



## **Binding Cultures: A Symbiotic Vision of Francis Bebey in *Agatha Moudio's Son***

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We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today (34)  
Chinua Achebe. *Hopes and Impediments*

European encounter with Africans happens to be one of the focal points especially in postcolonial discourse and the responses that arise from this contact especially from the African vary from author to author. Francis Bebey is one of the Cameroonian writers of French expression who has responded to issues concerning this encounter. How Francis Bebey in *Agatha Moudio's Son* attempts to negotiate a cultural balance from the remnants of western and African values in African soil is the motivating force of this paper.

The aim of this paper is to assess the outcome of the coming together of African and Western values on African soil as portrayed in Francis Bebey's *Agatha Moudio's Son*. It underscores the fact that there seems to be a tertiary culture that arises from the blend of African and Western cultures which Africans should embrace as they seek to negotiate space in the global space. In this regard, the paper will be based on the contention that Francis Bebey in *Agatha Moudio's Son* presents Africans who are caught between Western and African values and are negotiating spaces that represent their cultural "twoness", as WEB Du Bois puts it. Thus, Bebey seems to advocate that Africans should learn to live with both cultures which will, in fact, mean the creation of a new identity that shifts from the pre-colonial and colonial cultures. Paul Gilroy's notion of double consciousness in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* will serve as the major theoretical tool of analysis in this paper. According to Gilroy, because of encounter with the West, African and black cultures are undergoing a process of traveling and exchange that transcends specific cultural boundaries. Gilroy observes that:

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through

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[a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. (19)

Here, Gilroy envisages a society without barriers of race, ethnicity and cultures. This means that cultures should blend and because of this, Gilroy seems to reject the idea of Meta- culture and in this connection, the so called 'low cultures' should "push their thoughts to extremes" to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's phrase in *Provincializing Europe*.

Francis Bebey's novel, under study, is set in an African village that is at its cross roads as it is faced with not only an influential western culture but one that is imposing. However, this blend of cultures ends up with the construction of binaries. These binaries were created from the very first day of encounter to foster difference. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* stresses on this when he affirms that:

Between what is represented as the 'larceny' and distortion of European 'metatheorizing' and the radical, engaged, activist experience of Third World creativity, one can see the mirror image ...of that ahistorical nineteenth-century polarity of Orient and Occident which, in the name of progress, unleashed the exclusionary imperialist ideologies of self and other. (19).

Bhabha rightfully situates the origins of binaries and the reason for this divides was/is meant to claim dominion on the other. In *Agatha Moudio's Son*, the Africans do not see the Europeans like themselves and that is why discussing with Chief Mbaka, the ruler of the village, Moudiki, one of the characters in the novel, refers to Europeans as "them". He says "you heard them arrive...you heard their car arrive" (1). Moudiki sees these Europeans who come to hunt in the forest (which he claims is theirs) not as part of their community. The idea here goes beyond race as what he seems to fight against is the disregard that the Europeans have for what is African in the novel. The fact that Africans do not see the Europeans as "them" shows that to them, the European is not welcome the reasons being that the coming of the white man has led to a rupture in the affairs of Africans . The narrator says that: "The morning wore the sunny garb of a holiday, peaceful calm of June Sunday. Peace continued to reign until, suddenly, a shot rang out, followed shortly after by two or three more" (1). The scenery presented here is bright and calm before the coming of invaders (who in the case of the novel are Europeans). This calm underpins the view that African values have been intact before the coming of the white man. The village, as we read, is blessed with sunshine on a Sunday in June. Here, we see Western influence already encroaching as the month and day under discussion come from European importation that has been embraced by African including the narrator. However, the white man's presence is, as I have said, at the centre of rupture. The shots of the gun symbolize colonial exploitation of the Africans by Europeans. That is why when the villagers ask for compensation, they are refused. The white colonialist responds to the request thus:

'You won't get it, the salt for your tribe. We owe you nothing. We come here to hunt monkeys, which belong to nobody. What's more, without us and our guns the colony of monkeys in your forest would cause you plenty of trouble, even in your village. We are benefactors, and it's you, in fact, who should consider paying us something, instead of wasting our time when we are hungry. (7)

One remarkable thing that we see in the words of the European, like we saw in Moudiki's voice is the seriousness with which the self/other binary is constructed. Throughout this argument put forward by this European character, the personal pronouns he uses "we" and, "you" draw a clear line that he does not recognize the African like him. His tone in the excerpt reveals that as a colonizer, he sees himself as the civilised while the African needs to be civilised and even protected from monkeys by him. This goes a long way to justify the ideology that has guided this European all his life which is that the African lacks any value. This view is not strange, though, for it is part of the politics of globality. In fact, to this European, Africans do not exist and that is why the monkeys on African soil are owned by "nobody". Nobody here gives him the room to possess the forest, the monkeys and the "nobody" that he refuses to see. Homi Bhabha has commented on this issue of "see" in the following:

The elision of the eye, represented in a narrative of negation and repetition – no ...no...never – insists that the phrase of identity cannot be spoken, except by putting the eye/I in the impossible position of enunciation. To see a missing person, or *to look* at Invisibleness, is to emphasize the subject's *transitive* demand for a *direct* object of self-reflection, a point of presence that would maintain its privileged enunciatory position *qua subject*. To see a *missing person is to transgress* that demand; the 'I' in the position of mastery is, at *that same time*, the place of its absence, its representation. We witness the alienation of the eye through the sound of the signifier as the scopic desire (to look/to be looked at) emerges and is erased in the *feint of writing*. (All the punctuation is Bhabha's 47).

Negation of the other comes because the eye refuses to see the other and/or simply looks at the other as being evil or invisible. That is why the blend of eye /I is very useful as the personal pronoun "I" is the root of difference and stimulates not only the superiority of the individual but also breeds identity. It is then that the "other" is articulated as evil and/or invisible like the European seems to describe the people in the novel when they ask for compensation. This European also sees the activity of hunting as profitable to the African that he is struggling to help.

Since this view is not shared by some natives like Mbenda, the principal narrator, he now stands as a form of resistance. In fact, Mbenda is seen here as the Caliban figure who dares to question Prospero's authority over his

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territory. Mbenda does not only resist this European but also resists the values of Europe. He tells the European that:

'We're wasting your time? Perhaps you think that because you carry guns we shall be afraid to ask you for compensation if you come hunting in our forest. Well, I assure you that you won't leave here with these monkeys, unless you do as Chief Mbaka asks' ... I elbowed my way through the assembled crowd and stationed myself in front of the three white men. They looked at me and found they were looking at a stone wall. (7-8).

The image of the stone wall that Mbenda could possibly read in the minds of these white men makes him a veritable force of resistance to the European gaze on Africa and African. First, Mbenda makes us see him as one with an identity. Being the narrator of the story, we see Bebey placing him as an absolutist who falls in the same trap of the negation of the other like the white man. All through the novel, though white influence catches up even with him, Mbenda refuses to give the name of any one man but for Du Bous, the police chief who orders his arrest. Mbenda's continuous use of the 'I' pronoun shows that he is telling the white man that he has a culture and an identity that demands recognition.

The gun, which is born of European culture and civilisation, symbolizes power and dominion. The whites' possession of this deadly weapon stands for their dominion over the whole territory. This control is re-iterated by Chief Mbaka to Moudiki in these words:

'I'm interrupting, Moudiki, because there's one thing you're beginning to forget, with your common sense. You're beginning to forget that it is those people who rule us, you, me all the villagers, just as they rule our forest, our stream, our river, and all the animals and fish that live in them. (2-3).

Chief Mbaka's acceptance of white rule is therefore the approval of colonialism in Africa by an African ruler. Mbenda's refusal to bow to the threats of the gun makes him a true hero and a Caliban figure in the novel. Mbenda's action and that of Chief Mbaka that we have just seen sets the contrast between the two which can be interpreted at two levels. First it reveals Bebey's ironical sweep on the African. Mbaka stands as the custodian of the people and their culture yet cowardly relinquishes his authority to another force that, as he admits with Moudiki, are not their people (2). Bebey uses Mbenda's resistance as a form to correct this leader. That is why Mbenda acknowledges him as their leader when he tells the European that they will not leave until they do as their chief has said. In the second place, both actions could be read as naivety (Mbenda) and wisdom (Chief Mbaka). Mbaka, in his wisdom seems to be avoiding the white man and asking his subjects to learn to live with the white man. At this point, Bebey presents him as one who is open not because he wants but because the situation is above

him. He even accepts the European leadership on him because, it can be inferred from his tone, to him the white man is superior. On the other hand, Mbenda, a youth, challenges this terror of the European without counting the cost. Of course, though he becomes a hero in his village, he is punished by the colonial authority with a fifteen days detention at the New Bell prison. Michel Foucault suggests two reasons why Mbenda needs to be put into prison in his book *Discipline and Punish*. He observes that there are two reasons for this confinement: the “first is that of a pure community and the second that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men” (83).

The difference between the natives and the European as Edward Said puts it are distorted representation that needs to be reviewed. Francis Bebey in *Agatha Moudio's Son* attempts to deconstruct this stereotypical vision of the other at the threshold of African or Cameroon's political independence (this is because the novel was published in 1967 when the new state was just six years old)<sup>1</sup>. In order to do this, Bebey skillfully eliminates the European physical presence as their space occupies a short narrative duration. The rest of the story is centred on Africans and their responses to the effect of the western culture and theirs. In this connection, Bebey's ideology is to stress that colonialism is a fact that the African must face it and learn how to live with.

To better elaborate on his vision, Bebey satirizes the African way of embracing white values. The Fountain is the symbol of white culture. Agatha, another central character in the novel, tells Mbenda that:

We don't need these foreign things. Heaven created the river and the rain water for our pleasure; we can use it as we please. And what's more ... we don't need this fountain, which sows discord among the women where it's installed. (27)

What Agatha says makes us to see a reality in her that the other characters in the novel are unable to see. She is the most detested person in the novel because of her western style. Maa Médi, Mbenda's mother, sees Agatha as not a decent girl because she has been polluted by European ways. She argues when talking with Mbenda that:

If your father were still alive, he would have told you that there are no pure girls any more these days. Get that into your head once and for all: purity that was in my day. Except even today, there are girls who still have some self-respect. They don't all

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<sup>1</sup> I say six years old because I consider the full independence of Cameroon only in 1961 after the independence of Southern Cameroon and its subsequent reunification with French Cameroon. However, it is historically correct to say that the process of independence in Cameroon started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1960.

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behave like Agatha; they don't go and parade in the European quarters waiting to be picked up by the first white man they meet. (13).

Maa Médi, in this excerpt, plays the role of the mother and being the symbol of the traditional African mother in the novel, she represents motherhood. According to Julia Kristeva in "Women's Time", "The arrival of the child, on the other hand, leads the mother into the labyrinth of an experience that, without the child, she would rarely encounter: love for another" (25). Kristeva's words are exemplified in Maa Médi who single handedly brings up her boy child to manhood. Her effort is seen also in the fact that she, at least, wants the child to be educated in the ways of his people. To her, Mbenda is the only person, at the time that makes her feel complete especially when she hands Fanny, Mbenda's first wife, to him.

Another remarkable thing about Maa Médi's words is her nostalgia for what has passed. This nostalgia can never be gained because of colonial culture and its devastating consequences on the African culture. She seems to see young girls of the present time as not being pure as they were when they were young. This comparison, accentuates the idea of the passage of time and the way African values have been modified due to the encroaching influence of Western culture. To Maa Médi, Agatha is bad. She hangs around with white men and she is suspicious about anything white. Maa Médi at this point is absolutist in view because of her intolerance for Agatha.

The above representation of Agatha by Maa Médi seems distorted which illustrates Maa Médi's misconception about the person of Agatha. Agatha's words above build up the paradoxical prowess of Bebey's narrative. Agatha, seems not to appreciate white people's technology and the impact on the African. To her, the fountain is the white man's knife that has come to "put them apart" to paraphrase Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. The contrast she gives between the way the African fetched water and the new way also shows some regrets of a past or an African life style that is fast fading off. Like Maa Médi, Agatha seems to affirm that the fountain and the white man has brought some disastrous effects on their traditional life style.

The narrative programme is, at best, the characters' effort in the narrative to adjust to their new environment. In other words, it is Bebey's vision for the African and his call for the African that is summarized in what King Solomon, one of the characters in the novel, tells Mbenda when he discovers Fanny's pregnancy to turn his eyes to the future (151). This statement is very central to the narrative programme because the past and present are viable tools to negotiate the future but the future that King Solomon preaches here is not only for Mbenda but for all Africans who should look ahead and negotiate the future, taking cognizance of their multicultural state of being. This is what Homi Bhabha calls the 'Third Space'. According to Bhabha:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as integrated, open, expanding codes. (37).

What we learn from Bhabha is that the “Third space” is the destruction of and the elimination of distorted representation built by the self/other binary to the acknowledgement of ambivalence which ascribes tolerance and duality of individuality and identity. What makes Agatha Moudio’s *Son* unique, in its own way, is that almost all the characters in the novel seem not to attain the point of “fixity”. Bebey’s characters, in the narrative, are all caught up with the times and are on the move. The narrative is therefore Bebey’s attempt to destroy the ‘fixed’ and advocate the ‘dual’.

The enmity between King Solomon and Big-Heart is the affair of the whole community. These two characters represent two values: King Solomon, the wise one, is not only an elder but also a custodian of the people’s culture and that is why he commands a lot of respect. The narrator, Mbenda, on the day he has to decide on who to carry out the negotiations for his marriage says that “only King Solomon could inspire me with certain confidence. He, at least, was an honest man. Apart from the time when he genuinely wanted to make up stories” (44). The narrator’s appreciation of King Solomon is somehow objective because he seems to give a fuller picture of the man; his weaknesses and his strengths. However, he is a good man as he stresses. King Solomon’s weakness of creating stories is very useful to plot development and the understanding of Bebey’s symbiotic vision of cultures. This story is at the centre of the rivalry between King Solomon and Big-Heart. Being a firm believer in traditional values and the superstitions thereof, King Solomon creates the story of the frog in his jacket which he thinks is Big-Heart’s. He says that:

‘come on now, Dicky, I tell you it wasn’t a frog of the kind one usually sees, and I tell you it was like somebody we know well, you and I, and you still ask whose it was? Nobody here can afford a magic frog except our brother Big-Heart. (79).

Here, it is obvious that King Solomon, is someone who is superstitious and can say things that are irrational and unfounded. Bebey, in revealing his weakness, seems to satirize and redress aspects of irrational behaviour that characterize the African past.

Big-Heart, his rival, on his part, stands for what is new. He is presented as the only man in the village who worked regularly in the town and who could read and write. “My uncle Big-Heart was the only man in our village who worked regularly in town” (29) and he also has the record of someone who could read and write (77). First, we notice that Mbenda is closed to Big-Heart as a relative. This is because of the possessive pronoun “my” that he uses every time he refers to Uncle Big-Heart. This shows also that his

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narration is, though subjective, but without bias. Mbenda presents Big-Heart as one who has learnt western values and turned to mimic them and thus has no value for what is African. Big-Heart takes upon himself to minimize everybody and acts on his own. One of the things he does is presented to us by Mbenda thus, “this European in our midst who had forgotten to turn white and who sold the land of his fathers without asking the opinion of his fellows” (80). This act by Big-Heart is considered as a serious offence as most African cultures revere land as it remains the cradle of the ancestors. Mbenda's description of him here is couched in black humour full of anger in tone. This shows the extent to which western education has ruined the African. Locha Mateso and Benard Mouralis have argued that western education was a colonial scheme to Africans so as to rule over them. Mateso writes:

L'Africain a accès à une culture spécifique par le canal d'un enseignement 'adapté' étonnamment degargneux de la culture traditionnelle. Cette culture, nous avertit Bernard Mouralis(7), n'est pas européenne. Il est privé des instrument matériels et intellectuels qui lui permettraient de concevoir et d'organiser librement la vie culturelle. (*The African has access to a specific culture through the channel of an education 'adapted' strangely without considering the traditional culture. This culture, as Bernard Mouralis (7), warn us is not European. It restricts all cultural and intellectual material that leads to the conception and free organization of culture.(My translation) (60).*

Mateso and Mouralis's worry are founded as it shows that these Africanists understand that colonial agenda that led to the institution of western imposed education of the African. Maccaulay in 1935 proposed that the curriculum to teach Indians should reflect this proposal:

It is impossible for us with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of person, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect. (qtd in Ashcroft et al. 430).

Big-Heart's action on the land shows that Macaulay's programme for India was applied in all the colonies irrespective of who was the colonizer. Big-Heart is therefore a “neither...nor” because while the Mbendas see him as a black European, the Macaulays see him as a tool to ease their plans to govern. No doubt then that Big-Heart sells the land to a Syrian. A description of these two characters justifies their enmity. All about them is different yet Bebey's vision is to reconcile them. This reconciliation comes when Fanny is to be given to Mbenda officially as wife. The fact that this reconciliation comes at a happy event like that of marriage shows some hope for the future in this community. Big-Heart is the one who takes the first step and he says:



'I too have something to say,' stated my uncle. 'I want to say that all you're doing here is unjust. The Law's marriage is the marriage of us all. You have no right to celebrate it without inviting us. You, Solomon, I didn't intend to speak to you again, because of what you did to me. But it's no use, you remain my brother. And then my conscience is clear. I have something to reproach myself with, but it's not for being a sorcerer with a talking frog. No, I am not a magician. What I reproach myself with is that I took advantage of the fact that I can read and write, to sell to a stranger a piece of land which didn't belong to me more than the rest of you... I ask your pardon for what I did... and take me back among you. (91-92).

These words by Big-Heart reveal Bebey's view of cultural *mélange* and the deconstruction of self. What we see is that Big-Heart realizes that for him to cope in his community, he needs to blend his westernized self with that of his people. His "twoness" is the only force that can make him to completely belong to the community. Another remarkable thing is that for self to accept other, self should be able to go beyond narcissism whether racial or cultural and that is what Big-Heart does. He realizes that the people have a right to be angry with him. He reminds them of his wrong doings and pleads for forgiveness. In response to this, his arch rival, King Solomon says " 'It's true...it's true that this affair of land was at the bottom of all the rest...since you recognize, yourself, that you acted badly toward us. ...brother, stay among us, and let's forget it all" (92). This act of acceptance and negotiating a new beginning as King Solomon says is what the African should crave for with the different cultures that he has learnt.

To drive home his message of acceptance of both cultures, Bebey creates a scene where errors are part and parcel of man. Throughout the novel, no culture, whether western or African is presented as completely good. Talking about marriage, Mbenda comes at the centre. His first marriage is done from a purely African traditional style. When asked how Mbenda will want his marriage to go on, he replied:

'Chief Mbaka, and you, my fathers,' I said, 'I cannot disobey you. I am a child of this village and will follow tradition to the end. I declare before you that I leave to your experience and your wisdom the care of guiding me in life, until the distant day when I shall myself be called to guide others of our children. (44).

The choice of following the voice of his fathers is first of all to please his mother and not to make mistakes. But what we discover is that Fanny, the betrothed wife of Mbenda proves unfaithful and even carries a child that is not Mbenda's. Mbenda uses this as the tool to look for his own wife that he loves and does not follow tradition. He gets married to Agatha not by the values of the tribe and like Fanny; Agatha's son is a white as the people say. Bebey here justifies that no culture is perfect and therefore cultures should interact and not be aggressive as it struggles to be protective as has been the case (Said: 1994 xiv).

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In conclusion, this paper set out to investigate Bebey's view of cultural contact in *Agatha Moudio's Son*. Guided by the views of Paul Gilroy and other theorists like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said, it has been established that Bebey advocates that no culture can live as an island and thus, there is the need for cultures to interact. Bebey's narrative is therefore an attempt to help the African to learn to deal with colonialism and its effect without ignoring the African culture.

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