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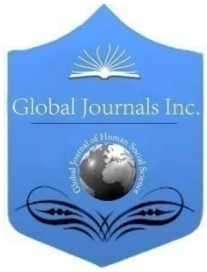

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Mongo Beti and Liberty: A Study of His and Other Names in his Fiction

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Keywords: *mongo beti, liberty, names, fiction.*

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Mongo Beti and Liberty: A Study of His and Other Names in his Fiction

Henry K. Jick [α] & Andrew Tata Ngeh [σ]

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Before he discovered the hypocrisy in the practice of assimilation, Alexandre Biyidi Awala did not see himself as different from the real Frenchman. When the dawn of realization came, withdrawal syndrome showed. Thus, the French intellectual still lurking in the Cameroonian Biyidi, informed him to adopt a pseudo-identity to be able to express his disgust with a system that enslaved him for a long time. This search for a second, concealed personality yielded a set of symbolically charged names: Eza Boto means "the alienated people" or people without any "authenticity or autonomy". Mongo Beti, "the son of soil, the child of Beti land. These names tell us what Biyidi thinks of the system he represents in his fiction.

This view is highlighted in this paper by examining Beti's fiction, paying particular attention to the symbolic significance of the names of some of his major characters. This is done with a view to corroborating Es'Kia Mphahlele's contention in his *The African Image* that every creative writer must be committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of value not purely aesthetic, but to a criticism of life geared towards liberating a people (VI). This paper therefore, opines that literature, in its critical realist tradition, contributes immensely to the freedom (liberty) of man.

Keywords: *mongo beti, liberty, names, fiction.*

I. Introduction

A writer responds, with his total personality, to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of sensitive needle, he registers, with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. (Ngugi Wa Thiong'o 47)

Mongo Beti's literary works are the products of his responses to his social environment. That environment, as the world well knows, is Cameroon. Literature offers a reconstruction of a people's collective experiences expressed in carefully selected words so as to entertain, instruct and move its readers. The novel, a genre of literature, offers such a reconstruction through a story with human characters by means of incidents, setting and dialogue. By means of such a reconstruction, a novel like any other work of literature, through its educative role, may seek to bring about social change. This paper argues that African literature came into being because of dramatic political, social and cultural transformation on the African continent. Consequently, it is a political literature since it is a product of colonialism. As such, it has a social function, a function embraced by many African writers who have become committed to their societies. While adducing evidence from Beti's works to show that he is political in the choice of his pseudonyms and his fiction, this paper argues that literature can play an important role in effecting change or in a struggle for lib

If Mongo Beti criticises the socio-political issues that he focuses on, it is because he intends to contribute to the struggle to liberate Cameroon in particular and Africa in general, from the grip of Western imperialism and the African stooges, who are constantly supported by their Western masters. We contend in this paper that good African literature must have a worthy purpose or moral obligation to a people. In other words, the writer is supposed to perform functions in his society. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his own pronouncements observed:

I believe that African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organisation that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country, and sing a new song…(50)

Many African writers of fiction are committed to their societies and are engaged in the struggle for change or to liberate their people. Their struggle for change is in line with what Inih Akpan Ebong means when he argues that by the very nature of his calling, the writer is primarily a revolutionary and that his principal objective is not so much to inform, educate and entertain as it is to change the society (72). Ebong's opinion therefore, reiterates the social function that Es'kia Mphahlele means when he submits that the value of fiction lies in the meaning or significance it has for a people at a particular time in history (269). On his part, Ernst Fischer, in *The Necessity of Art*, stresses the role of literature when he opines that "Art is necessary in that man should be able to change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it" (14). The world in our case is Cameroon in particular and other African states in general. By "inherent magic", Fischer is referring to the second function of literature – its aesthetic value. But while this second function may inhere in every work of art, it definitely does not

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constitute the most important element in all art. It is also in line with Fischer's argument that T.S. Eliot approves Virgil's opinion that the "greatness" of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards (42). If the greatness of literature is not determined solely by literary standards, then the meaning and significance of literature must be very important. In as much as this paper, inter alia stresses the functional aspect of literature, it does not in any sense suggest that the literary finesse of this literature should be sacrificed.

Frank Raymond Leavis in *The Common Pursuit* asserts that thinking about political and social matters ought to be done by minds of some real literary education, and done in an intellectual climate informed by a vital culture (193). He goes further to contend that literature will "yield to the sociologist…what it has to give only if it is approached as literature" (193). Since this critic uses poetry to substantiate his argument, he further reiterates that he is not thinking merely of poetry… "but if one were enumerating the more obvious kinds of gains literature has to offer the sociologist, prose fiction, it is plain would figure very largely" (193). Hence, the relevance of the works under reference in this paper. However, it is important to caution that such prose fiction should not be regarded as social treaties or political pamphlets but as literature. That is why Frank Raymond Leavis goes ahead in his argument to emphasize that the works should not only be what have been "printed and preserved" but must be something "whose subtlety of language and complexity of organizations can be appropriately and appreciatively evaluated" (193). Henry Jick has observed elsewhere (1996) that Beti is conscious of his working tools – literary finesse which make his works to be considered as high art.

II. Theoretical Framework

Mongo Beti's fiction in its socio-political context will yield to the sociologist or anyone else, a better understanding of the Cameroonian society at the given time portrayed in his writings. It is these critics' contention that, to fully evaluate any literature, the content, narrative structure, as well as character and linguistic format must all be studied. In other words, form and content must not be separated if the greatness of any work of art must be assessed. Es'kia Mphahlele reiterates this point when he submits that the argument as to whether a work "is" or a work "means" is fruitless because a work of art both "is' and "means". Mphahlele wonders how one can judge a work "separately from the ideology that makes it" (83). However, we must caution here that the fact that a work of art both "is" and "means" does not mean, in any case, that these two are both one and the same thing. The "is" exists for the "means". In other words, form exists for content. The writer, therefore, should have several options of form each time he wants to express something. This choice will depend on the writer's ability and his purpose as well as the factors and forces within which he operates. Consequently, the social and political issues of Beti's society affect his purpose of writing.

Another important criterion for appreciating any political literature is the external factor. This factor helps to highlight the major preoccupations of this paper. The importance of the social background as a formative stylistic factor cannot be despised in the criticism of African literature in particular. The French policy of assimilation, for instance, influenced Beti's choice of pen names as well as his writing to a large extent. Before he discovered the hypocricy in the practice of assimilation, Alexandre Biyidi Awala did not see himself as different from the real Frenchman. When he finally realized that he was not a true Frenchman in his black skin as the policy had made him to believe, the French intellectual still lurking in the Cameroonian Biyidi, informed him to adopt a pseudo-identity to be able to express his disgust with a system that enslaved him for a long time.

III. Textual Analysis

This search for a second, concealed personality yielded a set of symbolically charged names: "Eza Boto", in Ewondo language, the first pseudonym he used literally means "people who are alienated, without authenticity or autonomy". He used this name in his short novels *Sans Haine Sans Amour (Without Hatred Without Love*) (1953) and *Ville Cruelle (Cruel City)* (1954). "Mongo Beti", which Alexandre Biyidi Awala has permanently adopted, etmologically means, "Child of the Swamps", literally, "Son of the Soil" that is of the Beti people, by extension, an "African Child". That is why he has to drop the French name 'Alexandre' which makes the Biyidi Awala, an alienated Cameroonian in particular and an Africa in general.

There is a change from the detachment implied in the first pseudonym. In essence, these names are political and tell us what Biyidi thinks of the system he presents in his fiction. Mongo Beti in all his fiction is committed to the liberation of his Cameroonian society from the grip of French imperialism and his attempt through names and his fiction to project his chosen values has always escaped the Euro-centric critic or the unperceptive African mind.

The subtlety of his satire in his pre-independence novels in particular, gives room for deliberate misreading of his works by most critics especially those of Euro-centric views. The issue of misreading his works is also compounded by the fact that he has a philosophical focus; something full of elements of the existentialist philosophy. We must observe here that the ability to laugh at oneself when one ought to cry has elements of the existentialist

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concept of freedom in bondage, or liberty as used in the title of this paper, which, in essence says that when one has realized one's liberty in one's own way, then one is free no matter what someone else thinks or says. Such an attitude would usually arise from a deep and remote sense of loss of helplessness which is, in fact, part of the body of recurring existentialist themes such as guilt, alienation, despair and death. These themes are, indeed, strongly felt in Beti's choice of names and his pre-independence novels in particular. It is because of guilt that the novelist under reference, drops Alexandrè Biyidi Awala when he discovers that he is an alienated African. He does not know the French culture as well as his supposed traditional culture. Consequently, he chooses to be called Eza Boto. His first novelette, *Ville Cruelle* presents an analysis of the conflicting forces, social and political which determine the quality of the pre-independence Cameroon life. Gerald H. Storzer strongly believes that because of colonialism, the Beti protagonist represents a complex web of "paradoxical acts based upon mutually exclusive systems of values". He goes further to argue that each of these systems offers the protagonist a set of abstract rules by which to guide his behavior, yet each proves to be inadequate, "leading only to the feelings of disorientation and alienation" (93). This is exactly what one finds in the Beti pre-independence protagonist.

After all, his names mean "alienated people". *Ville Cruelle* brings out traditional values in a communal African society. To illustrate these points, Beti in *Ville Cruelle* presents Tanga North, a city noted for drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, crime delinquency as opposed to the peaceful Bamila village. Despair is also seen in the alienated people. Banda's success in having a wife for free and 10.000 frs (ten thousand francs) with which to begin a living is not a result of hard work or his endeavour but a product of fate. Consequently, the Arican in the new society has just to resign himself to fate if he must have the courage to live on in such a society. The clash of Western and African values leads Banda to total isolation from all cultural institutions. That is why in spite of the fact that the situation in the town of Tanga could not avail any means for him to improve upon himself, he finds it difficult to return to the traditional environment of his village and decides to venture further into the "cruel" hands of the new Urban Africa, Fort-Nègrè.

The spirit of alienation continues in Biyidi and he decides to change his pen-name from Eza Boto to Mongo Beti. But the initial years of his writing with this new name do not correspond with the meaning of the name, "the son of the soil". He still feels alienated and that is why his protagonists in his pre-independence novels are equally alienated. Denis in *The Poor Christ of Bomba,* and Medza in *Mission to Kala* are good examples to support this argument. At the end of *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, Denis now, a boy waits for a letter from his adopted father. As an adult, Denis still finds it difficult to remain at home. His regular journeys with the missionary had not given him the opportunity to do well in school and, therefore, he is not educationally prepared for any better job. At the end, the boy abandons both the Christian and traditional values for the material. This leaves him alienated from both cultures. Though Beti does not literally state this in the novel, the readers feel that the answer is "blowing in the wind".

In *Mission to Kala*, Medza'a half-education, pretentious nature and his complete ignorance of his traditional culture make him alienated in his very society, and therefore, he finds it impossible to contribute to the development of this society. Even though Medza'a only source of pride is European education, he does not stop from condemning it when an occasion comes up. The nature of the questions asked him at the first of the extramural sessions that the Kalans organize, suggests that Mongo Beti intended to bring out the inadequacy of the kind of education to which young boys like Medza had been exposed. Beti's voice seems to be heard saying that education that does not recognize the people's culture and tradition is bound to be irrelevant to their development and total emancipation. Each time Medza meets the native people, he is embarrassed. The intelligent and perceptive Kalans are able to prod his weaknesses and illogicalities with what Medza himself calls a "needle-sharp clarity". He is honest to confess; "but once again life had caught me on the wrong foot; every question took me completely by surprise" (81). He is, therefore not ashamed to observe that his education has not prepared him adequately to face the challenges of real life. The relevance of Medza'a education is put into question, by a woman:

> *You'll live in homes with a garden all round them, and hedge to fence them off from each other. You'll sit around in the evening smoking cigarettes and reading newspapers. You'll drink your water from a tap … You'll speak nothing but their language… Where do we come into all this? (82)*

By asking about the relevance of Medza's education to the people and the country as a whole, the woman helps to sharpen Medza's ideas about the future. This brings out the visionary role of the writer, who tries to portray what his society is supposed to be in the future. When Beti is presenting alienated lead-characters in his major pre-independence novels, it is not because the pseudonym used at the particular time is "Eza Boto". But this presentation was envisaged in his pre-independence novels by the spirit of the first pseudonym, Eza Boto – "Alienated people".

In his attempt to show the irrelevance of Western education, Beti criticizes Medza's use of textbook clichés in *Mission to Kala*. By so doing, the novelist is laughing at the boy's lack of originality and

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his uncritical assimilation of foreign education. Medza for instance, makes reference to Greek mythology about Helen of Troy:

> *It was at this stage in the proceedings, before I had even had time to get my personal emotions quietened down a little – let alone sorted out that my Helen, the real object of my mission, for whom I had been prepared to fight the second Troy before the walls of Kala appeared on the stage. (143)*

This style of constantly referring to historical figures/names, incidents and ancient folklore is one of Mongo Beti's strengths as a writer but a beautiful satire of French or Western education policy. Beti in essence, seems to be saying that this system of education prepares the African only to give parodies of Western clichés and knowledge without any attempt to make him original or prepare him for the reality of African life. Consequently, he ends up being alienated. This message is very political.

Apart from the existentialist philosophy which informs the political choice of Alexandrè Biyidi's pseudonyms and his works, negritude is another influencing philosophy. The influence of negritude which preaches non-violence is glaringly found in Beti's pre-independence novels. We are not however, suggesting in this paper that Beti is a negritude writer. But then, negritude could be interpreted as a silent and harmless revolution which could only be given birth to by an effective assimilation philosophy. Mongo Beti is a good example of this assimilation experiment in Africa. If Beti decides to drop his names Alexandrè Biyidi Awala, that remind him of the assimilation policy, it is because he wishes to cast away his bogus skin and thus acquire liberty but not by praising the past in spite of its virtues as presented in *The Poor Christ of Bomba, Mission to Kala* and K*ing Lazarus*.

It would have been very profitable to give an extensive demonstration of how the above mentioned philosophies have led to a misunderstanding of Beti's early fiction, but this cannot be conveniently done in such a paper due to the constraint of space. Suffice it to stress here that the names 'Eza Boto' and 'Mongo Beti' are both political and, therefore, contribute to the highly political tones of his fiction. Eustace Palmer, the voice of the Euro-centric "expert" on African literature, fails to see this politics in Beti's names and his *Mission to Kala* in particular. To Palmer,

> *Mission to Kala is neither an attack on education nor on Western civilization; rather it is a brilliant satire directed at all those half-baked young men who feel that a partial exposure to western ways makes them superior to their countrymen who will still live the tribal life. Mongo Beti subjects Jean-Marie's personal weaknesses – his condescension, arrogance, and stupidity – to rigorous criticism by means of his comic art (154).*

Eustace Palmer's summary is apt, but reveals what he does not mean to say. It reveals an acceptance on his part that Medza's education is inadequate; that his exposure to the West, that is his assimilation is incomplete. And Beti is conscious of this predicament. That is why Medza summarises his (and his people's) dilemma in one of his musings, in fact, the very last paragraph of the novel.

> *The more I think about it, the more certain I am that it is I who owe him a debt of gratitude for sending me on a journey which enabled me to discover many truths. Not the least among these was the discovery-made by the contact with the country folk of Kala, those quintessential caricatures of the "colonized" African – that the tragedy which our nation is suffering today is that of man left to his devices in the world which does not belong to him, which he has not made and does not understand. (181)*

If we were to accept Palmer's plea for an "aesthetic distance" between Beti and Medza, there will be no adequate explanation for such mature probing thoughts. The highlight of Medza's discovery is that their whole nation is suffering an ideological tragedy (for it could not be any other tragedy in the context which has been thrust upon it by France). The result of French policy of assimilation was half-baked black "Frenchman" (Beti inclusive) whose intellectual development and philosophical outlook on life were fashioned inevitably by, and according to French ideals. Perhaps there are no elements of Beti in Medza as Palmer would have us believe, but there is no clear reason why Beti cannot in all sincerity laugh at himself and his type, or any good reason why he must be distanced from Medza. But it is in conformity with Euro-centric criticism to say that Beti is not Medza. But it must be remembered likewise that Biyidi is not Beti. The distance between Beti and Medza cannot be wide because Beti wants to save his hero. When Medza does eventually come to self-realization, he assumes, just like Beti, the status of a spokesman than a mere victim. Beti can be said to stand solidly behind his "victim" character through whom he condemns French imperialism in Cameroon.

When Mongo Beti criticizes certain aspects of African tradition, he uses Medza. It is Medza who lampoons the inordinate acquisition of wives by the chief of Kala. He refers to the chief as "the old swine". He expresses his disgust when a girl of less than sixteen is led in marriage to a polygamous chief. Beti is aware that polygamy is legitimate in traditional society, what he condemns outright is the tendency not to respect the human value of women. Most of the women in Beti's pre-independence novels are virtually very passive and used just like objects for exploitation, sexual and economical. Therefore, the love of Beti's chiefs to acquire wives without the women's consent is castigated as a perversion of the African traditional

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society. Apart from their annihilation of female dignity, the chiefs abuse the tradition they are supposed to uphold and collaborate with the colonialists to oppress the people. The chiefs in *Mission to Kala* and *King Lazarus* are the main focus of Beti's criticism of traditional values. These chiefs virtually work against the development of the country and the total emancipation (liberty) of mankind. Towards the end of Medza's stay in Kala, he consummates sexual initiation by rejecting the "urban" charm of Eliza for the "rural" freshness of Edima. Consequently, we may make bold to state here that the use of these two names are very symbolic; Eliza for Western civilization and Edima for traditionalism. This particular experience of Medza comes with mixed blessings because Edima is the daughter of the very chief of Kala, whom Medza describes as an "old swine" and one of the people's oppressors. Therefore, the sexual act between him and Edima may not truly represent a perfect symbolic initiation into traditional rural purity. In fact, it substantiates Beti's contention that such purity no longer exists.

Beti's attack and criticism of the perverted African institution of traditional chieftaincies are carried even fiercely in *King Lazarus.* Chief Esomba Mendouga uses his twenty-three wives as "play things in his hands". Many of his subjects call him "the old swine". He oppresses the youths and women in particular. In fact, he embodies the vices that Beti identifies in the African elders and chiefs. Since his wives are very passive, they do not protest for their rights. It is only Makrita, the first wife, and the only woman in Beti's pre-independence novels, who stands up and fights for her rights. The elders and chiefs feel that a woman's opinion should never be sought. That is how they get their wives. That is equally how Medza's father probably married Edima to Medza's brother. Mongo Beti shows his readers that African youth and the women are the victims deprived of their rights and liberty by the stupidity of their elders and chiefs.

It is in recognition of this stupidity and collaboration of the elders and chiefs with the colonialists, that Beti portrays the main African heroes in his pre-independence works in the condition in which they are: Banda in *Ville Cruelle*, succeeds not because of his produce but due to the hand of fate. He does not find it easy to return to his traditional African society but ventures further to Fort-Negrè, an unknown city to him. Denis in The *Poor Christ of Bomba*, is handed over to Father Drumont by his father who has seen the Christian missionary as an opening for him to be relieved of his paternal responsibility. On his part, Jean-Marie Medza in *Mission to Kala* is sent to school at a very early age by his father with the desire to see him accumulate many certificates as possible. He is alienated from his traditional culture and finally, like the other lead-characters in the other novels, does not succeed in finding a place either in the traditional society or the Western. Once more, the informing spirit of Beti's first pseudonym, Eza Boto – "alienated people" is emphasized here.

All these vices militate against the emancipation and liberty of the youths. By such a presentation, Beti is out to educate the masses to stand up and fight for their rights. Through the educative role of literature, this paper opines that literature can effectively contribute to liberty in Cameroon.

Names are very important in understanding Beti's politics in his fiction. Names in literature, in general, effectively situate works of art in particular geographical environments. Apart from the white characters in Beti's fiction, the names of majority of his protagonists are essentially of Beti origin. Banda, Medza, Zambo, Edima, Esomba, Mendouga, Amougou, Mor-Zamba, Abena, Mbarga Onana just to name a few are good examples. When Beti gives some of these African characters Christian names, it is because he partly intends to expose the theme of alienation that his first pseudonym, Eza Boto, symbolizes. Jean-Marie Medza is a good example of this class, who possesses some western values. Chief Essomba Mendouga abandones the culture of the people that he is supposed to uphold and protect when he becomes a Christian and takes the name Lazarus. Chief Essomba Mendouga was during the advent of Christianity, used to the joys of polygamy and kept strictly to tribal ethics.

It is through a system of mutual acceptance that the king assures the political stability of the Essazam people and guarantees the safety of his subjects. As soon as the chief becomes a Christian and takes the name, Lazarus, he invites the wrath of all tradition-conscious persons in his kingdom. The chief, however, seems to have no sense of consistency. He falls back upon polygamy and as soon as he falls sick again, he pretends to go back to Catholicism and to send away his wives. In bringing out the clash of culture seen through the actions and reactions of Essomba Mendouga, Mongo Beti is in essence, criticizing the Cameroonian society at the time of his writing. The clash that leads to the civil war highlighted in *King Lazarus* is detrimental to the development of the society. There can be no development in any society without peace. This seems to be the main message Beti is stressing here.

Zacharia, an African character, with a western name plays a significant role in Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. He may be likened to the African seer who does not naively accept Christianity totally and neglect his own background. He is conscious of the fact that the two cultures must recognize the existence of the other. Mongo Beti seems to have given him a Christian name and even put him in the novel to play two main roles. First, to check Denis's naivety and Father Drumont's illusion about his mission in Bomba. Secondly, to act as the spokesman for the radical African point of view. It is he who makes readers realize that he knows his people

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very well and is equally proud of them. Shortly before they leave for the tour, he warns the Father that his years of neglect will not have changed the people of Kala one bit and he is later proved correct. Father Drumont makes a speech to the people and refers himself as "their good shepherd and they were his lamb" (25). It is Zacharia who gives a very cruel parody of the speech. He claims that the sentiments expressed by the Father are "utterly ridiculous" and contends that Drumont's use of a different cultural reference makes it incomprehensible to the people. One cannot understand what is "meant by a good shepherd, since we have no shepherds in this country (25). This aspect of Zacharia'a parody highlights the blunders that can result from ignorance of a people's cultural patterns which consequently, results in clash of cultures if one must be imposed on the other without any such considerations. Zacharia's point above, definitely receives Beti's approval as he further reiterates the idea in the father's conversation with Mr. Vidal, the French Colonial Officer in order to enable the African pass across his message to the father. It is, therefore, no doubt that Beti gives the African only a Christian name, Zacharia. Father Drumont seems to always listen to Zacharia in spite of his rudeness to him because he is conscious of the fact that the cook knows him too well. When Denis runs to Zacharia with complaints about the wickedness of the Talans, he retorts angrily: "What does it matter to them, all your confession and communion, God knows what? They are busy with something else, my little Father. Money, money … that's the great thing in life, man …" (19). Zacharia therefore, has quickly realized that these people are very smart and have recognized the importance of money in modern life and are chasing it no less eagerly than the priests themselves in particular and the colonial masters in general. After all, the catechist has reveled the thoughts of the people to the priest, "they say all of you are after money" (20). The Father is shocked but cannot do anything to change the people's point of view. When Father Drumont destroys the people's musical instruments because they are dancing on the first Friday, it is again through Zacharia that the readers seem to hear Beti's view being expressed. Zacharia continues to whistle the popular tune that was played on the xylophones before Drumont destroyed them (53). Mildred Mortimer thinks that through Zacharia, Beti is sending a "subversive message clear to the reader, if not to the priest' traditions live on in spite of many angry missionary's violence against a few sticks of wood" (49).

The last scenes of the novel show Zacharia, Father Drumont's African favourite, intending to marry Catherine and as a result becoming a polygamist. The father, who at the beginning of the story had advised his Christians against associating with polygamous members of their family, advises Clementine to stay with her husband, Zacharia but the "faithful" Christian refuses. At this particular juncture, one finds it difficult to understand the Father and the mission for which he came to Africa. However, one may contend that by this misunderstanding of the Father and his religion, Beti intends to show that the African culture is more important to the Africans than the imported religion. From the foregoing discussion, we can submit that Alexandrè Biyidi Awala, during his earlier years of using Mongo Beti, did not really show himself as a child of the land as the name supposes but brought out alienation as portrayed in his first pseudonym, Eza Boto. It is in the second part of his writing, the post-independence era, that he asserts, indeed that he is the "son of the soil". This is probably because most African states had gained independence by this time.

Main basse sur le Cameroun (1972) which broke Beti's fourteen years of silence since the publication of *King Lazarus* in 1958, acts as a pointer in his new literary perspective. The new perspective is the author's indictment of local post-independence politics. Andrè Ntonfo has stated that all the events that constitute Beti's political writings centre around.

> *Deux figures historiques antagonistes dont l'une, Ruben Um Nyobè, est nommemant designée, tandis que l'autre, Amadou Ahidjo porte l'identié fictive de Baba Toura la Bituré. (46)*

In effect, Andrè Ntonfo is saying that Beti's (main) political novels are constructed around two historical characters, Ruben Um Nyobè who bears his real names and Amadou Ahidjo, whose fictional name is Baba Toura the Biture. Consequently, we make bold to submit here that Beti's pen names and the names of these characters control the politics in his post-independence novels in particular. The role played by Ruben in shaping the political history of Cameroon is well-highlighted in *Main basse sur le Cameroun*. It is in this text that Beti first presents the reader with the image of an independent African state where scenes of human cruelty, misery and ignorance debunk the pre-independence romantic vision of liberty, equally and fraternity. It is because *Main basse sur le Cameroun* was proscribed shortly after its publication that Beti decided to present the fictional replica of the text. *Remember Ruben*, consequently, was written to satisfy this goal. The author himself acknowledges this:

> *… J'ai voulou mettre sur une forme romaneques toutes les idées que j'avias mises sous une forme d'essai, pamphlete dans main basse sur le Cameroun… Par consequent, il est certain que dans ces deux livres et dans la suite d'ailleurs, je témoigne sur la vérité de décolonisation au Cameroun et en Afrique … (Biakolo 101 – 03)*

Beti contends in this passage that though Cameroon is independent, it is yet to be decolonized. This accounts for his political inclination. Though Ruben is a historical figure in *Remember Ruben*, he plays only

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a very limited role in the novel. Instead, Beti makes Mor-Zamba and Abena to embody Ruben's revolutionary spirit. Ruben is almost completely absent from the first part of the novel that bears his name, even his name, apart from the title, only appears once in the eighty eight pages of the first part. The reader searches more and more, whom he should remember. Charley-Gabriel Mbock submits that each reader goes on searching his own Ruben – at least those who have not heard of him. But in order that the reader should have some information on the political history of Cameroon, his imagination projects beyond the simple description of an individual and he grows enthusiastic about an epoch, a region (116) (our translation). Consequently, a name in literature can mean much in controlling the plot of the work and highlighting the major pre-occupation of the author. Ruben in Beti's works means revolution – a total struggle or fight for a people's liberty. The title of *Remember Ruben* reminds the readers of the revolutionary spirit and combative nature of Ruben Um Nyobe, first leader of the U.P.C. political party that fought for the independence of Cameroon and who was killed on the 18th September, 1958.

Beti's major imaginary characters in *Remember Ruben* are Mor-Zamba and Abena. These are the characters who defy the tyranny of the system which Ruben had fought against to no avail. These two characters are very symbolic in the novel. Mor-Zamba in Beti language means "man of god" or "Providential man". By giving his character such a name, Beti partly wants to bring out the importance of fate or the role of destiny in any liberation struggle or any meaningful change in a society. The first part of *Remember Ruben* titled "Everything for a wife nothing for a gun" expresses the same dichotomy that one finds between Mor-Zamba and Abena. Mor-Zamba is in search of the past (represented by the women), that is, the symbol of his origin, whereas Abena is determined to move into the future. This part of the novel echoes Mor-Zamba'a attempt at getting into traditional life. Abena tries but to use the "gun" to free himself from the tyranny of the system which also represents the past. The disturbing question Mor-Zamba and Abena have to solve is whether one of them should stay in the village in order to cleanse it of its decadence or should go in conquest of new territories. A solution to this problem is finally found. Mor-Zamba learns of his past. Time to him has been found. This is very important because it was the absence of the knowledge of his past life at the beginning of the story at Ekoumdoum that led to his solitude and secluded life. This discovery can find meaning in Alexandrè Biyidi's pen names, first Eza-Boto – that makes Biyidi to be alienated and Mongo Beti that makes him to assert that he is the "child of Beti land". Abena can be likened in this novel to the one deprived of his past. Twenty years of separation between Abena and Mor-Zamba represent the most alienated colonial period experienced by Cameroonians. When Beti creates his heroes in two faces, the idea he seems to have is that the nation is constituted by the tribe (traditional village and the individual). The nation, therefore, can only advance if the past is recognized. However, it is worth noting that Beti does not mean here that the past must be set up as a model to be followed, but should be a source of inspiration towards which Modern Africa must turn. That is why Alexandrè Biyidi Awala becomes Mongo Beti, while Mor-Zamba, after having discovered his past, returns to Ekoumdoum and inherits power as the legitimate chief who is supposed to cleanse the village of its decadence.

In spite of the fact that Abena is to replace Ruben after his death as the leader of the U.P.C. political party, he could not liberate him physically from his enemies. It is Mor-Zamba (Providential man) in the Beti language and an illiterate, who is politically and socially naïve, who enjoys the honour of liberating Ruben from the police. It is in this way that the role of destiny as his name stands for, is made significant in the novel.

In *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*, Mongo Beti also uses names to send his high and explosive political message to the readers. Through Essola's quest for the cause of Perpetua's death, one discovers that the search is in essence to discover why there is, in effect, not much difference between the former colonial rule and the new rule established by the Cameroonians themselves. From Essola's investigations, one discovers the societal ills that Beti criticizes. The three main pests in the society, dictatorship, alcoholism and the French language hinder any meaningful development and liberty in the Cameroonian society. The investigation over, Essola, who represents an oppressed Cameroonian, summarily kills his drunken brother, Martin, whose complicity in the inhuman marriage of Perpetua, he takes for granted. It is an intentional act that Beti gives Essola's brother, Martin, a Christian name and presents him as a drunkard, symbolizing one of the pests in the society. He equally symbolizes the difficulty in establishing a solid base for tomorrow's nation against the despotism and greed of the neo-colonial elite. Perpetua is seen in the novel as a victim of her mother – a devouring mother and her brother, Martin.

Perpetua and her mother are also symbolically portrayed. In this way, they effectively convey Beti's high political message. Perpetua's name and symbolic character stand high as far as Beti's political image is concerned. She is first a clearly defined personality before his symbolic role. She represents absolute silence in Beti's novels. The silence of Perpetua is that of the Cameroonian nation that sees itself exploited by even her citizens and the mother (France). Her death in pregnancy constitutes a condemnation of the soul destroying materialism to which she is being sacrificed.

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In general, Perpetua's tragic fate represents the rape of Africa in the traditional, political, social and economic spheres. On the symbolic significance of the girl in the novel, Mongo Beti has pointed out that a sort of fatality aborts all the liberation efforts of Perpetua. In his 1979 interview with Anthony Biakolo which we have translated into English, Beti had this to say:

> *I think the name Perpetua itself contains no doubt something of fatality, of continuity in the feminine condition as well as in the African situation. The two conditions are similar: a sort of fatality aborts all liberation efforts of Perpetua and of women in general. The character goes back to square one in a kind of vicious circle. It is this kind of despondency that I wanted to depict in the word Perpetua and the character's own life. (Biakolo 103-04)*

We insist here that a name in literature can carry very high political message. This is exactly what we see in the name Perpetua and Beti's contention in the quoted passage bring out the kind of loss of hope that characterizes most African countries in their attempt to liberate themselves from traditional and imperialistic obstacles to progress. Symbolically, this stands for all the difficulties all African countries face in the liberation struggles. Perpetua is very optimistic until her death that she will one day be liberated. The consolation seems to be a political message that Beti is giving Cameroonians (humanity in general) that they will one day be liberated. Here, Beti seems to be saying that time and patience are necessary conditions in the Cameroonian politics. This fact can also be corroborated by using *Remember Ruben*. In spite of all the difficulties in establishing a truly democratic society in this novel, the future is not bleak. That is why at the end of the novel no one is left in doubt as to the intention of Mongo Beti in echoing the militant struggles of Ruben Um Nyobè:

> *Africa has been in chains, so to speak, from eternity, whenever we liberate her will be soon enough. Our struggle will be long, very long… Many years from now in the course of which thousands of our people, women and children among them, will probably die, there will be people, to smile at the memory of these preliminary stirring, as one does in thinking of innocent games of childhood. (252)*

From this contention, we opine that Mongo Beti is concerned and determined to see Africa liberated from forms of domination as he is angry with Africa's exploitation. This can be explained by the attention that the author pays to everything affecting the fate of Ruben and his followers. The name, Ruben therefore, means much as far as Mongo Beti's post-independence fiction is concerned. His choice of pseudonyms, names of some of his protagonists and the symbolic manner of presenting some of his characters, inform these critics to contend that Beti's post-independence works could be said to constitute a plea for political pluralism, tolerance, civil liberties and individual rights. At the end of reading *Remember Ruben* and *Perpetua and the Habit of unhappiness*, the question, what is in the names, 'Ruben' and 'Perpetua' would have been answered.

IV. Conclusion

This paper argues that true education is liberatory, not inhibitory. It is in Kala that Medza in *Mission to Kala* receives all the education that makes him a man; that brings about his freedom which he has long cherished but had been unable to assert because of his upbringing. To prove Beti's point, it is important that Medza leaves for Kala with preconceptions which he changes with the dawn of true education. This is exactly what obtains when Alexandre Biyidi Awala decides to drop his real name for Eza Boto.

In this respect, we submit that *Mission to Kala* is a parody of the white man's "mission to Africa". On the symbolic level, Medza parodies the colonial adventure. "An easy adventure" he says, among comparatively simple people, "is the secret wish and aim of every adventurer" (16). That Medza's mission is a parody of French mission in Africa finds illustration in the conquistador image and ambition with which Beti invests his hero. Pizarro, the Spanish adventurer, whom Medza begins to compare himself with (Medzarro) is a typical colonial figure in European history. He was an imperialist who conquered Peru in the 16th century. The French in Africa would not escape Pizarro's fate, Beti seems to say. Medza is both a typical example of the product of the colonial system (before the mission) and a weapon against it (during and after the mission). His short-coming, in as much as Beti does not show that they stem from innate disposition or tendency, must be taken as short-comings of the system.

As part of the conclusion of this paper, we should reiterate the role of literature in society. It was Frantz Fanon, one of the twentieth century's greatest black political thinkers , who said, "each generation must out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it" (176). This statement is applicable to the pioneering generation of African writers to which Mongo Beti belongs. He draws his inspiration from the Cameroonian society through problems and people. Each period in Beti's writing has its own peculiar values and problems: that is from pre-independence optimism to post-independence social and political disillusionment to the present economic mismanagement and political abuse. This paper has demonstrated that the writer has a social function or a moral obligation. That is why it upholds some critics' view on the role of the writer in his society. According to Wole Soyinka "The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time"

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(142). This view tallies with ours and it brings out the significance of history as vision in the creation of a work of art. On his part, Es'kia Mphahlele stresses the central political idea of writing:

> *Every writer is committed to something beyond his art, to a statement of criticism of life…the writer, a freeman addressing freeman has only one subject – freedom (VII)*

Mongo Beti has been shown in this paper as one who is willing to contribute to the freedom or liberty of mankind. Consequently, we assert in this essay that Cameroon literature, in its critical realist tradition, contributes immensely to freedom or liberty in Cameroon.

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