

# Of bastards, slaves, dogs and other things: discourses of bourgeois transgression and illegitimacy in two francophone sub-saharan novels

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Number 116, Summer 2020

Dossier spécial Léon-Gontran Damas

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071053ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071053ar>

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Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)

2562-8704 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kamara, M. (2020). Of bastards, slaves, dogs and other things: discourses of bourgeois transgression and illegitimacy in two francophone sub-saharan novels. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (116), 99–112.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071053ar>

Article abstract

The emergence and rise to preeminence of the bourgeoisie on the African political, social, and economic scenes have been the stuff of many novels. One could even argue that the rise of the sub-Saharan novel (because it is inherently connected to the colonial project) is more or less concurrent with the birth and rise of this class. In this essay, I seek to analyze the discourse of bourgeois transgression and illegitimacy as exemplified in two novels: Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les soleils des indépendances* (1968) and Francis Bebey's *Le ministre et le griot* (1992). The two works focus on the ruling elite in the immediate postcolonial period. In both novels, albeit in varying degrees, the colonial school is presented as the main catalyst of the change that occasioned the transgression decried by the members of the erstwhile aristocratic nobility.

# Of bastards, slaves, dogs and other things: discourses of bourgeois transgression and illegitimacy in two francophone sub-saharan novels<sup>1</sup>

Mohamed Kamara

In February 2015, during an interview at his private residence in Dakar, Abdoulaye Wade, president of Senegal from 2000-2012, shocked and infuriated many in the country when he claimed that Macky Sall—the man who unseated him in the presidential elections of 2012—was a descendant of slaves and cannibals<sup>2</sup>:

C'est un descendant d'esclaves. Les villageois l'ont sorti de là-bas. Il n'était pas sorcier, mais ses parents étaient anthropophages. Ses parents mangeaient des bébés et on les a chassés du village. C'est progressivement qu'ils ont commencé à fréquenter les êtres humains normalement. [...] Vous pouvez accepter vous les Sénégalais qu'il soit au-dessus de vous, mais moi, jamais je n'accepterai que Macky Sall soit au-dessus de moi. Jamais mon fils Karim n'acceptera que Macky Sall soit au-dessus de lui. On serait dans d'autres situations, je l'aurai vendu en tant qu'esclave.

That Abdoulaye Wade could be wrong about the real origins of Macky Sall<sup>3</sup> mattered less than the mentality that provoked the statement in the first place. The fact that in the twenty-first century an educated man like Wade could utter such a statement attests to the salience of social origins and hierarchy in human interactions, especially when it comes to politics. As Amadou Ndiaye reminds us in his opinion piece in *Le Monde*, Wade's statement, as outrageous as it sounds, was not that outlandish, after all:

Mais curieusement, toutes les réactions n'ont pas été défavorables à Abdoulaye Wade, 88 ans. Car l'ancien président a touché un point sensible. La société sénégalaise, sous un vernis de modernité, garde les stigmates d'une société organisée selon une hiérarchie implacable, héritée de l'ère précoloniale et dont les 'maccubé' (esclaves) constituaient la caste la plus basse, en particulier dans le Fouta (nord du pays), région d'où est originaire Macky Sall.

What we see in Wade's public display of animus toward Sall is the resurfacing of age-old complexes whose ghosts are always lurking just beneath the surface of contemporary social

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1 While my focus here is strictly on transgression as it relates to Francophone African socio-political structures, I would like to acknowledge the possibility of reading the two novels in question as representations of formal transgression. Indeed, a decent amount of critical literature already exists on the transgressive innovations brought to the novelistic genre (a Western import via colonialism) by African literary production of the twentieth century and beyond. For example, Peter Vakunta, in his *Indigenization of Language in the African Francophone Novel: A New Literary Canon* discusses how African writers like Ahmadou Kourouma, Nazi Boni, and Patrice Nganang deploy European languages "to convey messages that seem to be at variance with European imagination" (xi). For his part, Pius Ngandu Nkashama reminds us that "[à] travers le roman écrit, la nature de la narration institue cette typologie de l'oralité par certains aspects et la lecture de nombreux commentaires laissent penser que le passage de la parole orale à l'expérience de l'écriture ne pouvait construire que des langages en ellipses ou en métalepses, susceptibles de produire une narrativité nouvelle." From the foregoing references, we can see that it is entirely possible to view the emergence and rise of the African novel as running parallel to those of the so-called bourgeois elite minted in the colonial school.

2 Abdoulaye Wade was angry that the government of Macky Sall was prosecuting his son, Karim, for large-scale graft and embezzlement of state funds.

3 According to an investigative report by the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, Macky Sall is in fact of noble stock—"La famille Sall n'était pas esclave, elle avait des esclaves"—even if many anecdotal accounts on the ground in Senegal refute this "official" version of Macky Sall's genealogy.

and political discourse and praxis.<sup>4</sup> In *Les Castes au Mali*, Bokar N'Diaye notes: “Sans doute les castes finiront-elles, un jour, par disparaître, cédant ainsi aux rudes assauts engendrés par les contingences de la Société Nouvelle. Mais, pour le moment, il faut bien le dire, au Mali, comme dans bien d’autres parties de l’Afrique Occidentale, il faut encore incontestablement compter avec elles dans toutes les circonstances de la vie” (11).

To begin to understand Wade’s twenty-first century rant, we need to go back to the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century when colonization was the order of the day in West Africa. In other words, European colonization of the region was what made it possible for erstwhile lower caste elements to accede to the high offices of political power in much of Africa. This was achieved especially through the school<sup>5</sup> intended by the colonizer as the most effective weapon of his rule, and which had as one of its major consequences the re/stratification of society.

The emergence and rise to preeminence of the bourgeoisie<sup>6</sup> on the African political, social, and economic scenes have been the stuff of many novels. One could even argue that the rise of the sub-Saharan novel (because it is inherently connected to the colonial project) is more or less concurrent with the birth and rise of this class. In this essay, I seek to analyze the discourse of bourgeois transgression and illegitimacy as exemplified in two novels: Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les Soleils des Indépendances* (1968) and Francis Bebey’s *Le Ministre et le Griot* (1992). The two works focus on the ruling elite in the immediate postcolonial period. In both novels, albeit in varying degrees, the colonial school is presented as the main catalyst of the change that occasioned the transgression decried by the members of the erstwhile aristocratic nobility.

Kourouma’s *Les Soleils des Indépendances* is the story of Fama, a noble not only by appellation, but also by heritage. A fact the narrator, in the manner of traditional griots, hastens to tell the reader: “Vrai Doumbouya, père Doumbouya, mère Doumbouya, dernier

4 For example, over the past several years, American politics, as well as race and class relations, have been marred by discourses of transgression and illegitimacy. After the election of Barack Obama, members of the Tea Party and some mainstream Republicans used expressions like “take our country back.” The rise of Obama—a member of a so-called inferior race—to the highest level of power is for some a transgression. More recently, Donald Trump, winner of the 2016 presidential election, and spearhead of the so-called birther movement, has managed to bring these fringe sentiments to the mainstream with his divisive rhetoric crystallized in his campaign slogan Make America Great Again.

5 As is the case for virtually all colonizing undertakings, the goal of French colonization was total cultural and economic domination and assimilation of the colonized into the universe of the colonizer. It did not take long for the French colonizer to determine that the school was the most effective way to achieve this goal. The primary purpose of the school was the creation, from the ranks of colonized natives, of a class of individuals to serve as a buffer between the colonizer and the colonized masses. The French colonial school was thus used as the fabrication point of new human types among whom could be identified what many African writers and critics alike have often characterized as a band of inept and unscrupulous individuals in the political, administrative, and commercial sectors of African colonial and post-colonial societies. These are the occupiers of the middle stratum, the members of the so-called African bourgeoisie. Some critics (Fanon 1961; Kane 1982) have insisted that this class, in spite of its role—or perhaps because of it—in the acquisition of African political independence, continues to serve as an intermediary between the former colonizers and independent countries in a relationship that has invariably been referred to as neo-colonialist and neo-imperialist.

6 I refer here (for want of a better term) to the amorphous class of African graduates of the colonial school, most of whom populated the lower echelons of colonial administration and took over the helm of government after the official departure of the colonizer. In his *Roman africain et tradition*, the late Senegalese critic, Mohamadou Kane, identifies three types of bourgeois elites in the history of Francophone Africa, and in the evolution of the African novel. According to Kane, the first type of elite to emerge was the “élite des circonstances.” This elite was made up mainly of “cadres supérieurs de l’administration, des hommes d’affaires et des commerçants nouvellement enrichis” (254). The second group was the “élite de commande.” This elite, unlike the first one which came into existence and prominence by accident, was, according to Kane, “intentionnellement secrétée par le régime colonial” (259) to fill up certain gaps in its administrative sector. The third group identified by Kane is the “élite exemplaire,” or the post-colonial elite. This group consists of “dirigeants issus de milieux divers, de formation disparate mais communiant par leurs convictions politiques” (263).

et légitime descendant des princes Doumbouya du Horodougou, totem panthère...” (31). Fama finds himself at the wrong time in his country’s history, the period of French domination and subsequent independence. The story is about his anger, and the constellation of invectives he hurls against what he repeatedly refers to as the bastardy of modern times under the reign of “les pouvoirs illégitimes.” The novel is equally about the vehement authorial critique of 1) the inefficiency and totalitarianism of the bourgeois elites that have inherited the mantle of leadership in the fictional post-colonial state of Côte d’Ebène and 2) Fama’s biological impotence, which is symbolic of the sterility of his past in the new dispensation.

Bebey’s *Le ministre et le griot* is the story of a griot (by birth), Demba Diabaté, turned prime minister of his country, Kessébougou, and his finance minister friend, Keita Dakouri, who happens to be the son of Binta Madiallo, a noble who totally disapproves of Demba’s newfound social status. The novel’s plot is propelled by the controversy over Binta’s refusal to let her son invite the prime minister to his engagement party in her house. The issue quickly becomes a national crisis. Soon, there are bloody street clashes between supporters of the prime minister and those of the nobles. It is only when a man simply referred to as “le marabout” intervenes and explains to Binta the inevitability of the change brought by colonial education, and which has assured bourgeois hegemony in contemporary society, that the conflict is resolved. Francis Bebey, like Kourouma, also offers a scathing critique of post-colonial African politics.

### A discourse of bastardy

In his monumental œuvre, *La Comédie humaine*, Honoré de Balzac<sup>7</sup> paints a portrait, novel after novel, of the “grande bourgeoisie” (mostly Parisian, opulent, and cultured) and the “petite bourgeoisie” (largely provincial and mediocre). Max Andréoli points out that in the *Scènes de la vie politique* of *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac lambasts the “grande bourgeoisie” for joining forces with the “mediocre” petite bourgeoisie in order to bring down the old nobility: “...ce dont le romancier fait surtout grief à la grande bourgeoisie, c’est de chercher appui sur la petite bourgeoisie contre l’ancienne noblesse, au lieu de faire alliance avec les vestiges de cette dernière...” (54-55). Balzac sees in this alliance the principal cause of social and political degeneration, thus precipitating the transfer of authority from the real (noble, that is) aristocracy to what he scornfully calls (for the first time in *Les paysans*) “la médiocratie” populated by a heteroclitic coalition of parvenus, businessmen, and others of that ilk. Andréoli summarizes Balzac’s representation of the degradation of political power resulting from bourgeois transgression in France in this way:

Le pouvoir, maintenu intact par Robespierre, Napoléon, et même Louis XVIII, au-dessus des affairistes, des thermidoriens et des ultras, tombe sous Charles X, faute d’un grand homme, entre les mains des gérantes, avant d’échoir aux banquiers parisiens de Juillet 1830, pour descendre enfin à portée des démocrates, des masses populaires émancipées.... (58)

Power, it seems for Balzac, is sacred. It should therefore not be allowed to fall into the hands of the bourgeoisie, which he generally paints as representing mediocrity.

To a certain degree, the notion of bastardy, and its various avatars, as exemplified in Kourouma’s and Bebey’s novels, function like “médiocratie” in Balzac’s œuvre; both

7 Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) was arguably a die-hard royalist, a legitimist by another name. He was no fan of King Louis-Philippe (also known as the Roi-bourgeois for his preference of the bourgeoisie over the nobility) who, in the novelist’s view, was not royal enough. Louis-Philippe’s reign over France, 1830-48, coincided largely with Balzac’s writing of *La Comédie humaine*.

illustrate the general disintegration of society under bourgeois hegemony, at least as seen by a segment of the population.

Bastardy is both cause and effect. In a general sense, illegitimacy occurs when two or more entities that are expected, by a certain mindset or policy, to be morally or legally incompatible come together. It also denotes the by-product of such an 'unholy' union or alliance. The very mention of the word bastardy is premised upon supposedly opposite notions of purity and identity. Terminologies like hybridity and 'metisage' are just other names for bastardy, though with usually positive connotations today.

In his discussion of bâtardise in Kourouma's text, Memel-Fotê tackles two aspects of the notion: its essence and its sociological significance:

De fait, à l'analyse, l'idéologie de la bâtardise traduit les contradictions de la société traditionnelle en crise dans les jeunes formations nationales de la Côte d'Ivoire et de la Guinée.<sup>8</sup> En même temps, elle masque, au cœur de ces jeunes formations où de nouvelles classes sociales commencent à éclore, la position nostalgique, réactionnaire et impuissante d'une vieille classe sociale dépossédée par l'histoire de ses prérogatives économiques, politiques et intellectuelles. (54)

In addition to creating artificial boundaries that practically split Fama's kingdom, Horodougou, between two separate independent states (Guinea-Conakry and Côte d'Ivoire), French colonization initiated the destruction of the basis of Malinké survival. Fama hated colonization because, according to him, "elle a banni et tué la guerre..." (21). He spared no resources, financial or otherwise, in the fight against it. Fama hoped that the defeat and departure of the colonizer, and the eventual restauration of indigenous black rule, would give him back his princely privileges. The arrival of independence was for the dethroned Malinké prince the epitome of disappointments. Independence completed the destitution of the Malinké initiated by colonization: "la colonisation a banni et tué la guerre mais favorisé le négoce, les Indépendances ont cassé le négoce et la guerre ne venait pas. Et l'espèce Malinké, les tribus, la terre, la civilisation se meurent, percluses, sourdes et aveugles... et stériles" (21). Fama may no longer have the material resources to combat the abuses of the post-colonial era—having used up his entire financial heritage in the fight for independence—but his reserves of bitterness and anger against what he characterizes as the bastardization of values and politics by Africans are far from being exhausted. However, probably the single most significant change triggered by colonization is in the area of social structure. Which naturally brings us to the third (and, for my present purpose, most pertinent) level of bastardy: the transformation of the Malinké social structure.

Social structure, says Memel-Fotê, implies a hierarchy within whose framework certain groups dominate others materially and ideologically (58). The way the hierarchy functions within itself, and how it relates to other hierarchies are also important (Memel-Fotê 58). In the precolonial era, the lines that separated one category from another were clear and mostly immutable.

To fully appreciate how much the Malinké society described in both novels has changed, one must have an idea of how it looked before the transformation. This is how Memel-Fotê describes the pre-colonial Malinké social hierarchy:

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8 The two main countries mentioned in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* are la Côte d'Ebène and La République de Nikinai, pseudonyms for Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Conakry, respectively. The home of the protagonist, Fama, bestrides the two independent countries. What this fact points to is the artificiality of boundaries set by the colonizer: what used to be Samory Touré's empire is now Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea-Conakry, parts of Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, among others.

Au sommet, les *famade* et les *horon*, les nobles et les assimilés, c'est-à-dire, les chefs politiques et les soldats, les nobles de terre et les nobles du livre (les marabouts); au centre, les artisans, spécialistes de l'industrie et de l'art (*numu* ou forgerons, *garangé* ou cordonniers, *dyéli* ou griots, etc.); au rez-de-chaussée, les *dyon*, les esclaves. Auxiliaires dans les travaux domestiques et agricoles, l'industrie et le commerce (les palfreniers). (58)

At the head of each Malinké kingdom was a *fama* who wielded near absolute power. With colonization, and eventual independence, came the unraveling of this social structure. "The rigidity of a stratification system is indexed by the continuity (over time) in the social standing of its members. The stratification system is said to be highly rigid, for example, if the current wealth, power, or prestige of individuals can be accurately predicted on the basis of their prior statuses or those of their parents" (Grusky 6). To be sure, colonization in Africa shook the very foundation of the predictability upon which the caste system depended. A new system of social stratification was born, and with it a new social class that would take over the reins of economic, social, intellectual and political power in independent Africa. This class is the new African bourgeoisie whose members came principally, if not entirely, out of the colonial school.

In Kourouma's novel, the notion of bastardy is indispensable to the deciphering of both the novelist and protagonist's points of view. For Fama, bastardy is a distinctive mark of the times. Like a contagious disease, it has touched every aspect of life: people, the environment, the weather, and so forth. It is the trademark of his temperament and character. He understands and describes everything under the African suns of Independence, especially those that exasperate him and violate his sense of decorum and entitlement, within the framework of bastardy.

One of the earliest explosions of Fama's anger is directed against a griot. The late arrival of the so-called prince of Horodougou<sup>9</sup> for the funeral ceremony of another Malinké in the capital city does not leave the audience indifferent. An old sickly griot's remarks—"Le prince du Horodougou, le dernier légitime Doumbouya, s'ajoute à nous... quelque peu tard" (11)—wound Fama's princely pride. Thanks to Kourouma's use of the technique of internal focalization, the reader is privy to Fama's reaction to the griot's statement: "Bâtard de griot! Plus de vrai griot; les réels sont morts avec les grands maîtres de guerre d'avant la conquête des toubabs" (12). Against the city traffic, he exclaims "[b]âtard de bâtardise!" (9); against gawpers, "les bâtards de bâdauds plantés en plein trottoir comme dans la case de leur papa" (9). Not even the weather is spared Fama's anger: "[B]âtardes! Déroutantes, dégoutantes, les entre-saisons de ce pays mélangeant soleils et pluies" (11).

However, it is especially against the post-colonial socio-political system headed by the new elite that Fama unleashes his most vehement critique. "Fils d'esclave! Bâtards de fils de chien" is the formula of contempt par excellence used by the dethroned Malinké prince to designate the bourgeois(ified) elites of the new Africa. He feels personally threatened by the reign of this elite: "[c]es soleils sur les têtes, ces politiciens, tous ces voleurs et menteurs, tous ces déhontés ne sont-ils pas le désert bâtard où doit mourir le fleuve Doumbouya?" (99). Acknowledging his powerlessness vis-à-vis the new rulers, Fama prays that some calamity will befall "les pouvoirs des illégitimes et fils d'esclaves" (160).

Even though the word "bâtard" doesn't figure in *Le Ministre et le Griot*, Bebey's novel easily lends itself to the same reading as Kourouma's vis-à-vis the attitude of remnants of the old nobility toward the new aristocracy. Very early on in the novel, the reader

9 Horodougou, in Malinké, means land of nobles.

encounters a vehement critique by Binta of the new status quo represented in the prime minister: “Et c’est lui, le chef du gouvernement, et c’est ce griot, ce pauvre griot, ce chien, qui est le patron de mon fils, de mon fils à moi Binta Madiallo, la fille du grand Madiallo qui avait des dizaines de griots à son service! Et c’est ce vaurien qui dirige le pays de mes ancêtres ! (26)” Binta tries to make her son understand the gravity of what she views as the perversion of the natural order of things. She points out to him that as “le fils d’un prince (26),” he had no business serving in a government headed by a griot. ““Et si, tout au moins, c’était lui le premier ministre d’un tel gouvernement d’esclaves mal affranchis !” se disait-elle encore. Mais non, il fallait par-dessus le marché que le premier ministre fût ‘cette espèce de parvenu créé de toutes pièces par les mauvais temps d’aujourd’hui !’ (27). If the griot in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* is simply a “perverted” griot, the griot in Bebey’s novel is no longer a griot, but a bourgeois, and an aristocrat to boot. Not that, for the outraged noble, the difference matters. The griot’s audacious behavior in either case translates into the same thing: perversion and transgression of ancestral values and hierarchies. To truly appreciate Fama and Binta’s ire and disdain, it might help to review two things: the role of the griot in traditional West African societies, and the significance of the notion of “bâtardise” especially in the Malinké context in which both texts operate.

Today, the griot (griotte, in the feminine) is generally considered a mere praise-singer. In the past, this ‘master of the word’ was an intermediary, a translator, a storyteller, the community historian. As possessor and guardian of ancestral wisdom and memory, he was an important advisor to his masters in the aristocracy. Every King, prince, and chief worthy of his title, had his griot. Not unlike the court jester, the griot had the rare privilege of joking with and speaking truth to power not available to others.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding, the primary function of the griot remained that of serving (especially praising and informing) his king or chief. He had no right to criticize the king, or any member of the nobility for that matter, in a manner that could hurt the latter’s pride and prestige in public. So for Fama and Binta, the state of affairs in which a griot can say or do to a “noble” what he wants (criticize him in public or, worse, give him orders) is unthinkable. It is for them an unequivocal statement on the emasculation, demystification, and degradation of Africa and its traditional values. For the nobles in the colonial or postcolonial dispensation, what Binta calls “les mauvais temps d’aujourd’hui” (27), things have indeed fallen apart. What used to be an identifiable center, purportedly keeping the social edifice together and jealously guarded by the nobility, no longer holds.

The notion of “bâtardise” is also a coherent theoretical framework within which the novelist executes a vehement critique of post-independent African realities. In an article on *Les Soleils des Indépendances*, Matiu Nnoruka accuses Kourouma of tribalism and takes him to task for what he considers shameless collusion between writer and protagonist: “On a l’impression qu’il a fait avec son héros un bout de chemin. Comme celui-ci, il est nostalgique du passé africain, du moins celui des Malinké” (98). This doesn’t seem a fair and accurate reading of Kourouma’s novel.<sup>11</sup> There is, for example, a fundamental difference between the protagonist’s use of the notion of bastardy and that of the author. Marie-Paule Jeusse explains this difference: “Sous la plume de Kourouma, *bâtard* ne signifie pas illégitime au sens où l’entend Fama, mais désigne la dégénérescence” (70). It is safe to say that, unlike some of their characters who see bourgeois transgression in terms of what the critic Mohamadou Kane calls “le viol de la stratification de la société en castes

10 Article 43 of *La Charte de Kurukan Fuga* or the Mandé Charter specifically addresses this: “Balla Fassèké Kouyaté est désigné grand chef des cérémonies et médiateur principal du mandéen. Il est autorisé à plaisanter avec toutes les tribus, en priorité avec la famille royale” (10).

11 Kourouma’s satirical style and his preponderant use of the technique of internal focalization might give the unsuspecting reader the impression that the author shares his protagonist’s point of view.

étanches" (239), Kourouma (and Bebey, as we shall see) is far from endorsing the retrograde perspective of his character. He presents the emergence and hegemony of the bourgeoisie not as a usurpation of legitimate, traditional authority, but as a historically inevitable disruption of precolonial caste-based hierarchies. If Fama is incensed by what he considers the 'base' origin of the new leaders, what enrages the novelist is the inadequacies of those leaders presiding over a system marked by the reign of total confusion, in which there is no distinction between moral and immoral: "La politique n'a ni yeux, ni oreilles, ni cœur; en politique le vrai et le mensonge porte le même pagne, le juste et l'injuste marchent de pair, le bien et le mal s'achètent ou se vendent au même prix" (164). The novelist unleashes a biting criticism against the corruption, wastefulness, and cupidity of the new African Elite comprising mainly politicians and state functionaries: "député, ministre, ambassadeur et autres puissants" (66). They all connive to siphon resources from state coffers: "Ils étaient tous enrichis avec l'indépendance, roulaient en voiture, dépensaient des billets de banque comme des feuilles mortes ramassées par terre" (164). According to Kourouma, the new leaders stop at nothing to perpetuate their stranglehold on power at the expense of their opponents or constituents, including consulting marabouts and witch-doctors (163).

We see a similar criticism of the post-colonial bourgeoisie in *Le Ministre et le Griot*; more indirect though no less biting. Bebey frequently uses the impersonal pronoun "on" in phrases like "on sait que...", "on racontait...", and so forth. For example, in the very first chapter, on the occasion of the inauguration of the bridge linking the two sections of the Capital of Kessébougou, we encounter the first instance of Bebey's subtle criticism: "...que l'on se montre critique en reconnaissant que la construction du pont aurait dû préoccuper plus tôt 'ces intellectuels bourgeois qui sont au pouvoir et qui, des années et des années durant, n'ont pas une seule fois oublié d'investir l'argent des contribuables dans des affaires commerciales pour leur intérêt à eux seuls'" (16). And later in the novel, government officials are criticized for the same issue of the bridge: "On racontait, par exemple, que le budget, originellement prévu pour la construction du célèbre pont de Ta-Loma, était passé par le Club<sup>12</sup>. Il paraît qu'en sortant de là, il avait considérablement maigri..." (66). At the head of the dysfunction, of the parade of bastardy described in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* and *Le Ministre et le Griot*, is the one party political system. Installed in most African countries after independence, the one party became quickly the bastion of corruption, nepotism and violence. The narrator in Kourouma's novel describes it as a cannibalistic institution: "Le parti unique, le savez-vous? ressemble à une société de sorcières, les grandes initiées dévorent les enfants des autres" (23). As for Bebey, his strongest criticism is reserved for the totalitarian tendencies of the single party in power called the "Parti de l'Authenticité Nouvelle." Bebey criticizes the efforts of the party brass to homogenize the population: "Ses dirigeants pensaient avec ferveur que tous les citoyens du Kessébougou devaient obligatoirement être membres du Parti,... avoir la même opinion, le même jugement sur les choses de la vie publique ou privée dont il pouvait être question, non seulement au cours des réunions du parti, mais même en dehors de celles-ci" (74).

So what has made this rise of bastards, griots and slaves possible? As has already been suggested above, colonial education was the single most important factor responsible for the emergence of the bourgeoisie. In certain respects, the pedagogical institution installed by the colonizer could be likened to the marketplace. In *The Politics and Poetics of*

12 The "Club de Grands" is an old colonial officers' mess converted into a sumptuous meeting place for government officials and foreign businessmen. It is actually here that government contracts are awarded, and bribes and commissions discussed and distributed (65). In a way, this club is akin to Kourouma's "sociétés de sorcières."



*Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe the marketplace, the site of the fair, as the supreme disrupter of traditional classifications:

A marketplace is the epitome of local identity (often indeed it is what defined a place as more significant than surrounding communities) and the unsettling of that identity by the trade and traffic of goods from elsewhere. At the market center of the polis we discover a commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. In the marketplace pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided. Only hybrid notions are appropriate to such a hybrid place. (27)

While at first glance the above rapprochement of the marketplace and the colonial school may seem farfetched, it reveals some interesting facts on closer look. First of all, it is worth remembering that colonization was principally a commercial endeavor masquerading as a civilizing mission: It is true that the colonizer presented the school as an institution for the moral and cultural expansion of the colonized. The reality, as Aimé Césaire points out in *Discours sur le colonialisme*, was something else:

Sécurité ? Culture ? Juridisme ? En attendant, je regarde et je vois, partout où il y a, face à face, colonisateurs et colonisés, la force, la brutalité, la cruauté, le sadisme, le heurt et, *en parodie de la formation culturelle, la fabrication hâtive de quelques milliers de fonctionnaires subalternes, de boys, d'artisans, d'employés de commerce et d'interprètes nécessaires à la bonne marche des affaires.* (19)<sup>13</sup>

If the school taught culture and morality at all, it was culture and morality intricately linked to the capitalist and profiteering ethos or goals of the western bourgeoisie. The colonizer quickly realized that the most efficient way to maximize his profit margins was through a formal educational system. Therefore, he built the school.

Like the marketplace described by Stallybrass and White, the school became a locus of erstwhile unheard of commingling of the sons of chiefs and the sons of their griots and other subjects. This phenomenon is vividly illustrated in *Le Ministre et le Griot*.

L'école avait été construite à Ta-Loma par Monsieur Cravachon, administrateur des colonies qui y régnait en maître. C'était lui qui avait décidé que fils de riches, de nobles, ou de paysans recevraient sans discrimination la même instruction, et dans les mêmes conditions matérielles, du début à la fin de leur scolarité. (58)

The members of chiefly castes considered such disregard for social hierarchy as an act of abomination. "Pour eux, ce mélange tout à fait incongru allait brutalement à l'encontre de la sacro-sainte tradition qui séparait systématiquement déshérités et âmes bien nées avant même la venue au monde des uns et des autres" (Bebey 58). The children in school also demonstrated this disapproval of social mixing. For example, one of Demba's classmates, a noble, shows his indignation not only for the mixture but also for the fact that Demba is top of their class. "Voici Diabaté, le griot qui oublie toujours d'apporter son tama [tam-tam] avec lui. C'est le griot muet de notre classe" (59). The caste system is so entrenched that even the children from lower castes express their discomfiture with the new order. Such is the case of Demba: "Lorsque Demba Diabaté entra à l'école il y trouva des enfants

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13 Italics mine.

d'un rang social supérieur au sien. Lui, étant fils de griot lui-même, se situait automatiquement au bas de l'échelle, comme le voulait la tradition" (58).<sup>14</sup>

That it brought under the same roof elements from disparate social backgrounds made the school, like the marketplace, the institution of bastardy par excellence. There is, nonetheless, an important difference between the marketplace and the school. The former, very much like the Bakhtinian carnival<sup>15</sup>, represents only a provisional disruption of social hierarchies, "an *intersection*, a crossing of ways" (Stallybras/White 27). At the end of the market and the carnival, participants put aside their wares and paraphernalia and retreat to their former categories. Only fading memories linger until the next market day or carnival. Consequently, the transgression manifested here is short-lived, at best "an occasional event which in itself left few permanent traces" (Stallybras/White 32). According to Bakhtin, "[a]s opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (109). Conversely, the disruption of normal forms of social categorizations occasioned by the colonial school was more than the Rabelaisian transgression privileged in the realm of fantasy and playfulness capable of engendering laughter even in those that are the target of the transgressive practices. The colonial school left an indelible imprint on society. The bourgeois elite that came out of the school not only replaced the ancient nobility, it also assured the gradual dissolution of precolonial distinctions of upper and lower casts (though, ironically, its hegemony would eventually produce its own high and low dialectical contradictions). For in the colonial school, not only griots and slaves were bourgeoisified, nobles were too. As the marabout in Bebey's novel reminds us, "Le livre, leur livre... il est venu pour toujours. C'est lui qui désormais nous impose une vie nouvelle..." (187). This reality, more than anything else, guaranteed the permanent disruption of precolonial caste-based hierarchies,<sup>16</sup> turning the world upside-down, as it were. Consequently, the marabout argues, it is those who know the White man's book that will naturally be the leaders of the new society:

Et tu n'y pourras rien. Même du haut de ta classe la plus privilégiée. Car aujourd'hui la classe privilégiée, c'est celle qui possède ce savoir nouveau. Et le chef, c'est celui qui a le mieux appris à utiliser ce savoir-là. Voilà notre vérité nouvellement forgée par le temps. (187-88)

One thing led to another! To administer his colonies effectively and conveniently, the colonizer was bound to make changes in many of the traditional ruling structures. The nobility and their governing systems were gradually replaced by the new bourgeois elites and new bourgeois governing structures. This is particularly so in the French colonies where the system of direct rule<sup>17</sup> was practiced. As a result, many traditional chiefs saw their power either weakened or lost altogether. In many cases, the French colonial authorities created new administrative chiefs with virtually no traditional authority

14 We see a similar situation in Hampâté Bâ's autobiography, *Amkoullel, enfant peul*. When on the first day of school the young Amkoullel protests that he cannot be made to sit in front of the son of the local traditional ruler, the teacher replies caustically: "Ici, il n'y a ni princes ni sujets. Il faut laisser tout cela chez vous, derrière la rivière" (25). The Rubicon, it seems, has been crossed.

15 In his now critically acclaimed *L'Œuvre de François Rabelais*, the Russian ethnocritic, Mikhail Bakhtin, argues that the image of the grotesque in Rabelais' works is like a carnival in which transgression of high and low are privileged. He also claims that the image has its source in popular culture.

16 A situation the Grande Royale in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Aventure ambiguë* wishes to avoid when she urges her fellow aristocrats to send their own sons to the White man's school first before sending anyone else there (37).

17 Unlike the French, the British mostly practiced the system of Indirect Rule in their colonies. The policy ensured local chiefs maintain a certain degree of their power of governance over their own people.

(Gardinier 334-35). Such chiefs were mostly drawn from the indigenous educated elite. The changes instituted in the socio-political structures of the colonial territory carried over to the post-colonial state. So it was that at independence, governing authority was transferred definitively to the graduates of the White man's school, many of whom originated from the erstwhile lower casts.

At independence, Fama (who had spent his financial resources in the anti-colonial struggle) expected to be rewarded with a key appointment in the government. His expectations are shown to be unrealistic considering his complete lack of Western education, an excuse given by the new leaders for his exclusion from their ranks. The narrator underlines this fact about Fama: "Passaient encore les postes de ministres, de députés, d'ambassadeurs, pour lesquels lire et écrire n'est pas aussi futile que des bagues pour un lépreux. On avait pour ceux-là des prétextes de l'écarter, Fama demeurant analphabète comme la queue d'un âne" (23).<sup>18</sup> If Fama the noble was prevented from joining the ranks of the new elites because of his illiteracy, Demba the griot, thanks to his Western education, got to be one of the new leaders.

### "Où a-t-on vu un fils d'esclave commander ?"

The nobles in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* and *Le Ministre et le Griot* do not care very much, it appears, that the socio-political structure has changed. What is unthinkable and unacceptable to them is that they no longer exclusively constitute the aristocracy of that new society. Fama's question "Où a-t-on vu un fils d'esclave commander ?" (138)—when he realizes that the head of the committee that has replaced his village chieftaincy is the son of a slave—contains in it all the bitterness against and rejection of the new reality. Similarly, in Bebey's novel, when Binta Madiallo expresses her refusal to allow the prime minister, Demba Diabaté, to attend her son's engagement party, Keita Dakouri tries to reason with his mother thusly: "Tu n'as pas raison, Mère. Aujourd'hui, il est avant tout le Premier ministre, c'est-à-dire l'homme le plus influent après le président lui-même. Et n'oublie pas que c'est lui qui m'a appelé au gouvernement" (39). The fact contained in Keita's statement is exactly what enrages his mother. Her response to her son's argument is unequivocal: "C'est bien ce que je déplore, fils: que ce soit lui qui t'ait appelé, et non l'inverse. Mais qui donc autorise un griot à monter jusqu'à la place du chef" (39). Binta Madiallo is not the only member of the old nobility who considers the accession of Demba-the-griot to the position of authority in terms of transgression of ancestral laws. In fact, according to the narrator, all the nobles in the country think like Keita's mother:

Binta Madiallo n'était pas la seule personne à penser de la sorte, dans la Très-Paisible République du Kessébougou; tous les nobles partageaient ce point de vue, tout naturellement, et en toute sincérité. Demba Diabaté, descendant d'une longue lignée de griots, avait beau avoir étudié à l'université, obtenu des diplômes enviés par tous, il restait simplement un griot, et rien de plus. D'ailleurs, qui lui avait dit d'aller faire des études à l'école des Blancs, alors que la tradition de sa caste et de la société toute entière avait prévu qu'il serait un griot pour remplir dans la vie des fonctions sans aucun rapport avec celles de Premier ministre ? (28)

The nobles are particularly baffled that one of their numbers, the president of the Republic, chooses no one as prime minister but the griot. Demba, in their view, is guilty of double

18 The primacy of western education, a vestige of colonization, cannot be underestimated. One cannot be a head of state anywhere on the continent (or occupy a position of low or high functionary) without a modicum of literacy in one of the European languages. In fact, as demonstrated so powerfully in Sembène Ousmane's film, *Mandabi*, one cannot fully be citizen in one's own country without the ability to read and write.

transgression: not only has he joined the club of the privileged few, he has also practically become its second-in-command. Binta Madiallo would have no problem if her own son, by virtue of his noble heritage, were the head of the government, with Demba, the griot, answering to him (as was the case in the olden days). The bourgeois is for both Binta and Fama, and all the nobles in Bebey's novel, a parvenu, an arriviste and usurper.

If the colonial school brought together the children of chiefs and the children of griots and slaves and, by this act, permanently restructured society, it did not succeed in entirely erasing the memories of the remnants of the old nobility. For nobles who, for one reason or another, refuse to accept the new reality, their memory of halcyon days becomes their last bastion of consolation.

To escape what he deems the moral wilderness of the new order, Fama sometimes seeks refuge both in his mental and physical memories. The problem, however, is that attempts on his part to return to his physical past always end in disaster. First, his two remaining loyal servants in his native Horodougou are aging and useless to him. Furthermore, one of them, Diamourou, benefits from the current system and has no genuine interest in seeing it changed for the sake of Fama. Second, Fama realizes that the bastardy he is fleeing in the city has reached his home village. The new-fangled elite there has dissolved old forms of political authority: "Les Indépendances avaient supprimé la chefferie, détrôné le cousin de Fama, constitué au village un comité avec un président. Un sacrilège, une honte" (116). The only return to the past Fama can undertake with some degree of success is the mental one to his childhood. This seems also to be the case for the nobles in Bebey's novel, in which we see no reference to a special physical space as is the case of Fama. They can only travel to the past through time: "[t]ous les nobles pensaient comme Binta Madiallo, et reconnaissaient avec amertume que, décidément, les temps d'aujourd'hui étaient bien différents de ceux d'autres-fois. 'Un griot qui devient roi, qui donc aurait osé imaginer cela voici seulement trente ans !'" (28).

Why this obsession with the head? Two explanations can be proposed for this. First, in the caste system, but also in modern class systems, the notions of superiority and inferiority always occupy an important place in social relations. As such, over time, the superior caste or class considers itself the (natural) head that must control the rest of the body, determine its functioning, and maintain its wholeness, harmony and equilibrium. The very functioning and stability of society depend on how much the class distinctions are respected by the different components of the hierarchy. The inference from such a view then is that, when the head is sick or prevented in any other way from performing its 'sacred' function, the entire body politic becomes corrupted, or bastardized, as the nobles would put it. This first explanation applies particularly to Binta Madiallo whose major concern<sup>19</sup> is the restoration of what she deems sanity into the African body politic by reinstating the ancient nobility as the head. Secondly, the superiority complex of members of the upper caste puts them in the position where they inevitably demand first access to superior privileges. This is exactly what Fama does.<sup>20</sup> Because Fama, unlike Binta, has lost both his 'superior' social status and the attendant material benefits, his immediate primary concern is not the restoration of the nobility per se, but his own personal wealth and privileges. Therefore, it appears here, at least in the case of Fama, that the

19 Binta Madiallo is doubly different from Fama. First, she is financially independent, having inherited her husband's wealth. Second, her son is an important government minister, and the best friend of the Prime minister. Fama has none of these benefits.

20 Fama is said to be "... né dans l'or, le manger, l'honneur et les femmes ! Éduqué pour préférer l'or à l'or, pour choisir le manger parmi d'autres, et coucher sa favorite parmi cent épouses !" Fama's main concern has always been to retrieve this lost life of luxury.

primary value of being on top is not moral superiority; it is rather the access to power and material wealth guaranteed by being on top.

Both Fama and Binta are lampooned for being anachronistic, maladjusted, and for deliberately refusing to understand and accept the contemporary African situation. They appear blinded by their disdain for the present and their suicidal attachment to what Andréoli labels the “*emblème périmé du pouvoir*” (52). Furthermore, they are ridiculed not only for their desire to resuscitate a sterile past (symbolized in Fama’s impotence), but also for their will to impose on a heterogeneous society a restricted worldview from the moribund past. Thanks to their unwillingness (initially for Binta) to see the new social reality for what it is, Fama and Binta end up calling upon themselves unwanted attention. Fama gets himself arrested, tortured and jailed in a bizarre circus of a trial that doubles as a commentary on his powerlessness and a vehement critique of the absurdity and heavy-handedness of the new political heavyweights.<sup>21</sup> Binta’s stubbornness put her and the entire country of Kessébougou in a precarious position. In the upheavals that follow her actions and Demba Diabaté’s refusal to expel his friend, Binta’s son, from his government,<sup>22</sup> Keita’s fiancée elopes with a French expatriate and perishes in the process, and Binta almost loses her beloved son.

Beyond the striking resemblances between Kourouma and Bebey’s novels, important differences between the two emerge. Both novels begin with a challenge to bourgeois hegemony. By making Fama impotent, and killing him off at the end, Kourouma seems to suggest that there is no room for co-existence, within the same bastard space, between the new bourgeoisie and the die-hard ancient nobility. Bebey’s novel, on the contrary, ends with the active capitulation of the nobility, a capitulation borne out of the necessity of survival and the recognition of the historical social transformation occasioned by the school. Furthermore, Ahmadou Kourouma does not provide any explicit alternative to the present dystopia which he so vehemently lambasts. Francis Bebey, on the other hand, is more explicit about the shape he would prefer the future to take. For Bebey, it is in the union of all antagonistic forces, regardless of their origins and present status. How does Bebey do this?

When his mother chides him for flouting his heritage by inviting the descendant of griots to his engagement party, Keita responds thus: “Je sais, je sais qu’il porte un nom de griot. Je n’ai pas oublié notre tradition à ce point, crois-moi. Ce que je veux dire, c’est que, bien qu’étant en quelque sorte prédestiné à être griot comme son père et tous ses ancêtres, il a acquis aujourd’hui, grâce à son travail et à son intelligence, une place tout à fait exceptionnelle dans notre société” (38-39). When the efforts of Keita and a popular schoolteacher fail to dissuade Binta, the onerous task of convincing the woman falls upon a man, a neutral figure, respected by everyone in the country. This man is simply referred to as “le grand marabout.” A little over an hour after his return from his pilgrimage to Mecca, and disregarding the dangers posed by the curfew imposed by the authorities to calm tensions arising from popular revolts against the nobles’ behavior and the Prime minister’s refusal to dismiss Keita, he decides to pay Binta a visit.

In making his case to Binta, the marabout highlights the inevitability of change and all that it brings with it. He points out in particular the role of the school in social transformation (187). Furthermore, he explains to Binta specifically the status of Demba in the modern society:

21 Fama is summarily arrested, tortured, and incarcerated for having failed to divulge to the authorities his dream of a coup d’état (173).

22 Opponents translate his refusal even in the light of Binta’s behavior as the unequivocal sign of the unholy pact between them (the prime minister and the finance minister) to steal the country’s money.

Binta, Demba n'est pas un griot. C'est un homme rempli d'une autre intelligence. D'un savoir que ses ancêtres ne connaissaient pas. L'intelligence et le savoir des avions et des trains et des automobiles. Avec lesquels notre vie ne sera plus jamais la même. (187)

The marabout's statement that Demba is not a griot, but a man, represents, in the context of Malinké philosophy, a revolutionary approach to the age-old idea of the status of the individual in society. What the statement posits in effect is that all men are born equal, that a griot is not an essential category, but rather a socio-cultural construct that over the years has managed, at least in the mind of some, to assume a fixed essence. The marabout's words are not without effect. The next morning, the noble Binta appears at the prime minister's residence where she kneels in front of the son of a griot, "les yeux levés vers lui" (190), with a cross section of the nation watching.

Every society has experienced, at some point in its history, in one form or another, the situation depicted in *Les Soleils des Indépendances* and *Le Ministre et le Griot*. Bokar N'Diaye describes this, referring to the West African situation, as the transformation from "l'état statique à l'état dynamique" (106). At the core of the tensions occasioned by shifts in power dynamics is always the question of which members of any given society should have access to power and privilege at any given time in that society's history. Moreover, when the shift happens or threatens to, the haves are the ones most likely interested in the reification of social separateness and its attendant benefits. A point amply demonstrated in the two novels analyzed here. What colonial education did in Africa, and in other caste-based societies, is destroy or weaken long-established essentialist notions of sameness and difference which seek to permanently make one group superior and others inferior, favoring instead the idea that one can be socialized into a particular caste or class if certain criteria are met. If anything, the novels of Kourouma and Bebey should serve as cautionary tales. The reconciliation we see at the end of Bebey's novel offers a possible antidote to the dangers inherent in the will to ossify difference and sameness.

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