporter, a man who perhaps has a gift not only for seeing but also for telling people what he saw and they may have missed. I think a writer ought to be true not only to himself but to his age, and nothing pleases me more than to have people with no literary pretensions pick up my book and say, "Yes, this is what happened in my village."¹⁰

Thus for Oyono Mbia, the writer is a type of journalist who observes and records what society may have missed without trying to chant slogans or

⁸ Ibid., p. 237

⁹ Ibid., pp.237-8

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 238-9

prescribe a moral or political vision to his people. This is easily understood when one sees the treatment given to some African writers who tried to criticize the policies of their governments.

1.3 Oyono Mbia: The Translator of his own Works

In addition to being a language professor, a cultural affairs civil servant, and, like all African writers, a producer of committed literature,¹¹ Oyono Mbia is also the "translator" of some of his literary works. Completely bilingual, he is an unusual author who wrote his plays in both English and French, and the process of going from one language to the other he calls "rewriting" rather than "translation". In fact he even claims that he never translates his plays:

I hate it when people refer to my translations. I take into account the different mentalities of English and French speakers. And the theater experiences of the French-speaking and English-speaking audiences are so widely different that I always try to make not only linguistic but staging differences.¹²

Of course, with his bilingual education - in Cameroon and in Britain, while preparing a diploma as translator/interpreter - Oyono Mbia can write French and English very well. But to say that he never translates his plays is subject to much argument because some translation theorists consider rewriting as part of the translation act itself.

Oyono Mbia's practice of translation provided me with guidelines in the translation of his short stories. It will thus be of interest here to include

¹¹ This is the view generally held of African authors as expressed by L. S. Senghor: "En Afrique, l'art pour l'art n'existe pas: tout art est social", L. S. Senghor, "L'esthétique négro-africaine" in Liberté 1: Négritude et Humanisme, p. 207

¹² Lee Nichols, op. cit., p. 236

a detailed description of the way in which he translated the many literary and enunciative devices that abound in his writing. The examples used here to show how his translation specifically affected my own translation are drawn from Trois prétendants...un mari, which he translated as Three Suitors: One Husband.¹³

Oyono's language in this first play of his is very highly "Africanized"¹⁴ and is full of ideophones, pauses, oaths, proverbs, loan words from his native Bulu, and phrases that reflect the peculiar French usage of Cameroon. He consequently Africanized his English translation, or "rewritten version" as he would like it to be called, by carrying over all these devices.

His translation of pauses and of ideophones such as interjections, gap-fillers and onomatopoeia was of particular interest to me. Consider the following examples:

- Euh... Il faut avouer que Juliette est une fille digne d'un père comme moi (p. 15)₁₅
Er... I must admit, Juliette is the right daughter for a wise man like me (p. 11)
- Kaé... kaé! Il vous faudra alors prendre une autre décision! (p. 33)
Kiaah! kiaah! You'd better reconsider your decision (p. 24)
- A a a ka, Atangana! N'en parle pas! (p. 13)
Ah ka Atangana! Don't talk about it! (p. 9)

¹³ G. O. Mbia, Trois prétendants...un mari, (Yaoundé: CLE, 1964) Three Suitors: One Husband, (London: Methuen & Co., 1968)

¹⁴ Gerald Moore, "English Words, African Lives", Présence Africaine, XXVI, 54 (1964), p. 90-101

¹⁵ Each example is followed by its page in the original or in the translation

- Ha ha! Tu te fâches encore, Ondoua? ... (p. 14)

Ha ha! ...So you're getting angry, Ondoua? ... (p. 10)

These examples reveal the efforts made by Oyono Mbia to preserve the local colour in his translation by carrying over such interjections as "kiaah! kiaah!", "ah ka", gap-fillers like "er..." and onomatopoeia like "ha ha!", as they appear in the original or after adapting them to the graphology of the English language. In the first and last examples above, respectively, the speakers pause after the gap-filler "er..." and the mocking laughter "ha ha!..." which is used to draw the audience's attention. Un-typical of "standard" English as they are, these ideophones and pauses have been preserved in Oyono Mbia's English translation so as to simulate African usage.

In addition to the ideophones and pauses, Oyono also carries over swearwords:

- Zua Meka! J'espère que ce sera assez pour donner à Ndi! (p. 69)

Zua Meka! I hope that's going to be enough for Ndi! (p. 50)

- ... Je vois les femmes manger même des vipères, des sangliers, des... (claquant des mains scandalisée) Eé é kié Oyono Eto Mekong ya Ngozip é é é ! (p. 15)

... I see women eating even vipers, wild boars, and ... (clapping her hands in disgust) Aa Keeeah, Oyono Eto Mekong ya Ngozip aah!
(p.10)

In both cases, "Zua Meka" and "Oyono Eto Mekong ya Ngozip", oaths invoking Bulu ancestors, have been preserved in the translation; similarly, the interjections "Eé é kié" and "é é é", which express the speaker's disgust, have also been carried over after being adapted to the graphology of English.

Another device in Oyono's works is the use of "cushioned" loan words. Cushioning is of two types: "In overt cushioning", explains P. Young, "The author uses explanatory tags or parentheses to explain the loan words, while in covert cushioning he fashions the immediate co-text into a careful context

of explanations."¹⁶ Oyono preserved both types of usage in his translation, as in this example:

- Les femmes de ce village font illégalement distiller de l'arki!
J'en ai bu... chez le chef Mbarga (p. 79) (my italics)

The women of this village are illegally distilling 'Arki'!
I drank... some of it... in the Headman Mbarga's house! (p. 57)
(my italics)

In both versions, the untranslated Bulu word "arki" has been covertly cushioned by an explanatory context. This shows Oyono Mbia's determination to make sure that both English and French suit their "new African surrounding", in the words of Chinua Achebe.

Apart from untranslated Bulu words, Oyono also used literal translations of proverbs and wise sayings from Bulu. This gave rise to certain fixed-phrases in his language which he rendered literally, too, in the English version:

- Quand le caméléon meurt, le margouillat hérite de son sac de kolas
(p. 80)

When the chameleon dies, the grey lizard should inherit his sack of cola nuts... (p. 58)

- ... Les fantômes ne parlent jamais avant que la pluie ne soit tombée! (p. 84)

... Dead men never speak unless it has rained... (p. 60)

- ... Quand la rivière est à sec, l'eau ne coule plus! (p. 86)

... when a river has dried up, the water no longer runs! (p. 60)

The use of these literally translated Bulu proverbs and sayings calls for further cushioning in the immediate co-texts to make them match their environments and render them intelligible. Oyono Mbia translates them literally into English since their contexts of usage make them intelligible.

¹⁶ Peter Young, "Mechanism to Medium: The Language of West African Literature in English" in Anna Rutherford, ed., Common Wealth. (1971), p. 40

I did the same with proverbs and wise sayings in my translation.

Oyono Mbia also preserved the Africanized language with its repetitions so as to reflect the spirit and flavour of village ways of oratory:

- Mariage impossible! Impossible! Rendez-lui sa bière! Parenté! Parenté! (p. 33) (my italics)
- No marriage... No marriage! Return him his beer! He's related to Juliette! No marriage! (p. 23) (my italics)
- Tu... tu étudies toujours à Dibamba, n'est-ce pas, ma petite? (p. 18) (my italics)
- You... you're still studying at Dibamba, aren't you, my child? (p. 13) (my italics)

Repetition is important here for emphasis (first example) and also when the speaker expresses doubts (second example). It is for this reason that the author preserved them in his translation, thereby conveying his village usage.

In my translation, I was also guided by the way Oyono rendered distorted words, phrases and certain aspects of usage which constitute the peculiar Cameroonian French usage, particularly in the villages where both literate and illiterate characters live. This is because each character's language reflects his or her level of education, as in these examples:

- ... tu étudies toujours à Dibamba, ... (p. 18) (my italics)
- ... you're still studying at Dibamba ... (p. 13)
- Sieur! (p. 44)
- Sah! (p. 31)
- Deux cent mille ... quoi? (p. 52)
- Two hundred ... what? (p. 38)

In the first example, the speaker, an old man, is talking of Libamba but mispronounces the name. In the second, the speaker, an illiterate driver, answers his boss Sieur instead of Monsieur. The third example looks like a question but is in fact a statement expressing the speaker's surprise at the

amount of money paid as dowry. Oyono Mbia rendered all these phrases by equivalent Cameroonian distortions in English. This guided me in my translation of "Sion", "rôki" and "Travail... quoi?"¹⁷ as "Sion", "roasti" and "To work... what?"

Oyono Mbia also took some liberties in his translation of Trois prétendants ... un mari. The freeness of his translation is revealed by the additions, omissions and modifications which are found in the English version. This can also be taken as a justification for his claim that he "rewrites" and does not "translate" his plays. The differences between his source and target texts appear in the following examples:

- ... Epouser un homme si riche! E é é é ! la veinarde! Elle aura bientôt des tas de robes, des jupes en tergal, des perruques blondes, elle aura tout! (p. 16) (my italics)
- ... Fancy marrying a wealthy man! She'll soon have lots of dresses, blonde wigs, she'll soon have everything! (p. 11)
- C'est cela! Je lui annoncerai la bonne nouvelle moi-même! (p. 18)
- Yes!... I'll break the good news to her myself! Just go and get her suitcase... (p. 12) (my italics)
- Bon... euh... je vais t'expliquer la situation, mon enfant ... (p. 19)
- I'll tell you all about it my child!... (p. 14)
- Ah Oyôn! Ne reste pas planté là à me regarder comme si je dansais l'"Ozila"!... (p. 73) (my italics)
- Ah Oyono! Don't just stand there looking at me!... (p. 52)

In the first example, the structures "E é é é ! la veinarde!" and "des jupes en tergal" - a French cultural item - have been omitted in the translation while in the second an explanatory sentence has been added. In the third

¹⁷ "Sion" see note no. 61 on the translation
 "rôki" see note no. 57 on the translation
 "Travail... quoi" is discussed in the next chapter

example, a word, "bon", and a gap filler "euh" have been left out, as has the comparison to "Ozila", a dance, in the last example. Given that the source-text is a play, the omissions do not affect its meaning since the omitted segments have been compensated for in other parts of the text. Their absence nonetheless represents significant omissions in the translation. I, however, could not exercise the same freedom in my translation.

The preservation of ideophones, swearwords, cushioned loan words, transliterated Bulu proverbs, repetitions and distorted words and phrases in Oyono Mbia's translation - as in mine - produces a convincing portrait of traditional Bulu society. The presence of these devices in his English enable it to describe his African experience. As Chinua Achebe says in answer to the question "Can [an African] ever learn to use [English] like a native speaker?":

I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for [an African] to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use.¹⁸

As used by African writers like Oyono Mbia, the English and French languages are paying this price, for the function of African literature - like that of any other literature - is to describe the unique experience in which it is rooted. The prose style of Oyono as an African author simulates natural expression in his native tongue. My translation must do the same.

With the exception of Notre fille ne se mariera pas! (1971) and Chroniques de Mvoutessi I, II, and III, Oyono Mbia's literary works all exist now in bilingual editions. This reveals the author's desire to be read by English-speaking Cameroonians - and Africans as well. These efforts as a translator were obviously productive because his bilingual plays with themes

¹⁸ Chinua Achebe (1965): "The African Writer and the English Language". Transition, Accra, Vol. 4, No. 8, reproduced in Morning Yet on Creation Day, Heinemann, 1975, p. 61

that are typically Cameroonian, or at best African, have carried his image and his ideas beyond the frontiers of his country, Cameroon - though there has been no in-depth study of him and his works.¹⁹

x

x x

Oyono Mbia's background throws light on his literary works and helps in decoding their message. However, his readers - particularly non-African readers - need some knowledge of Cameroonian society to fully understand his themes and objectives. This makes it necessary for me to give some extra information on Oyono Mbia's culture and society. But before giving a cultural background to the source texts, I will first analyse their themes.

¹⁹ No initial work has been published on Oyono Mbia. The information about him and his works given here is collected from several books, and from the back covers of some of his works.

CHAPTER 2.

"Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes":

Themes and Signifiers

"Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes", the two tales which I have chosen to translate, were both published in 1971 in Chroniques de Mvoutessi I. In his preface to these tales, Oyono Mbia makes it known that their purpose is to entertain his audience while reminding them of a nostalgic past, i.e. their life before the publication of the tales.

One must not, however, be deceived by the date of publication of these stories because Oyone Mbia says in his preface that he wrote them during "...ces années, fort lointaines et déjà allègrement oubliées, qui avaient suivi l'indépendance du Cameroun." This means that the nostalgic past referred to could have been the colonial era, and also that some of the situations described in the stories might have changed by the date of publication. He affirms this in the same preface: "Les temps changent, certaines choses passent, d'autres demeurent. Peut-être n'avons-nous plus au Cameroun des personnages comme j'en décris dans mes 'chroniques'." Thus one can say that the traditional society in conflict with imported cultures, as described in these tales, is not fixed but changes with the times, as a summary of the two tales and their themes will reveal.

The first tale, "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" - translated as "A Christmas Day in Mvoutessi" - recounts the events that take place in this village on a particular Christmas day while informing us of village life in general through flashbacks. The prudish, teetotaler village catechist, Yohannes Nkatefoé, assisted by the missionaries in Bibia, a nearby township,

gives sermons in the village chapel and is bent on converting all the villagers to Christianity. Of course, most of the villagers embrace Christianity, but some, under the leadership of Atemeteme, refuse the new religion, preferring to continue practising the cult of the ancestors and organizing drinking sessions on Sundays and Christian holidays so as to compete with the Christians. This tale ends with everybody in the village, Atemeteme included, going to the church to become Christians.

The second tale "Les sept fourchettes" (translated as "Seven Forks!") is set in the same village, Mvoutessi. Here, we meet protagonists such as Tita-Mongo, a villager who, having been to college, is considered a "white man" by the other villagers; Tita-Mezoe, the village chief, who after a visit to the city describes (with some exaggerations) all he saw there to the other villagers; Tita-Mongo's father, the dignified father of the village's literate teacher, who regrets the good old days and prepares sermons in the absence of the Catechist, and a host of other egoistical villagers with their taboos and superstitious beliefs. This tale compares the traditional life - hard work, bush products eaten with the hands, local values - with that of the city folk - who live in the villas, drive cars, and eat imported food with "seven forks". At the end of the tale the villagers agree that Tita-Mongo, their own son, must go study in Europe so that when he returns and lives in the city they too can visit him and share the material benefits of his education.

2.1 Themes

In both short stories, Oyono Mbia's plot is straightforward and logically developed; the humour is mainly verbal, with some good fun at the expense of his village types, some of whom recur in his stories. Oyono Mbia is also a master of comic situation, and the major theme that runs through both stories

is the conflict between indigenous and imported cultures. In the first tale, palm wine, symbolic of the indigenous culture, competes for the villagers' lives with Christianity, which signifies imported culture. In the second, the traditional life of the villagers is contrasted with that of their city brothers who live a life based on imported values. However, the villagers - though momentarily disconcerted by the complexities of new-fangled ideas and institutions such as Christianity in "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and concrete houses, automatic guns, sofas, imported frozen meat, and seven forks in "Les sept fourchettes" - are not necessarily worsted by their experiences, nor overwhelmed by the superiority of the city dwellers. In addition to the main theme there are also sub-themes in both stories: the unauthentic Christianity practised by the villagers, the subjection of women, and village versus city life. However, Oyono Mbia's moralizing in both tales is lighthearted and it is clear that his first intention is to exploit to the full the comic potential of the situation and the characters.

In the first tale we see the village divided into two camps with the Christians on one side and the non-converted with their Bacchic cult on the other. Wine and religion compete for the villagers' lives: On Sundays and Christian holidays, the catechist's drum beat calls the Christians to church and a similar beat calls the drinkers to Atemeteme's house:

- "Kandang...kandang...Chrétiens de Mvoutessi...de Mvoutessi...Réveillez-vous...Venez au culte...Noÿl...No...ÿl" (p. 76).

- "Kandang...kandang..Buveurs de Mvoutessi...de Mvoutessi...Préparez vous...beaucoup de vin..vin..Noÿl...No...ÿl..." (p. 76).

Here the author heightens the tension between religious worship and wine drinking by placing them in equivalent positions.¹ Later on in the tale we are told that the drinkers organized "un culte du vin destiné à rivaliser avec le service divin." This rivalry runs through the tale until the end when all the villagers go to church, including Atemeteme, the chief of the drinkers.

In addition to this opposition between religion and wine in Mvoutessi, Oyono Mbia shows the unauthentic way in which the converted villagers practise the Christian religion. These villagers bear Christian names such as Yohannes, Makrita, Tsakrias (for Johannes, Marguerite, and Zacharie, respectively), just to cite a few. These Biblical names have been adapted to the phonology of the Bulu language and, thus deformed, reflect the liberties taken by the villagers with the Christian religion, which they have adapted to suit their own African realities. Hence, some of the villagers attend church but still go to drink palm wine in the "unholy house." In the second story, Tita Oyono Essola misquotes Abraham of the Bible as having invited angels to come and drink palm wine instead of eating calf, though the Biblical verse had

¹ This exploitation of equivalences deriving from positional features is carried out systematically in the story, so as to bring out the tension existing in the village between the Christians and the non-converted. For example:

- Tous les dimanches matins, Nkatefoé faisait résonner son vieux tam-tam ... (p. 84)

- Tous les dimanches matins, le petit tam-tam tout neuf d'Atemeteme lui faisait écho. (p. 84)

- Deux fois déjà, le tam-tam de Nkatefoé avait annoncé le jour de Noël aux fidèles.

- Deux fois déjà, Atemeteme avait rappelé à ceux de sa bande que ce jour de Noël devait revêtir un éclat particulier. (p. 86) (my italics)

been taught to the villagers less than a week before;² Tita-Mongo's father is surprised by his Christian friends who expected Tita-Mongo to buy drinks for them after returning from the city where he had been to mark the school-leaving certificate. All these facts reveal the unauthentic Christianity practised in Mvoutessi by the newly converted villagers. In the light of this discussion one can say that Oyono Mbia portrays them as people who are trying to practise a new religion while retaining many of their old ways of living.

In addition to the conflict of indigenous and imported cultures, and the unauthentic Christianity practised in Mvoutessi, the two stories also deal with the subjection of women in the village. Without elaborating on it, they present the tragedy of the African woman. Oyono Mbia uses his stories as a vehicle through which he advocates social reform, launching a battle against traditional practices which have become harmful to society. He pleads for the emancipation of the African woman by describing their situation in his stories.

² Here the text reads thus:

- Sidome! reprit mon homonyme; et qu'est-ce que je disais? Abraham n'avait-il pas dit aux anges: Même si vous êtes pressés d'aller brûler Sidome, venez vider une petitealebasse de vin de palme?

- Abraham n'avait jamais dit cela! s'écria maman. Voilà comment tu te rappelles du verset biblique appris dimanche dernier! Abraham avait parlé de leur égorger un veau! (p. 124-126)

which I translated as:

"Sidom!" continued my homonym. "What was I saying? Didn't Abraham say to the angels: 'Even though you are in a hurry to go and burn down Sidom, just come drink a calabash of palm wine?'"

"Abraham never said that!" exclaimed my mother. "That's all you can remember of the Biblical verse that was taught only last Sunday! Abraham spoke of killing a calf for them! (p. 125-127)"

The North American reader will certainly be familiar with the problem of women's emancipation, which has been an issue in his society for some time. However, in reading these short stories he must understand this issue within its African context, because the situation differs in certain ways from that of the western world. In Africa, a man who wishes to marry pays a bride price for a wife who becomes his property. Besides, the woman's life, as portrayed by Oyono Mbia, is one of drudgery; rising in the small hours of the day, she attends to household chores, then leaves for the farm, to toil until sunset, when she returns home to prepare dinner for her husband and children. Hence, in the first story the catechist's wife cooks for him and even prepares his warm baths, while the other men spend their time sipping palm wine and "arki", leaving their wives to take care of the household chores. Polygamous men³ often have several wives who sometimes quarrel amongst themselves since they all live in the same harem. In the second story, the whole village had to go to Effot⁴ just to settle a dispute between two co-wives in Lukas Owono's harem.

However, it must be pointed out that the women generally accept this "traditional" role: housekeeping, child-rearing, and farming are considered as part of the business of being a wife and women do not view themselves as leading a life of bondage. Nonetheless, the subjection of women was a major source of inspiration for Oyono Mbia's writings⁵ and comes up in most of his

³ See note no. 49

⁴ See note no. 48

⁵ Of his four plays, three have as a theme the selling of daughters for a bride price and the three volumes of short stories deal with the exploitation of women

plays and short stories.

The situation he depicts has undergone little change today, especially in the rural areas - whose women inhabitants are illiterate and cannot enjoy the equal opportunities in schooling and education which have opened the door to "freedom" for their city counterparts. Today, as always, the educated woman's lot is far better than that of the others: there is no job discrimination, nor are there discrepancies between the wages of males and females. Should she be faced with an unhappy marriage, the educated woman may sue for divorce, whereas her rural and/or uneducated counterpart is incapacitated by her illiteracy. As it is, all the female characters in Oyono Mbia's stories are quiet on the issue of their subjection and he leaves it to the reader to judge from his description of their activities in the society. The chapter giving background information on the cultural aspects of the short stories will give further clarification on this issue to my North American or Western reader.

The two short stories, though set entirely in the Mvoutessi village, also reveal an opposition between life in the village and life in the city. The village here manifests all the major aspects of the indigenous culture, whereas the city manifests those of the imported culture. In the first story, the characters are all villagers who live on fish caught in the nearby So'o river and on game brought home from hunting trips, and who drink palm wine and "arki", both of which are local drinks. These people who eat the plantains and peanuts they cultivate themselves also practise their ancestral worship. It is in this state that Christianity, with all its western ways of living, such as salaried jobs in the sawmill, meets the villagers. The villagers thus have to make room for these new things while at the same time carrying on with their old ways of living. In the second story, too, the village characters,

consume bush meat sold to them by Haussas⁶ from the North of Cameroon, and silurids, caught in the village river and fried in karite butter, all of which they eat with their hands. In addition, they live in their local huts and go on journeys by foot. It is against this background of traditional practices that the village chief, Tita-Mezoe, on returning from a visit to Yaoundé, decides to tell the villagers of the modern things he has seen in the city. Unlike the villagers, city folk use knives and forks to eat imported frozen beef, drink red and not-so-red wines, drive cars, and live in concrete houses with soft beds. All these things reflect the material advantages enjoyed by the cityfolk while the villagers barely have the basic necessities. The poverty of the villagers makes them favour nepotism: if their son, Tita-Mongo, should one day be appointed Minister, they will expect him to appoint his brothers and cousins as divisional officers so that they can channel some of the financial benefits of salaried jobs into the village coffers. Thus, the village becomes the centre of out-dated traditional customs such as nepotism, strong tribal and family ties, and the exploitation of the few salaried workers from the city, while city life appears to be more individualistic and more egoistic in its materialism.

Faced with these superficial commodities of Western living, the villagers realize that the only way they can change their society from a traditional to a modern one is through education. But it is too late for most of them, so all they can do is to send their children to school while hoping that these children will bring home the material benefits of their education to share with the family. They have realized that proficiency in the "white man's tongue" and acquisition of his education are prerequisites to, and guarantees

⁶ See note no. 56

of progress: with them one could gain easy access to the posts of school teacher, catechist, clerical assistant, divisional officer, or even Minister in the government.⁷ This discovery of a new way to modernism makes the villagers feel that their inherited tradition, cultural values, and institutions are of no use and cannot lead them to the riches of the white man's education.

It must, however, be pointed out that Oyono Mbia compares life in the village with city life, not because he wants to discredit indigenous culture, but because he wants his people to see that change can only come through self-examination: his criticism is directed not against the imported culture found in the cities, but against the very roots of his society. Such roots are constituted by the negative aspects of tradition such as nepotism, egoism, and exploitative family and tribal ties. Thus, Oyono Mbia, without disseminating the idea that educated indigenous people are superior to their uneducated counterparts, makes them realize that change and progress can only come to their society through education, which is the only thing that can do away with their financial dependency.

With the conflict between indigenous and imported cultures as the main theme, and with sub-themes such as the unauthentic Christianity practised by the villagers, the subjection of women, and the contrast between village and city life, "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes" exemplify the type of literature that Robert Pageard categorizes as "social et réformateur" because it examines the problems of a society faced with change from traditional to modern ways:

⁷ In fact the villagers in the second story, "Les sept fourchettes" advise Tita-Mongo to go study in Europe so that on his return he may be appointed Minister in the government.

Il s'attaque aux problèmes que pose le passage de la société ancienne, patriarcale et mystique, à la société nouvelle fondée sur la raison et le respect de la liberté individuelle. Donc conflit entre générations.⁸

2.2 Symbolic Signifiers

These themes are organized about a number of items which acquire symbolic value. In the first story, palm wine is symbolic of the indigenous culture and its traditional practices such as ancestor worship, illiteracy, a life of bondage for women who must work all day while the men sit at home drinking their wine and only going out once in a while to hunt or fish for the family. The symbolic value of wine comes out in the following sentence, which sets up a parallel between wine worship and the divine worship of the Christians, and serves as a thematic matrix for the entire story:

Sans avoir lu Rabelais...[Atemeteme] avait décidé, en accord avec ses fidèles sujets, d'instituer à Mvoutessi un culte du vin destiné à rivaliser avec le service divin (p. 80);

suggesting a Bacchic cult which, with its "arki", brings the wine worshippers into conflict with the central gendarmerie. This symbolizes the negative aspects of tradition which contradict the administrative laws of the modern government. Atemeteme's final decision to break his wine calabashes before becoming a Christian confirms this symbolic value of wine as a signifier of the indigenous culture, while establishing Christianity as the imported culture. Religion thus symbolizes all the foreign values that stand for change, modernism and progress in the village. In fact, most of the Africans who first embraced the new religion did so for the materialism and progress associated with it because they thought that it was because of their God that

⁸ Littérature Négro-Africaine (1966), p. 45

the white missionaries were able to enjoy their material prosperity.

In the second story, the village symbolizes the indigenous culture with its negative aspects such as nepotism, polygamy, and strong family and tribal ties expected to yield material benefits. The poor living standards of the villagers with their huts, local beef, long journeys on foot, and illiteracy are also symbolized by the village when compared to the city. Hence, whenever the villagers think of the city, what comes to their minds is the symbolic value of the city: education, cars, cutlery, imported goods and foodstuffs, concrete houses with cement floors, soft beds and chairs. The forks in this story stand for the new modernized life of the western world. Tita-Mezoe eats with his hands in the village but eats with forks in the city. It is because forks are symbolic of education, progress, material riches that he tells Tita-Mongo:

...Tu iras toi-même signer des papiers en ville, comme mon beau-frère...Et alors, nous viendrons manger chez toi aussi avec sept fourchettés! (p. 132)

Thus it is that the different themes in Oyono Mbia's stories are invested in symbolic signifiers: wine and the village stand for the indigenous culture with its negative aspects that retard progress, while religion and the city stand for the imported culture that can be seen everywhere in the form of material prosperity and a higher standard of living.

CHAPTER 3

Oyono Mbia's Idiom and Its Mapping From Source to Target Text

As the translator of Oyono Mbia's stories, my task was not only to convey his ideas (discussed in the chapter on the source texts and their themes) but also to render his idiom in such a way as to make the translation accessible to a non-African speaker of the target language, English.

Mainstream English and French reflect different conceptualisations and orderings of the world as seen by their peoples and cultures. These differences pose problems when one is translating from French into English, as is the case here. But such differences are compounded when the source language is a sub-variety of mainstream language, especially created as a vehicle or medium for a uniquely African experience. The "fashioning" of a language to suit a particular environment, as described by Chinua Achebe with regard to the use of English by African writers, can be applied to African French usage as well:

The African writer (...) should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (...) I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

In the stories translated here, Oyono Mbia uses French so that it reflects, not the French culture, but his Bulu culture by trying as far as possible to utilize traditional Bulu thought processes, rhythms (e.g. "Lorsque

¹ C. Achebe, (1965), op. cit., p. 62

tu partiras, tous tes pères viendront te cracher sur le visage pour te bénir.." (p. 128)), and turns of phrase (e.g. "Travail...quoi?" (p. 88)), which he transposes into French. This complicates the translation process because two cultures and two language varieties are involved: the French culture, since French is the linguistic medium of the stories and the African culture seen through a Bulu world view. That is why, apart from the choice of French words and the specific way he arranges them, Oyono Mbia makes use of Bulu proverbs (e.g. "les fantômes ne parlent jamais sans que la pluie soit tombée, ..." (p. 98)), cushioned loan words (e.g. "arki" in "Ils vidaient à la hâte quelques grands verres d'"arki" (p. 80)), ideophones (e.g. "Eée!" as in "Eée! s'écria l'auditoire, soulagé, ..." (p. 104) and "kindang" as in "Kindang... kindang... Chrétiens de Mvoutessi..." (p. 76)) and enunciative devices which mimic the story-telling situation and describe the indigenous milieu in which the characters evolve. These African stylistic and mimic devices colour the idiom which Oyono has constructed to convey his African perspective. As Gabriel Okara has written in Transition: "Once an African, always an African, it will show in whatever you write." Berneth Lindfors describes the medium of African literature in another way:

[African] novelists (...) show a clear preference for a prose style in English which simulates natural expression in their native tongue[s]. By introducing traditional (...) proverbs, idioms, images and words into their fiction, they produce a convincing, in-depth portrait of traditional [societies].²

Our analysis of the characteristics of Oyono's French will bring out the translation problems of his culture-bound idiom.

² G. Okara, "African Speech...English Words," Transition, Kampala, Vol. 4, No. 10, September 1963, p. 15

B. Lindfors, (1971): "Characteristics of Youruba and Igbo Prose Styles in English," in Anna Rutherford ed., Common Wealth

3.1 At The Level of Phonology

Departures from mainstream French are already evident at the level of phonology. In the first story, the sound of the drum beat is heard through Bulu ears. The message transmitted is "carried to the Christians" by echos, they do not "hear it". It does not say "ding-dong! ding-dong!" or "drin-drin!" in the manner of French bells, but "Kandang... kandang..." which is interpreted by the Bulu ears as "Christians of Mvoutessi (...) Come to church (...) Christmas" or "Drinkers of Mvoutessi (...) get ready (...) lots of wine (...) Christmas..." depending on whether the villagers listening are Christians or non-converted palm-wine drinkers. I used the Bulu transcription of the drum beat in my translation, just as it was used in the original, so as to preserve the local colour of the source text.

3.2 Loan Words

The influence of the writer's mother-tongue can also be seen in the numerous Bulu signifiers embedded in the stories. The words "arki", "bo'ofiang", "Bikokoé Mendeke", "Yevo" and "Zua Meka", for instance, are loan words from Bulu. The author uses many Bulu words but renders them understandable because he cleverly glosses them in the course of the story through "cushioning". For example, in talking about the drinkers in Atemeteme's house he writes:

- ... ils vidaient à la hâte quelques grands verres d' 'arki'. Ce dernier mot (...) désigne une boisson fortement alcoolisée (...) (p. 80) (my italics)

The reader thus knows that "arki" means a strong alcoholic drink and the translator need only render the gloss. In some cases, however, the reader is left without an explanation for some of the Bulu terms as in:

- Tita-Mongo voyage beaucoup, dit maman. On lui a peut-être fait manger une cuisse de chien chez les Yevo! (p. 112) (my italics)

Though one can vaguely guess that "Yevo" is the name of a tribe, I had to add a footnote in my translation to describe who they are, after using the term:

- "Tita-Mongo travels a lot," my mother said. "The Yevos must have given him the thigh of a dog to eat."³

As for the other words, "Bikokoé Mendeke" and "Bo'ofiang" which, respectively, mean "empty calabashes" and "birds of evil omen" in Bulu, I used them in my translation because they are glossed by their contexts, as was the case in the original:

- ... les villageois de Mvoutessi (...) avaient décerné le sobriquet de 'Bikokoé Mendeke' - 'Les Calabasses Vides' [à Atemeteme] (p. 88)
- ... the Mvoutessi villagers had given [Atemeteme] the nickname of 'Bikokoe Mendeke' - Empty Calabashes (p. 89)
- ... ces 'bo'fiang', ces oiseaux de mauvais augure qui se posaient presque sur mes épaules! (p. 100)
- ... these 'bo'fiang', the birds of evil omen which almost alighted on my shoulders! (p. 101)

3.3 Proverbs and Sayings

The stories also contain proverbs and wise sayings from Oyono Mbia's French and Bulu backgrounds. These proverbs and wise sayings are the kernels in which popular wisdom is stored. They are philosophical and moral statements shrunk to a few words and are used by those in society who have acquired the wisdom of their forefathers, those who are the upholders of the beliefs and philosophy of the community. It is proper, therefore, that in "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé", the narrator, the catechist, and Atemeteme respectively, the pillars and corner-stones of the village culture and customs, should be the most gifted users of proverbs.

³ See note no. 50 on the translation

Many of the proverbs and sayings used in the stories are literal translations from Bulu: "... les fantômes ne parlent jamais sans que la pluie soit tombée" (p. 98) is the Bulu equivalent of "there is no smoke without fire" or, more generally, "every effect has a cause". I have rendered it literally⁴ - following the example given by the author in the original - because it also reveals some of the spiritual beliefs of the Bulus such as their cult of the ancestors, whom they believe can talk to the living at times. This literal translation is "... dead men never speak unless it has rained" (p. 99). "Vais-je donc mourir avec toute ma sagesse dans le ventre, comme disaient nos ancêtres?" is a wise saying also translated literally from Bulu into French; I in turn have rendered it literally as "Was I going to die with a bellyfull of wisdom as our ancestors used to say?" (p. 103) in order to capture something of the oral tradition of the Bulus, according to whom all knowledge and sayings have been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

"Vous trouvez quelqu'un en train de monter au sommet de l'arbre, et vous lui dites: 'redescends'" (p. 128) is a proverb used by the chief in "Les sept fourchettes" to illustrate his speech to the egoistical villagers who want to hinder Tita-Mongo's progress by demanding too much. Its literal translation as "You see somebody climbing a tree and you say to him: 'Come down'" (p. 129) preserves the African idiom. The use of proverbs by Oyono Mbia shows that

⁴ The wise sayings and proverbs, used in the source-text, are already translations i.e. "formal equivalence" translations. They're used by the author in order to reproduce meanings in terms of the source content (Bulu), by attempting to "reproduce expressions more or less literally so that the reader may be able to perceive something of the way in which the original document employed local cultural elements to convey meanings." Eugene Nida, Charles Taber, The Theory and Practice of Translation (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), p. 165

proverbs are indeed, as Chinua Achebe has put it, "the palm oil with which words are eaten"⁵ in African literature.

~ In some cases, the proverbs used are standard French proverbs subverted by their contexts as in "l'habit ne saurait faire le moine dans une chapelle protestante" (p. 96). The normal English equivalent of this common-place French proverb would be "Appearances can be deceiving". But in this context, the proverb has been "doctored" or tampered with to allow the play on the idea of clothing and embedded in "un co-texte qui le re-sémantise ... en rétablissant la primauté du littéral sur le figuré."⁶ To translate such proverbs which have been tampered with,

Il faut remplacer... l'équivalent standard par un proverbe factice, un syntagme qui, tout en ayant des allures de proverbe, s'enchaînerait avec l'isotopie du co-texte, de façon à donner prise à une inversion de la démarche qui conduit de la lecture littérale à la lecture figurée.⁶

Thus this proverb has to be rendered, not by its English equivalent, but by a fictitious saying which fits in with the play on the idea of clothing in the text: "fine clothes do not the Christian make in a Protestant chapel."

3.4 Regionalisms

Oyono Mbia's use of an international language to express his uniquely African experience also gives rise to certain words, terms and turns of phrase that constantly stand the risk of misrepresentation in the passage from SL to RL. One such item is represented by the word "professeur", which occurs in the following statement:

⁵ C. Achebe, quoted in "Literary Translation: The experience of translating Chinua Achebe's Arrow of God into French" by I.A. Almeida, Meta, 27, No. 3, (1982), p. 290

⁶ B. Folkart, "Metatextualité et traduction", forthcoming in The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature

- Tita-Mongo n'est pas un maître d'école, dit mon oncle Ko'oko Atemeteme. C'est un professeur! (p. 108)

The English "professor", would generally be considered an equivalent of "professeur", but not exactly so in this case because the villager is talking about a secondary school teacher. He simply wants to say that Tita-Mongo is more than a primary school teacher. Consequently, my translation is based on the intention of the author in the original:

- Tita-Mongo is not a primary school teacher," said my uncle Ko'oko Atemeteme. "He's a tutor!" (p. 109)

"Tutor" though being the title for a private teacher, is used in Cameroon to designate a secondary school teacher. It reflects the exaggeration expressed in the original and hence its linguistic local colour. As a result, I have attempted to maintain the style of the original, for as Louis Kelly points out:

... the translator seeks to find in the translation the same equilibrium between signifié, signifiant and human user as in the original text and not to represent it as something it is not.⁷

Another term in these stories that risks misrepresentation in the translation process is "grand homme" which occurs a few times in the second story in the following statements:

- Si vous réserviez les plus belles des filles qui abondent tant a Awaé pour les grands hommes, vous ne manqueriez pas de cartouches. (p. 116)
- Savez-vous ce qu'un grand homme, un homme vraiment important, portant veste et cravate, m'avait dit dans le car ce matin à propos de Tita-Mongo que voici? (p. 122) (my italics)

The English "great man" would be an equivalent of "grand homme", but only a formal one. In a chapter on the principles of correspondence in translation, Nida discusses intraorganic meaning as one of the elements requiring

⁷ L. Kelly, The True Interpreter (1979), p. 214

adjustments in the RL in order to obtain "dynamic equivalence".⁸ According to him, words which depend so largely upon the cultural context in which they are used are difficult to translate.

"Grand homme" falls in this category because the villagers are not using it to refer to a person who is great through his contribution to the arts or sciences but rather to an important or influential person. This shows that when one uses a foreign language to describe his culture, this often gives rise to lexical neologisms. Such neologisms are a sub-class of the regionalisms that sometimes occur when a foreign language (French here) is used to describe foreign experiences. The English translation given to the term each time it is used in my source text is aimed at bringing out the referential meaning it had in the particular context of usage:

- Had you kept the prettiest of the many pretty girls in Awaé for the influential men, you would never have lacked cartridges.
- Do you know what one influential man in the bus, I mean someone really important, in a coat and a tie told me this morning about this Tita-Mongo you see here? (My italics)

Also characteristic of the variety of French used in Cameroon are the turns of phrase that are peculiar to Cameroonian French usage. At the syntactic level, for instance, a construction like "Travail... quoi?" may be misleading if taken at face value, as in the following conversation between the catechist and Atemeteme, who speaks first:

⁸ "Intraorganic meanings suffer most in the process of translating for they depend so largely upon the total cultural context in which they are used and hence are not readily transferable to other language culture contexts..."

A dynamic equivalent is defined here (p. 166) as: "The closest natural equivalent to the source language message". Towards a Science of Translating, (1969), p. 171

- Ne te donnes pas tant de mal, Cécilia; je ne mangerai pas beaucoup ce matin. Je crains de m'alourdir avant de travailler.
- Travail... quoi? s'exclama Nkatefoé. (...) (My italics)
- Travailler, continua Atemeteme qui n'était nullement fâché de constater qu'il produisait de l'effet sur l'homme de Dieu. Que veux tu le vin devient de plus en plus rare, et je voudrais abattre ce matin un palmier que j'avais vu quelque part à Nkòl'Sò'ò. (p. 88)

Such an utterance consists of the partial repetition of the word or words of one's interlocutor, followed by 'quoi'.

Far from indicating that the speaker has failed to hear or recognize the words of his interlocutor, the formula denotes mockery or opposition. In this example, the object of ridicule is the idea that someone can go to work on a Christmas day. By answering the question, Atemeteme fails to register the catechist's surprise and mockery but his answer may also be seen as his determination to make his point.

The translation problem here consists in rendering a complex signifier (prosodic traits plus syllabic or lexical ellipsis) which functions to signify "mockery" or "opposition". No similar mechanism exists in Cameroonian English. However, "travail... quoi?" has been rendered by "to work... what?" This translation makes it possible for Atemeteme to say what he is going to do, while preserving the same linguistic local colour as the original expression.

The translation problems encountered in rendering "professeur", "grand homme" and "travail... quoi?", all of which are used in a sense particular to Cameroonian usage, stem from the fact that they all result from the tendency of Oyono's characters to exploit the resources of the French language in ways that diverge somewhat from those common to its metropolitan users.

In addition to the typical Cameroonian usage in the stories, a few foreign words and nouns are also distorted by the villagers who cannot pronounce them properly: Cécilia for Cécile, Makrita for Margherita (Italian), Yohannes for Johannes in German, the language of Cameroon's former colonial masters, Andréas for André, Monti for Monsieur, rôki for "rôti de boeuf", and Sion for Sodom. Being illiterates, the villagers have adapted the words to the phonology of the Bulu language. Christian villagers pronounce them better than the non-converted villagers. Hence, Atemeteme still finds it difficult to pronounce the adapted words: for him, Yohannes is Yohanna, (p. 100) and Yessou Christouss is Yetou Chrissou (p. 100). The names have been left as they are in the English translation since they provide local colour to the text. The other words were modified. For instance, Monti for Monsieur became Massa and rôki for rôti de boeuf became roasti.⁹ This is because Massa is the equivalent distortion of Master in Cameroonian Pidgin English¹⁰ and "roasti" conveys the same socio-linguistic information about the speaker as rôki did in the original. If the author intended a play on words here it has unfortunately been lost. The English distortions do convey the meaning and the intention of the original.

⁹ See note no. 57 on translations

¹⁰ The distorted French words would be considered part of Français petit-nègre or pidgin French, which, as I.A. Almeida suggests, can be rendered by pidgin English, i.e. "a marginal language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language." It is a bastardized form of English with borrowings from local languages but has its own lexical and syntactic peculiarities. It serves the same communication purposes for anglophone Cameroonians as Français petit-nègre does for their Francophone counterparts. Todd Loreto (1974): Pidgins and Creoles, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, p. 1

3.5 Metaphor, Simile and Rhyme

The use of Bulu ideas and words, proverbs and wise sayings, turns of phrase from Cameroonian French usage and distorted French words constitute typically African stylistic devices.

Other stylistic devices used by Oyono Mbia include metaphor, simile and rhyme, which are more conventional and, generally, more readily accessible to the reader than those that pertain to Cameroonian French usage with words adapted to the phonology of the Bulu language.

In the first story, rhyme plays an important role in the following passage:

- Sans avoir lu Rabelais, il avait décidé, en accord avec ses fidèles sujets, d'instituer à Mvoutessi un culte du vin destiné à rivaliser avec le service divin (p. 80) (my italics)

This sentence is the matrix of the opposition between wine and religion (and thus between indigenous and imported cultures) that structures the entire story. The sound effect achieved by the rhyme "du vin" and "divin" may therefore be assigned the expressive function of adding to the tension that exists between wine worship and divine worship in the village. The claims of form in this example are thus of considerable significance. Although rhyme is more often than not language-bound, in my translation I was able to preserve the form while also giving precedence to meaning:

- Without having read about Falstaff¹¹ he had decided, in agreement with his faithful subjects, to set up a wine worship destined to rival the divine worship in Mvoutessi... (p. 81)

Oyono Mbia also uses metaphors: "culte du vin" in the above example, which, coupled with "adeptes du vin" (p. 82), compares the village drinkers to

¹¹ See note 14 concerning the conversion of Rabelais to Falstaff

those who are faithful to Bacchus, the Greek God of wine, and emphasizes the non-converted villagers' love of wine.

3.6 Oral Literary Devices

In addition to his typically African style, Oyono Mbia uses certain enunciative features which are characteristic of story-telling in Cameroon in general and in the Bulu tribe, in which his stories are set, in particular. The stories translated here were inspired by oral African literature which is an unwritten traditional literature normally passed down word for word from generation to generation and reproduced from memory for centuries. Stories are usually acted out by the narrator, who brings alive the speech patterns and gestures of the characters. The action is presented through narration and through dialogue between characters who are portrayed vividly by the storyteller. This explains the presence in these stories of stylistic and mimic devices akin to those of oral literature: ideophones, pauses, repetitions, and rhetorical questions.

3.6.1 Ideophones

Ideophones are commonly used in African languages and literature to add emotion or vividness to descriptions or recitations, thus serving as the key to native descriptive oratory. They enable the story-teller to sustain and heighten the audience's interest in the story, for listeners must be attentive to catch their meanings from their contexts of usage. They are used to express movements, sounds, feelings of fear, anger, joy or amazement because they mimic sounds so aptly that they make the listeners hear the movement of, say, a falling palm tree (e.g. "ku...u...u...!" (p. 104)), or feel the apprehension and relief of an audience which has just learnt that the falling

tree did not touch Atemeteme, ("Eée! s'écria l'auditoire, soulagé" (p. 104)). An ideophone is a special type or word which conveys a kind of idea-in-sound. For example, "kindang... kindang..." and "toop... toop!" are, respectively, the transcription of the drum beat and the imitation of the pestle strokes as Cecilia pounds plantains in her kitchen. It is for this reason that ideophones have been referred to as mimic, intensive or descriptive nouns and classified as interjections, gap-fillers and onomatopoeia depending on the type of referent.¹² In the stories translated here, ideophones have been used to dramatize the action because in African languages they are effective rhetorical and emotive tools. They thus add meaning to the stories in which they are used.

When used as interjections, ideophones are cries or inarticulate utterances expressing the speakers' emotions. For instance, "Eée!" (p. 104), "ah..." in "Je te le répète, ah Yohannes!" (p. 78) and "kaé... kaé..." in "Kaé... kaé... Taisez-vous!" (p. 126), respectively, express the relief felt by the audience, Cecilia's self pity and the chief's shout to quell the noise in the house. When the story-teller hesitates or doubts something he can also use a gap-filler such as "...euh..." in "... un événement important est à l'origine de [la] décision [d'Atemeteme] de renoncer à sa vie un peu... euh... mais je lui laisse la parole" (p. 98).

In onomatopoeic ideophones, the phonetic structure of the word closely imitates the acoustic event which constitutes the referent. Onomatopoeia may be either acoustic - when words are formed in imitation of natural sounds (things or actions are named by a phonetic approximation of the sounds

¹² Ruth Finnigan, Oral Literature in Africa, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 64

associated with them) or articulatory (the referent is imitated by the movement of phonation). In the stories, "bo'ofiang" (p. 100) and "Ah ka ka ka" (p. 114) are expressions whose sounds, respectively, evoke an acoustic event (we hear the cries of the birds of ill omen) and imitate the majestic laughter of the village chief.

As the translator of these stories, I was faced with certain problems in dealing with the different African ideophones which have been embedded in the French source texts as "foreign bodies" - interjections (e.g. "ah...", "Eh kié..." and "Eéé!"), gap-fillers (e.g. "...euh...") and onomatopoeia (such as "kindang...", "toup...toup", "bo'fiang", "Ah ka ka ka" and "ku...u...u..."). These problems arose from the fact that the ideophones used to express a given referent are not necessarily the same from one language to another. It follows that the translator has a choice. He can render them by their equivalents in the target language since, as S. Ullman says in Semantics (p. 86), speaking about onomatopoeia, "Even when there is a genuine similarity of perception, there are also marked differences, due to the fact that the imitation is only partial and that each language has conventionalised it in its own way". Using TL equivalents here would require that every ideophone be analyzed in order to discover the impression it was intended to convey before a functionally equivalent expression - assuming it exists - can be found in the TL.¹³ This is so because there is a very subjective element in the study of phonetic motivation. Alternatively, the ideophones can be integrated directly into the TL text.

¹³ Joseph Suh, René Philombe's "Histoires queue-de-chat". A commented Translation. (M.A. Thesis, University of Ottawa, 1983), p. 41

Of the two solutions, I opted for the second for two reasons, the first being that Oyono Mbia is not a Frenchman but a Bulu who learned French as a second language and is describing his African and cultural realities in French. His idiom thus has, in some respects, the status of a translation from Bulu into French. In the light of these facts, the ideophones he used in the French text are "foreign bodies" borrowed from his Bulu language because most of them describe experiences which are peculiar only to the Bulu culture and would have no direct equivalents in French.

The second reason for which I decided to carry the ideophones over into my translation is that the linguistic contexts in which they are used as borrowings provide enough information for my readers to guess what such loan words signify. In passages such as "kindang... kindang... Chrétiens de Mvoutessi...", "Ku...u...u...! C'est mon palmier qui vient de tomber" and "Kaé...kaé... Taisez-vous! s'écria-t-il; pourquoi tout ce bruit?" (p. 126), the loan word is cushioned by its context, and all I had to do was reproduce this cushioning in English: "Kindang... kindang... Christians of Mvoutessi...", "Ku...u...u...! My palm tree had just fallen" and "Ka eeh...ka*eeh... Be quiet!" he exclaimed. "Why all this noise?" (p. 127). The contexts make it obvious that the objects referred to are the drum beat, the sound made by the falling tree, and the chief's shout to quell the noise, and no others. However, I have also added out-of-text explanations in notes and in the background information on the Bulu culture so as to permit a better understanding of my translation. I have preserved the ideophones because the local colour, the sounds and the emotions which they express in the stories are characteristic of oral African literature and are important components of meaning in the larger sense. Where necessary, I have adapted the ideophones to the phonology of the English language: "Eh kîé", "Kaé... kaé", euh..." and

"Eh kié kié kié: for instance, have been rendered adapted as "Aa keeah", "Ka eeh... ka eeh", "er..." and "Aaa keeeeah", respectively. This is because -ié, -aé and -euh are not English graphemes. In so doing, I have followed the example of Mbia himself, who adapted ideophones in his translation of one of his plays: Trois prétendants: un mari (1964) translated as Three Suitors... One Husband (1968).

3.6.2 Swearwords

In addition to ideophones, Oyono Mbia uses swearwords or oaths as "foreign bodies" in the stories. These oaths, in the names of his Bulu ancestors, are used by the characters to express annoyance or surprise, as in the following example:

- C'est que Cécilia ne lui facilitait pas les choses, Zua Meka!
(p. 86) (My italics)

Here, Zua Meka evokes an ancestor who the villagers believe exists in the spirit world and can assist them. Since this belief is peculiar only to the Bulu culture, Zua Meka has no direct equivalent in French. It is for this reason that the author used the Bulu oaths in his French texts, and it is for the same reason that I have decided to use them in the English translation:

- ... Cecilia was not making things easy for him, Zua Meka! (p. 87)
(My italics)

Thus "Zua Meka" and "Oyono Eto Mekong ya Ngozip" (p. 84), both oaths, have been preserved in the translation as Bulu signifiers which reveal the cult of ancestors practised in the village of Mvoutessi.

3.6.3 Enunciative Devices

3.6.3.1 In translating these texts, I also had to deal with a number of enunciative devices. In "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept

fourchettes", the author either speaks directly through his own voice - as the narrator - or through the voices of each of the characters he brings to life - as story-tellers. He intervenes through dramatic dialogue and mimic devices such as pauses, repetitions, and rhetorical questions, aimed at making the audience participate in the story. Two types of pauses abound in Oyono Mbia's stories. Affective pauses are introduced into the stories by the use of exclamations and suspension points which interrupt the flow of the narrative and, deliberate pauses, which mark the oral device of the pause when transferred into written literature, are indicated by the use of suspension points.¹⁴

Affective pauses are used abundantly both in dialogue and in the narrative because they are pregnant with meaning:

- a) "Aucun catéchiste ne pourra jamais convertir un homme pareil!..." (p. 78)
- b) "De vrais cadavres!...Pourquoi penses-tu que je revienne de Yaoundé?..." (p. 114)
- c) "Atemeteme!...tu vas abattre un palmier le jour de Noël!..." (p. 90)
- d) "Un si long sermon, ah Cécilia!..." (p. 106)

From the above examples, one can say that the exclamations take on several forms and meanings such as a) self pity, b) emphasis, c) anger, and d) relief. The exclamation is used to indicate forceful utterances and their underlying strong feelings.

As untypical as these may be of ordinary English usage, I decided to carry the affective pauses over into my translation because they are meaningful in the stories and mark them as oral literature. Thus I went

¹⁴ The affective and deliberate types of pauses are used by African story-tellers for rhetorical effort. See Joseph Suh, op. cit., p. 49

against "standard" English usage so as to preserve the characteristically African enunciative features of the stories:

- a) "...no catechist can convert such a man!..." (p. 79)
- b) "We're real corpses!...What do you think took me to Yaoundé" (p. 115)
- c) "Atemeteme... You are going to cut down a palm tree on Christmas day?..." (p. 91)
- d) "Such a long sermon Cecilia, ah!..." (p. 107)

Deliberate pausing is used in the story to create a different type of rhetorical effect and to recreate the story-telling situation. As was stated earlier in this chapter, the story-teller addresses his audience directly and expects their active participation in the story-telling; he expects them to laugh when he brings in something amusing while using facial expressions (example a) below); he makes statements and expects murmurs of support and agreement from them (example b)), or he asks rhetorical questions and expect muttered rejoinders from them; and so on.

Examples:

- a) "Sans parler d'un énorme chimpanzé que j'avais rencontré après avoir traversé deux ruisseaux, qui s'était arrêté pour me regarder comme je vous regarde..."
Atemeteme adopta, ce disant, une pose simiesque du plus haut comique, et la chapelle vibra longtemps du fou rire qui secoua toute la congrégation (p. 100)
- b) "Je pensais, en effet, que le poids du palmier serait suffisant pour rompre la liane, au cas où elle essaierait de me gêner dans mon travail..." (p. 102)

In the first example above, Atemeteme speaks and pauses, expecting the audience to laugh at his comic posture, and in the second, he expects from them murmurs of support and agreement. Thus a good story-teller in oral African literature often interrupts the narrative with pauses and expects suitable answers from the audience.

In my translation, I retained these pauses, which express forceful utterances, strong feelings and gaps which have to be filled in by the audience, again, deliberately running counter to "standard" English usage so as to preserve the African flavour of the text. The preservation of these pauses in my translation poses no problems because they come at the end of clauses or sentences and can be used without modifying the structure of the clause or sentence.

3.6.3.2 Oyono's characters also use a number of devices involving repetition. In the first story, repetitions are used for rhetorical effect, with words repeated at the beginning or at the end of two successive clauses or sentences, as in the following examples:

- "Mes frères en Yessou Christouss, ...mes frères, Atemeteme, ici présent, vient de m'annoncer son intention de se tourner vers Dieu" (p. 98) (My italics)
- "Même un superbe palmier que j'avais abattu près de l'arbre-aux-toucans-bleus, dans la plantation de Yohanna, était à sec. A sec!" (p. 100) (My italics)
- ... rien que pour souligner telle parole particulièrement ... Zua Meka! Si particulièrement ... Zua Meka! ... que le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambé ... s'en allait mettre un peu d'ordre dans la maison du diable. (p. 84) (My italics)

Here repetition is intended both to inform the listener and to win him over to the speaker's point of view.

The emphasis and feelings expressed by word repetitions have been maintained in the translation to simulate natural expression in the author's African native tongue:

- "My brothers in Yessou Christouss ... My brothers, Atemeteme here present, has just told me of his decision to turn towards God." (p. 99)
- "Even an excellent palm tree which I felled near the "blue-toucan-birds'-tree" in Yohanna's farm was dry. Dry, I said!" (p. 101)

- ... their only reason being to put emphasis on a particular sentence ... Zua Meka!
Such a particular word here and there ... Zua Meka! ... that papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe [would] go to set things straight in the unholy house ... (p. 85) (My italics)

3.6.3.3 The story-tellers within the stories make personal appeals to the audience so as to engage them in the story-telling and prevent their losing interest and going to sleep. They often seek the participation of the audience through frequent use of questions, as in the following examples:

- "... Aucun catéchiste ne pourra jamais convertir un homme pareil!... Qui d'autre pourrait réussir la où tu as échoué?" (p. 78)
- "Éé kié! que mon fils avait su copier les traits de son père! ... Comment font-ils donc, ces sorciers, pour avoir des enfants leur ressemblant à ce point? ..." (p. 114)

These are basically rhetorical questions used for effect or for the reinforcement of a particular point. The answers to such questions are normally obvious and are not expected, as in the first example above. But when Cameroonian story-tellers ask such questions, they expect the listeners to respond to them by uttering murmurs of support or agreement and muttered rejoinders. Hence, after his question (second example), the village chief pauses, expecting a rejoinder from the other characters. Rhetorical questions serve as reinforcing devices and I have retained them to preserve the local colour of the original stories:

- "... Ah Yohannes, believe me, no catechist can convert such a man!... Who else can succeed where you failed?" (p. 79)
- "Aa keeah! How this son of mine has copied his father's features!... How do these sorcerers manage to have children who resemble them so much?..." (p. 115)

In conclusion, Oyono's use of Bulu words, ideas, proverbs, ideophones and turns of phrase, his recourse to literary and enunciative devices (pauses, repetitions, rhetorical questions) typical of African story-telling are highly

relevant. One of the main - if not the main function of African literature - is to convey a uniquely African perspective. The language of my source texts is thus a medium or vehicle which the author constructed to convey his peculiar African experience. I have decided to retain his literary and enunciative devices in my translation of "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes" so as to preserve the African spirit and flavour of the texts. Rendering the various devices that constitute Oyono Mbia's African idiom by their normal English equivalents would have resulted in assimilation.¹⁵ It was only through the use of non-standard equivalents that I could achieve my goal, which was to preserve the uniquely African perspective of my source. I believe firmly in Jean Louis Laugiers' statement to the effect that "une société ouverte se souciera peu de naturaliser les textes étrangers: elle voudra les connaître en tant que tels, et refusera de gommer les différences."¹⁶

Thus the English of the translation has been fashioned out in such a way that it is "at once universal and able to carry [Oyono Mbia's] peculiar experience," i.e. it has been made to suit its new African surroundings.¹⁷ To do this, I deliberately went counter to normal English usage insofar as Bulu proverbs, idioms and loan words, pauses, ideophones and rhetorical questions are concerned. My only concession to the target language system has been to adapt the ideophones to the graphology of the English language, following the

¹⁵ "To find an equivalent is to make the Other mine, to practise a kind of assimilation."

E.D. Blodgett, "How Do you Say 'Gabrielle Roy'?", In Translation in Canadian Literature (1983), p. 33

¹⁶ Jean Louis Laugier, "Finalité sociale de la traduction: le même et l'autre", in La Traduzione: Saggi E Studi, (Trieste: Lint, 1973) p. 25-32

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, op. cit., p. 62

examples given by the author in his translation of one of his plays "Trois prétendants... un mari" (discussed in the chapter on the author's background).

I have preserved the Africanness of my source texts by producing a translation that, in E.D. Blodgett's words, is an inter-text:

a text between, ..., a texte d'arrivée that never arrives... a text that exists dans le passage, thus perhaps falling short of the impossibilities of a pure speech, but creating the possibility of a speech that is not a mother tongue.¹⁸

Such a target text makes little or no attempt to conform to the literary conventions of the target-language polysystem. It is a translation that cultivates what Jiri Levy has described as anti-illusionism, "a technique that never permits the reader to forget that the text is a translation".¹⁹ Had I done otherwise the real loss would have been the very foreignness, the uniquely african experience which constitutes the main value of Oyono Mbia's stories.

¹⁸ E.D. Blodgett, op. cit., p. 33

¹⁹ Jiri Levy, quoted by E.D. Blodgett, op. cit., p. 33

CHAPTER 4

Background Information Required to Understand the Culture
from which Oyono Mbia's Cultural Allusions in the Stories Emanate

4.1 Geographical setting of the stories

"Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes" are set in Mvoutessi, which is situated within the area of the Bulu tribe in the South Province of Cameroon. This country lies to the north-east of the Gulf of Guinea, between longitudes 8° and 16° east of Greenwich and latitudes 2° and 13° north of the equator. It extends from the thick equatorial forest, through savanna and grassland, to the desert in the north. Mvoutessi, the setting of the short stories studied here, is found in the forest region: hence the reference to "forêts environnantes" (p. 76), in the first story.

In these stories, Oyono Mbia describes some of the agricultural activities of his characters, who depend on the surrounding forests for products such as the wood used in their drums, furniture, and buildings, for jobs in the sawmill, and for the food provided by the wildlife which they hunt. Some parts of the village are named after the type of animal that is found there: "plantations de Nkòl'Sò'ò" (p. 90), in Bulu, literally means "antelope hill plantations". The villagers also rear livestock such as sheep and goats, and poultry - some of which the "préfets"¹ expect as offerings when they go on visits. Even their superstitious beliefs are centred on the animals and trees around them - such as the hooting owls, chimpanzees, and the bo'ofiang, the birds of evil omen which Atemeteme meets on his way to work on a Christmas Day. In African traditional religion, there is complete union and

¹ See p. 71

intercommunication between the physical and the invisible worlds. So, when Oyono Mbia describes the physical world here - i.e. nature with animals, birds, etc. - he intends to draw the readers' attention to its esoteric and mystic role.

The food eaten in Mvoutessi comes from the plants that grow in the forest region: plantains, mangos, karité butter, peanuts, and palm oil. Palm wine is tapped from palm trees and stored in calabashes which are grown locally as well as the tobacco smoked in the village. Oyono Mbia's description of these animals, trees, plants and farming activities help the reader to visualize the geographical setting or the village milieu of his stories.

4.2 Human setting

4.2.1 The African component in the stories

In addition to their geographical setting, the stories focus on their human setting, which reflects the Cameroonian society. The Bulu, who constitute the African component in the stories, comprise only one of the many different tribes in Cameroon. Despite their diversity, however, the numerous tribes that exist in Cameroon all have in common a certain number of cultural traits, including those described by Oyono Mbia in his stories.

These stories focus mainly on two aspects of Bulu society and therefore of traditional Cameroonian society: social organization and religious life (worship, beliefs, rites and ceremonies). Although these aspects are often inseparable in the stories, I will nevertheless examine them separately in order to convey more clearly to the reader their real nature and the relationship that exists between them.

4.2.1.1 The smallest social unit in Cameroon is the family. At the level of the family, the man, considered a representative of family ancestors, is

the religious and social head of the family. His wife or wives (in the case of a polygamous family) and children regard him as protector of their destinies. As family head he lays down and executes all rules governing the family in accordance with the will of the family ancestors: he names the children after ancestors and makes sure the death of any family member is celebrated properly.² All the members of the family are expected to obey and respect him because failure to do so would imply disobedience to ancestors and to tradition.

Despite his authority within the family, the family head is subordinate to the village head, who is the magistrate and educator of the village. Assisted by a council of village elders and medicine-men,³ he settles disputes between individuals and between families. He makes decisions on all matters that affect the entire village. Since, in Cameroon, the village is an extension of the family and often consists of relatives spread all over a particular area, the village head, like the family head, is also a representative of family ancestors.

The village head is in turn subordinate to the tribal head, who is the spiritual and social leader of the tribe and is also regarded as the highest priest, administrator, and judge of the people. He too is assisted by a council of village heads and medicine-men from the tribe. In consultation with the latter, he settles disputes between individuals, families, and villages. He also makes decisions on important issues affecting the whole tribe, such as disasters, declarations of war, etc.

² After a person's death, the first day is used for mourning and the following three days are spent celebrating (in an attempt to forget the unhappy event).

³ These are the good sorcerers who act as the intermediaries of the ancestors.

Thus the family, village and tribe constitute a tri-level administrative structure in traditional society. On the one hand, the family, village and tribal heads are fully aware of their divine calling - to initiate children and family members into the secrets and wisdom of the ancestors; and to ensure that all family and village members respect the customs and traditions of the society. On the other hand, the family, village and tribe members regard themselves as belonging to one global group, and see tradition as the expression of the will of their ancestors; as a result, they normally accept and respect all that is laid down by tradition. This is revealed in "Les sept fourchettes" when the chief, Tita Mezoe, complains of his many wives and is asked by Tita-Mongo's mother why he married so many of them. He answers with a question: "... tout le monde sera-t-il catéchiste comme ton mari et toi? Et la gloire de la tribu Fông?..." (p. 130). For him, polygamy is one of the vestiges of tradition as handed down by the ancestors and it also reflects the glory of the tribe.

The African, subject to the authority of the family, the village and the tribal head, basically lives a life in which his own interests merge with those of the group. This is the view expressed by M. Ojike about Africans:

"The African thinks in terms of his family not individuals; of his village not family; of his town not village; of his nation not clan; of his race not nation; of mankind not his race."⁴

Hence, in "Les sept fourchettes," Tita-Mongo's mother expects the chief to bring gifts from the city not only to his legal wives but also to the other women in Mvoutessi; and the villagers all expect Tita-Mongo to share his riches freely with them.

⁴ M. Ojike, My Africa, (N.Y., 1946), p.138, quoted in Umezina, W.A. La Religion dans la littérature africaine, (Kinshasa: P.U.Z., 1975), p.103

As part of their family duties, parents and village elders in general enforce the social practices of the tribe. However, the extreme control which parents have traditionally had over wives and children, and elders over youths, is considered undesirable by some today. This control by the parents and elders is so strong that women and youths see the world mainly through their eyes. Oyono Mbia brings out this point in his stories. In "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé", the catechist's wife, Cecilia, cultivates the food, cooks for him, and even prepares his warm baths. When the congregation runs out of seats the children are asked to give their places to elders, and the uproar caused by Atemeteme and his drinkers can only be quelled by Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe, an elder of the chapel and the village. The elders and the parents control the younger generation to the point of choosing a spouse for their children. This practice is alluded to in the second story by Tita-Mongo's mother, who talks of going to another village, Nkoumadjap, to examine a future spouse for Tita-Mongo: "... j'irai un de ces jours à Nkoumadjap, au pays Otololo'o, voir une certaine fille dont on m'a parlé là-bas. Il paraît qu'elle n'a jamais, de sa vie, manqué une seule séance de prière matinale" (p. 130). In fact, even after she recommends the girl for her son, he will only be able to "love" her after the council of church elders has carefully examined the nature of their relationship: "... ils ne les aiment [les filles] qu'après que le conseil des anciens de l'Eglise ait longuement étudié la nature de leurs relations..." (p. 130).

After marriage, the young couple has to submit to the norms of society by having many children, for marriage in traditional society is viewed strictly as a union between man and woman for the purpose of procreation. This is because procreation ensures the survival and continuity of the community, also maintaining a link between the community and ancestors living in the

supernatural world: children are named after ancestors and are very central to marriage. In fact, they are so important in married life that people can hardly conceive of marriage without them.

To fulfill this purpose of marriage, which is to have many children, men often practise polygamy in traditional society. This ensures legitimate lineage in case one of the wives is sterile or when there is a high infant-mortality rate. Another reason for this practice is that in rural areas the workload of the woman is heavy so that the husbands always marry many of them to make the task of feeding the family easier for the first wife. Also, after the slave trade people thought that only polygamy could produce enough people to exploit the natural resources of the country.

However, some men now see polygamy as a means to enrich themselves rather than to survive, their many wives and children constituting an unpaid labour force on their big farms.⁵ In the cities polygamy is on the decline because of the high cost of living in urban centres, the influence of Christianity with its policy of "one man, one wife,"⁶ and the life of fights and quarrels that is often found in polygamous homes. Today, polygamy exists mostly in the rural areas which still follow traditional customs, like the one mentioned in the second story: "... ce matin-là, tous les gens de Mvoutessi et des environs s'étaient rendus à Efôt pour ramener le calme dans le harem de Lukas

⁵ The men have farms in which they plant crops such as cocoa, plantains and palm trees, which bring in all the money the family uses. The money is basically considered the man's, though once in a while he buys for the family those things which are not produced locally, such as new clothes for Christmas Day, salt, corrugated iron sheets for roofing the houses, etc.

With the modern administration in place now, some of the men leave the village to go and work for the government or in private businesses, such as the sawmill mentioned in both stories. In such cases, most of them leave their wives in the village to take care of their farms and only return, when on leave, to sell the produce from the farms.

Owono où deux femmes s'étaient battues" (p. 112). As Oyono Mbia explains, this lack of harmony and the fight that took place in Lukas Owono's polygamous compound resulted from the latter's failure to respect the organization and norms of the polygamous compound as originally conceived: the structure of the polygamous family is such that stability and happiness are ensured only if the husband respects each of the wives' turns and sees them regularly.

Contrary to the youths of the cities, the people in traditional society accept and even approve polygamy as a mark of social prestige: the more wives a man has, the more he is respected. Polygamy is an essential pillar in the social organization, where the eldest son normally inherits his father's wives and possibly, also, his brother's wives to ensure that they are looked after after their husband's death. The acceptance of polygamy stems also from the facts that prostitution is considered undesirable, and that the number of women exceeds that of men. The government thus sees polygamy as a solution to problems and has legalized it, limiting the maximum number of wives a person can have to four.

Polygamy is still widely practised by 80 per cent of Cameroon's population, which is still living in rural areas, where the influence of traditional beliefs, customs and practices is still very great. These native Cameroonians have remained loyal to their traditional beliefs and customs despite Western colonization, foreign religious influences, modern administrative structures, and increasing contact with the outside world. This loyalty to tradition has tended to slow down the development of their society. It is for this reason that Cameroonian writers like Oyono Mbia are trying to encourage them to reexamine their traditional beliefs and eliminate the abuses and injustices which impede their country's development.

In "Les sept fourchettes", we are told that the villagers name their children after their ancestors: "Un peu partout, dans les régions Bulu et Beti, on appelle respectivement Tita-Mongo et Na-Mongo les enfants qui portent le nom de leur grand-père ou de leur grand'mère" (p. 108). In addition to ancestor's names they also give names which reflect their communal experiences in the village. These are names like "Nkatefoé", "Atemeteme" and "Mvendé-Nda-Zambe" in the first story. For an outsider, that is, a nonspeaker of Bulu, these are just names - i.e. simple designators. To a Bulu speaker however, they have meanings and are "allegorical" in that they define the very essence of their bearers.⁶ For example, "Nkatefoé" means "a story-teller", that is, one who tells the village about God. "Atemeteme" means a person who is always surprised, as his behaviour, in the story, shows. Finally, "Mvendé-Nda-Zambe" (literally Law-House-of-God) means a person who maintains law and order in the house of God. These names are, therefore, nicknames reflecting the moral or behavioural features of the characters while also revealing the social norms and attitudes of the natives, as G. Okara affirms in his article.⁷ Thus the characters either bear ancestors' names or they have new names given to reflect their roles in society.

⁶ B. Folkart refers to such proper names as "onomastique allégorique" and writes "ici le nom est choisi pour définir le faisceau de traits actantiels auquel se réduit le personnage; comme dans le discours technique, où le mot est construit pour désigner après coup le concept défini au préalable comme un faisceau de traits rigoureusement pertinents, il est exact que nomina rerum consequentia sunt".

"Structure et symbole en traduction", Carrefour, 4.1, Printemps 1982, p.10.

In other words, allegorical names are chosen to define the pertinent characteristics reflected in the behaviour of their bearers in the story

⁷ He writes: "... From a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people."

G. Okara, "African speech ... English words," op. cit., p.15.

In addition to these names, the social norms of the natives - their collective life - are also reflected in their use of kinship terms. In the two stories, the use of kinship terms reflects the social organization of the traditional society, which does not overlap the structures embodied by the standard French terms that have been borrowed. Oyono Mbia is thus superimposing on his culture the grid peculiar to a foreign language and culture (as discussed in the Introduction). This type of usage gives rise to the regionalisms that often occur when a foreign language (French here) is appropriated by non-native users (Cameroonians) and incorporated into their culture.

One such kinship term is "père" as used in the following quotation:

Ni les descriptions des flammes éternelles que faisait Nkatefoé, ni les versets bibliques que récitait le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe, l'ancien de l'Eglise, ne semblaient émouvoir cette brebis égarée (p. 80).

In standard French, "père" is used before a proper name to refer to a reverend father or an old man (cf. Petit Robert). But in this quotation the use of the word before the name of a person, who is not a priest, is a sign not only of old age but also of the respect that is due to old age. The traditional symbol of this old age plus the responsibilities which accompany it is the fly-swatter which Mvendé-Nda-Zambe carries around with him. A respectable person, who is not as old, would be addressed as "oncle X", to mark the difference, as in the following example:

Les cris d'une bande de toucans bleus se disputant des noix de palme dans la plantation de l'oncle Thomas Eboulou troublèrent, seuls, cette convention de silence (p. 96).

Thomas Eboulou is nobody's uncle in the story. The use of "oncle" before his name simply refers to the fact that he is a respectable adult not an elder. This use of "père" and "oncle" makes them to undergo semantic extensions in French but they reflect the respect that is due to the characters; one as a

village elder and educator, and the other as a respectable family head.

Other kinship terms used as regionalisms or extensions can be found in the following examples:

- ... j'étais allé [à Yaoundé] trouver mon beau-frère, le cousin de ma cinquième femme, et lui dire: 'si tu ne me sauves, je suis un homme mort!'... (p. 114) (my underlining)
- Ah Mammi! dit mon père en s'adressant à maman; le chef de village est ici! (p. 116)
- A' Mammi! Il faut que je rentre maintenant, sinon mes femmes commenceront à me chercher (p. 130).
- Ne pouvais-tu pas lui dire également: 'Irai-je trouver mes femmes avec des mains vides?... (p. 118)
- ... je suis le fils de grands hommes du pays Fông;... (p. 128)

In the first example here, as the author's in-text explanation reveals, the person referred to is not the speaker's brother-in-law but the cousin of his fifth wife. But in traditional society one does not marry one's spouse alone: the families or clans of both spouses are considered to be united by the marriage of their children. Thus all the male relatives of the chief's fifth wife are his brothers-in-law because of the extended family system in traditional African society. However, the author, knowing that this usage is strange in French, integrated the explanation into the text.

In the second and third examples, "Mammi" (a distortion of "mammie") is used by two different persons to refer to the same woman. In typical African usage, "Mammi" designates an elderly woman who deserves respect. This word thus reflects local colour with the element of respect attached to it, so I rendered it by "Mammy", which is the Cameroonian English equivalent.


In example four, the speaker quoted is the chief of the village, not the husband of the speaker. She expects him to think of them as his women because as chief of the village, he is the head and educator of all the women in the

village. Moreover, in traditional society, all the married women are considered to belong, collectively and socially, to the married men, who are also thought of as one united group. A similar social custom is portrayed in the last example. A child (Tita-Mongo, here) belongs not only to his biological parents; he belongs to the village as a whole. Hence, the villagers expect him to tell his hosts in Europe, when he goes to study there, that he is the son of the important men of Fongland. The use of "fils" here refers to a "social son" of the village not a biological one as in standard French. In fact, the chief even refers to him as "notre fils" (p. 128) showing the collective ownership and responsibility that they have over their offspring.

In the light of the above discussion, one can say that Oyono Mbia's use of kinship terms reflects the typical Cameroonian usage. Through the use of regionalisms such as "beau-frère" to refer to the cousin of a wife, and semantic extensions of other words such as "père", "fils", "oncle", etc., he gives literal translations of his Bulu expressions in French. This gives linguistic local colour to the texts, and reveals the extended families that exist in traditional society. This literal translation of native ideas and thoughts is recommended by G. Okara, who writes:

As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression.⁸

⁸ G. Okara, ibid., p.15.



4.2.1.2 \ While social customs and practices are a necessary part of any socially organized society, traditional religious beliefs are at the very basis of Cameroonian society. For this reason, Oyono Mbia pays particular attention to them in his description of traditional society faced with the new Christianity.

In traditional society, people believe in the existence of a supreme and invisible being, who is the Creator of the universe. This Supreme being is considered removed from the community and is only called upon to accept sacrifices for favours received or to intervene in cases of great misfortune. People can gain access to Him through their ancestors, who are believed to have life after death, and who live in the invisible world in the form of spirits or demigods.

The traditional religion is one in which we find a coherence, a union and a constant link between the physical and supernatural worlds. The nature of stars, winds, water, plants and animals serves as an intermediary between these two worlds. God, demigods and ancestral spirits manifest themselves to man through nature, which is described in these tales not for esthetic reasons but because of its sacred role in religion. It has an esoteric and mystical role. In return man can communicate with the invisible world through sorcerers, village, tribal or family heads, who all serve as priests for their people.

Ancestors act as God's assistants, and it is through them that all prayers are said and sacrifices offered to Him. Hence, the swearwords "Zua Meka" (p. 79) and "Eé kié, Oyõnõ Eto Mekong ya Ngozip!" (p. 84) are all in the names of ancestors who are believed to be capable of asking God to act on behalf of the swearer. When a miracle happens in one's life sacrifices are offered and prayers said through the same ancestors. Such is the case of

Atemeteme (in the first story) who refuses to go to church until his life is saved miraculously by a liana before he goes to be converted. The people's belief in the fact that ancestors have life after death, can be seen in the same story, where it is said that the women's crying could have brought them back to life, were it not for the better things retaining them in the spirit world:

Des vieilles femmes se mirent à pleurer de cette façon touchante qui rappellerait les morts à la vie si de bien meilleures préoccupations ne les retenaient dans l'au-delà (p. 104).

Sorcerers are in a position to ask for and get all they want from the gods. In "Les sept fourchettes" the chief suggests that one must be a sorcerer (i.e. very close to the gods) in order to have a child who resembles one very much: "Comment font-ils donc, ces sorciers, pour avoir des enfants leur ressemblant à ce point?..." (p. 114). This is because a sorcerer communicates with the gods.

The Supreme being and the ancestral spirits are believed to control the actions and destiny of man. While some ancestral spirits render services to man, some are also believed to cause him harm and are termed evil spirits. These spirits or demigods manifest themselves through nature, that is, through the heavenly bodies, the wind, water, mountains, trees, snakes, animals, and so on, which serve as intermediaries between the physical world and the invisible world of gods. Nature is considered such a reliable channel of communication that living beings constantly observe nature very closely in order to detect any messages sent by the gods. This important role of nature is revealed in "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" when Atemeteme regrets not having returned to the village after receiving the warning from the gods:

J'aurais dû me douter qu'un jour comme celui-ci ne vaut rien pour aller chercher du vin en brousse. Tous ces hiboux qui ne cessaient de hurler sur mon chemin, ces "bo'ofiang", ces oiseaux de mauvais augure qui se posaient presque sur mes épaules! sans parler d'un énorme chimpanzé que j'avais rencontré après avoir traversé deux ruisseaux, qui s'était arrêté pour me regarder comme je vous regarde... (p. 100).

In other words, hooting owls, evil birds, or a chimpanzee met en route to a place must be considered as a sign that the trip will not be a success. Thus the spirits communicate with people through nature and people can in turn communicate with the spirits - both good and evil - through sorcerers or medicine-men, family, village or tribal heads, or through elders who are considered to be closer to the dead and can understand their whispers.

In addition to invoking ancestors or calling on sorcerers, the people are also capable of communicating with the spirits by performing certain rites and rituals which correspond to certain aspects of human life: birth, puberty, marriage, illness, hunting, war, death, and so on, and which are very central to traditional religion. Thus communication between the spirits and the living is not unidirectional. In the second story, we are told of the catechist, Yohannes Nkatefoé, who had to go to his village, Ngoantet, for the funeral of one of his cousins. The idea here is that when one participates at a relative's funeral, the dead ancestor's spirit will always come to one's help - since the rites and rituals performed at a funeral serve as an invitation to ancestors to come and take the deceased along with them into the invisible world, thereby facilitating his journey from the world of the living to that of the spirits.

In addition to this belief in the existence of God and ancestral spirits in the invisible world, people also have superstitious beliefs. In the second story, Tita-Mongo's mother thinks that he travels a lot because he might have been served the thigh of a dog: "Tita-Mongo voyage beaucoup... On lui a peut-

être fait manger une cuisse de chien chez les Yevo!" (p. 112) This is because dogs are always wandering from place to place, so people believe that if one is served a dog's thigh, one will do the same. These people also believe that saliva can be used to do good to somebody, just as a spoken word, addressed to the ancestors, can cause evil to an opponent or a disrespectful family or clan member. It is because of this belief that the chief, in the second story, tells Tita-Mongo that all his fathers will come spit in his face to bless him as he leaves to study in Europe, so that he will be first in all his exams: "... Lorsque tu partiras, tous tes pères viendront te cracher sur le visage pour te bénir, et tu seras reçu premier à tous tes examens." (p. 128) Thus the fathers, as the spiritual and social heads of the village, are believed to have the power of blessing their children.

However, these traditional superstitious as well as religious beliefs related to spirits, rites and rituals have, since colonization, been attacked by foreign religions,⁹ which were introduced to replace traditional beliefs, considered primitive by missionaries. Many people accepted conversion to these foreign religions, but for materialistic rather than spiritual reasons. For most of the converts, the new religion meant educational institutions, medical centres and other social services. As another Cameroonian writer, Mongo Beti, points out, most of the new converts were surprised when the preachers talked to them about God - since, in the newly converted's opinion, they knew about God even before the arrival of the missionaries during

⁹ Apart from the Muslim religion which came before, colonization brought the Catholic and Protestant missions, which were followed later on by Baha'is, Hindus, etc. However, the village of Mvoutessi, in which the stories are set, has only known the Protestant faith.

colonization.¹⁰ The converted natives gave their souls in return for social services but soon discovered that they could not practice certain traditional customs - such as polygamy, wine drinking, and ancestor worship, for instance - as Christians.

The missionaries often set up their social services near the churches which were built for the native Christians. Some of them were trained as catechists and had to prepare sermons for Sundays and Christian holidays. In the first story, for instance, the mother parish of the Mvoutessi Christians is found in Bibia (p. 82) and it is from there that the catechist, Nkatefoé, receives directives on how to conduct his worship services. Once converted and baptised, the villagers took Christian names, like Atemeteme who became Jerome Atemeteme (p. 106), and paid lip service to the new religions in exchange for services. The successful implantation of these religions in traditional Cameroonian society was taken for granted and in several areas it is assumed that they have replaced traditional religion. But the Christians of Mvoutessi, while paying lip service to the Protestants, still sneak to Atemeteme's "maison du vin" (p. 90) to participate in drinking sessions. In "Les sept fourchettes" the villagers, all Christians, still expect Tita-Mongo to offer them "vin rouge" (p. 124). And the catechist, Nkatefoé, still goes to take part in the rites and rituals performed at funerals, like his cousin's.

¹⁰ "Les premiers d'entre nous, dit Zacharie, en s'adressant au Père, qui sont accourus à la religion, à votre religion, y sont venus comme à ... une révélation, c'est ça, une révélation, une école où ils acquerraient la révélation de votre secret, le secret de votre force, la force de vos avions, de vos chemins de fer, est-ce que je sais, moi ... le secret de votre mystère, quoi! Au lieu de cela, vous vous êtes mis à leur parler de Dieu, de l'âme, de la vie éternelle, etc. ... Est-ce que vous vous imaginez qu'ils ne connaissaient pas déjà tout cela avant, bien avant votre arrivée?" M. Beti, Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba, (Paris: Laffont, 1956), p.56.

The inauthenticity of this Christianity could be explained by the fact that the natives' reasons for conversion were materialistic rather than spiritual, as well as by the fact that they could not abandon their traditional beliefs and practices in one day just because they had embraced a new faith. In fact, those who attempted to do such a thing always ended up in a "no man's land", living in psychological and moral alienation, because on the one hand, they found it difficult to abandon customs to which they were strongly attached, and on the other hand, they could not adapt themselves to the new imported values that came with the new religions.

4.2.2 The imported component

Apart from the African component which is part of the human setting of "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoe" and "Les sept fourchettes" we also have an imported component introduced through colonization. This imported component is portrayed in the stories in the form of a modern administrative structure with its services, officers, gendarmes, and the educational system set up by the different missionaries.

In the stories, the traditional administrative structure controlled by the family, village and tribal heads is encompassed by a more recent and powerful one introduced by the French during colonization and later maintained by the country after independence. This modern administrative structure¹¹ consists of ten provinces,¹² each of which is headed by a Governor and is sub-

¹¹ However, the family, village and tribal heads of the traditional society still exist but almost without any administrative powers.

¹² These are the Western, Northern, Extreme North, Littoral, Adamoua, North West, South West, Central and Southern Provinces. Yaounde, the national capital, is also the capital of the Central Province.

divided into Divisions administered by Divisional Officers. These Divisions, in turn, are sub-divided into Districts headed by District Officers. Mvoutessi, Zoetélé, Sangmelima and Ebolowa in the Bomba and Ngoko Division, (Central Province) are referred to in both stories. Each Division has a gendarme station and divisional services which represent the different ministries in the country. The Divisional Officer and the gendarmes all have greater authority than the family, village and tribal heads, because the former group represents the central government of the country. Thus, in the second story, everyone in the village has to go to the "préfecture", (p. 114) the divisional office, to get a permit in order to buy cartridges. The chief's brother-in-law, the "grand docteur en médecine" (p. 114), signs papers in a ministry in Yaounde, the capital of the country. Private businesses also employ people in this modern society such as the "scierie", (p. 102) referred to in both stories, and the mission schools which recruit teachers from amongst the few educated villagers.

These modern authorities have used their administrative powers to curb certain criminal and inhuman practices in the traditional society. Such is the case with the gendarmes who arrest those who drink "arki", a locally distilled alcoholic drink whose consumption has been forbidden by the government because its alcoholic content is not controlled:

... lorsque les espions accrédités ne signalaient aucun gendarme de Zoétélé à l'horizon, [les buveurs] ... vidaient à la hâte quelques grands verres d'"arki" (p. 80)

The gendarmes who patrol the Mvoutessi village, on the look out for such criminals, come from Zoétélé, the nearest town with a gendarme station. In the second story, the Divisional Officer controls hunting, which threatens to exterminate all the wildlife, by issuing permits to all those who want to buy cartridges. These negative practices in traditional society justify the

strictness of the modern administration which has done everything to promote the development and education of the citizens, particularly by eliminating the undesirable aspects of their culture.

One can say that the officers, gendarmes and the new administrators had good objectives. But, like the villagers, who practice a distorted Christianity, the government workers are corrupt and the system is full of injustices. This is illustrated in the second story when a villager, Tita Andreas, blames the others for not giving their beautiful daughters to the influential men, who work in the divisional office, so that the latter can give more permits to those who want to buy cartridges: " Si vous réserviez les plus belles des filles qui abondent tant à Awaé pour les grands hommes, vous ne manqueriez pas de cartouches..." (p. 116). Even the newspapers give false information to the villagers, promising them all sorts of things on condition that they continue offering chickens to the Divisional Officer during his frequent rounds:

- ...les villageois... [allaient] même jusqu'à traiter le jeune lecteur [du journal] d'ignorant s'il restait muet sur le passage habituel concernant une promesse de fusils, de maisons en dur et de femmes blanches à tous ceux qui ne manqueraient jamais de sacrifier des poulets à l'occasion des tournées fréquentes de M. le Sous-Préfet (p. 122).

Because of this corruption practised by the educated workers, the villagers see education as a means to a post which offers the benefits of bribery, corruption and traditional nepotism. They consequently advise Tita-Mongo to go study in Europe so that when he becomes a Minister he can appoint all his brothers and cousins Divisional Officers, to whom goats and sheep will be brought:

- Quand tu seras devenu ministre, tu nommeras tous tes frères et cousins préfets, afin qu'en effectuant des tournées...ils nous apportent des moutons et des chèvres (p. 132).

This brings out the love of nepotism and egoism cultivated in the innocent and naive villagers by the abuses in the modern administrative structure.

The practices of civil servants also produce cultural and psychological alienation in the natives. Their city counterparts use the riches acquired through corrupt practices to import products and even foodstuffs from foreign countries. In the second story, for example, the minister, Tita Mezoé's brother-in-law, imports sofas and frozen beef from France while the villagers content themselves with the "boeuf de brousse" (p. 120) sold to them by the cattle rearers. Consequently, they advise their son, Tita-Mongo, to go study in Europe so that they may later on pay visits to him, in the city, and eat at his place with "sept fourchettes". The imported values have made the villagers to despise what is theirs, only admiring foreign things.

As years go by the abuses in the new administration have tended to diminish as the author points out in his preface:

Les temps changent, certaines choses passent, d'autres demeurent. Peut-être n'avons-nous plus, au Cameroun, des personnages comme j'en décris dans mes "Chroniques".... Les préfets, sous-préfets et autres fonctionnaires en tournée de prise de contact ne mangent plus - je le tiens de source extrêmement sûre - autant de poulets, de chèvre et de moutons qu'autrefois...¹³

This is because as more and more people are educated they realize their rights and refuse to be intimidated by the civil servants. The government has also made it illegal for anyone to receive a bribe - be it in kind or in cash. But such laws are difficult to enforce because people are very reluctant to report such crimes. After all, they feel that bribes are similar to the tips which are accepted in most countries of the world.

Thus one can say that the African society depicted in Oyono Mbia's stories is a society in decadence. All the inhabitants suffer in one way or the other from the negative effects of colonization and of the new administration: acculturation, materialism, corruption, etc. and from their own bad habits such as nepotism, the subjection and exploitation of women and youths, in general, egoism and exploitative family and tribal ties. All live in psychological and moral alienation, for the modern administrative structure and Christianity have broken social and interhuman links in the traditional society. In sum, the characters are African by definition, Christians by conversion and westerners by assimilation.

It is for this reason that more and more committed Cameroonian writers like Oyono Mbia are now trying to attack, and even hold up to ridicule, undesirable practices, abuses and injustices inherent both in traditional society and in the new administration. While they do not want the natives to abandon completely their traditional beliefs and customs, they do hope that they will carry out a self examination and get rid of the abuses and injustices in their society. The same hopes apply to the civil servants. It is only by doing away with harmful practices that society can progress.

SOURCE TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

LE SERMON DE YOHANNES NKATEFOE

Conte de Noël

A Jean Samuel et Rose Zoé

1

"Kindang... kindang... Chrétiens de Mvoutessi... de Mvoutessi... Réveillez-vous... Venez au culte... Noël... No...Ël..."¹

Tandis que l'écho des forêts² environnantes transportait ce message jusqu'aux oreilles de ses paroissiens, Nkatefoé attendait, immobile, auprès de son énorme tam-tam d'appel. Un grand silence planait dans l'air, car les "oiseaux-gendarmes"³ eux-mêmes, qui palabraient comme chaque jour à l'aube dans les palmiers géants, s'étaient tus pour méditer sur le message du catéchiste⁴. Un vrai paradis sur terre et sur palmiers, la paroisse de Mvoutessi!

Soudain, de la maison d'Atemeteme partit, narquois, un autre appel de tam-tam:⁵

"Kindang... kindang... Buveurs de Mvoutessi... de Mvoutessi... Préparez-vous... beaucoup de vin...vin...Noël...No...Ël..."⁶

Nkatefoé, résigné, se dirigea lentement vers sa maison au seuil de laquelle Cécilia, son épouse, se tenait déjà, indignée. Dans les palmiers géants, les oiseaux-gendarmes avaient repris leurs palabres au point même où ils les avaient arrêtées, et le catéchiste dit, vexé par ce dernier détail:

- On aura toujours battu le chef des buveurs de quelques instants, ce matin, ah Cécilia!

Cécilia haussa les épaules: - Ça n'a rien d'étonnant, dit-elle, après tout le tapage que lui et ses compagnons avaient mené hier soir! S'enivrer de

A CHRISTMAS DAY IN MVOUTESSI

Dedicated to Jean Samuel and Rose Zoé

(1)

"Kindang ... Kindang ... Christians of Mvoutessi ... of Mvoutessi ...
Awake ... Come to church ... Christmas ... Christmas ..." ¹

While the echo from the surrounding forests ² carried this message to his Christians, Nkatefoe waited near his big drum, immobile. It was very quiet all around because even the police birds, ³ which used to waffle on endlessly at dawn in the big palm trees, had stopped chatting as if to meditate on the catechist's ⁴ message. The Mvoutessi parish was a true paradise on earth and in the palm trees!

Suddenly, another drum beat ⁵ came sardonically from Atemeteme's house:

"Kindang ... Kindang ... Drinkers of Mvoutessi ... of Mvoutessi ... Get ready ... Lots of wine ... of wine ... Christmas ... Christmas ..." ⁶

Nkatefoe moved slowly and resignedly towards his house in front of which his wife, Cecilia, was already waiting, indignant. The police birds on the big palm trees had resumed their endless chattering and the catechist annoyed by it, said:

"Ah Cecilia, this morning we were ahead of the chief of drinkers by some minutes!"

Cecilia shrugged her shoulders saying:

"There's nothing so surprising about that, after all the uproar that he and his friends created yesterday evening! To get drunk like that on

cette façon à la veille de Noël! Je te le répète, ah Yohannes! Aucun catéchiste ne pourra jamais convertir un homme pareil!... Qui d'autre pourrait réussir là où tu as échoué?

Nkatefoé, tout d'abord tenté de protester, réfléchit qu'après tout les paroles de sa femme étaient flatteuses à son égard. Il dit cependant, parce qu'il faut être modeste:

- Patientons encore, Cécilia; les voies de l'Eternel sont cachées aux hommes.⁷ Ainsi, j'en demeure persuadé, lorsque mes paroissiens auront entendu mon sermon de Noël...

Cécilia ne l'écoutait plus: elle s'était plongée dans les préparatifs du petit déjeuner, travail que l'homme de Dieu n'eût interrompu pour rien au monde. Car il faut dire qu'à Mvoutessi, un petit déjeuner de Noël n'a de petit que l'épithète.⁸ Celui qu'apprêtait Cécilia se composait, par exemple, de savoureux silures pêchés la veille dans la rivière Sô'ô, et rôtis, dûment et fortement épicés, dans des feuilles de bananiers au-dessus des braises. Ajoutez à cela des boulettes de plantain pilé, choisi deux ou trois jours avant la maturité complète, et vous jugerez si Nkatefoé avait le moindre intérêt à distraire son épouse ce matin-là. Il prit donc la sage décision de retourner à sa Bible en bulu,⁹ à ses lunettes rondes de Bibia¹⁰ et à son sermon qui l'attendaient sur une petite table branlante, dans la maison principale.¹¹

Nkatefoé s'était promis, en ce jour de Noël, d'étonner son auditoire par un sermon exceptionnel. Oui, assez exceptionnel pour détourner l'attention générale du vacarme qui proviendrait certainement de la maison d'Atemeteme pendant le service religieux. Zua Meka!... Cet Atemeteme!

Plusieurs fois déjà, le catéchiste avait entrepris de véritables campagnes de conversion pour le gagner au Seigneur. Ces pieuses expéditions

Christmas Eve! Ah Yohannes, believe me, no catechist can convert such a man!...Who else can succeed where you failed?"

Nkatefoe, tempted at first to protest, said to himself that his wife's words were meant to flatter him. However, one has to be modest, so he said:

"Let's be patient, Cecilia. The ways of the Eternal are hidden from men's eyes.⁷ I'm sure that once my parishioners have heard my Christmas sermon ..."

Cecilia had stopped listening to him. She was now busily preparing breakfast, a task which the man of God would not have interrupted for anything in the world. Because in Mvoutessi a Christmas breakfast is as big as any other meal.⁸ The one that Cecilia was preparing was made of tasty silurids caught the day before in the So'o river, pungently and properly spiced, wrapped in banana leaves, and roasted over glowing embers. Add to this balls of plantains harvested two or three days before they are fully ripe, cooked and pounded, and you'll understand why Nkatefoe did not want to distract his wife's attention that morning. He wisely decided to return to his Bulu Bible,⁹ his round glasses from Bibra,¹⁰ and his sermon, which were waiting for him on a small shaky table in the main house.¹¹

This Christmas, Nkatefoe had decided to surprise his congregation with an extraordinary sermon. Yes, extraordinary enough to turn public attention away from the uproar which would certainly come from Atemeteme's house during the service. Zua Meka! ... That Atemeteme!

The catechist had at various times launched veritable campaigns in an attempt to convert him to the Lord. But all these pious expeditions had

s'étaient, invariablement, soldées par de lamentables échecs. Ni les descriptions des flammes éternelles que faisait Nkatefoé, ni les versets bibliques que récitait le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe,¹² l'ancien de l'Eglise, ne semblaient émouvoir cette brebis égarée. En fait de brebis, du reste, Atemeteme rappelait plutôt un énorme bélier aux cornes apocalyptiques, capable de rebuter par de facétieuses réponses l'éloquence la plus divinement armée. Aussi exerçait-il, sur la gent ivrogne de Mvoutessi et de tous les villages environnants, ce qui se fût appelé une royauté si le régime démocratique de chez nous ne l'avait limité à une simple chefferie.¹³ Sans avoir lu Rabelais,¹⁴ il avait décidé, en accord avec ses fidèles sujets, d'instituer à Mvoutessi un culte du vin destiné à rivaliser avec le service divin, mais se distinguant nettement de ce dernier par le caractère tout de même plus joyeux des manifestations qui s'y déroulaient. L'heure de ce culte devait être la même que celle des cultes de Nkatefoé. La maison d'Atemeteme, la plus proche de la chapelle, devint tout naturellement le théâtre des opérations bachiques. Pendant le service proprement dit les fidèles, on s'en doute, se livraient à une consommation enthousiaste de vin de palme. Souvent aussi, lorsque les espions accrédités ne signalaient aucun gendarme¹⁵ de Zoétéélé à l'horizon, ils vidaient à la hâte quelques grands verres d'"arki". Ce dernier mot, que le lecteur prononcera à voix basse après avoir pris la précaution de regarder autour de lui, désigne une boisson fortement alcoolisée dont la consommation est très formellement interdite à tous ceux qui ne savent pas tenir leur langue.

Naturellement, le programme des cérémonies bachiques avait sérieusement inquiété Nkatefoé. Il venait de s'apercevoir que ses fidèles venaient de plus en plus tard à la chapelle. Certains même écoutaient le sermon en dodelinant de la tête d'étrange manière, attendant visiblement la fin du culte pour

invariably failed miserably. Neither Nkatefoe's descriptions of hellfire nor the scriptures quoted at him by Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe,¹² the church Elder, had seemed to move this lost sheep. And speaking of sheep, Atemeteme was more like an over-sized ram with apocalyptic horns capable of rebutting the most divinely equipped eloquence with his mischievous answers. To the drinking folk of Mvoutessi and all the surrounding villages, he would have been a monarch if our democratic government had not limited them to a simple chieftaindom.¹³ Although he'd never heard of Falstaff,¹⁴ he had decided in agreement with his faithful subjects to institute wine worship in Mvoutessi, destined to rival with the divine worship, though clearly differentiated from the latter by the more joyful nature of its manifestations. This wine worship was to be held at the same hours as Nkatefoe's services. Since it was the nearest house to the chapel, Atemeteme's house naturally became the scene of the Bacchic activities. During the actual service the faithful drank palm wine with enthusiasm. From time to time they also hastily emptied some glasses of "arki" when the trusted spies indicated that the coast was clear of gendarmes¹⁵ from Zoetele. The word "arki" - to be pronounced in a whisper by the reader after he has taken the precaution of looking all around-- designates a highly alcoholic drink whose consumption is expressly forbidden to all those who cannot hold their tongues.

Of course, Nkatefoe was seriously disturbed by the program of Bacchic ceremonies nearby. He had noticed that his parishioners were arriving later and later at the chapel. Some even followed the sermon with their heads nodding forward in a strange manner, visibly waiting for the service to end so

déguerpir. De son côté, Atemeteme remarquait chez certains de ses consommateurs une grande hâte à disparaître avant la clôture officielle des cérémonies.

Pourquoi de respectables fidèles, hier encore aussi exacts que le toucan bleu qui chante toujours à six heures du soir, étaient-ils devenus de gênants retardataires? Où se rendaient les ivrognes qui s'en allaient avant d'avoir épuisé la provision de vin de palme? Autant de questions qui restaient sans réponse à Mvoutessi.

Atemeteme, le premier, crut avoir compris: les buveurs se rendaient tout de même à la chapelle parce que Nkatefoé y faisait chanter! Après examen de ce nouvel aspect de la question, les adeptes du vin décidèrent d'avoir, eux aussi, leurs hymnes. Alors commença la série des dimanches de cauchemar pendant lesquels Nkatefoé se demandait s'il ne valait pas mieux de renoncer à chanter pendant le service religieux, malgré les instructions formelles reçues à cet effet à Bibia. Non que la proximité des buveurs empêchât le moins du monde la congrégation de chanter à la gloire de son Dieu: les adeptes du vin étaient bien plus tolérants que cela. Ils laissaient à l'assemblée des fidèles tout le temps de terminer leurs hymnes. Puis, lorsque les derniers échos avaient cessé de se répercuter dans les forêts avoisinantes, Atemeteme faisait reprendre le même hymne par ses fidèles à lui. En version bachique toutefois. Une version bachique revue et augmentée par les soins du dirigeant, et qui, si elle ne pouvait être certifiée conforme de la bouche d'un des buveurs à celle de l'autre, n'en témoignait que davantage du don d'improvisation des exécutants.

Les chanteurs d'Atemeteme étaient tous, sans exception, doués de voix puissantes qu'une lubrification constante au vin de palme semblait encore amplifier. De plus, au grand désespoir de l'homme de Dieu qui risquait d'en

that they could take off. Atemeteme, for his part, had noticed that some of his drinkers were in a great hurry to disappear before the official closing of the ceremonies.

Why were respectable believers, once as punctual as the blue toucan bird which always sings at six p.m., turning into disruptive late-comers? Where were the drinkers hurrying off to before emptying the containers of palm wine? Such questions remained to be answered in Mvoutessi.

Atemeteme was the first to think he had an explanation: the drinkers kept on going to Nkatefoe's services because of the singing! After examining this new aspect of the situation the wine worshippers decided to have their own hymns. It was then that those nightmarish Sundays began, during which Nkatefoe would wonder if it would not be better to stop singing during the service in spite of the explicit instructions received to this effect in Bibia. Not that the proximity of the drinkers in any way prevented the congregation from singing the glory of their God: the wine worshippers would not have been so intolerant. They first gave the faithful the time to finish their hymns, then, when the last echoes had died out in the neighbouring forests, Atemeteme would have the same hymn repeated by his followers - this time in a Bacchic version. A Bacchic version revised and augmented by the leader and which, while certainly not identical from one drinker to the other, only served to prove what gifted improvisers they were.

Atemeteme's singers all had powerful voices which appeared to have been amplified by the constant lubrication with palm wine. Worse still - and this so dismayed the man of God that he was in danger of breaking his beautiful

casser ses belles lunettes rondes, ces coquins vous mettaient des points d'orgue là où le compositeur original n'avait pas songé à en placer, rien que pour souligner telle parole particulièrement... Zua Meka!

Si particulièrement... Zua Meka!... que le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe lui-même se levait, armé d'un saint courroux et de son chasse-mouches, et s'en allait mettre un peu d'ordre dans la maison du diable. Les fruits de cette croisade ne tardaient pas à mûrir, car les buveurs se taisaient peu après. Et la vieille Makrita, épouse du croisé, profitait de ce que Nkatefoé nettoyait encore ses lunettes de Bibia pour faire remarquer:

- Heureusement qu'il nous reste de vrais hommes comme mon Mvendé-Nda-Zambe à Mvoutessi!... Où va le monde maintenant? Eé kié, Oyòñò Eto Mekong ya Ngozip!

Les autres femmes de l'assemblée approuvaient, sans dire tout haut qu'elles n'auraient pas usé leurs forces à semer des arachides au pays Fông¹⁶ si leur Matthias ou leur Tsakrias à elles n'avaient, eux aussi, été de vrais hommes. Et le sermon continuait tandis que là-bas, chez Atemeteme, le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe devait, sans doute déverser des torrents d'éloquence sur la tête des buveurs, car on ne le voyait rentrer qu'une demi-heure plus tard. Et les fidèles assis près de la porte remarquaient alors que l'indignation prêtait au brave homme une démarche un peu chancelante.

Voilà comment les choses se passaient à Mvoutessi avant les événements que nous allons raconter. Tous les dimanches matins, Nkatefoé faisait résonner son vieux tam-tam fendillé pour inviter les fidèles à venir au culte. Tous les dimanches matins, le petit tam-tam tout neuf d'Atemeteme lui faisait écho. Pendant le service religieux, le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe sortait, d'un pas assuré, et s'en allait réduire les buveurs de vin de palme au silence. Il rentrait une demi-heure plus tard, le pas moins assuré qu'au départ.¹⁷ Tant

round glasses - the rascals inserted pauses where the original composer had never thought of doing so, just to stress a particular word here and there.

... Zua Meka!

Such a particular word here and there ... Zua Meka! ... that Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe himself would leave the church armed with his holy wrath and a flyswatter and go to set things straight in the unholy house. Such crusades always had immediate results, and the wine drinkers would be quiet soon after. Then Makrita, the elderly wife of the crusader, would take advantage of the fact that Nkatefoe was still cleaning his Bibia glasses to say:

"Fortunately, we still have real men here in Mvoutessi like my dear Mvende-Nda-Zambe! ... What is the world coming to? Aa Keeaah, Oyono Eto Mekong ya Ngozip!"

The other women in the congregation would show their approval without saying out loud that they wouldn't have wasted their energy planting peanuts in the Fong land¹⁶ if their own Mathias or Tsakrias had not been real men. Then the sermon would continue, while over at Atemeteme's Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe was doubtlessly unleashing torrents of eloquence on the drinkers, for he always stayed at least half an hour before returning. And the faithful seated near the door would notice then that his indignation caused the good man to walk with an unsteady gait.

This was how things stood in Mvoutessi before the events we are going to relate. Every Sunday morning Nkatefoe sounded his cracked old drum inviting the faithful to the church service. Every Sunday morning Atemeteme's small, brand new drum echoed Nkatefoe's call. During the church service Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe would sally forth with a steady gait to reduce the palm wine drinkers to silence. He would come back half an hour later with a less steady gait than when he was leaving,¹⁷ so much so that some of the malicious and

et si bien que les mauvaises, et surtout les bonnes langues de Mvoutessi osèrent attribuer à la démarche du croisé rentrant dans la chapelle une autre cause que le saint courroux. Le fait est que le brave homme ne tenait plus en place pendant le reste du culte. Plus d'un gamin somnolent s'apercevait de ce changement aux dépens de ses oreilles que le chasse-mouches¹⁸ du père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe venait caresser de façon plutôt énergique. Nkatefoé lui-même parut s'être aperçu de quelque chose car, un beau jour, il attaqua publiquement Atemeteme, l'accusant de se servir de méthodes déloyales pour lui corrompre ses fidèles. A quoi Atemeteme avait répondu que l'évangéliste le lui rendait bien aux jours de fêtes religieuses. En effet, Noël et Pâques étaient les seules occasions pendant lesquelles Nkatefoé s'octroyait de magistrales revanches sur Atemeteme: les fidèles du vin - leur chef lui-même excepté - venaient à la chapelle pour voir les saynètes préparées par Cécilia et les autres paroissiennes.¹⁹ Certains allaient même jusqu'à écouter le sermon de Nkatefoé.

2

Deux fois déjà, le tam-tam de Nkatefoé avait annoncé le jour de Noël aux fidèles. Deux fois déjà, Atemeteme avait rappelé à ceux de sa bande que ce jour de Noël devait revêtir un éclat particulier. Les adeptes du vin s'étaient signalés la veille par le vacarme dont nous avons entendu Cécilia se plaindre au début de cette histoire.

Nkatefoé venait de prendre un bain chaud²⁰ préparé par sa femme. Il faisait maintenant des efforts surhumains pour se concentrer sur son sermon qu'il préparait. C'est que Cécilia ne lui facilitait pas les choses, Zua Meka! Le texte sacré dansait devant ses yeux au rythme des coups de pilon que

most of the pious tongues in Mvoutessi dared to attribute the unsteady gait of the crusader returning to the chapel to something other than his holy wrath. The truth is that good man could hardly sit still throughout the rest of the service and many a sleepy youngster noticed this change at the expense of his ears, which Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe's flyswatter¹⁸ would caress in a rather energetic way. Nkatefoe himself seemed to have noticed something because one blessed day he publicly attacked Atemeteme, accusing him of using underhand methods to corrupt God's faithful believers. In reply to which Atemeteme said that the evangelist did the same to him on religious holidays. And indeed, Christmas and Easter provided the only occasions during which Nkatefoe took his revenge on Atemeteme, because the wine worshippers (minus their chief) came to the chapel to watch the playlets performed by Cecilia and the other parishioners.¹⁹ Some even went as far as to listen to Nkatefoe's sermon.

(2)

Twice already, Nkatefoe's drum beat had announced Christmas Day to the faithful. And twice already, Atemeteme had reminded the members of his group that this Christmas Day was to be a special one. The wine worshippers had sworn to be worthy rivals of the catechist and had shown their determination the day before by the uproar about which we heard Cecilia complaining at the beginning of this story.

Nkatefoe had just taken a warm bath²⁰ prepared by his wife and was now making a superhuman effort to concentrate on the sermon he was preparing, for Cecilia was not making things easy for him, Zua Meka! The holy text was dancing in front of his eyes to the rhythm of the pestle as the housewife

la ménagère assénait sur ses bananes vertes maintenant cuites.

"En ce temps-là... (toup... toup...!)... César Auguste... (toup... toup...)... Quirinus... "21

Le gouverneur Quirinus passa soudain devant l'évangéliste sous les traits du chef des ivrognes, Atemeteme. Seulement, au lieu de registres de recensement, Atemeteme portait, accrochées à chaque épaule, ces pittoresques gourdes naturelles qu'on nomme calebasses.²² Celles dont nous parlons faisaient si bien partie du portrait physique et moral d'Atemeteme que, entre autres distinctions honorifiques, les villageois de Mvoutessi lui avaient décerné le sobriquet de "Bikokoé Mendeke" - "Les Calebasses Vides". Vides, parce qu'elles ne restaient jamais longtemps pleines de vin de palme.

- Atemeteme! dit Nkatefoé; viens donc manger! Atemeteme s'arrêta, surpris. L'évangéliste avait la réputation, dans tout le pays, de ne jamais manger seul. Mais de là à inviter son adversaire le plus irréductible! Ce fut donc plein d'une vague fureur qu'il se dirigea vers la petite table improvisée sous la véranda. Cécilia, qui venait d'y déposer les plats alléchants que nous connaissons, se précipita vers la cuisine pour ramener un supplément de mets et de couverts. Mais la voix d'Atemeteme l'arrêta sur le pas de la porte.

- Ne te donne pas tant de mal, Cécilia; je ne mangerai pas beaucoup ce matin. Je crains de m'alourdir avant de travailler.

- Travail... quoi? s'exclama Nkatefoé. Et, de saisissement, il laissa tomber une grosse tête de silure que Boubou, sa chienne, attrapa au vol et emporta en courant. Cécilia fusilla son mari du regard: des silures apprêtés à l'huile de karité!²³

- Travailler, continua Atemeteme qui n'était nullement fâché de constater qu'il produisait de l'effet sur l'homme de Dieu. Que veux-tu, le vin devient

pounded the green plantains she had just finished cooking: "At that time ... (toop ... toop ...!) ... Ceasar Augustus ... (toop ... toop ...) ... Quirinus..."²¹

Governor Quirinus suddenly passed in front of the evangelist in the person of Atemeteme, the chief of the drinkers. But instead of census registers, Atemeteme carried, hanging from each shoulder, the picturesque gourds known as calabashes.²² These particular ones merged so well with the physical and moral traits of Atemeteme that amongst other honorary titles, the Mvoutessi villagers had given him the nickname of "Bikokoe Mendeke" - Empty Calabashes. Empty, because they never stayed full of palm wine for long.

"Atemeteme!" said Nkatefoe. "Come and eat!"

Atemeteme stopped, surprised. The evangelist was known throughout the land for never eating alone, but it was unimaginable that he should invite his sworn enemy! It was thus full of a vague anger that he approached the small table improvised on the veranda. Cecilia, who had just placed on the table the mouth-watering dishes we have seen her preparing, hurried back to the kitchen for more food and cutlery, but Atemeteme's voice stopped her at the door step:

"Don't bother, Cecilia, I won't eat much this morning. I don't want to weigh myself down before going to work."

"To work ... what?" exclaimed Nkatefoe, who out of surprise dropped a big fishhead which Booboo, his dog, caught in mid-air and ran away with. Cecilia looked daggers at her husband; how could he be so careless with silurids cooked in karite butter?²³

"To work," continued Atemeteme, who wasn't the least bit annoyed to notice that he had made an impression on the man of God. "What do you expect?"

de plus en plus rare, et je voudrais abattre ce matin un palmier que j'avais vu quelque part à Nkòl-Sò'ò.²⁴

Cette fois, Nkatefoé attendit avant de parler, car Cécilia détestait qu'un homme se fâche la bouche pleine. Lorsqu'il fut en mesure d'articuler le moindre son, Atemeteme allait déjà disparaître derrière la chapelle, là où débouchait la principale des pistes menant aux plantations de Nkòl-Sò'ò.²⁵ Il cria cependant, à tue-tête:

- Atemeteme!... tu vas abattre un palmier le jour de Noël!... Et la naissance de Yessou Christouss?²⁶ Et les anges de la nuit dernière?

Aucune réponse ne parvint à l'évangéliste. Il se rassit, et se disposait à continuer son repas lorsque, une idée lui traversant l'esprit, il se leva d'un bond et courut vers son tam-tam. Et les paroissiens de Mvoutessi entendirent un message débordant d'une vigueur telle qu'ils n'en connaissaient à leur évangéliste qu'aux jours, lointains, déjà, antérieurs à l'institution du culte bachique. Le savoureux petit déjeuner de Cécilia fut la première victime de ce changement de régime: impossible d'obtenir de Nkatefoé qu'il le terminât. Il répétait, surexcité:

- Atemeteme sera absent de sa maison pendant le service religieux! Je te dis, Cécilia, que les adeptes du vin seront tous présents.

- Et après? dit Cécilia, toujours sceptique. Ils viendront peut-être assister au culte. Mais les empêcheras-tu, ensuite, de se rendre dans la maison du vin?

L'enthousiasme de Nkatefoé tomba un peu à ces paroles. Cécilia ne venait-elle pas de lui rappeler ce qui s'était passé le jour de Noël précédent? Le service religieux s'était normalement déroulé. Les ivrognes d'Atemeteme s'étaient tenus tranquilles dans la chapelle; bien d'entre eux s'étaient même levés, à la fin du sermon, pour se convertir. Mais, à la

Palm wine is getting scarcer and scarcer and this morning I intend to chop down a palm tree which I saw somewhere in Nkol-So'o."²⁴

This time Nkatefoe waited before answering, for Cecilia hated seeing people get angry with their mouths full. Before he was able to articulate a single sound, Atemeteme had almost disappeared behind the chapel, where the main path started to the farms in Nkol-So'o.²⁵ Nevertheless, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Atemeteme! ... You are going to chop down a palm tree on Christmas Day?... What of Yessou Christouss,²⁶ birth? What of last night's angels?"

There was no reply. The evangelist sat back and was going to resume eating when an idea came to his mind. He sprang up and ran towards his drum. And the parishioners of Mvoutessi heard a beat full of the vigour they remembered from the long gone by days before the institution of the Bacchic cult. The tasty breakfast prepared by Cecilia was the first victim of this change in regime. It was impossible to convince Nkatefoe to finish his food. Overexcited, he kept repeating:

"Atemeteme will be away from his house during the service! Cecilia, I can assure you that all the wine worshippers will be present."

"So?" replied Cecilia, always skeptical. "They may come and attend the service but will you prevent them from going back to the wine house?"

Nkatefoe's enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by these words, for Cecilia had just reminded him of what had happened the previous Christmas. The religious service had taken place as usual. Atemeteme's drinkers had been well-behaved, and many of them had even stood up to be converted at the end of

sortie du culte, une bonne partie de ces convertis, anciens et nouveaux, s'était rendue chez Atemeteme. Notons, à la décharge de ces fidèles, que le chef des ivrognes était doué d'un sens de l'humour absolument irrésistible. Des personnes animées des plus sobres intentions du monde venaient souvent chez lui après le culte rien que pour entendre les plaisanteries osées dont il émaillait ses moindres propos. Que voulez-vous, on a beau être un chrétien exemplaire, irréprochable aux yeux de la redoutable assemblée des anciens de l'Eglise, on n'en prend pas moins un innocent plaisir à écouter des paroles grivoises. Et Nkatefoé, en ce jour de Noël-là, avait, du seuil de la chapelle, vu ses fidèles s'engouffrer par petits groupes discrets chez Atemeteme, et en ressortir une ou deux heures plus tard, riant encore au souvenir des bons mots entendus et oubliant, dans leur hilarité, de rectifier une démarche assez peu normale.

Voilà par quels souvenirs Cécilia venait de décourager son époux. Mais le catéchiste, qui s'était promis d'étonner son auditoire par son message de Noël, s'étranglait à rectifier le noeud de sa vieille cravate rayée.

3

La chapelle de Mvoutessi était comble. Plusieurs paroissiens devaient même se tenir debout pour laisser à Cécilia et à ses compagnes l'espace nécessaire à la représentation des scènes de la Nativité qu'elles avaient préparées. Ces actrices méritaient bien l'attention amusée que la congrégation leur accordait. L'une d'entre elles notamment, Marla Memvouta, pensa faire mourir les spectateurs de rire en interprétant à sa façon le rôle de Saint-Joseph, - un Saint Joseph local, ressemblant à s'y méprendre à l'époux de l'artiste dont personne n'ignorait les petites manies. Les

the sermon. But after the church service, many of the converts both old and new had gone to Atemeteme's house. It should be noted in defence of these Christians that the chief drinker was gifted with an absolutely irresistible sense of humour. People full of the most sober intentions in the world often came to his place after the church service just to hear the risqué jokes with which he peppered his talk. After all, even a model Christian accepted by the draconian assembly of church elders enjoys the innocent pleasure of listening to ribald expressions. And that Christmas Day, Nkatefoe, standing in the doorway of the chapel, had seen his faithful Christians disappear into Atemeteme's house in small discreet groups only to come out one or two hours later still laughing at the jokes they had heard and forgetting in their hilarity to correct a gait which was far from normal.

These are the memories with which Cecilia had just discouraged her husband. But the catechist, who had vowed to surprise his congregation with his Christmas message, was almost strangling himself trying to correct the knot of his old striped tie.

(3)

The chapel of Mvoutessi was full. Many of the parishioners even had to stand up so as to give Cecilia and her friends room to present the Nativity scenes which they had prepared. These actresses deserved the attention paid to them by the amused congregation. One of them, Maria Memvouta, nearly caused the audience to die laughing by interpreting Saint Joseph as a local suspiciously like her own husband, whose odd little mannerisms were known to

compagnons-d'Atemeteme étaient là au complet, à demi-cachés par les palmes que les jeunes gens avaient plantées un peu partout dans la chapelle pour donner au modeste édifice un air de fête.

Quelqu'un de très occupé pendant le service religieux, c'était le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe. Il se démenait comme un possédé (de bon esprit bien entendu), distribuait des coups de chasse-mouches aux gamins, pour montrer aux fidèles du vin que le saint édifice n'était pas comme leur maison bachique, dont il savait quelque chose. Il avait également beaucoup de mal à obtenir que les jeunes filles se mettent à plusieurs sur le même banc, pour faire de la place à ceux des paroissiens qui devaient se tenir debout. Chacune de ces jeunes personnes avait besoin de l'espace nécessaire pour étaler sa nouvelle robe.²⁷

Les saynètes de Cécilia avaient pris fin. Une fin bruyante ponctuée encore, de loin en loin, de quelques éclats de rire vainement comprimés. Nkatefoé, fier de sa femme et désireux de se montrer son digne époux, se leva majestueusement. N'étant pas de ces prédicateurs sans intelligence qui s'embrouillent, il suivait un programme; ce programme était même écrit, et il y jeta un coup d'oeil ostensible (au cas où les buveurs l'eussent soupçonné d'improviser). Or un programme, même écrit par Nkatefoé, peut réserver bien des surprises. C'est ainsi qu'au lieu d'entendre la chorale que l'évangéliste venait d'inviter à s'exécuter, l'assemblée, ahurie, fut témoin d'un événement sans précédent dans les chroniques de Mvoutessi.

Une clameur terrifiante serait certainement sortie des trois cents poitrines réunies dans la chapelle, sans l'intervention d'une indicible stupeur qui avait coupé le souffle à tout le monde. En général, les gens qui ont perdu l'énergie nécessaire pour parler gardent celle qu'il faut pour se taire. Cette loi physique fut démontrée dans la maison de Dieu en ce

everybody. Atemeteme's companions were all there, half hidden by the palm fronds which the youths had put up everywhere in the modest little chapel to give it a festive atmosphere.

Busiest of all during the service was Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe. He thrashed about as if possessed (by a good spirit, naturally) lashing at the youngsters with his flyswatter so as to show the wine worshippers that the chapel was not like their Bacchic house, which he knew so well. He also had considerable difficulty getting the young girls to sit closer together on their benches so as to make space for those parishioners who were standing, for each of these young ladies needed space so as to display her new dress.²⁷

Cecilia's playlets had just ended and the congregation was noisy, here and there, with uncontrollable bursts of laughter. Nkatefoe stood up majestically, proud of his wife and eager to prove himself a husband worthy of her. Unlike those unintelligent preachers who often get mixed up, he had drawn up a programme which he had even written out and which he made great show of consulting (just in case the drinkers had thought that he was improvising). But a programme, even written by Nkatefoe, can always contain surprises. So it was that instead of listening to the choir which the evangelist had invited to sing, the congregation, flabbergasted, witnessed an event without a precedent in the annals of Mvoutessi.

Were it not for the inexpressible astonishment which had taken everybody's breath away, a terrifying clamour would have certainly erupted from the three hundred persons in the chapel. Usually, people who have lost the energy to speak retain enough to keep quiet. This law of physics was

mémorable matin de Noël. Les cris d'une bande de toucans bleus se disputant des noix de palme dans la plantation de l'oncle Thomas Eboulou troublèrent, seuls, cette convention de silence. Mais les toucans n'entendent pas grand-chose à la physique.

Atemeteme venait d'entrer dans la chapelle.

Le vent de la stupeur eut bientôt cessé de souffler. Un ouragan impétueux lui succéda, jaillissant des poumons tout à l'heure comprimés. N'eût-il duré que l'espace d'un souffle, cet ouragan eût emporté Atemeteme jusqu'au sein du diable en personne, car il avait nom Indignation. Heureusement pour le chef des ivrognes, l'Ouragan-Indignation fut bientôt neutralisé par la brise légère, mais efficace, du bon sens.²⁸ Une brise qui, soufflant justement dans le bon sens ce matin-là, venait de sauver Atemeteme d'un grave péril. En effet, le père Myvendé-Nda-Zambe, déjà armé de son chasse-mouches, cherchait son saint couproux²⁹ à tâtons sous le banc pour infliger à l'intrus la correction qu'il méritait. La brise du bon sens venait de calmer tous les esprits, et aussi de révéler à l'assemblée un détail stupéfiant: Atemeteme portait des habits neufs.

A Mvoutessi, dans tous les villages du sud où l'homme idéal reste le paysan vêtu de ses hardes, l'habit ne saurait faire le moine dans une chapelle protestante.³⁰ Mais, bien que tout le monde mette de beaux habits le dimanche, jamais personne n'avait vu Atemeteme en faire autant, si grand était son désir de ne rien faire comme un fidèle de Nkatefoé. Son élégance se limitait donc aux jours de semaine pendant lesquels il arborait, sitôt finie la tournée de ses troncs de palmiers en pleine production de vin, ses habits neufs achetés à Sangmélima.³¹ Dimanche, il mettait ses habits les plus usagés, et venait passer devant Nkatefoé pour se rendre en brousse. Déguenillé le dimanche, endimanché en semaine, telle pouvait être la

proved in the holy house on that memorable Christmas morning. The silence was disturbed only by the cries of a flock of blue toucan birds fighting over palm nuts in Uncle Thomas Eboulou's farm. But toucan birds know next to nothing²⁷ about physics.

Atemeteme had just entered the chapel!

The wind of stupor stopped blowing and was followed by an impetuous rushing storm from the lungs that had been compressed a moment earlier. Had it lasted only as long as a single breath this storm would have swept Atemeteme right into the arms of the devil himself, for its name was Indignation. Fortunately for the chief of the drinkers, this Storm of Indignation was soon neutralized by a light but effective Breeze of Common Sense.²⁸ A breeze which had just saved Atemeteme from a grave peril by blowing in the right direction that morning. In fact, Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe, already armed with his flyswatter was groping around trying to find his Holy Wrath²⁹ under the bench so as to inflict the punishment deserved by the intruder. The Breeze of Common Sense had not only calmed down all the spirits but had also revealed a stupefying detail to the congregation: Atemeteme was wearing new clothes!

In Mvoutessi and in the villages in the South, whose population is typified by the peasant dressed in rags, fine clothes do not the Christian make³⁰ in a Protestant chapel. But, though everybody wears his best clothes on Sunday, nobody had ever seen Atemeteme do the same, so great was his desire never to do anything like one of Nkatefoe's faithful believers. His elegance, then, was limited to weekdays, during which he sported his new clothes, bought in Sangmelima,³¹ as soon as he had finished his tour of the palm tree trunks which produced palm wine. On Sunday he would wear his worst clothes and pass in front of Nkatefoe on his way to the bush. Ragged on Sundays and in his

définition vestimentaire d'Atemeteme.

Or, il venait d'entrer dans la chapelle; en habits neufs.

Les paroissiens, que nous venons de laisser sous l'influence de la brise du bon sens, commençaient maintenant à se transmettre de muettes questions de banc en banc. Atemeteme, lui s'était rapproché de Nkatefoé, et lui avait longuement parlé à l'oreille. On vit alors le saint homme rayonner de joie, se précipiter pour chasser à grand fracas un gamin qui dormait sur une chaise:

- Ces enfants d'aujourd'hui... Ça vient dormir là tandis qu'un homme respectable se tient debout!

Décidément, l'évangéliste déraisonnait: Atemeteme, un homme respectable?

Atemeteme, le seul sans doute à prendre les paroles de Nkatefoé au sérieux, s'intalla le plus naturellement du monde. Nkatefoé entreprit une longue prière pendant laquelle tous les fidèles, le père Mwendé-Nda-Zambe compris, gardèrent les yeux ouverts pour voir si Atemeteme allait oublier de fermer les siens. L'homme de Dieu demandait au Seigneur de bien vouloir éclairer Son enfant repentant, etc.

De mieux en mieux!

- Mes frères en Yessou Christouss, dit l'évangéliste à la fin (car tout a une fin) de sa prière; mes frères, Atemeteme, ici présent, vient de m'annoncer son intention de se tourner vers Dieu. Comme les fantômes ne parlent jamais sans que la pluie soit tombée, vous penserez, de même que moi, qu'un événement important est à l'origine de sa décision de renoncer à sa vie un peu... euh... mais je lui laisse la parole.

Ainsi parla Nkatefoé. Ces messieurs de la "Maison qui envoie les Paroles", à Yaoundé,³² n'eussent pas mieux présenté à leurs chers auditeurs leur envoyé spécial sur la lune. Atemeteme se leva et commença à parler:

- Mes frères en... comment l'appelais-tu déjà, Nkatefoé?

Sunday best on weekdays: such was Atemeteme's policy regarding clothes.

But he had just entered the chapel in new clothes!

The parishioners, whom we had just left basking in the breeze of common sense, began to exchange questioning glances from one bench to another. As for Atemeteme, he approached Nkatefoe; after a lengthy whispered conversation, the man of God, visibly beaming with joy and happiness, hurried noisily to remove a youngster who was sleeping in a chair.

"These modern children ... They come to sleep here while a respectable man has to stand!"

Undoubtedly, the evangelist was crazy. How could Atemeteme be a respectable man?

Atemeteme, without doubt the only person to take Nkatefoe's words seriously, sat down calmly. Nkatefoe said a long prayer during which all the faithful, including Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe, kept their eyes open to see if Atemeteme would forget to close his. The holy man was asking the Lord to enlighten His repenting child, etc ...

It was then that things became really interesting.

"My brothers in Yessou Christouss," said the evangelist at the end of his prayer (for everything has an end). "My brothers, Atemeteme here present has just told me of his decision to turn towards God. As dead men never speak unless it has rained, you will, just as I do, think that an important event must have given rise to this decision to give up his former way of life which, as you know, was a bit ... uh ... But I'll let him tell it himself.

So spoke Nkatefoe. The people of the "House which sends Voices" in Yaounde³² wouldn't have done any better in introducing their special correspondent to the moon to their audience. Atemeteme stood up and started speaking:

- Yessou Christouss, répondit l'évangéliste, sans se départir de son calme habituel, ni trop se vexer en voyant de larges sourires aux lèvres de vrais fidèles, ceux qui étaient plus habitués à prononcer le nom de notre Seigneur.

- Mes frères en Yétou Chrissou,³³ continua Atemeteme; je m'étais rendu en forêt ce matin pour abattre un palmier, et aussi faire ma provision de vin pour Noël. Arrivé à Nkòl-Sò'ò, j'ai visité mes troncs de palmiers les uns après les autres. Pas une goutte de vin! Même un superbe palmier que j'avais abattu près de l'arbre-aux-toucans-bleux,³⁴ dans la plantation de Yohanna,³⁵ était à sec. A sec! Andréas m'entend-il?

L'interpellé ayant fait la sourde oreille, Atemeteme continua:

- J'aurais dû me douter qu'un jour comme celui-ci ne vaut rien pour aller chercher du vin en brousse. Tous ces hiboux qui ne cessaient de hurler sur mon chemin, ces "bo'ofiang", ces oiseaux de mauvais augure qui se posaient presque sur mes épaules! Sans parler d'un énorme chimpanzé que j'avais rencontré après avoir traversé deux ruisseaux, qui s'était arrêté pour me regarder comme je vous regarde...³⁶

Atemeteme adopta, ce disant, une pose simiesque du plus haut comique, et la chapelle vibra longtemps du fou rire qui secoua toute la congrégation. Lorsque le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe et son chasse-mouches eurent ramené le calme, la narration put continuer:

- Arrivé à Nkòl-Sò'ò, je me suis disposé à abattre le palmier dont je vous ai parlé. Un vieux palmier dont le tronc, presque lisse, ne gardait plus qu'une touffe de feuille au sommet. Voilà un palmier qui ne me laisserait jamais rentrer au village avec des Calebasses vides, ai-je pensé.

Un autre éclat de rire se déclina, car les dernières paroles du chef des ivrognes avaient réveillé des échos dans l'esprit de ses auditeurs. Le père

"My brothers in ... what did you call him Nkatefoe?"

"Yessou Christouss," answered the evangelist in his usual calm manner, paying no attention to the big smiles on the faces of the real believers who were more in the habit of pronouncing the name of our Lord.

"My brothers in Yetou Chrissou,"³³ continued Atemeteme. "I went into the forest this morning to cut down a palm tree and collect palm wine for Christmas. On arriving at Nkol-So'o I inspected my palm tree trunks one after the other and did not even find a drop of wine. Even a superb palm tree which I had felled near the "blue toucans' tree"³⁴ in Yohanna's³⁵ plantation was dry. Dry, I said! Andreas, do you hear me?"

Andreas having turned a deaf ear, Atemeteme continued: "I should have known that a day like this one is not good for me to go looking for wine in the bush. All those owls which kept hooting on my way, those-"bo'ofiang", the birds of ill omen which almost alighted on my shoulders! Not to mention a huge chimpanzee which I met after crossing two streams and which stopped to look at me just as I am looking at you ..."³⁶

While saying this Atemeteme assumed the most comic/ape-like posture and the chapel for a long time vibrated with the laughs which shook the entire congregation. After Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe had restored order with his flyswatter the narration continued:

"On arriving at Nkol-So'o I prepared to cut down the palm tree I just told you about. It was an old palm tree with a trunk that was nearly smooth and only one cluster of fronds was left on top. Here's a palm tree which will never let me return to the village with empty calabashes, I thought to myself."

These last words from the chief of the drinkers reminded his audience of something and caused another outburst of laughter. Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe was

Mvendé-Nda-Zambe lui-même se tenait les côtes, et Yohannes Nkatefoé se laissait aller à un sourire discret.

- La grande difficulté qui avait failli me décourager, dit Atemeteme lorsqu'un calme relatif se fut de nouveau rétabli, était la suivante: le palmier avait poussé à côté de cette espèce de manguiers sauvage que vous connaissez tous, et dont le bois, extrêmement dur, n'intéresse pas les blancs de la scierie.³⁷ Entre les deux arbres, une liane avait poussé, s'enroulant étroitement autour de leur tronc. En conséquence, quiconque voulait abattre le palmier devait tenir compte de son association avec le manguiers et la liane; le palmier était ainsi assuré de ne jamais subir l'affront d'une cognée, car le vin de palme ne vaut pas la peine d'un abattage général. Mais moi, j'avais pensé pouvoir abattre le palmier sans nécessairement m'occuper du manguiers et de la liane. Je pensais, en effet, que le poids du palmier serait suffisant pour rompre la liane, au cas où elle essaierait de me gêner dans mon travail...

Voilà mon palmier qui commence à frémir sous mes coups de cognée. Mais, je dois faire attention à ne frapper qu'après m'être assuré de l'inclinaison adoptée par l'arbre. Chose curieuse, aucun signe notable ne semblait m'indiquer que le palmier allait bientôt tomber, et, pensant qu'il me faudrait encore attendre longtemps, je me mis à frapper comme un sourd, en chantant.

Or, j'avais oublié la liane! En effet, elle seule empêchait le palmier de tomber. Et voilà qu'au moment où je m'y attends le moins, le palmier amorce une chute vertigineuse, droit sur moi.

Un frisson d'horreur parcourut l'assistance.

- Vais-je donc mourir avec toute ma sagesse dans le ventre, comme disaient nos ancêtres. Non, car j'essaie de me précipiter hors d'atteinte. Mais j'avais encore oublié la liane dont les multiples racines qui rampaient

splitting his sides and even Yohannes Nkatefoe had to smile discreetly. When things had quieted down somewhat in the chapel, Atemeteme continued:

"The main obstacle which had almost put me off was that the palm tree had grown near a wild mango tree whose extremely hard wood is of no interest to the white men of the sawmill.³⁷ A liana had grown between the two trees curling itself tightly around their trunks. Because of this any one wanting to cut down the palm tree would have to think of its close ties with the mango tree. The palm tree was thus assured of never receiving a blow from an axe because palm wine would not be worth the trouble of felling a lot of trees. But I thought I could cut down the palm tree without necessarily cutting down the mango tree and the liana. In fact I thought that the weight of the palm tree would be enough to break the liana if it tried to disturb my work ...

Here's my palm tree which starts shaking as I strike at it with my axe. But I can only continue after checking the angle it's leaning at. Strangely enough there was no sign that the tree was about to fall so I continued striking at it like a deaf man, singing away.

But I had forgotten the liana! In fact it was the only thing keeping the tree from falling. And just when I was least expecting it, the palm tree starts crashing down directly upon me."

A shudder of horror ran through the audience.

"Was I going to die with a bellyfull of wisdom as our ancestors used to say? No, I tried to jump out from under the falling tree. But, I had once again forgotten the liana, whose creeping roots all around me wound themselves

tout autour de moi s'entortillent autour de mes jambes. Je m'étais donc de tout mon long, tandis que le palmier fonce inexorablement sur moi.

Ici, une véritable clameur s'éleva dans la chapelle. Des vieilles femmes se mirent à pleurer de cette façon touchante qui rappellerait les morts à la vie si de bien meilleures préoccupations ne les retenaient dans l'au-delà. Atemeteme lui-même regretta peut-être d'avoir échappé à une mort qui eût été si bien pleurée. Le fait est que les pleureuses le dépeignaient comme la sobriété même, et comme un homme qui avait été célèbre dans tout le pays Fông.

- Ku..u ...u...! C'est mon palmier qui vient de tomber. Je suis resté longtemps sans en croire mes propres yeux, car j'avais cru remarquer une chose étrange: près de m'écraser, le palmier avait paru hésiter, puis décrire un arc de cercle pour m'éviter.

"E é e!" s'écria l'auditoire, soulagé, bien qu'encore incrédule.

- Un vrai miracle, mes frères! Je me suis alors dit: j'irai voir cela de mes propres yeux avant d'aller le raconter au village. C'était la liane qui m'avait sauvé: elle s'était déroulée sous le poids du palmier tombant. Parvenue au terme de sa course, elle avait donné au palmier l'impulsion à laquelle je devais la vie.

Ici, Atemeteme s'arrêta, car des "Zua Meka" et des "Oyônô Eto Mekong-ya-Ngozip" d'étonnement fusaient de tous les coins de la salle. Il continua, après s'être épongé le front du manche de sa chemise neuve achetée à Sangmélina:

- Mes frères en Yétou...

- Yessou Christouss! corrigea l'assemblée en chœur, et sans aucune envie de rire cette fois.

- Mes frères, cette liane m'a rappelé les paroles de Yohannes Nkatefoé ce matin. Je serais parmi vous depuis longtemps déjà si, une autre idée m'étant

about my legs. As I tried to run off, they caught my legs and I fell flat on the ground, while the palm tree kept crashing down towards me."

At this point a real clamour came from the chapel. Old women started crying in that moving way of theirs that would bring the dead back to life, if they didn't have better things to do where they are. Perhaps Atemeteme himself regretted having escaped a death which would have been mourned so well. The truth here is that the mourners were depicting him as sobriety itself, a man famous throughout the land of the Fong.

"Ku ...u ...u ...! My palm tree had just fallen. For a long time I couldn't believe I'd actually seen what I thought I saw: just before landing on me the palm tree had seemed to hesitate and had then veered away so as to spare me."

"Eee aah!" shouted the audience relieved though still skeptical.

"This was a true miracle my brothers!" I said to myself, "I must go and see it with my own eyes before going to tell the village". The liana had saved me by unwrapping itself under the weight of the falling tree, till it reached its full extent causing the tree to veer away and save my life."

At this point Atemeteme stopped because "Zua Meka's" and "Oyono Eto Mekong-ya-Ngozip's" of surprise were being shouted from all the corners of the chapel. Then, after wiping his forehead with the sleeve of his new shirt, bought in Sangmelima, he continued:

"My brothers in Yetou ..."

"Yessou Christouss!" said the congregation in chorus to correct him and without any desire to laugh this time.

"My brothers, this liana reminded me of what Nkatefoe said this morning. I would have been here long ago had I not had another idea on my way back and

venue en cours de route, je n'étais rentré près du palmier abattu. Je tenais à casser moi-même mes anciennes Calebasses. Mais je les ai cherchées longtemps avant de trouver ce qui en restait: le palmier les avait écrasées dans sa chute.

Aujourd'hui, à Mvoutessi, personne ne parle plus de Bikokoé Mendeke - les Calebasses Vides. En revanche, tout le pays Fông résonne des louanges de Monti (Monsieur) Jérôme Atemeteme,³⁸ le bras droit de l'évangéliste Nkatefoé.

L'homme de Dieu, de son côté, bien qu'heureux - et fier - de voir Atemeteme se ranger sous les drapeaux du Seigneur, n'a cependant pas encore tout-à-fait pardonné à l'ex-chef des ivrognes de lui avoir volé, certain jour de Noël...

- Un si long sermon, ah Cécilia!... Atemeteme lui-même se serait converti s'il l'avait entendu!.

returned to where the palm tree fell. I wanted to break my old calabashes myself. It was only after a long search that I discovered what remained of them because the palm tree had crushed them all."

In Mvoutessi nowadays nobody talks of Bikokoe Mendeke - Empty Calabashes. Instead all the land of Fong echoes the praises of Massa (Mister) Jerome Atemeteme,³⁸ the right-hand man of Nkatefoe the evangelist.

For his part and though happy and proud to see Atemeteme fall in under the Lord's flag, the man of God has nonetheless never quite forgiven the former chief of drinkers for having, on a certain Christmas Day stolen ...

"Such a long sermon, Cecilia, ah! ... Atemeteme himself would have been converted had he heard it!"

LES SEPT FOURCHETTES

Ce soir-là, après le repas, mon père me demanda pour la dixième fois peut-être:

- Tu parles de te rendre demain à Ebolowa?³⁹

- Oui, répondis-je. Je voudrais aller rendre visite à certains de mes anciens élèves là-bas. Mon cousin Joseph Mezôé m'accompagnera.

Papa⁴⁰ resta un moment silencieux. Ce projet de voyage ne lui plaisait pas beaucoup: pourquoi les jeunes gens de maintenant ne pouvaient-ils pas imiter ceux de son temps, qui ne se déplaçaient jamais de chez eux? Il dit enfin, après avoir semblé réfléchir:

- Quelle sorte de maître d'école es-tu donc? Je ne t'ai jamais vu amener tes élèves ici pour te défricher ta cacaoyère.

- Tita-Mongô n'est pas un maître d'école, dit mon oncle Ko'oko Atemeteme. C'est un professeur!

Un peut partout, dans les régions Bulu et Beti, on appelle respectivement Tita-Mongô et Na-Mongô⁴¹ les enfants qui portent le nom de leur grand-père ou de leur grand'mère. Ce sont, le plus souvent, les aînés de leur sexe dans la famille.

Mon père fut irrité par les corrections de Ko'oko Atemeteme.

- Est-ce à toi qu'on parle? s'écria-t-il. S'agit-il ici de vin de palme? Ce serait là le seul sujet de conversation digne de toi!

Atemeteme resta silencieux, réaction inouïe pour quiconque le connaissait, et que les personnes présentes attribuèrent à la recherche d'une riposte cinglante. Ces personnes étaient en plus de mon père, mon ami Bulamba, venu d'Aae⁴² en compagnie de Jacques Ella et d'Emile Ma'a, tous deux de Melomébaé.⁴³ Deux de nos oncles, Tita-Andréas Zang et Tita Oyônô Esslôa

SEVEN FORKS!

For the tenth time or so after supper that evening my father asked me:

"Did you speak of going to Ebolowa³⁹ tomorrow?"

"Yes," I answered. "I would like to visit some of my former students there. My cousin, Joseph Mezoé will be going with me."

My father⁴⁰ remained silent for some time. He was not very keen on my planned trip. Why couldn't the youths of today imitate those of his time who never travelled away from their homes? Finally, apparently after some reflexion, he said:

"What kind of school teacher are you anyway? I've never seen you bring your students here to clear your cocoa farm."

"Tita-Mongo is not a primary school teacher," interrupted my Uncle Ko'oko Atemeteme. "He's a tutor!"

Just about everywhere in the Bulu and Beti regions, Tita-Mongo and Namongo⁴¹ respectively designate the children who bear the name of their grandfather or their grandmother. Such children are usually the eldest of their sex in the family.

My father was irritated by Ko'oko Atemeteme's correction.

"Who was speaking to you?" he asked. "We weren't talking about palm wine, which is the only conversation topic worthy of you!"

Atemeteme kept quiet. This was a strange reaction for those who know him and those present assumed that he was searching for a stinging rejoinder. In addition to my father, the other people present were: my friend Bulamba, who had come from Awae,⁴² accompanied by Jacques Ella and Emile Ma'a, both from Melomebae.⁴³ Two of our uncles, Tita Andreas Zang and Tita Oyono Essola (who

(qui m'appelait toujours son homonyme⁴⁴ parce que nous portions le nom du même ancêtre) avaient également partagé le dîner que nous venions de terminer.

Je profitai de l'accalmie survenue dans la discussion pour expliquer, une fois de plus, le but de mon voyage. J'ajoutai que nous nous arrêterions à Ngoulmekong, à mi-chemin, pour passer une nuit chez notre vieille grand'tante. Papa fut ému :

- Tu as raison! dit-il; va visiter ta grand'tante! La pauvre Na'Eyenga est devenue si maigre que, pour la renverser, il suffirait de souffler un peu dans sa direction! Quelle femme c'était pourtant, ma tante! De son temps, jamais une de ses compagnes ne lui avait ployé le genou, ni demandé: "es-tu aussi une vraie femme?"⁴⁵ ... Puisque tu vas lui rendre visite...

- Est-elle donc une des élèves de Tita-Mongô? dit Ko'oko Atemeteme, rentrant dans l'arène verbale. Tu ne bois pas de vin de palme, et tu parles cependant comme un ivrogne! Tita-Mongô parle d'aller visiter ses élèves. Il s'arrêtera à Ngoulmekong pour passer la nuit.

- Et qu'est-ce que je disais? répliqua papa.

Il détestait qu'on le comparât à un ivrogne. Justement, ce soir-là, il préparait un sermon contre les boissons fortes et tumultueuses⁴⁶ pour le dimanche prochain, car il devait remplir l'office de Yohannes Nkatefoé, notre catéchiste, parti chez lui la veille, à Ngoantet, prendre part aux funérailles d'un de ses cousins.

Maman entra dans la maison, venant de la cuisine où elle mangeait en compagnie de mes soeurs et de quelques voisines. Comme elle avait entendu les derniers mots de la discussion entre papa et Ko'oko Atemeteme, elle dit:

Eh kié kié kié!...⁴⁷ Ce sera donc une habitude entre vous deux? Si tout le pays Fông vous savait si éloquents, ne vous aurait-on pas invités pour aller trancher la palabre de ce matin à Efôt?⁴⁸

always called me his "homonym"⁴⁴ because we both bear the name of the same ancestor) had also taken part in the supper which we had just finished.

I took advantage of the lull in the discussion to explain once again the goal of my trip. I added that we would be stopping halfway^v at Mgoulmekong to spend one night at our old aunt's. My father was moved.

"You are right!" he exclaimed. "Pay a visit to your great aunt. Poor Na'Eyenga! She's lost so much weight you could blow her away! Yet what a woman she used to be, my aunt! In her younger days, none of her friends could show disrespect to her or ask her: are you too a real woman?⁴⁵ ... Anyway, as long as you'll be paying her a visit ..."

"So is she one of Tita-Mongo's students?" asked Ko'oko Atemeteme, jumping back into the verbal fray. "You don't drink palm wine but you talk like a drunkard! Tita-Mongo says he's going to visit his students. He will stop in Nouglmekong only to spend the night."

"Isn't that what I was saying?" asked my father. He hated being compared to a drunkard. That very evening, in fact, he had been preparing a sermon against strong and riotous drinks⁴⁶ for the coming Sunday, when he was to replace our catechist, Yohannes Nkatefoe, who, the day before had gone to his village, Ngoantet, for the funeral of one of his cousins.

At that moment, my mother came into the house. She was coming from the kitchen where she had been taking her meal with my sisters and some women neighbours. Having followed the last section of the discussion between my father and Ko'oko Atemeteme, she exclaimed:

"Aah kee aaah!⁴⁷ ... Is this becoming a habit between the two of you? If all Fong land knew how eloquent you are, they would have invited you this morning to go settle the dispute in Efot."⁴⁸

- Tu veux qu'un homme de Dieu aille trancher des palabres de polygames?⁴⁹
s'écria papa, scandalisé.

En effet, ce matin-là, tous les gens de Mvoutessi et des environs s'étaient rendus à Efôt pour ramener le calme dans le harem de Lukas Owônô où deux femmes s'étaient battues. C'était, chuchotait-on, à propos des conventions fondamentales de l'endroit, trop bien observées en faveur de la plus jeune des deux, et pas assez ou point du tout à l'égard de l'autre.

- Si tu ne veux pas aller trancher des palabres de polygames, continua maman, pourquoi persistes-tu à raconter celles des ivrognes?

- Qu'est-ce que je disais? triompha Ko'oko Atemeteme.

Papa se mit à rouler un énorme cigare. Ce tabac, produit de nos plantations de Nkôl-Sô'ô, n'a pas de pareil pour le goût. Quand il eut fini d'ôter soigneusement la nervure des feuilles, il dit à Maman qui venait d'engager une conversation avec mon ami Bulamba:

-Tita-Mongô se rendra demain à Ebolowa. Il passera la nuit chez ta belle-mère à Ngoulmekong.

- Tita-Mongô voyage beaucoup, dit maman. On lui a peut-être fait manger une cuisse de chien chez les Yevo!⁵⁰

- C'est aussi ce que je pensais! dit mon homonyme, Tita Oyônô Essôla. Mon homonyme voyage beaucoup; et pourtant, il n'est pas comme nous autres, les ignorants, qui pouvons nous déplacer sans crainte. Les sorciers des tribus étrangères ne cherchent qu'à tuer des gens comme lui.

- Tu dis vrai! appuya Tita Andréas Zang. Des blancs⁵¹ comme Tita-Mongô sont rares... !

- Rares! tonna, du dehors, une voix puissante, celle, à nulle autre pareille, de Tita Mezôé lui-même, le chef de village. Il entra et, sans façons, se mit à étreindre tout le monde, car il revenait d'un voyage à

"You don't expect a holy man to go and settle disputes amongst polygamists?"⁴⁹ retorted my father, scandalised.

That very morning, in fact, everyone in Mvoutessi and the surrounding villages had gone to Efot to straighten things out in Lukas Owono's harem, where two co-wives had been fighting. Rumour had it that certain rights fundamental to such an establishment were at stake, with the younger wife receiving more than her due and the older one little or none at all.

"If you don't want to go and settle polygamists' disputes," continued my mother, "why do you keep on recounting those of drunkards?"

"What did I tell you?" asked Ko'oko Atemeteme, triumphantly.

My father started rolling an enormous cigar. He was using tobacco from our farms in Nkol-So'o, unrivalled for its aroma. When he had finished removing the veins of the tobacco leaves with great care, he turned to my mother, who had started a conversation with my friend Bulamba, and said:

"Tita-Mongo will be going to Ebolowa tomorrow. He will spend the night with your mother-in-law at Ngoulmekong."

"Tita-Mongo travels a lot," my mother said. "The Yevos must have given him the thigh of a dog to eat."⁵⁰

"That's just what I was thinking," said Tita Oyono Essola, who bears the same name I do. "My homonym travels too much; yet he is not like the rest of us, the ignorant, who can go around without any fears. The sorcerers of foreign tribes like nothing better than killing people like him."

"That's true," added Tita-Andreas Zang. "Whites⁵¹ like Tita-Mongo are rare!..."

"Rare!" thundered a powerful and unmistakable voice from the outside. It was Tita-Mezoe, the village chief. He entered and, without further ado started embracing everyone, for he was returning from a two-week trip to

Yaoundé, qui lui avait pris deux semaines. Il embrassa plus chaleureusement mon ami Bulamba en disant:

- Eé kié! Que mon fils avait su copier les traits de son père! Tenez, regardez-moi cela: les mêmes yeux, les mêmes tailles, les mêmes épaules Mvôg-Zambô! Comment font-ils donc, ces sorciers, pour avoir des enfants leur ressemblant à ce point?... Comment va ton père?

- C'est à peine s'il se tient debout, répliqua Bulamba. Ses maux de dos le reprennent de temps en temps.

Tita Mezôé eut un petit rire entendu:

- Ah ka ka ka, mon fils! Nous reste-t-il des dos, à nous autres les polygames? Nous sommes morts!

Tout le monde partit d'un éclat de rire à ces paroles, et Tita Mezôé dit, en marchant à reculons pour aller s'installer dans le fauteuil en rotin que mon neveu, Owônô Ella, venait de quitter à son intention:

- De vrais cadavres!... Pourquoi penses-tu que je revienne de Yaoundé? J'étais allé trouver mon beau-frère, le cousin de ma cinquième femme, et lui dire: "si tu ne me sauves, je suis un homme mort!"... Vous savez, c'est le grand docteur en médecine, un de ceux qui signent des papiers dans les bureaux.⁵²

- Et il t'avait soigné? demanda Ko'oko Atemeteme.

- Ecoutez un peu cet animal! dit Tita Mezôé ahuri par une telle naïveté. Tu n'as pas entendu qu'il est docteur? Et tu veux qu'il soigne des malades? Il signe des papiers. Puis, se tournant de nouveau vers Bulamba, il demanda:

- Ton père et toi avez-vous des "flèches"⁵³ ces jours-ci?

- Pas une seule cartouche! répondit Bulamba. Il nous est très difficile d'obtenir la moindre autorisation d'achat de cartouches à la préfecture.

Yaounde. My friend Bulamba he embraced with special warmth:

"Aa keeah! How this son of mine has copied his father's features! Look! The same eyes, the same height, the same shoulders as Mvog-Zambo! How do these sorcerers manage to have children who resemble them so much?... How's your father doing?"

"He's barely on his feet," answered Bulamba. "His backaches flare up, now and then."

Tita Mezoe laughed knowingly:

"Ah ka ka ka, my son. Do we polygamists still have any backs left? We're done for!"

Everyone burst into laughter at these words. Backing into the rattan armchair from which my nephew Owono Ella had just risen for him, Tita-Mezoe continued:

"We're real corpses!... What do you think took me to Yaounde? I went there to visit my brother-in-law, the cousin of my fifth wife, and to tell him: 'If you don't help me I'll be a dead man!...' He's the big M.D., you know, one of those who sign papers in offices."⁵²

"Did he treat you?" asked Ko'oko Atemeteme.

"Listen to the animal!" exclaimed Tita-Mezoe, stunned by such naivety. "Didn't you hear me say he's a doctor? And you expect him to treat the sick? He signs papers." Then turning again to Bulamba, he asked:

"Do you and your father still have 'arrows'⁵³ these days?"

"Not a single cartridge!" said Bulamba. "It's very hard to get a permit to buy cartridges from the Divisional Office."

- C'est de votre faute! dit Tita Andréas Zang. Si vous réserviez les plus belles des filles qui abondent tant à Awaé pour les grands hommes,⁵⁴ vous ne manquerez pas de cartouches. Mais comme vous souffrez que de simples collégiens et de petits marchands de friperies vous les gâtent, personne ne veut plus vous rendre service dans les grands bureaux.

- Peut-on gouverner les filles de nos jours? dit mon homonyme Tita Oyônô Essôla, en regardant mes soeurs qui entraient. Si c'était possible, nous autres de Mvoutessi ne paierions peut-être même plus d'impôts! Mais elles n'écoutent personne!

- Personne! dit l'assistance.

- Ah Mâmmi!⁵⁵ dit mon père en s'adressant à maman; le chef de village est ici!

Maman sortit et se dirigea vers la cuisine. Tita Oyônô Essôla demanda au chef:

- Ton beau-frère t'avait-il bien reçu?

- Extrêmement bien! répondit Tita Mezôé; si seulement tu pouvais voir le lit dans lequel j'avais passé ces deux semaines!

Tous les auditeurs se penchèrent, comme pour voir sur la peau du narrateur les traces du lit dans lequel il avait dormi en ville. Maman, qui rentrait de la cuisine, nous surprit dans cette position. Elle tendit un plat à Tita Mezôé en disant:

- Puisque tu es venu en retard, je ne t'ai trouvé qu'un os au fond de la marmite.

- Et où se trouve toute la saveur de la viande, sinon dans les os? dit le chef, que jamais personne n'avait pris au dépourvu. A Yaoundé, lorsque je mangeais chez mon beau-frère, je disais toujours au maître d'hôtel (car ils ont un maître d'hôtel, un cuisinier, deux marmitons, un jardinier, une

"That's your fault!" exclaimed Tita Andreas Zang. "Had you kept the prettiest of the many pretty girls in Awae for the influential men,⁵⁴ you would never have lacked cartridges. But since you allow mere students and small secondhand clothes dealers to spoil them for you, nobody wants to use their influence for you in the big offices."

"Who can keep young girls in line nowadays?" exclaimed my homonym, Tita Oyono Essola, watching just as my sisters came in. "If it were possible we in Mvoutessi would perhaps be paying no taxes! But these girls will listen to nobody!"

"Nobody!" echoed those present.

"Ah Mammy!"⁵⁵ said my father to my mother. "The village chief is here!"

My mother went out towards the kitchen. Tita Oyono Essola asked the chief:

"Did your brother-in-law receive you well?"

"Extremely well!" answered Tita Mezoë. "If only you could see the bed I slept on for the last two weeks!"

All the listeners bent forward as if to see, on the skin of the speaker, the traces left by the bed he had slept on in the city. My mother, returning from the kitchen, surprised us in this position. She handed a dish to Tita Mezoë:

"Since you came late, all I have to offer you is the last bone in the pot."

"And where is all the flavour of meat, if not in the bones?" asked the chief, who has never been caught off his guard by anybody. "In Yaounde,

servante, un chauffeur), - je disais toujours au maître d'hôtel: "moi, je viens de la brousse; sers-moi seulement des os!"

- Tu nous oubliais donc, nous autres tes femmes de Mvoutessi? dit ma mère. Ne pouvais-tu également dire à ton cuisinier...

- Maître d'hôtel! corrigea Tita Mezôé.

- Ne pouvais-tu pas lui dire également: "Irai-je trouver mes femmes avec des mains vides? Veux-tu qu'elles aillent m'égorger? Fais-moi un petit paquet, afin qu'en arrivant à Mvoutessi je leur dise: voici ce que je vous avais gardé!"

- Ah ka, Mammi, dit Tita Mezôé; on voit bien que tu n'as jamais mangé chez ces grands hommes qui reviennent du pays des blancs. Veux-tu savoir comment ça se passe?

- Dis-nous! s'écria l'assistance.

- Chacun reste assis à sa place, dit le chef, en mimant avec autant de liberté que lui en laissait le précieux plat posé sur ses genoux. Il'y avait plusieurs linges blancs devant moi, à droite et à gauche. J'avais bien compté, à côté de mon plat, sept fourchettes.

- Que dis-tu là? s'exclama l'auditoire, presque incrédule.

- Je dis sept! affirma Tita Mezôé, tandis qu'à défaut des sept fourchettes de la ville il se servait de ses dix doigts pour empoigner son morceau de viande, et le déchirer à belles dents. Mon père, ce voyant, dit à mes soeurs Lydia et Phili:

- Où sont les sept... les fourchettes de cette maison? Les-a-t-on encore toutes cassées? Nous en reste-t-il assez pour le chef?

Phili entreprit de chercher nos sept fourchettes. Je me demande encore si nous en avons jamais possédé tant à la fois. Mais Tita Mezôé déclara qu'il se contenterait de ses doigts:

every time I ate at my brother-in-law's, I always told the butler (they have a butler, a cook, two kitchen boys, a gardener, a maidservant, and a chauffeur, you know) I always told the butler: 'Me, I'm from the bush, just serve me the bones!'"

"So you'd forgotten about us, your women of Mvoutessi?" asked my mother. "Couldn't you also have said to your cook..."

"Butler!" corrected Tita Mezoe.

"Couldn't you also have said to him: 'Will I return to my women empty handed? Do you want them to kill me? Give me a little something so that on arriving in Mvoutessi I'll be able to say to them: here's what I saved for you!'"

"Aah ka, Mammy," said Tita Mezoe. "It's obvious you've never eaten in the homes of these important people who've returned from the white man's country. Do you want to know what it's like?"

"Tell us!" exclaimed the audience.

"Everyone remains seated at his place," said the chief gesticulating as best he could with the precious plate on his knees. "There were several white napkins at my place - to the left and to the right. And beside my plate - I counted them - seven forks!"

"What?" exclaimed the audience, almost incredulous.

"Seven!" reiterated Tita Mezoe, all the while using his own ten fingers - instead of the seven forks used by cityfolk - to grab his piece of meat and tear into it with his teeth. Seeing this, my father said to my sisters, Lydia and Phili:

"Where are the seven ... forks we used to have? Have they all been broken again? Do we still have enough for the chief?"

Phili started looking for our seven forks. Even now I wonder if we had

- Nous sommes en brousse, dit-il. Je me débrouillerai sans fourchettes.

- Il ne se débrouillait pas mal, en effet, sans pour autant discontinuer son récit.

- Sept fourchettes, dit-il; les unes plus grandes, les autres petites.

- Que mangiez-vous avec tant de fourchettes? Un éléphant?

Cette question, qui venait de Ko'oko Atemeteme, déclencha de grands éclats de rire. Le chef dit d'un ton apitoyé:

- Comment veux-tu te tenir au courant des choses importantes, toi, si tu restes éternellement dans la brousse, à pêcher les silures de la rivière Sô'ô... Nous mangions du boeuf.

- Du boeuf?

- Du boeuf, mais pas du boeuf de brousse comme nous en vendent les Haoussas.⁵⁶ Du vrai boeuf de frigidaire que l'on fait venir de France. Le maître d'hôtel l'appelait "rôki".⁵⁷

- Rôti! corrigèrent les jeunes gens de l'assistance.

- Comme vous dites, repartit le chef de village. Nous mangions du rôti; et nous buvions des vins rouges et des moins rouges.

- Est-ce qu'il parle de vin de palme? demanda mon père en s'adressant à Ko'oko Atemeteme.

Ko'oko allait répliquer lorsque les trois voisines qui se trouvaient à la cuisine entrèrent. Elles avaient été attirées par la voix puissante du chef, et venaient le saluer à la façon Bulu, en l'étreignant longuement et en demandant:

- Quoi de neuf en ville?

- Rien, répondit Tita Mezôé; les journaux de maintenant ne contiennent plus de nouvelles!

- Où va le monde? s'exclama-t-on. Et tous regrettèrent les journaux du

ever had so many at the same time. But Tita Mezoe declared that his fingers would do:

"We are in the sticks," he said. "I'll manage without forks."

In fact he was managing very well, without interrupting his story.

"Seven forks," he said. "Big ones and little ones."

"What were you eating with so many forks? An elephant?" This question from Ko'oko Atemeteme brought great bursts of laughter. The chief said pityingly:

"You, how do you expect to keep up with the really important things if you stay in the backwoods fishing silurids in the So'o river? ... We were eating beef."

"Beef?"

"Beef, but not the beef from the bush that the Haussas⁵⁶ sell us. Real frozen beef imported from France. The butler called it "roasti."⁵⁷

"Roast beef," corrected the young people in the audience.

"As you say," continued the village chief. "We ate roast beef, and we drank red and not-so-red wines."

"Is he talking about palm wine?" my father asked Ko'oko Atemeteme.

Ko'oko was going to answer but the three women neighbours from the kitchen entered. Attracted by the powerful voice of the chief, they had come to greet him in the style of the Bulu, embracing him at length:

"What's new in the city?"

"Nothing," answered Tita Mezoe. "There's no news in newspapers anymore!"

"What's the world coming to?" everyone asked. All present regretted the

bon vieux temps, toujours pleins de nouvelles que les villageois faisaient lire aux écoliers, et écoutaient en hochant gravement la tête, allant même jusqu'à traiter le jeune lecteur d'ignorant s'il restait muet sur le passage habituel concernant une promesse de fusils, de maisons en dur et de femmes blanches à tous ceux qui ne manqueraient jamais de sacrifier des poulets⁵⁸ à l'occasion des tournées fréquentes de M. le Sous-Préfet.

- Pas de nouvelles, continuait le chef. Mais, comme je le disais tout-à-l'heure en entrant, nous sommes maintenant sauvés, nous autres de ce village. Nous avons aussi un blanc parmi nous. (Et il pointa un doigt autoritaire sur moi en continuant): Savez-vous ce qu'un grand homme, un homme vraiment important, portant veste et cravate, m'avait dit dans le car ce matin à propos de Tita-Mongô que voici?

- Qu'avait dit le grand homme? demandèrent les auditeurs.

Tita Mezôé avala lentement sa dernière bouchée. Il aimait bien tenir les gens en haleine.

- Portant veste et cravate, continua-t-il enfin; maintenant que j'y repense, je suis sûr qu'il portait également un gilet, parce que la chaleur était étouffante dans le car. Un grand homme.

- Un grand homme! reprurent les autres.

- Grand, dit encore Tita Mezôé. Après m'avoir longtemps considéré, il m'a demandé: "N'es-tu pas Mezôé, le descendant de Mbia-Nnangya-Mimbili, le chef de village de Mvoutessi-Fông?" Et moi, je lui ai répondu: "Qui d'autre serais-je?" Alors il m'a dit: "O Mezôé, vous autres, les Fôngs de Mvoutessi, vous étiez certainement nés avec des étoiles sur le front! Vos ancêtres devaient être de grands sorciers! Sais-tu que ton fils commandait tous les blancs; européens et africains, qui corrigeaient le brevet à Yaoundé?"

- E e e e kié! s'écrièrent les villageois en fixant sur moi des yeux

newspapers of the good old days, which were always full of news and which the villagers had schoolboys read aloud, nodding their heads with gravity as they listened and even going so far as to berate the young readers for their ignorance if they didn't read the usual passage with its promises of guns, concrete houses and white women for all those who would unfailingly continue sacrificing chickens⁵⁸ when the Sub-Divisional Officer made his frequent rounds.

"No news," continued the chief, "but as I told you, just now, on entering here, we in this village are saved. We also have a white amongst us. (He pointed to me authoritatively as he continued): Do you know what one influential man in the bus, I mean someone really important, in a coat and a tie, told me this morning about this Tita-Mongo you see here?"

"What did the important man say?" those present asked. Tita Mezoe slowly swallowed his last mouthful. He enjoyed keeping people on tenterhooks.

"A man in a coat and a tie," he continued at last. "Now that I think of it I'm sure he was also wearing a vest because the heat in the bus was stifling. An important man indeed."

"An important man!" exclaimed the others.

"Important," Tita Mezoe repeated. "He asked me after having looked at me for a long time: 'Aren't you Mezoe, the descendant of Mbia Nnangya-Mimbili, the chief of the Mvoutessi-Fong village?' 'Who else could I be?' I answered. Then he said to me: 'Oh Mezoe, you, the Fongs of Mvoutessi, you were certainly born with stars on your foreheads! Your ancestors must have been great sorcerers! Do you know that your son was in charge of all the whites, European and African, who were marking the school-leaving certificate⁵⁹ in Yaounde?"

"Aa keeah!" exclaimed the villagers, beaming at me with the pride of

pleins de fierté, la fierté de posséder dans le village un savant qui était allé commander les correcteurs du brevet⁵⁹ à Yaoundé. Le chef, satisfait de l'effet produit, me demanda:

- Est-ce que je mens? d'un ton qui exigeait un "non".

- Pas tout à fait, lui répondis-je. J'étais l'un des membres de la correction, comme tu dis. Mais je ne commandais personne. Je...

- C'est lui qui commandait! dit Tita Mezôé, avec une assurance accrue parce qu'il croyait être ma modestie. Le grand homme du car me l'avait bien dit!

- Mais puisque je te dis moi-même que... voulus-je essayer de protester. Mais mon homonyme, Tita Oyônô Essôla, me coupa la parole en s'exclamant, indigné:

- Que veut dire tout ceci? Mon homonyme s'en va commander les blancs qui fabriquent le brevet à Yaoundé. Il revient sans penser à battre le tam-tam pour appeler ses pères, et leur dire: "O Fôngs, mes pères, où êtes-vous? Venez, que nous mangions ensemble ce que je vous ai rapporté de la ville. Même si vous ne buvez chacun qu'une dame-jeanne de vin rouge, ne vous demandez pas: "notre fils se moque-t-il de nous?"⁶⁰

- Et vous seriez venus vous enivrer chez moi? s'écria papa, scandalisé.

Il n'avait pas encore oublié le sermon qu'il préparait.

- E é é kié, Mbia! dit Tita Oyônô Essôla. Serais-tu donc plus missionnaire que Tita Abraham de la Bible lui-même, qui avait dit aux anges du Seigneur qui s'en allaient brûler Sion...⁶¹

- Sodome, rectifia maman.

- Sidome! reprit mon homonyme; et qu'est-ce que je disais? Abraham n'avait-il pas dit aux anges: Même si vous êtes pressés d'aller brûler Sidome, venez vider une petitealebasse de vin de palme?

- Abraham n'avait jamais dit cela! s'écria maman. Voilà comment tu te

having, in their village, a scholar who'd been to Yaounde to oversee the correction of the school-leaving certificate. Satisfied with the effect produced, the chief turned to me:

"Am I lying?" he demanded in a tone that necessitated a "No" for an answer.

"Not exactly," I answered. "I was one of the markers as you say, but I wasn't in charge of anybody. I ..."

"He was the one in charge!" said Tita Mezoe whose assurance was fortified by what he considered my modesty. "The important man in the bus told me!"

"But since I'm telling you in person that ..." I tried to protest, but my homonym, Tita Oyono Essola, indignant, interrupted me:

"What's all this?" he exclaimed. "My homonym goes to Yaounde to oversee the whites who make the school-leaving certificate. He returns and doesn't even think to call his fathers with a drum beat to say to them: 'Oh Fongs, my fathers, where are you? Come, let's feast together on the food I've brought you from the city. Even if you drink only a demijohn of red wine each, do not ask yourselves: 'Is our son making fun of us?'"⁶⁰

"And you would have come to get drunk in my home?" exclaimed my father, scandalized. He had not forgotten the sermon he was preparing.

"Ah ka, Mbia!" cried Tita Oyono Essola. "Are you more of a missionary than Tita Abraham of the Bible who said to those angels of the Lord who were going to destroy Sion⁶¹ ..."

"Sodom," corrected my mother.

"Sidom!" continued my homonym. "What was I saying? Didn't Abraham say to the angels: 'Even though you are in a hurry to go and burn down Sidom, just come drink a calabash of palm wine?'"

"Abraham never said that!" exclaimed my mother. "That's all you can

rappelles le verset biblique appris dimanche dernier! Abraham avait parlé de leur égorger un veau!

- C'est ce que je voulais entendre, dit Tita Oyônô Essôla. Pourquoi mon homonyme n'avait-il pas réuni ses pères pour leur dire: "Venez manger ce petit boeuf que Monti Ministre m'avait donné à Yaoundé?" S'il nous avait dit cela, aurions-nous refusé de venir?

- Qui aurait vu cela! dirent quelques'uns de l'assistance.

- Et on mange toutes les choses rapportées de la ville dans cette maison...

- Nous mangeons des choses? Quelles choses? demanda Atemeteme, déjà inquiet.

- Est-ce qu'on te demande de payer? dit Tita Oyônô Essôla. N'avez-vous rien mangé ici depuis l'arrivée de mon homonyme?

- Pas le moindre écureuil! affirma Ko'oko Atemeteme.

- Si vous préférez continuer à manger en cachette...

Le chef de village intervint alors.

- Kaé...kéa... Taisez-vous! s'écria-t-il; pourquoi tout ce bruit? Allez-vous déjà commencer votre sorcellerie du pays Fông? Ai-je dit que Tita-Mongô cachait les richesses du brevet ici? S'il en avait rapporté, cette maison ne serait-elle pas remplie de malles?

- De malles! reconnut l'assistance.

- Le sol ne serait-il pas cimenté? Moi qui vous parle, serais-je assis dans un vieux fauteuil de rotin, au lieu d'être confortablement calé dans un divan comme un de ceux que mon beau-frère avait fait venir de France?

- Un divan!

- N'aurais-je pas mangé le morceau de viande que ma femme m'avait apporté avec sept fourchettes?

remember of the Biblical verse that was taught only last Sunday! Abraham spoke of killing a calf for them!"

"That's what I wanted to hear," said Tita Oyono Essola. "Why didn't my homonym gather his fathers to say to them: 'Come and eat this nice young side of beef that Massa Minister gave me in Yaounde?' Had he said this to us, would we have refused to come?"

"Who has ever heard of that?" asked some of those present.

"And all the food brought back from town we eat it right here, in this house ..."

"We're eating food? What food?" asked Atemeteme already agitated.

"Have you been asked to pay?" Tita Oyono Essola asked. "Haven't you eaten anything here since the return of my homonym?"

"Not even a squirrel!" affirmed Ko'oko Atemeteme.

"If you prefer to continue eating on the sly ..."

The chief of the village interrupted them.

"Ka eeh ... ka eeh ... Be quiet!" he exclaimed. "Why all this noise? Are you about to start your sorcery from the Fong land? Did I say that Tita-Mongo was hiding the riches of the school-leaving certificate here? Had he brought any back, wouldn't this house be full of trunks?"

"Full of trunks!" acknowledged the audience.

"Wouldn't there be a cement floor? Would I be sitting here in an old rattan chair instead of being comfortably ensconced in a sofa like one of those that my brother-in-law ordered from France?"

"A sofa!"

"Wouldn't I have eaten the piece of meat my wife served me with seven forks?"

- Sept fourchettes!

- Zua Meka! Je n'ai jamais vu des gens comme vous! Vous trouvez quelqu'un en train de monter au sommet de l'arbre, et vous lui dites: "redescends"? Je n'ai même pas encore fini de vous raconter ce que le grand homme du car m'avait dit!

- O Mezôé, fils de mon père, dit Tita Andréas Zang. Continue ton récit.

- Voulez-vous, dit le chef de village, que Tita-Mongô se trouve aussi en mesure de nous faire boire et manger comme en ville?

- Nous le voulons! repartit l'assistance.

- Il faut qu'il aille étudier en Europe! continua le chef. C'est là que se trouvent les vraies écoles. Il n'aura qu'à dire au blanc qui commande là-bas: "je suis le fils de grands hommes du pays Fông; mes pères m'envoient m'inscrire à l'Ecole des Ministres".

Ici, tous les jeunes gens de la salle éclatèrent de rire, et je dis à Tita Mezôé:

Mais il n'y a rien de tel en Europe!

- Tu chercheras! répliqua-t-il d'un ton autoritaire. Lorsque tu partiras, tous tes pères viendront te cracher sur le visage pour te bénir, et tu seras reçu premier à tous tes examens.

- Premier! approuva la foule.

- A la fin de ses études, continua Tita Mezôé, s'adressant cette fois aux autres villageois, il ira dire au revoir à tous les blancs qui possèdent des usines là-bas. Ce sont nos amis, car ils nous envoient toujours des catalogues. Ils ne laisseront pas notre fils rentrer les mains vides.

- Le chef a raison! dit quelqu'un. Les hommes mûrs du pays des blancs ne peuvent laisser un visiteur rentrer chez lui sans rien.

"With seven forks!"

"Zua Meka! I've never seen people like you! You see somebody climbing a tree and you say to him: 'Come down.' I haven't even finished telling you what the important man told me in the bus!"

"Oh Mezoe, son of my father, continue your story;" said Tita Andreas Zang.

"Do you want to see Tita-Mongo in a position to serve us food and drink as in town?" asked the village chief.

"Yes!" cried the listeners.

"He must go to Europe to study!" the chief continued. "That's where the real schools are. He would only have to say to the man in charge there: 'I am the son of the important men of Fong land, sent here by my fathers to enroll in the School of Ministers.'"

At this point, all the young people in the room burst out laughing and I said to Tita Mezoe:

"But there's no such thing in Europe!"

"You'll go look for it!" he answered authoritatively. "When you leave, all your fathers will come spit in your face to bless you and you'll be first in all your exams."

"First!" the crowd agreed.

"When he's finished his studies," Tita Mezoe continued, speaking this time to the other villagers, "he will go and say good-bye to all the whites who own factories there. They're our friends: they always send us catalogues. They will not let our son come back empty-handed."

"The chief is right," said a voice. "The grown men of the white men's country cannot allow a visitor to return home empty-handed."

- Il nous apportera des fusils à cinq coups, comme celui du directeur de la scierie... Quel douanier osera lui poser des questions à la frontière, alors qu'il aura son diplôme de ministre en poche?

- Quel douanier!

- Il paraît que personne ne travaille manuellement en Europe. Regardez un peu les mains de nos fils qui en reviennent: aussi délicates que celles d'un nouveau-né! Je vous assure que lorsque Tita-Mongô reviendra, personne n'osera plus lui serrer la main. Il sera devenu un homme civilisé.

Ayant atteint ces points de ses prophéties, le chef de village se leva, s'étira, et dit à sa mère: A' Mammi! Il faut que je rentre maintenant, sinon mes femmes commenceront à me chercher. Tu sais que je viens de passer deux semaines loin d'elles... Quelle vie!

- Pourquoi en avais-tu épousé tant? demanda Maman.

- Ah ka! dit le chef; tout le monde sera-t-il catéchiste comme ton mari et toi? Et la gloire de la tribu Fông? Puis, se tournant vers moi, il ajouta:

- Que vas-tu faire au pays Bulu?

- Ne peut-il aller chercher des filles? demanda Atemeteme après un coup d'oeil prudent à l'adresse de papa. Ce fut maman qui s'indigna:

- Chercher des filles comme un païen, lui, un professeur de la Mission!

- Les professeurs de la Mission n'aiment donc pas les filles? demanda sournoisement Tita Mezôé. Maman dit, avec conviction:

- Si, mais seulement des filles comme il faut. Et ils ne les aiment qu'après que le conseil des anciens de l'Eglise ait longuement étudié la nature de leurs relations. Par exemple, j'irai un de ces jours à Nkoumadjap, au pays Otololo'o, voir une certaine fille dont on m'a parlé là-bas. Il paraît qu'elle n'a jamais, de sa vie, manqué une seule séance de prière matinale.

"He will bring us five-shot guns like the one the director of the saw mill owns ... What customs officer will dare interrogate him at the frontier when he has his Minister's diploma in hand?"

"What customs officer indeed!"

"They say there are no manual labourers in Europe. Just look at the hands of our sons who return from there: as delicate as those of newborn babies! I can assure you that when Tita-Mongo comes back nobody will dare shake his hand. He'll be a civilized man."

Having arrived at this point in his prophecies, the village chief stood up, stretched and said to my mother:

"Ah Mammy! I have to go now or else my wives will start looking for me. I've been away from them for two weeks, you know... What a life!"

"Why did you marry so many?" my mother asked.

"Ah ka!" exclaimed the chief. "Should everyone become a catechist like you and your husband? What would happen to the glory of the Fong tribe?" Then, turning to me, he continued: "What are you going to do in Bulu land?"

"Can't he go look for girls?" Atemeteme asked after a cautious glance at my father. Mother was the indignant one though:

"He, a mission teacher, going after girls like a pagan!"

"Don't mission teachers like the girls?" Tita Mezoe asked sardonically. Mother answered with conviction:

"Yes, they do, but only decent girls. And they only love them after the Council of Church Elders has carefully examined the nature of their relationship. So, one of these days I'll go to Nkoumadjap in Otolo'o land to meet a certain girl that I've been told about. They say she has never once

Tandis qu'avec celles-ci (regardant mes soeurs Lydia et Phili qui commençaient à rire) celles-ci qui dorment plus profondément que des antilopes, j'ai tout essayé! Autant s'évertuer à maintenir unealebasse vide sous l'eau!... Vous riez? Attendez un peu: la trompette sonnera, et vous arriverez comme les vierges folles!

- Mes filles ne sont pas folles! protesta Ko'oko Atemetema à qui, ce matin-là Lydia avait apprêté un plat de silures frits dans de l'huile de karité, comme il les aimait. Maman lui dédia le coup d'oeil apitoyé qu'elle réservait à tous ceux qui ne connaissaient pas toutes les paraboles bibliques par coeur.

Tita Mezôé, voyant que tout le monde était sur le point de partir, me dit encore:

- N'oublies pas mes conseils à propos de tes études. Quand tu seras devenu ministre, tu nommeras tous tes frères et cousins préfets, afin qu'en effectuant des tournées un peu partout dans le pays, il nous apportent des moutons et des chèvres. Tu iras toi-même signer des papiers en ville, comme mon beau-frère.

Il s'arrêta, voulant s'assurer que tous les auditeurs hochaient la tête en signe d'assentiment, puis il conclut avec toute la solennité possible:

- Et alors, nous viendrons manger chez toi aussi avec sept fourchettes!

missed morning prayer. Whereas with these ones (looking at Lydia and Phili, my sisters, who were beginning to laugh), who sleep more soundly than antilopes, I've tried everything! One might as well struggle to hold an empty calabash under water! ... You are laughing? Wait a bit: the trumpet shall sound and you'll be caught unprepared like the foolish virgins!"

"My daughters are not foolish!" protested Ko'oko Atemeteme for whom, that morning, Lydia had prepared silurids fried in karite butter, just as he liked them. My mother shot him the scornful look she reserves for all those who do not know all the Biblical parables by heart.

Seeing that everyone was ready to leave, Tita Mezoë said to me again:

"Don't forget my advice regarding your studies. When you become a Minister you'll appoint all your brothers and cousins Divisional Officers, and after going the rounds all over in the country they'll bring us sheep and goats. You yourself will go sign papers in the city like my brother-in-law."

Here he stopped to make sure that everyone present was nodding in agreement. Then with all the solemnity he could muster, he concluded:

"And then, we'll go eat at your place too with seven forks!"

NOTES

1. Here the author has imitated the sound made by the drum beat i.e. "Kindang ... kindang ...," followed by the message which is conveyed to the Christians of Mvoutessi. Usually on Christmas days, Christians first go to church before returning home to continue the celebrations; since they don't have watches, the drum beat gets them out of bed, also inviting them to church.
2. This story is set in the Central Province of Cameroon and this Province is in the forest zone. Thus the villages are built in clearings which are surrounded by forests, hence the allusion to "forêts environnantes".
3. These birds weave their nests on top of palm trees. They chat at dawn, after sunset and everytime that somebody passes by, thus disturbing the silence. The reference to them as "oiseaux-gendarmes" describes their role because they alert the whole village whenever somebody is passing near the trees. I have rendered this expression by "police birds" so as to preserve the name given to them by the author.
4. After the arrival of missionaries in Cameroon, missions were set up in urban centres and small churches were built in the villages. Pastors were trained to handle big parishes, while smaller villages were left in the care of a catechist who read the scriptures to the illiterate villagers in their native language and also gave sermons on Sundays and on Christian holidays. The Mvoutessi church is run by Yohannes Nkatefoe (literally translated, Nkatefoe in Bulu means "story-teller" i.e. he tells the village about God) who wants to convert every villager to the Christian faith. As the Mvoutessi catechist, Nkatefoe preaches in Bulu which was widely used as a language of

evangelization by American Missionaries in the central province of Cameroon. cf. L. Todd, "Cameroon" in the series "Varieties of English Around the World" (Heidelberg, 1982), p.9.

5. The "tam-tam" is an instrument made of a hollowed out log of wood and used to play music or to transmit messages. The sound it produces depends on the length and circumference of the log of wood. The translation usually given for it in English is "drum".

6. Everytime the Christians go to church, the non-believers go to drink palm wine in Atemeteme's house. The pagans are thus competing with the believers in the village. For Christmas, the former will drink heavily while the latter are in church, as Atemeteme's message says. Palm wine is extracted from palm trees after felling them or while they are still growing.

7. As a preacher, Nkatefoe never loses hope. Here he is still convinced that he will succeed in converting his opponent, Atemeteme, one day. Hence this quote from the scriptures.

8. In most Cameroonian tribes there is no difference between breakfast and the other meals. However, the one referred to here is a Christmas day meal taken in the morning and as such is a very heavy meal of pounded plantains and fish caught in one of the rivers that run through the territory of the Bulu tribe (So'o river).

Here the play on the word "petit" in "petit déjeuner" cannot be reproduced in English through the same formal mechanisms as in French, because "petit déjeuner" in French is simply "breakfast" in English.

Since the play on words is untranslatable I have instead reproduced the particular intention of the original i.e. the fact that the breakfast was as big as any other meal.

9. The Holy Bible has been translated into some of the national languages spoken in Cameroon. The one referred to here, is in the language spoken in the Mvoutessi village (in Bulu).

10. The religious headquarters of the Mvoutessi parish was in Bibia, one of the towns in Southern Cameroon and it was from there that the missionaries sent glasses to Nkatefoe when he started having problems with his eyesight.

11. In the rural areas people live and cook in the same house. Nkatefoe has a small kitchen behind his house and the main house is reserved for bedrooms and a parlour.

12. The word "père" is used before a proper name in French to refer to a reverend father or an old man (cf. Petit Robert). In Africa, the use of this word before a proper name, when the person named is not a priest, is a sign not only of old age but also of the respect that is due to old age. Hence the elder of the church, Mvende-Nda-Zambe (which in Bulu means law in God's house or the person who keeps order in God's house) is called "le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe".

The English equivalent of "le père X" given in Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary, "old X", does not convey the element of respect which is very important in the African context. So I have therefore rendered "le père Mvendé-Nda-Zambe" by "Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe" because the word "Papa"

followed by a proper name is often used in English-speaking Cameroon as a sign of respect for old men. The use of "Papa" adds local colour to the text.

13. Villages which speak the same local language are usually grouped under a chief who serves as their traditional ruler. Thus Mvoutessi and all the neighbouring villages which speak Bulu make up a chieftaindom. All the drinking folk from these villages are considered as constituting Atemeteme's chieftaindom because they have refused to become Christians and still drink lots of wine.

14. Rabelais was a French writer whose characters praised wine and reference is made to him here because the pagans, like Gargantua and Pantagruel, have decided to worship the bottle, i.e. la dive bouteille. They are followers of Bacchus, the god of wine.

An equivalent personality in English literature is Falstaff, the wine-loving character in Shakespeare's King Henry IV Part I. He too, like Rabelais' characters, loved the bottle. I have thus rendered Rabelais by Falstaff so as to achieve what Nida calls "dynamic equivalence" i.e. "the closest natural equivalent to the source language message" which is directed primarily towards the "equivalence of response" from the TL readers.

15. In Cameroon, enforcement of law and order is ensured by the police force and the gendarmerie, though they differ in a number of ways. Policemen operate in urban centres while gendarmes operate out of town and in rural areas. Also the gendarmes, as part of the nation's armed forces, receive military training while police do not.

16. The Bulu, Ewondo, Beti, Eton and Ntumu speaking tribes make up the bantou group known as Fongs in Cameroon. Besides plantains, bananas, cocoa, etc. these people also cultivate peanuts as a staple product.

17. The gossipers inferred from Papa Mvende-Nda-Zambe's shaky steps that each time he went to quell the noise of the drinkers, he took some wine.

18. Elderly Cameroonians carry around with them a flyswatter which is used to drive away the flies that settle on them. The flyswatter is also used as a cane for beating children.

19. At Christmas and Easter, the Christians perform plays which depict the particular event. Thus for Christmas the plays would be on Christ's birth and on his crucifixion in Easter. However, both Christians and pagans come to watch the plays and Nkatefoe always gives his sermons afterwards so as to gain new converts from the newcomers.

20. In the rural areas of Cameroon where there is no electricity, the wives usually heat water for their husbands' baths in the morning.

21. The referent of the onomatopoeia "toop ... toop" is an acoustic experience which is closely imitated by the phonetic structure of the word. However, onomatopoeic formations are not necessarily similar from one language to another because each language has conventionalized the sound perceived in its own way. So, I have converted the SL "toup ... toup" into English onomatopoeia "toop ... toop".

22. Petit Robert 1 defines "calebasse" as "fruit du calabassier et de cucurbitacées qui, vidé et séché, peut servir de récipient". A calabash can be used as a container for fetching water, storing cowries, seeds or for transporting wine as in this text. I have rendered the term "calebasses" by "calabashes" in English, which is one of the three equivalents proposed by Harrap's: calabash, gourd and water-bottle. Of the three, "water-bottle" is inappropriate, if one wants to preserve local colour, since it suggests neither the form of the "calebasse" as a shell of a fruit nor the multiple uses it is put to in Africa. "Gourd" and "calabash" are the correct terms because they both designate the shell of a fruit. Here I have rendered "calebasses" by "calabashes" because that is the term used in other good translations of African works. In his English translation of Ferdinand Oyono's Le vieux nègre et la médaille John Reed renders "calebasse" by "calabash": ... "prit une calebasse taillée en gobelet ..." (p. 42) is translated in The Old Man and the Medal as "... picked up a calabash which had been shaped to serve as a cup ..." (p. 26).

23. Petit Robert 1 defines "karité" as "nom de l'arbre à beurre qui croît en Afrique équatoriale et dont la graisse renferme une substance grasse, comestible après traitement (beurre de karité)". I have thus rendered "l'huile de karité" by "karite butter" though the villagers call it oil just because they use it for cooking meals.

24. "Nkòl-Sò'ò" means "the hill of antilopes" in English and this is the name given by the Mvoutessi villagers to the hill.

25. In Cameroon, a plantation normally refers to an extensive plot where agriculture is mechanized and which is usually exploited by a corporation, whereas a farm refers to a small piece of land cultivated by indigenous inhabitants, without the help of machines. Since this story is set among one of the native villages, "plantations" seems to refer to the indigenous farms. I have therefore rendered "plantations de Nkôl-Sô'ô" by "farms in Nkôl-So'o".

26. Jesus Christ's name has also been adapted phonologically to the Bulu language so as to facilitate its pronunciation by the villagers. I have left it as such in my translation so as to preserve the local colour in the story.

27. In Cameroon, the practice on Christmas days is for everyone to wear a new dress or the cleanest dress to church so as to show their happiness. This practice is so common that even non-Christians too dress well on Christmas days and join in the celebrations.

28. The author plays on words in this passage by writing: "la brise ... du bon sens ... qui, soufflant ... dans le bon sens (p. 96). I have rendered this by "... the Breeze of Common Sense ... blowing in the right direction (p. 97). The play on words in the SL has the expressive function of adding to the comic atmosphere produced by Atemeteme's surprise visit to church.

29. In translating this figure of speech, I have used capitals to extend the allegorical effect, even though the ST uses lower-case letters for "saint courroux" and "brise du bon sens".

30. The original's play on the French proverb "l'habit ne fait pas le moine" cannot be reproduced in English because proverbs are often language bound - each language having its own proverb for every situation. I have rendered it by "Fine clothes do not the Christian make" so as to create the effect of a proverb while preserving the denoted content of the ST.

31. This is the administrative headquarters of the Dja and Lobo division in which our story is set. It is here that administrators reside and that the main commercial centre operates.

32. The radio station in Yaounde, the capital of the country. The villagers know it as the house which sends voices because they receive transmissions from it without ever seeing it.

33. Atemeteme's pronunciation of Christ's name shows his illiteracy and his newness to church.

34. This is a literal translation from Bulu describing the tree Atemeteme is referring to, i.e. the tree on which blue toucan birds are always found. I have given the English equivalent of the descriptive name so as to preserve local colour.

35. The indigenous pronunciation of "Jean" (Johanna in German) which the other villagers call "Yohannes"; Atemeteme, as a pagan, had never learnt even the adapted local pronunciation of the name.

36. The Bulu people believe that they can communicate with their ancestors and God through nature. Hence this belief that certain animals foretell evil and that if you meet them on your way to a place, you should be prepared for something bad to happen. Thus after seeing owls, birds of ill omen and a big chimpanzee before being missed by a falling tree, Atemeteme is convinced that those animals had been sent by God to warn him and after his nearly fatal accident he goes to the chapel to be converted as a Christian.

37. Mvoutessi is in the forest zone and some foreigners have set up sawmills so as to exploit the timber in the forest.

38. After conversion and baptism, Atemeteme had a Christian name which is Jerome. "Monti" is the indigenous pronunciation of "Monsieur".

39. Headquarters of the Ntem division, in which the Mvoutessi village is situated, in the South Province of Cameroon.

40. In French-speaking Africa, "papa" is used mostly to refer to one's biological father. This is different from its usage in English where it can refer to a father or generally to any respectable elder (cf. Note number 12 on the usage of "papa" in English).

Harrap's New Standard French and English Dictionary proposes many English equivalents for "papa": papa, dad(dy), pa and father which could be used by different persons. So I have therefore rendered "papa" by "my father" since Tita-Mongo, the speaker in the text, is referring to his biological father.

41. The villagers' life is dominated by the invisible presence of their ancestors. The cult of the ancestors plays a key role both in traditional religions and in the family clans; hence the Bulus honour their ancestors by naming their children after them so as to make sure the ancestor does not feel forgotten by the family. This maintains a link between the family and its ancestors living in the supernatural world: a new-born baby is seen not as the mere fruit of a biological act but above all as the reincarnation of an ancestor into the visible world.

42. A small town near the village of Mvoutessi.

43. The nearest village to Mvoutessi; some families are divided between many villages. For example, Tita-Mongo's old aunt, Na-Eyenga, lives in Ngoulmekong, another neighbouring village.

44. This etymological use of homonym is much rarer in English than in French, so I have used it in quotes. The word namesake (i.e. one who is named after another) would be more usual, but would not mean the same thing because none of the two characters was named after the other. Both were named after the same ancestor.

45. In talking about his aunt, Mbia regrets the days when she was young, healthy, strong and respected by her peers, none of whom doubted her qualities as a woman. However, as an old woman now, she is weak and spends most of her time at home.

46. The source text collocation "boissons fortes et tumultueuses" is bizarre. I have rendered it by its content, i.e. "strong and riotous drinks".

47. The interjection "Eh kié kié kié!" expresses the disgust felt by Tita-Mongo's mother. I rendered it by its phonological adaptation in English, following the example given by the author, G. Oyono Mbia, in his English translation of one of his plays, Three Suitors: One Husband (1968, p. 58). (cf. Introductory chapter on G.O. Mbia's life and works)

48. Another village close to Mvoutessi.

49. Since the *raison d'être* of marriage in traditional societies in Cameroon is procreation, continuity and establishment of links with the ancestors for whom children will be named, children are very central to marriage. To this end, men often practise polygamy. In this way, they ensure legitimate lineage in spite of the possible sterility of one of the wives or the high infant mortality rate. Hence in Cameroon, polygamy, far from being frowned on, is accepted and even approved as a mark of social prestige: the more wives a man has, the more he is respected. This can be seen in the answer given by the village chief to Tita-Mongo's mother, later in this story, when she asks him why he married many wives:

Ah ka! dit le chef; tout le monde sera-t-il catéchiste comme ton mari et toi? Et la gloire de la tribu Fông?

With the arrival of the Christian faith and its policy of "one man, one wife" as well as the friction that often exists amongst co-wives, fewer and fewer Cameroonians take more than one wife today.

50. The Fong people believe that if you eat the thighs of a dog then you will never stay in one place for long. This is because dogs themselves are always wandering from village to village. When Tita-Mongo informs his parents of his trip to Ebolowa, his mother accuses the Yevos (the people who live in Yaounde

where Tita-Mongo went to mark the school-leaving certificate) of serving him dog's thigh.

51. The villagers consider Tita-Mongo a white because he has been to school and can work and live like the whites.

52. The villagers cannot distinguish between a medical doctor and a person with a doctorate in another field. Hence, Tita Mezoe thinks that the cousin of his fifth wife is an M.D. whose work is to sign documents in an office, while the other villagers believe that any person addressed as "Doctor X" can treat the sick.

53. In Cameroon, the ownership of firearms as well as hunting are controlled by the government. Here, the villagers refer to "cartridges" as "arrows" because they are afraid of government agents and also because they used to hunt with bows and arrows before the arrival of guns.

54. In Cameroonian usage, "grand homme" is used to refer to a man of substance or to a man who is either rich, important or very influential in the society. This meaning is different from that of the equivalent English expression "great man", which refers to a person with some achievement as a contributor to the Arts or the Sciences of the world. I will therefore render "grand homme" by big, important or influential man depending on the context of usage. Here, the villagers are referring to the influential men who run government services.

55. In typical African usage "mammi" designates an elderly woman who deserves respect. Thus it is a respectful form of address and does not imply family ties between the user and the person addressed. This is shown in the text by the fact that Tita-Mongo's father and the village chief both refer to the wife of the former as "mammi".

In John Reed's translation of Ferdinand Oyono's Le vieux nègre et la médaille, "mammi" is rendered by "Madam" (cf. "Chez Mammi Titi qui habitait le quartier indigène ...", Le vieux nègre et la médaille, p. 14): "Madam Titi lived in the African location..." (The Old Man and the Medal, p. 5) and "Mammy" (cf. "Tous ceux qui se rendaient au travail au quartier blanc passaient chez Mammi Titi ...", Le vieux nègre et la médaille, p. 15): "Everyone who went to work in the European quarter came there, to Mammy Titi's...", The Old Man and the Medal, p. 5). In common language, "mammy" (an alteration of "mamma") could designate a mother, a negro woman serving as nurse to white children or a wife (in the south of the U.S.A.), or a woman when used in slang. (cf. Webster's Third New International Dictionary).

However, I decided to render "Mammi" by the same equivalent in all contexts in the story (in order to avoid confusing the reader by a change in terminology). I could not use "Madam", which would not be appropriate when the speaker is the husband of the woman addressed, so I have used "Mammy" which is the more general of the two terms.

56. Natives who live in the grassland north of Cameroon. In this part of the country, cattle rearing is the principal occupation of the natives. The cattle are transported by train or in trucks to the forest regions, butchered and sold to the people there. Hence, the reference to Haussas as the sellers of beef.

57. The speaker here is a villager whose first language is not French but Bulu. He can hardly remember the name of the strange and imported meat which he ate in the city; hence his reference to it as "rôki" before being corrected by the youths who have been to school.

The translation problem here consists in rendering a signifier comprising not lexical or syntactic elements, but a mispronunciation used to signify the illiteracy of the chief and his lack of familiarity with the cuisine of the colonizers. No similar mechanism exists in Cameroonian English. However, I have rendered "rôki" by "roasti" so as to preserve the socio-linguistic information conveyed by "rôki" about the speaker in the original. Also, "roasti" elicits correction from the young scholars, as "rôki" did in the original. I could have rendered this term by its correct equivalent but that would have entailed a loss of the information which "rôki" conveys about the speaker.

58. Cameroon is made up of ten provinces, each of which is sub-divided into divisions and sub-divisions which are governed by sub-divisional officers. These officers often go on tours during which the villagers are expected to make offers of goats, chickens and other food items to them.

59. Secondary school studies in Cameroon end with the "brevet" for Francophones and with a secondary school-leaving certificate (G.C.E. Ordinary Level) for Anglophones. So I have rendered "brevet" by school-leaving certificate.

60. The villagers enjoy feasting. Here they are blaming Tita-Mongo for not having organized a feast for them after taking part in the marking of the school-leaving certificate in Yaounde. They feel that that would have been their only chance to have a share of the wages that are usually paid to those who mark exams in Yaounde.

61. Tita Oyono Essola, like many of the Christians in Mvoutessi, goes to church but retains only parts of the sermon, not to mention the names of Biblical places mentioned there. In this text, he thinks Sion (city of God) is Sodom (the city of Palestine destroyed for its wickedness). Even after correction he still mispronounces "Sidom". This is because villagers are not familiar with foreign names.

CONCLUSION

A handwritten scribble or signature, possibly a stylized letter 'D' or a similar mark, located in the lower-left quadrant of the page.

As E. Nida affirms, "translation is entirely Communication."¹ The translator's task is to convey the writer's ideas and to render his style in such a way as to achieve "equivalence of response,"² which in this case of an idiom constructed to convey a peculiarly African experience, means conveying the local colour of the source texts so that readers experience the foreign culture described in them. As a result, I carried over into my translation interjections such as "Ah!" and "Ah ka ka ka!...", Onomatopoeia such as "ku...u...u...!" and "Kindang...kindang", and distorted French words like Cécilia, Andréas, Makrita and rôki (respectively, for Cécile, André, Marguérite and rôti de boeuf) which the characters could not pronounce properly.

Where necessary, however, I adapted the text to the target-language and culture. I modified some of the ideophones to bring them into line with the graphology of the English language so that they could read naturally. Hence, the exclamation "Eh kié" was rendered as "Ah ka" and "Kaé...kaé" as "Ka eeh... ka eeh". Rabelais, the promoter of "la dive bouteille", was rendered by an equivalent personality in English Literature, Falstaff. Since plays on words are, more often than not, language-bound, there were cases where I could capture only the general meaning of the original text. For instance, I rendered "... un petit déjeuner de Noël n'a de petit que l'épithète" by "... a breakfast is as big as any other meal" (p. 79). Thus, since equivalence of response is the objective, a judicious blend of naturalization and local colour is needed in the translation of this type of texts.

¹ E. Nida, Towards a Science of Translating (1964), p. 166

² E. Nida, ibid., p. 166

My task was further simplified, but also complicated, by the fact that "Le sermon de Yohannes Nkatefoé" and "Les sept fourchettes" are African in inspiration but French in expression. Thus the source texts are products of two cultures - the French culture, since they are written in French, and the author's African culture. My task was simplified because certain translation techniques like "borrowing"³ (for example, "arki", "bo'ofiang" and "Zua Meka") and the use of calques (e.g. "maison-qui-envoie-les-paroles" and "arbre-aux-toucans-bleus") had already been used by the author to present his culture; I could thus use his borrowings in my translation as well as literal translations for his calques. However, this task was also complicated by the fact that the characters, in describing their traditional lives, use standard French terms in a particular sense. Terms such as "professeur" and "grands hommes" were rendered, not by the normal English equivalents, but according to the meaning they assume in their Cameroonian contexts of usage. For instance, I rendered "professeur" by "tutor" because the text is referring to a college teacher not a university lecturer, and also because "tutor" is the term used in Cameroon to designate a secondary school teacher. As to "grands hommes" I rendered it by "important men" or "influential men", depending on the context, not by "great men" because it is evident from the context of usage in the original that the men referred to have made no contributions to the Sciences or the Arts.

In addition to the loan words used by the author in his French texts, I have also used other loan words, previously borrowed by others. These include words such as "papa", a typically African word used to address any elder in

³ Words such as transcriptions, loan words, adoptions, and transfers have also been used to refer to borrowings

the community, and "Mammy", a title of respect for elderly women.

Furthermore, I have used in my translation terms which, while found in English lexicons, are low-frequency words in English because they describe typical African things. Examples of such words are "calabash", "karite butter" and "mango".

My translation was also made easier by the author's use of proverbs, wise sayings and Bulu thought processes, which in reality are "calques d'expressions" or literal translations from Bulu, the purpose of which is to convey local colour. Since the author "calqued" them in French from his Bulu culture, I, in turn, have "calqued" them in English. For example, the Bulu proverb "les fantômes ne parlent jamais sans que la pluie soit tombée" has been translated literally as "dead men never speak unless it has rained."

Having used loan words, literal translations and low frequency words in my translation, I felt that they could make my translation difficult to understand for my North-American readers, who are unfamiliar with the cultural background in which the stories' actions occur, since, according to P. Newmark, "dynamic equivalence is not possible when the translation's reader has not the same information as the original's reader."⁴ To bridge the gap, I have provided my readers with the background information on the author and on his culture which they need to understand the stories. The notes on specific words and expressions, at the end of the translations, will help eliminate any ambiguities which might impede my readers from understanding them.

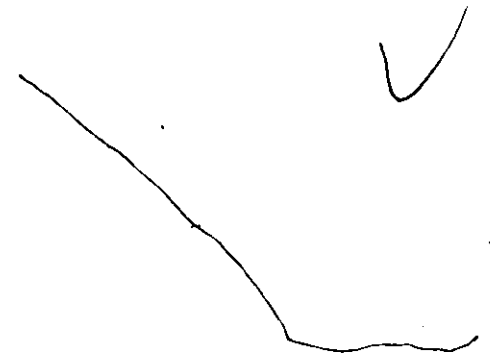
Finally, the fact that I am a Cameroonian, more familiar with the cultural background in which the actions of the stories occur, sympathetic to

⁴ P. Newmark, Approaches to Translation (1981), p. 100

Oyono Mbia's beliefs, and sensitive to his style, should further help to reduce the distance between the original source and the source of the translated texts.

While trying to communicate Oyono Mbia's message to my English North-American readers I could not, however, ignore the fact that the style of his short stories, inspired by oral literature, is full of typically African narrative, descriptive and enunciat~~ive~~ive devices, which might be difficult for a non-African to understand. I have therefore given an analysis of my author's idiom with its mapping from source to target language, in Chapter 3. By explaining my translations of the various stylistic devices, I hope to make my author's style accessible to my readers.

I hope that my translations, with the background information on Oyono Mbia, his culture and his idiom as well as the notes, will help my intended readers to understand and appreciate Oyono's message and style.



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