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Towards a poetics of decolonization: Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*

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The Poor Christ of Bomba (1956), Mongo Beti's major novel, depicts the effects of French colonial infringement on the Cameroon landscape and consciousness. The novel charts the story of Father Superior Drumont, a Catholic priest assigned to the rainforest region of Cameroon around the 1930s. His professed task is to convert the indigenes of a six-tribe region to Catholicism. Despite Father Drumont's seeming piety, he is not what he seems. Governed by the French colonial ideology of assimilation, he is bent on forcing his Christian converts to forsake their African traditions and cultural ways as a condition for Christianity. The *sixa*, a church establishment aimed at grooming young female converts in preparation for Christian marriage, is Father Drumont's signature project during his twenty-year tenure at the Bomba Mission. In practice, however, the *sixa* is a complete mockery of Catholicism and a subversion of African traditional marriages. Father Drumont's increasingly rebellious converts come into a full awareness of his complicity with French colonial administrators like Vidal. Unable to re-establish a strong foothold in a resistant parish, a disillusioned Father Drumont returns to France. The novel depicts an awakening of a growing "national" consciousness similar to the Harlem Renaissance that occurred in the United States in the early twentieth century. Just as slave narratives exposed the brutality of slavery as a means to promote abolition, this essay explores *The Poor Christ of Bomba* as a fictional slave narrative that exposes French imperialism by constructing a discourse of resistance that is bound to serve as a path to decolonization. **Keywords:** discourse of resistance, Mongo Beti, national consciousness, slave narratives.

At the dawn of Western industrialism, depictions of Africa as a wilderness—a jungle co-inhabited by uncivilized man and beast—entered Western imperialist discourse. Varying portrayals of Africa as a "dark" continent began to infiltrate Victorian imagination and whet Western appetite for exploration and conquest, making it both appealing and popular for European imperialists to perceive Africa as a "wilderness" that was up for grabs. Post-industrial theories emerged explaining the African's mind as less developed and incapable of complex thought, thereby justifying European "beneficence" to tame the inhabitants whom they imagined as barbarians. The architects of the transatlantic slave trade and territorial imperialism variously promoted debates that framed Africans as sub-human with no jurisdictional authority over themselves and the land they lived in—debates that promoted slavery and imperialism as altruistic acts of Christianization and enlightenment. Challenging this premise, Aimé Césaire upholds that, "colonialism is neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor

a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God" (32). Césaire is referring to lofty notions and masqueraded labels, constructed by imperialists and fed to a European public, without much challenge. The voices of embattled Africans were not represented to the Western reader until the slave narrative emerged, as a genre, in England and the United States. In West Africa, territorial plunder went on from 1884 up until the 1950s, when the African colonial novel emerged to challenge imperialist notions of Africa and Africans. Published in 1956, Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is one such example of an African colonial novel. At once, Mongo Beti's novel is both "representation" and "resistance"—representation of a complex, rich African culture and resistance to a virulent French colonization. This essay examines Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* as a protest novel—akin to the slave narrative—that portrays and deconstructs an insidious French colonialism through narrative discourses that resist imperialist agency and affirm a push for renewed or reclaimed African spaces.

Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (originally published in French as *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*) is a fictive construction of symbolic interactions between a Catholic priest, Father Superior Drumont, and his parishioners in the rain forest of southern Cameroon. The priest mirrors French imperialist views about colonized territories as wildernesses with natural and human resources waiting to be explored and exploited for the glory of Empire. Although the priest's official mission is to convert indigenous people to Catholicism, he pursues his assignment without attempting to win the hearts and souls of his converts. His silent arrogance is predicated on an assumption about the inferiority of the black race, a notion that was largely at the base of French colonial indoctrination, as articulated by popular French writer Arthur de Gobineau who declared: "La variété mélanienne est la plus humble et gît au bas de l'échelle. Le caractère d'animalité empreint dans la forme de son bassin lui impose sa destinée, dès l'instant de la conception. Elle ne sortira jamais du cercle intellectuel le plus restreint" (de Gobineau 214) ("The Negroid variety is the lowest and stands at the foot of the ladder. The animalistic characteristic, which can be seen in the shape of his pelvis, foreshadows his destiny from the moment of his birth. This variety will be constrained within the most narrow intellectual circle", Pigeon 185). An important aspect of French colonialism was assimilation, that is, the systematic replacement of colonized peoples' "inferior" cultures and institutions with "superior" French culture and civilization. As critic Nick Nesbitt (1404) explains, this experiment seems to have worked fairly well in the French Antilles, where the French slave plantation "resulted in a powerful ideological valorization of and identification with a highly centralized metropolitan French culture" that prolonged French colonialism. To facilitate the contrived eradication of indigenous cultures, the French Empire implemented an educational system, which included Christian conversion, in the colonies. Immersion training in France was available for those

students who excelled, and the grand scheme was to educate Africans and then use them in converting everyone else in the Empire. This pathway to study in France was part of France's *mission civilisatrice*, or civilizing mission, which was the public rationale for France's "intervention" in Africa. Ironically, it was the implementation of this imperialist policy that fostered the creation of a diasporic community of "black" students in Paris and led to a black consciousness awakening, in much the same way that the Harlem Renaissance had revalorized African Americans a decade earlier. Together, black students from French colonies were able to dissect and reflect about the erosional effects of colonialism on black identity.

It was in this context in 1935 that Aimé Césaire founded *L'Étudiant noir*, *Journal Mensuel de l'Association des Étudiants Martiniquais en France* (The Black Student: Monthly Journal of the Martinican Students Association in France), in which his inaugural article explores the knotty issue of assimilation as an imperialist strategy. It was in *L'Étudiant noir* that Césaire first used the term *négritude* to designate the racial consciousness awareness they were experiencing. Although the journal only published twice, the ideas it advocated gave rise to a renewed black racial awareness that resisted French imperialist practices in the colonies. It was during this black consciousness ferment that Mongo Beti went to France and came under the influence of *négritude* and the Harlem Renaissance. Born Alexandre Biyidi-Awala in Mbalmayo, a town near Yaoundé, he adopted the pen name Eza Bota with his first book and thereafter used the pseudonym Mongo Beti. He was educated in Catholic Mission schools and then at a French Lyceé in Yaoundé. Beti went to France in 1951 to study literature at the University of Aix-en-Provence (Young 230). Growing up in a traditional environment that was very much under the grip of French rule, the young Mongo Beti could not escape noticing the ecological and historical remnants of previous colonial encroachments on his environment—a past that involved the Atlantic slave trade and German colonization, all of which were bound to inspire his creative imagination. These symbolic reminders are archetypically engrained in the historical consciousness of Cameroonians. Exposed to a diasporic community of black intellectuals who coalesced ideas and debated strategies for countering the evils of colonialism, one may argue, this reflective awareness about French imperialism inspired Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, a protest novel that innately has the markings of a slave narrative.

Although the impact or relevance of *Négritude* as an intellectual movement has waned, it is important to look at how its birth in the 1920s and 1930s helped shape the African colonial novel in general and *The Poor Christ of Bomba* in particular. By connecting black students from French colonies with the Harlem Renaissance, *Négritude* helped introduce these young intellectuals to models of black consciousness activism in African American culture and literature. It was mostly through Claude McKay that the Paris-based community of black students

discovered the Harlem Renaissance Movement or New Negro Movement (1918–35) and related African American activists. Students from French colonies were more likely to have been subjected to assimilation than were those from English colonies, since the English imperialist ideology had a different philosophical leaning.¹ These interactions illuminated Césaire’s awareness about the extent to which African identities had been eroded in colonized Antilleans as a direct result of French colonial policy of assimilation. In effect, Negritude was situated in the crucible of French imperialist ideology as a construct that resisted the French policy of assimilation and as a movement that sought to reconstruct Afrocentric identities.² In the case of black Antilleans, Césaire attributed their dislocations to the psychological and physical alienations forced upon them by slavery, followed by French imperialist annexation. In his seminal essay, *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, Césaire writes: “Between colonizer and colonized, there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses” (6). Many of these interlocking consequences of colonization are explored in Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba*.

Despite the paternalistic undertones of the *mission civilisatrice* and the Cartesian statement, “je pense, donc je suis” (I think, therefore I am), used as a seductive preamble to French assimilationist indoctrination, black consciousness intellectuals saw the slogan for what it is, the French Empire’s view of blacks as simplistic, inferior beings. This oversimplification of black identity is one of the follies of French Empire in particular and imperialist hegemonies in general that Negritude rejects and Mongo Beti picks up as a subject for his satire in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. The connection with African American struggle, one may argue, introduced the black students from French colonies to the slave narrative as an American genre and to its astounding effectiveness in defamiliarizing slavery in the public sphere. The black consciousness awakening, ushered by Negritude prepared black intellectuals for the task of resisting colonialism and provided impetus for the rise of the colonial novel, which has been seen as a sequel to the slave narrative genre. Generally speaking, a slave narrative is a self-reflexive compendium of the experiences of slavery. William L. Andrews explains that, “many slave narrators become I-witnesses as well, revealing their struggles, sorrows, aspirations, and triumphs in compellingly personal story-telling” (*The Carolina Digital Library*). In the American slave narrative, the narrator’s ‘epic’ quest for freedom and narrative progress, as Andrews describes, are “impelled by [the narrator’s] faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity (the slave narrative often stresses) comparable to that of America’s Founding Fathers. He further notes that, “Some of the classic texts of American literature, including the two most influential nineteenth-century American novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and such prize-winning contemporary novels as William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987),

bear the direct influence of the slave narrative" (*Carolina Digital Library*). All of these literary texts have provided a steady discourse of the experience of slavery in the West.

It is noteworthy that slave narrators blazed the narrative trail for the colonial novelist. Although the most studied slave narratives are those by Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley is, arguably, a slave narrator who has embedded within her poetry a reflective narrative of resistance against the atrocities of American slavery. And, in so doing, she demonstrates the ability to effectively navigate the contours of the colonizer's language to actualize her agency in undermining imperialist ideologies and, most importantly, forges a new identity as an "enlightened witness."³ Given her well-documented precociousness, Wheatley certainly had the presence of mind to speak brilliantly and eloquently about her African experience prior to being kidnapped and sold into slavery, much the same way that Olaudah Equiano speaks about his early life in West Africa. Wheatley's seeming silence to the indignities of slavery has prompted critics to suggest that her Puritan conversion caused her to reject Africa and her African identity. Such assessments of Wheatley seem to ignore her social and historical realities. Much to the contrary, Wheatley's poetry is embedded with a narrative that tacitly resists slavery and affirms her black identity. First, she received a fairly liberal education from her owners once they had recognized her talent. Second, she was schooled in Puritan doctrine and converted to Christianity. Third, she needed the patronage of her owners in order to publish and disseminate her work, at a time when slavery was still official in America. These are all factors that shaped the style of her discourse on slavery and identity. If she had openly challenged the institution of slavery in her writing, she would have immediately lost the patronage of her owners, and, with it, any chance of being published. After the death of her owner and after her emancipation, she was unable to get her work published, and this fact alone bears out the rationale for her apparent silence on the subject of slavery. Nonetheless, Phillis Wheatley's poetry seemingly promotes the views of her owners as well as the religious ideologies of the day, but it calculatedly draws from the oral repository of colonial archetypes that tacitly signify her rejection of slavery.

In spite of the inhibiting conditions of her enslavement, Wheatley cleverly tucks away within the deep layers of her poetry semiotic inflections that portray her love for Africa and her rejection of slavery. Her nostalgic and ennobling elevation of Africa betrays her genuine feeling of kinship and validates the construct of a private "self" as a topos of the slave narrative tradition. In Wheatley's poem, "An Hymn to the Morning," she writes:

See in the east th' illustrious king of day!
His rising radiance drives the shades away—
But Oh! I feel his fervid beams too strong,
And scarce begun, concludes th' abortive song (Mason, Jr. 26)

Pointing to the “east,” that is, in the direction of Africa (in relation to North America), the speaker indicates that sunrise which “drive[s] the shades” or fuzziness, is the muse or source of poetic inspiration. This association of the sun rising over Africa with poetic illumination—stemming from a common belief that links genius to the sun in ancient mythology—wittingly nullifies her professed rejection of Africa. Just as the speaker begins to bathe in this powerful stream of inspiration, the light source is cut off: “And scarce begun, concludes the abortive song.” Why does her song conclude abruptly and abortively? One might argue that Wheatley is referring to the entrapment of her passionate feelings about Africa that cannot be given free expression, lest she offends her captors, whose beneficence has allowed her to write. Her reverential allusions to Africa suggest that although she seems to publicly condemn “blackness” in order to conform to the “political correctness” of the day, Wheatley privately extolls her African-ness. This contrast can be discerned in these verses: “Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / ‘Their colour is a diabolic dye,’” which Wheatley carefully constructs in the poem, “On being brought from Africa to America” (Mason, Jr. 7). She certainly knows that she had been forced from her native land into slavery, so the title of the poem is a euphemism. Through gentle and not-so-obvious satire Wheatley writes herself into the poem “On being brought from Africa to America” as the less-than-human object that highlights the distortions of Africa in imperialist discourse. By thanking God for the “altruism” of her enslavers who have “saved” her from her heathen land, she mocks the barbarity and inhumanity of slavery, not Africa, which is masqueraded as a heroic, search-and-rescue mission.

The line “Some view our sable race with a scornful eye” is direct speech in which Wheatley separates herself from the interlocutors who are doing the viewing and she becomes the object that is being scorned. The adjective “sable” is also used as a noun in reference to the endangered black sable antelope, which is native to parts of Africa. The sable is a rare species that is hunted for its valuable fur and trophy horns. Like the sable, Africans were hunted and sold into slavery for the value of their labor in Wheatley’s day. These inflective adorations are more or less Wheatley’s muted sentimentality for the idyllic African culture that she has all but lost. In spite of her Christian conversion, Wheatley inserts in her poetry a subtext of archetypal motifs that seek to reconstruct her African-ness that has been eroded by the inhuman institution of slavery. The historical ironies of imperialism that produced African-American slave narrators, such as Phillis Wheatley, are the same ones that produced African colonial writers.⁴ Arguably, an important lesson of slave narratives for the African colonial novelist is that the process of decolonization begins with intellectual discourse that exposes and counters the ignobility of colonial ideology.

Mongo Beti’s first challenge, as a realistic novelist, is, one would assume, the difficulty of having to convey the experiences of colonized Cameroonians in a language and generic forms bequeathed to him as a legacy of colonization. But, this

situational irony also offers him a unique opportunity. Equipped with a repository of oral materials—African rhythms, cadences, and ecological archetypes—the colonial African writer explores subtleties within the colonizer’s language (in the manner of Phillis Wheatley) and uses them for the task at hand. As Chinua Achebe explains, the African writer’s mission, first and foremost, is to re-tell the African story that has been distorted and falsified by agents of imperialism seeking to justify territorial plunder in a way that helps the victims regain their self worth “by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they [had] lost” (Achebe, “Editorial” 1964). To deconstruct the legacy of colonialism, as Achebe suggests, the writer must also construct a new African consciousness. In the case of Cameroon, the fragmentation was also ecological—tribal units were split and the colony was a new formation of various tribes that would have to work together to forge a national identity in spite of their many tribal identities. This is similar to the manner in which enslaved Africans in the West had to deal with the issue of locational alienation and reinvention of a new identity. It is the sense in which Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* may be seen as a fictional version of the slave narrative. The themes that Mongo Beti explores revolve around the confluence of Cameroon’s traditions and modernism, and the spaces in which to repatriate the decolonized Cameroonian are neither of an idyllic past nor some utopian future. That desired space or “national culture” for the colonized, as Frantz Fanon cautions, is not some idyllic place: “A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people’s true nature. It is not made up of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say actions which are less and less attached to the ever-present reality of the people” (Fanon 155). Rather, a “national culture,” Fanon suggests, “is the whole body of efforts made by a people in a sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon 155). In other words, such a reclaimed space is the tenable totality of the moment, in which all the identities of a people work and struggle together in one knowable walk. *The Poor Christ of Bomba* thus stands on the foundations of the slave narrators in its portraiture of imperialism and in setting the stage for decolonization in colonial Cameroon.

Set in the 1930s, Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1956) recounts the story of Father Superior Drumont, a Catholic priest who has established his mission in Bomba, a parish outpost in the rainforest region of southern Cameroon. He is a “messenger” of Jesus Christ bringing the gospel to “heathens,” but his understanding of Africans is myopically influenced by French imperialist indoctrination. His relationship with indigenous populations seems to be shaped by the master-slave paradigm, not the Christian gospel he proselytizes. Similar to the owners of Phillis Wheatley who imagined her enslavement, Christianization and education as functions of their altruism, Father Drumont sees his parishioners as beneficiaries of his beneficence. His projected generosity is personified in Denis, whom he takes in after his mother

died. Denis' father, a catechist of Father Drumont, sends the thirteen-year youngster to serve as a page for the Bomba Mission priests. After two years, Denis has learned sufficient French language and "culture" to serve as a mass boy and run errands for the priests. He also tells us that he has grown to love Father Drumont even more than he does his own father. So, Denis is presented as Father Drumont's successful experiment or exercise in Christian conversion.

Denis has become a devout Christian who feeds on every word that proceeds from the mouth of Father Superior Drumont. He is a case in point that "proves" the efficacy of the mission *civilisatrice*. Denis loving Father Drumont more than he loves his own father is the model the French Empire is seeking to replicate, so Denis symbolizes the French imperialist strategy to brainwash colonized people enough so they will love French culture more than they do theirs. Similarly, Denis reminds us that he loves "their" Bomba Mission, and he uses the inclusive pronoun to signify his total conversion, not just to Catholicism but also to the culture of the colonizer. Imposing himself on his converts the same way as the French Empire runs the colonies, Father Drumont rules his parish with an iron fist. Known throughout the parish as Father Superior or Jesus Christ, his name and missionary philosophy suggest he is every bit an agent of French imperialism. Mongo Beti's ultimate goal, as is every African writer's in the 1950s, is for each reader (both Western and African) to have a shared connection with the victims. This is a technique slave narrators effectively use in calling attention to their plight. Like the slave narrators, the indigenous people depicted in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* do not deserve the toll of atrocities visited upon them by imperialism and this is the implied message.

Written in the form of a reflective journal narrated by Denis, the novel is a blend of parody and satire, in which narrated events are intermixed with interpolated reflections. The technique of narration is bidirectional, with causes and effects presented in circular fashion, leaving the reader to delineate and process the linkages. This style is effective as it allows the reader to do her or his own reflection about the role of the Church in the context of French imperialism in Cameroon. The narrator gives us a description of Father Drumont's Bomba Mission, a complex consisting of the *sixa*, a primary school, a church, and living quarters for the priests and their staff. The Bomba Mission also doubles as the seat of government for the six extended territories or tribes that make up Father Drumont's parish, a domain that may be seen as a microcosm of French imperial authority in colonial Cameroon. The school serves children from the region. Graduates from the school, who also are converted to Christianity, help expedite Father Drumont's Christian conversion project. This is evidence that the Bomba Mission School is fulfilling its function as mandated by France's *mission civilisatrice*, where students are educated to be used for the advancement of Empire.

For two years Father Drumont has ignored the Talas—the most populous and most resistant to Christian conversion of the six tribes—depriving them of his spiritual

nourishment, in hope that his starved “flock” would rush back upon his return. The novel begins at the end of his two-year moratorium, and it is an account of his two-week reflective tour of the Tala tribe. Father Drumont is shocked to discover that converts throughout the villages of Tala have not missed him. It becomes obvious to the reader that Father Drumont does not know his parishioners as he thought, the simple reason being he has never cared about them as people. His relationship with Denis, for example, is impersonally focused only on the chores that the lad performs in his house and church. It is not a holistic, father-son relationship that Denis assumes and seeks. Father Drumont’s paternalism is consistent with the master-slave relationship and typifies the unequal nature of colonizer-colonized relationships. After living with the priest for two years, Denis does not know anything about Father Drumont’s family or his homeland. His paternalistic view is also reflective of his relationship with converts throughout the Bomba Mission, which equally reflects France’s view of the colonies. His only interest is in turning his parishioners away from their native traditions, converting them to Christianity, and collecting all kinds of membership dues for his church coffers.

As Father Drumont, who is also called Jesus Christ, makes his way through the Tala tribe, he finds out that almost all the churches he helped build (using forced labor) have fallen into disrepair. He grows pensively disturbed by the lack of “progress” in this region, and he learns from one of his own catechists, in the village of Timbo, an unsettling truth that has eluded him for twenty years; that is, the Talas have only half-heartedly accepted him and his Catholic religion because they felt, from the outset, that the path to the white man’s secret power (money) is hidden in his church and school. Father Drumont asks his catechist: “Why is it, do you think that so many backslide from the true religion? Why did they come to mass in the first place?” (Beti 29). Accosted by Father Drumont, the catechist tells him what he doesn’t want to hear: “My Father, at that time we were poor. Well, doesn’t the kingdom of Heaven belong to the poor? So there is nothing surprising in many of them running to the true God. But nowadays, as you know yourself, Father, they are making pots of money by selling their cocoa to the Greeks” (Beti 29). Then Zacharia, Father Drumont’s cook adds, “I will tell you just as it is, Father. The first of us who ran to religion, to your religion, came to it as a sort of [...] revelation. Yes, that’s it, a revelation; a school where they could learn your secret, the secret of your power, of your aeroplanes and railways [...] in a word, the secret of your mystery. Instead of that, you began talking to them of God, of the soul, of eternal life, and so forth. Do you really suppose they didn’t know those things already, long before you came? So of course, they decided that you were hiding something” (Beti 30). At every village during his tour of Tala, Father Drumont’s obsession with Christian conversion is paramount. He wants to know if 1) church followers are paying their church dues, 2) the men have stopped marrying more wives, 3) babies are being born out of wedlock, and 4) Christians are refraining

from traditional customs. Someone points out to him that the white settlers and administrators are not good Catholics either, and they don't see him imposing the same rules of restraint on them. As a result, they now see Father Drumont as one more white man standing in their way, with whom they must work as a matter of necessity.

Pushed by these self-effacing revelations, Father Drumont reflects on his role as a missionary, and the tour of the Tala tribe turns into a self-reflective journey to explore and discover his inner self. It is also clear that he is not happy to be criticized by his converts, whom he has always seen as mindless and incapable of complex thought. Obstinately disillusioned with the reality that these people can actually think and, above all, actualize their thoughts, Father Drumont sees himself as a failure. Acknowledging his feeling of defeat to Vidal, a colonial administrator, Father Drumont says that his defeat has been immanent: "I hadn't understood that my defeat was already pronounced, like a young man who refuses to admit that the girl of his dreams has scorned him" (154). Consistent with the hero motif and the Victorian ideal to "explore" and "conquer" the mysteries that Africa symbolized, his disillusionment is more with the disruption of his hero quest. He is unhappy that he has not "conquered"; after all, he is not here to discover the hearts and minds of these people. His mission was exogenously decided—to replace the cultures of his converts with Christianity, and French education and civilization. In spite of the unfolding illumination that results from the rebellious response of his parishioners, Father Drumont does not learn that the Talas have been turned away because of his self-centered, colonial vision that does not include them in any realistic way. He simply cannot bring himself to learn from "inferior" beings. Father Drumont would like to set his work apart from what he characterizes as the brutality of colonial administrators, which he condemns, tongue-in-cheek. But, the colonial administrator, Vidal, reminds him that his Bomba mission and his sixa use the same brutal tactics of exploitation that the French Empire is notoriously guilty of.

Father Drumont's actions betray a conscious or unconscious assumption of his "superiority" over the natives. He sees his work in Cameroon as a failure, only in the sense that his parishioners have failed to utilize his beneficence for their own betterment. He shares this self-assessment with Vidal: "I wish you good luck here, my dear Vidal! I am a failure, a sacred failure. I doubt if anyone has ever fallen deeper into defeat" (Beti 150). His sarcasm comes across as he continues: "These good people worshipped God without our help. What matter if they worshipped after their own fashion—by eating one another, or by dancing in the moonlight, or by wearing bark charms around their necks? Why do we insist on imposing our customs upon them?" (Beti 150–1) By suggesting that his parishioners are barbarians who eat one another, Father Drumont reinforces the French colonial assumption about Africans and their "inferior" culture. His abhorrence of "inferior" indigenous cultures is steered by his stoic adherence to the "superior" French culture he is seeking to implant.

Assumptions about culture, Homi Bhabha explains, problematize culture: "It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity" (208). Infirm about the fluidity of culture, Father Drumont fails to make adjustments dictated by cultural 'difference'. An example is his *sixa* program that will not work in southern Cameroon just as the xylophone dance he disrupts may not work in Paris, but Father Drumont will not see it that way because he sees cultures as hierarchical and static objects that can be imposed or disposed of.

As an anti-colonial novel, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* assumes agency for revealing the hypocrisy of imperialism as symbolized by the complicity of Father Drumont's Church. Denis confesses his sexual sin/loss of innocence (105), an act that parodies Father Drumont coming to terms with the fall of his Bomba mission. Denis places all blame of his sexual sin on Catherine, the "Eve" figure—"she made me do it," he says, even though we have seen him lusting for her. Similarly, Father Drumont blames his parishioners for his fall, even though they never sought his help in the first place. Central to this decolonizing discourse of Father Drumont's fall is the *sixa*, the place where girls are sexually exploited by Father Drumont's hired hands, and he allows the perpetrators to escape without any form of punishment. Instead, he equips his cook with a horsewhip and supervises his beatings of some of the girls. The *sixa* exposes him as just another beguiling French imperialist and symbolically provides an epistemology for reading and understanding imperialist ideology. Commenting on the progress of decolonizing impulses, Edward Said notes that the colonized "bear their past within them--as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and re-deployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire" (Said 31). Father Drumont's Bomba mission is symbolic of the French Empire because it orchestrates the exploitation and wounding of the natives.

For twenty years, Father Drumont has extracted forced labor from his converts, whipped them as slaves, treated them as juveniles, connived with colonial administrators to further exploit them, and "imprisoned" their wives in his *sixa*, indirectly turning them into sex slaves for his staff. In light of this unequal relationship, the apparent docility of his parishioners wears out and they engage in an intellectual agitation against his continuing, imperialist oppression. By raising intelligent questions and presenting reasoned arguments against these routine acts of enslavement and exploitation, Father Drumont's parishioners prove not to be the ignoramus he has mistaken them for twenty years. Having comfortably asserted himself as the paramount "Jesus Christ" of Bomba, he is suddenly outwitted as his

parishioners now prove to be intellectually agile, exposing him as the one who should be the recipient of enlightenment and conversion—a poor Christ of Bomba, indeed. As Achebe has observed,

To the colonialist's mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: "I know my natives", a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand—understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding" (Achebe, "Colonial Criticism" 58).

Faced with mounting resistance to his self-serving, hypocritical Christian conversion project, Father Drumont tries to paint the French colonial administrator (Vidal) as the evil one. After all, it is the administrator that is about to start a road project in the region that will require forced labor, and Father Drumont—acting as the good priest—compares that kind of forced labor to the "methods of the Congo rubber companies," an allusion to King Leopold's reign of terror in Congo (Beti 35). He reminisces about the suffering endured by villagers who were forced to work on another road project in southern Cameroon: "men working all roped together and with soldiers watching them. If one fell, they flogged him where he lay until he staggered up again" (37). Father Drumont's own cook, Zacharia, raises a critical question that goes to the heart of his complicity: "But, Father you must be very happy about this, no? Isn't it just what you longed for? They will be treated like beasts and in their misery they'll run to you, saying: 'Father, you alone are kind. You are truly our Father.' [...] Why not admit it? Isn't it true they will return to you now?" (Beti 41). Father Drumont is unable to respond to Zacharia and his silence confirms what the natives already know, that the church is an agent of empire.

The situational irony here is that Father Drumont is quick to see the infirmities of French colonialism, and he fails to realize that he is a colonizer. His complicity is emphasized by the plurality of his mirroring of the colonial administration. First, Father Drumont forcefully converts indigenous people to Christianity, through fear and intimidation, just like the colonial administration is forcing a foreign government on Cameroon tribes and the historic foundation of traditional chieftains is being dismantled. Second, Father Drumont imposes all kinds of dues on his church members and enforces collection of these dues through a feudal system of church catechists, similar to the taxation of natives by the colonial government. Third, Father Drumont and his catechists extract forced labor from the converts, and the most noted ones are the sixa girls who are forced to labor for ten hours a day on Bomba mission projects in the same way the colonial government forces the people to construct farm to market roads to transport cocoa to commercial centers for shipment to Europe. Fourth, both the church and the colonial administration work hand in hand to eradicate indigenous traditions and cultures, such as marriage

rituals. Fifth, both train indigenes, whom they use to facilitate their exploitation of fellow Africans and further their respective missions. Sixth, both Father Drumont and Vidal are merciless in carrying out their missions. Vidal uses foul epithets to describe the natives whom he does not see as fully human; Father Drumont disagrees with Vidal about the appropriateness of such epithets but his treatment of Christian converts, however, indicates that he sees them in the same light. For example, Father Drumont's response is one of rage, not compassion, when he is forced to acknowledge the pattern of sexual exploitation the *sixa* girls have suffered at the hands of his staff. Although Doctor Arnaud's report indicates that most of the girls have been infected with syphilis, Father Drumont refuses to authorize treatment that is recommended. Shocked by the response, Doctor Arnaud tells the priest: "Then, Father, you have only to write to me with your decision. But if you will permit me to advise you, you'd better decide quick" (Beti 202). Instead of providing the girls treatment, Father Drumont closes down the *sixa* for good and sends the girls away. In effect, his institution that was supposed to prepare the girls for monogamous marriages has raped and disposed of them. One girl shares her sense of agony and loss: "I have no family now and no homestead to return to. The only home I have is the mission" (Beti 206), but her wailing is to no avail as Father Drumont closes down the Bomba mission in preparation for his return to France.

His treatment of the *sixa* simply as a project is symbolic of his missionary philosophy. By asserting himself as one who has an ordained right to convert all indigenous Cameroonians to Christianity, Father Drumont assumes the right to decide the fates of his parishioners until the very end. Césaire reminds us that the dispensation of power between colonizer and colonized is always unequal; there is "no human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production" (6). Father Drumont plays all of these roles and sees his parishioners only as "instruments of production." He typifies the cronyism of the French colonial government which is driven by a devastatingly alienating ideology that Gerard Pigeon explains this way: "The French, according to their law, were more inclined to adopt a policy of integration that, when put into practice, was more theoretical than real, bearing a strong resemblance to indoctrination. [...] Where the English only alienated socially, the French colonization resulted in both personal and social alienation for the African" (Pigeon 170). As Father Drumont has shown, imperialism has nothing to do with enlightenment; it has everything to do with subjugation and enslavement.

By masquerading himself as "beneficent" and the "bearer of enlightenment," the imperialist takes focus away from the colonized, whom he has wounded, disfigured, raped, and enslaved. What Mongo Beti has done in *The Poor Christ of Bomba* is to unveil the masked face of the colonizer, showing him as the one who has inflicted

disfiguring wounds of alienation and dislocation on the colonized—in this case, the Cameroonian in particular and the African in general. Beti’s “implied” reader is both the European who needs to see in realistic terms the face of imperialism and judge for himself or herself, and the pre-independence Cameroonian who needs to foster a national culture that decolonizes and revalorizes. For post-independent readers, Beti’s tacit message about a requisite national culture rings true. In the absence of a national culture that can secure and sustain the gains of independence, imperialism, which is both amoebic and insidious, would simply renew its face and find new ways to disfigure and maim.

Notes

1. While the French adopted a policy of direct rule that involved the eradication of traditional structures in the colony, the English adopted a system of indirect rule where traditional chieftains were drafted to serve as a buffer between the indigenes and the colonial administrator.
2. In many ways, Negritude, as a cultural movement, established an aesthetic connection between black writers in the French colonies and a continuum of black resistance writing in the United States.
3. A term used by bell hooks to emphasize literacy as a predicate for self-empowerment.
4. Although the transatlantic slave trade ended in 1807 as a result of mounting pressure in part, from English and American abolitionists, the enslavement of Africans in the west continued for another half century.

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