

Review

## Colonial administration extortion in the African novel

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Received 29 July, 2014; Accepted 10 August, 2015

From all the colonial systems French, British, Belgium, German and Portuguese, the French one was the object of severe criticisms by the pioneers of the African literature of the Sixties through their works. The example of the Nigerienne Mahamadou Halilou Sabbo's *Caprices du Destin* [Destiny's Whims] (1981), the Cameroonian Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1956) and *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956) was edifying. These two writers, although being themselves fruits of the colonial school, succeeded to be different from the non-committed novelists by a straight out denunciation of colonial system practices, ranking from the forced labor to the exercise of power, through the famous perception of taxes. One should not be deluded, in spite of the outside differences that existed between European colonial systems, in the content, they are the same. The French Direct Rule does not envy in anything, the British Indirect Rule, as insofar their fundamental objectives are identical and similar: political domination and economic exploitation of Africans.

**Key words:** Colonial systems, extortions, political domination, economic exploitation.

### INTRODUCTION

The period between 1607 and 1775 was called colonial period. William Bradford, John Winthrop and the theologian Cotton Mather were the first writers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to discuss the history of some colonies. The word colony is used to qualify a group of men who have left their area in order to live and exploit another country. And the colonization is the fact of transforming countries into colonies for social, political and economical exploitation. In 1923, for example, Albert Sarraut "presents colonies as the decisive recourse that will raise France of war miseries" (Ki-Zerbo, 1972: 429). Indeed, if Europeans

had developed and kept the colonial system, it was for a question of pride, socio-political and especially economic interests. It was necessary to find a transient and compensatory structure in view of the economic reconstruction after the two great wars (1914-1918 /1939-1945) and the economic crisis of 1929.

Colonial administrators' extortions brought back by Mahamadou Halilou Sabbo (1981) in their novels have mainly dominated the history pages of the colonization. One would necessary have to understand the perpetrated extortions on colonized people by the different actors of

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the colonial time - both expatriate and local actors. For them, a colonized person, far from being a human, has to be treated as a ferocious wild beast that must be tamed and educated like a circus animal. For the African having lived the bitter experience of this domination, they have especially complained about the inhuman and anti-social behaviour of certain actors of that period.

The objective of this paper is to enumerate a certain number of historical facts that can permit an understanding of some present behaviours, aiming at preventive projection for the future. Why do these two authors have denounced these extortions? What has been the impact of this denunciation?

### Genesis of a colonization

As seen above, the colonial European countries systems have not by no means good for the colonized countries. For that reason they were object of stern critical, by pioneers of the African literature of the sixties, through their works of arts. Exactions committed on the colonized people were flagrant and murderous that some African authors of the moment were not able to pass themselves to denounce. One must not be deluded; in spite of differences of shape that existed between the European colonial systems, in term of content, they are not dissociable.

## THE FRENCH COLONIAL SYSTEM

### The French direct rule

The direct rule is the contrary of the British colonial system called indirect rule or indirect government. In opposition to the French colonial system the Indirect Rule had initiated and applied for the first time in Northern Nigeria, by the Governor Lugard between 1900 and 1906. It made a "tâche d'huile"- spot of oil and had become a doctrine for all. This doctrine sustained and kept the traditional chiefs' power notably in the emirate of Sokoto where the "Sarkin Musulmi" (chief of the Moslems) had representatives in villages that were judging and collecting taxes which a part was only put back to the central government. The white officials counselled and supervised emirs. Elizabeth (1983) affirmed that the Indirect Rule was concentrated on the position of kings or emirs and disregarded government's other traditional institutions: "Indirect Rule Concentrated on the position of the king, and neglected the other traditional institutions of government" (65).

The notion of Indirect Rule permits to better understand The Direct Rule. It was the direct command. En lieu et place des autorités africaines le colon français administrait lui-même ces colonies. At the place of the

African authorities, the French colonist managed directly the colonies. The traditional chiefs were annexed, dismissed, deported, constrained to exile or suicide; that was the case of Sarraounia, the queen of the Aznas of Lougou (Dogon – Doutchi); Dan-Koulodo, chief of Province of Maradi (deported to Fada- Ngourma in Upper-Volta, the present Burkina - Faso); Amadou Kouran-Daga, Sultan of Damagaram or Zinder in Niger and the Almamy Touré of Guinea to only mention these ones.

For Kholer and Taylor (1985), the French administration was highly centralized. The African west colonies that formed a blocks, were managed from Dakar, the capital of French West Africa (AOF- or FWA). Every colony had a Lieutenant - Governor (delegated by the Governor - General based in Dakar) who applied politics as defined by Paris. A similar grouping of colonies formed French Equatorial Africa (AEF- or FEA) administered from Brazzaville. Every colony was straight forward directed by French at all levels. The traditional chiefs were attributed only subordinate roles. This system qualified of *direct rule* is the model *par excellence* of annexation of colonized people. For the French metropolis, colonized people must be subjugated and assimilated to the point to consider the Gallic as being his forebears. Africans were divided in two categories: The first group composed by native citizens of the four townships of Senegal and the others and the second category of Africans, significantly qualified as subjects, had a status of indigents.

French believed that peoples of colonies could not be civilized only if they would be assimilated to the French culture – when they would be converted to good French citizens. But having noted that in the only colony of Senegal there was may assimilated and that all African cultures could not be absorbed by the French culture, French people had created, as it had been said by the Burkina Faso historian, Ki-Zerbo (1972), a rigorous doctrine that preceded World War I (1914- 1918). An African could become French citizen if he knew how to read and to write in French; if he agreed to abandon his common laws-as the right for a man to have more than one wife- while integrating the French army or while working for a French man during ten (10) years.

The other Africans were declared French subjects, having a link with France without having the right to be French citizen. All these laws did not embarrass the colonized African laborious mass. What intrigued it, was the reason for which Halilou Sabbo and Ferdinand Oyono had denounced the colonial dictatorship. It was about the *indigénat* system. This system bestowed to the French administrators the summary jurisdiction power that was felt strongly by colonized people who were compelled to forced works. However, the small elite of assimilated African had the right of French citizenship; and even to occupy stations of responsibility in the metropolitan government of France and its colonies. But let us

examine the French system of *indigénat*.

### The French System of *Indigénat*

The system of *indigénat* was governed by a decree of 1924 which gives to French agents the right to decide on the disciplinary pains (jail, fines) for a set of motives, among which, for example, the abstention to greet the commander or the flag. The administrative internment was sometimes a recruiting means of free labour.

The French administrator could jail a *native* during two weeks without judgment and could stop him again. *Natives* did not have the right to share the same hospitals with the French citizens. There were indigenous clinics that Oyono qualified in his works of art as “crève nègres”- negroes’ mortuary. Another injustice was with the native new recruits who did not have the privilege of wearing boots. Also they rarely reached officer's rank and hardly passed the grade of captain.

The indigenous security forces depended on the first degree court house of the Chief of canton or the chief of subdivision. They belonged to the second-degree of the commander's courthouse. That was why the Governor Van Vollekhoven declared “only the commander is responsible. The indigenous chief is only an instrument, an auxiliary.” These warrant chiefs did not have the right to judge peasants and to discern taxes. Can one believe that the system of *indigénat* was at the basis of the blockage of the native blossoming in the French colonies? How did the physical and psychic or psychological violence permit to annihilate the African societies known for their war strategies? (Case of the Aznas of Lougou - Doutchi in Niger under the reign of the Sarraounia).

### Violence as a consequence of the change

The method of pacification of colonized people by the colonizer is incontestably the strong manner - the physical and psychic violence. This is the reason for which some African writers denounced him through their works. To criticize colonization, Oyono and Halilou have skilfully chosen, selected, organised and presented their characters in order to depict how the colonizer has succeeded to annihilate and annexe natives. It is better known to show evidence of ingenuity in the choice and the order of passage of their characters in order to put to naked the convenient of extinction and annexation of *natives*. To reconstitute negative practices of the colonialism, it is more logical and realistic to pass through the romantic characters as done by the two aforementioned authors. They both used the characters of commanders of circle, guards, “goumiers” and police that were the direct active actors of the system. These

personalities can be categorized as follows:

### Working Ankle of the Colonialism

This work designates characters who had helped the development of colonial system through their functions. We had both good and wicked actors. Colonized people had kept especially in mind the mediocre ones. The Commander of circle is a “whole” in the colonial works. He is “*L’homme orchestre*”- man orchestra, the master Jacques assigned to prepare decisions and to execute them. He must be at the same time judge, finance officer, civil engineer, agent of police and security, chief military, manager of public attics, inspectors of teaching, sanitary agent or recruiter, etc.,... Brief, all in all, he was commending.

This “Jacques in all trades” is described by Mahamadou Halilou (1981) in his novel *Destiny's whims* like a man “sans cœur”- heartless man- that does not have any mercy for *natives*. “The commander's cruelties are immeasurable... Currently interdiction is made to dogs of Garin-Kowa to bark at night, for fear of disturbing the sleep of Mr. and Mrs. Goumaibe” (27). The infringing are castigated publicly to stroke of horsewhip before being jailed for some days without counting the chore of pounding millet and the preparation of other prisoners’ meals. For the commander, “violence is the only language known by Negroes” (28). What is illogical, contradictory and coercive, is that the Commander possessed a gigantic and superb dog - wolf [that] terrorized all the district. From time to time, under people’s eyes, it devoured goats and sheep of security forces. And owners had not the right to complain.

At this level Mahamadou Halilou thinks that the contempt of Goumaibe—Commandant of Circle - for the Black surpasses the intendment and his wife constitutes the absolute limit of negrophobia. The Commander was not the first administrator to forbid the toads to cry at night. Long before the colonization, there were customary chiefs (as Bawa Jangorzo- Gobir Empire) that forbade roosters to sing, donkeys to bawl and the interdiction spread to all house pets. Even to cough was forbidden. That is why Jangorzo was nicknamed *Hana Tari*. Between the interdiction made by the customary chief and the one made by the Commander of circle, there was a difference. The one of the customary chief was generally enacted by the protective mystical powers of the clan. While the colonial administrator made it by pride. In *Destiny's Whims*, the attitude of Mrs. Goumaibe pushed him to make this allegation. Indeed, during the rainy season, she ordered to make toads keep quite because they disrupted her sleep. For that, the Commander asked his guards of circle, to constitute teams in order to forbid the batrachians to produce any noise.

For the commander it is a definitive solution permitting to put an end to croaks of toads, but for villagers it is a cynical act; because they will not be able to water their herds anymore; since the fountain is more than one kilometre long from the villagers' district, in the white area, as notified by Oyono (1956) in *Houseboy*. "The most laborious task was to climb the hill a can of water on the head, with a guard who made natives moved with whip" (173).

Halilou and Oyono have both deplored the collaborative attitude of circle commanders, when it comes to satisfy their women's fantasies. In their novels, these African writers have denounced the behaviour of the white women's officials who have qualified natives as loafers, lazy and macaques.

The two writers have succeeded to draw the reader's attention on the white man and white woman's behaviour, especially in the colonial context. Oyono and Halilou have pointed out and compared these white characters to African actors, mainly African women. Although these women were taking part to the development of their region, they underwent the masculine ascendancy. The reader could deduct that all commanders of circle looked alike and assembled around their wives' caprices.

All the condemnation and disapproval of these actors of the colonization only constituted a *garde-fous* to the African intelligentsia in order not to follow the traces of their white predecessors. After the Commander of circle, I qualified the security forces as the blinded of the colonial system.

### Blinded of the Colonial System

Why did I nickname them blinded of the colonial system? It is because simply they had the charge of defending and protecting a system based on the extinction, the exploitation and the pass-right. These personalities are divided in two groups: Commissioners of police and managers of jail on one hand, guards, *goumiers* and policemen on the other hand. They have all one common denominator, that is torture and oppression. They had only one target, to pacify the colonized native by force only.

### Commissioners of Police and Managers of Prisons

In the colonial system commissioners of police and managers of prisons have a primordial role to play. Far from accomplishing the noble mission of security and defence, they turned into excellent executioners. Halilou and Oyono's present them like real torturers. In *Houseboy* for example, Mr. Moreau the manager of the jail is qualified of *Eléphant blanc*- White elephant- who "teaches how to live to Negroes. Toundi the hero of the

novel has said that Mr. Moreau, helped by a guard, whipped his compatriots. They were naked until the belt... it was terrifying. The nerve of hippopotamus ploughed up their flesh... Mr. Moreau, dishevelled, sleeves of shirt rebuked, persecuted Toundi's poor compatriots with such a violence that he wondered with anguish if they would live long after this beating.

The image of colonial prisons managers and police commissioners has been tarnished by the bad role that they had to play. Characters of *Gosier-d'oiseaux-Throat of Bird* - and *White elephant* in *Houseboy* are edifying. Even the prison took the nickname of the "natives' hospital"- *Negroes mortuary*, because generally suspects sent in jail after the stay to the police were agonizing and died one or two days later. Commissioners of police and managers of prisons represent the symbol of the modern power. The creation of police stations and prisons is a new thing among natives. Traditionally they only know the *dogari* of the customary chief – kind of traditional guards playing the role of republican guard or policeman. The only quick change of the security actors in colonies had disturbed the social climate that reigned within the local communities.

### Guards, *Goumiers* and Police

Direct torturers of natives, they act, without worrying about the wrong deeds caused to their fellow citizen or similar. These security forces are issued from the natives, although belonging to other tribes and clans or to other parts of Africa. If in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, they are nicknamed *Kotma* or Court Messengers, Oyono and Halilou described them like real executioners, as testify the description of the Guard Ndjagouma in *Houseboy*: "Ndjagouma [the big Sara] gave a stroke with his gun on kidney. The Negroes subsided and stood up to subside under another more violent stroke than the first..." (115). Compared to the traditional *dogaris* that they know, colonized people do not want to feel the presence of these new security forces, who are only present to molest them. Indeed, the goodwill of guards is so excessive that they never wait their master's order when they will hurry on the young Africans whom they started to beat with a whip, up to the point where they let them lying down. They hit them with their boots on all the body. They will never stop until they live their victim inanimate or when the commander asked them to stop.

This practice is common to all colonial security forces. It has been denounced by some African writers of sixties like Chinua Achebe (1958), Eza Boto (1954) and Ahmadou Kourouma (1968). Once on duty, guards or policemen misbehave. These *Goumiers* [the commander's nomadic guards] terrorize everybody. Whole villages are depopulated to the announcement of their passage. They sow consternation everywhere, abusing peasants' women

and confiscating people's belongings at their ease. Humiliated villagers are bound to flee the village or to commit suicide. That is the case of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. He has preferred to hang himself rather than to surrender, after decapitating a *kotma*. For guards, *goumiers* and police, the Commander's order is like a sentence that they must apply to the letter. They consider the white man like a "*demi-dieu*". His orders must not endure any carelessness. Toundi the hero in *Houseboy* noted that when "the Commander arrives, the chief of guards howls. All guards and convened to them greet. The chief of guards howls again and everybody continues to do what he is doing before..." (26). Everybody knows the power of the white man. No one can escape to his claws.

In *Destiny's Whims* for example, the guard on order of the Commander, put the rope to the neck of the teacher Kasko and attached the other extremity to his horse to drag the village school teacher from the village of Korzalé to Garin Kowa where resides the Commander. The school teacher has neither drink nor eat, or even take a rest or have the possibility to satisfy all other needs. This act is the proof that a colonized person, no matter his social rank, if he goes against the interests of the metropolis, can be liable of the most atrocious pains.

To sum up, Halilou and Oyono have presented guards, *goumiers* and police as the zealous of the colonial system. They take advantage of their statute of uniform wearer and valets of the Commander to go beyond/ or to abuse their power. When they are on ordered tour in villages, they make themselves more royalist than the king. The guard's language is authoritative. He is much more listened in villages than the Commander of Circle. The horsewhip sent in advance is the symbol of repression. The name of *Kafi-Rana-Zahi* assigned to the guard is an anosmatic of the Hausa language meaning "hotter than the sun". It translates the guard's stern character; he only knows the language of oppression- to beat the Negro to force him think. The horsewhip nicknamed *Sa Maza Goudou*- forced brave men to run- in Hausa language, denotes the guard's spitefulness. Halilou also qualified the horse of the guard as *Kafi Sarki-better than a customary chief*- to point out the extravagance with which the colonial guards have behaved with their counterparts. For the single horse of the guard about ten old women and twenty young boys have been mobilized to take care of it; some people are in charge of the straw, others dealing with the watering and the rest supply millet. These people will work in turn up to the guard's departure; a true chore for a horse. The paradox is that the guard does not represent anything to eyes of the official white. He is only a vulgar auxiliary of the colonial administration assigned to execute all odd tasks without being himself safe from caprices of the Commander's wife or of any other white.

Halilou and Oyono have insisted on the dictatorial

behaviour of these underlings of the colonial administration to denounce them; and on the other hand, to bring other Africans not to follow their steps. If the French colonist mistreats an African one can understand it because he has his reasons. But an African who denigrates his brothers, it is incomprehensible and inadmissible.

## ACCOMPLICES OF THE COLONIAL SYSTEM

### Men of faith

Priests as presented in Oyono's works are the true accomplices of the colonial system. Oyono wonders through the character of Toundi, if in front of the atrocities of the security forces, in presence of "all these priests, pastors, and all these white who want to save our souls and to preach the love of our fellows...who can be silly enough to believe again in all what is said at the church and the temple" (1956: 115).

Natives being tortured unjustly in front of the leaders of the church, do no longer have confidence in this institution; because even if it comes that a Negro succumbs under the effect of oppression, the priest will only say a banal sentence on Sunday: "My dear children, pray for all these prisoners who die without having made the peace with God". It is not proper for a priest to say that prisoners "didn't make the peace with God", since they have been beaten unjustly to death.

In opposition to Oyono who has complained about the indifferent attitude of the colonial priest face to the colonial officials 'extortions on the colonized people, Halilou has evoked the theme of religion through the character of *Malam* - marabout in Hausa language. On contrary to Oyono, he used the character of *Malam* to show that the koranic school has existed in Niger before the colonial school; and also that the colonist have stopped its expansion by torturing *Malam* to death. The white colonizer has killed *Malam* the promoter of this koranic school under the deceptive pretext of incitement to the revolt. Therefore, the death of *Malam* is symbolic of the change; French school has taken the place of the Islamic school. After the men of faith, there is another category of persons who have taken advantages of the colonization. They are the traders.

### Tradesmen

The European tradesmen were also accomplices of the colonial officials. Oyono has denounced in *The Old Man and the Medal*, the interdiction made to natives to distill the low-priced banana and corn alcohol to lead them toward the European hot drinks and red wine that flooded the commercial center. Delinquents were beaten,

amended and jailed. If the European tradesmen accused them of robbery, the Africans were beaten fatally to the great pleasure of these merchants that were sometimes *kura* - Lebanese in Hausa. In *Houseboy*, Oyono has given the example of a Lebanese tradesman that he has described in these terms: "The fat Janopoulous chewing his cigar and non happy to see his so called thieves whipped to death, launched his dog against them. The animal nibbled at their calves and had fun to tear their bottom of trousers" (114).

Consciously or not, these European and Lebanese tradesmen have participated in the extinction of the local production in favor of metropolitan articles. As their name indicated, they are merchants. They are ready to do all what they can, if they know that the action will be fruitful for their trade. In any case, the colonizer and the tradesman have a common denominator - to become rich on the back of colonized people.

During the colonial period, French colonies have served as sources of provision in raw materials to French industries; and also they have been used as commercial counters of goods out-flowing. The example of the old West African French Company (CFAO) has been edifying. To sum up, Christian religious and European or Lebanese tradesmen have in one way or another, directly or indirectly, contributed respectively to the pacification and the exploitation of natives during the colonial period.

## Conclusion

Colonization has passed and it is now part of history. There were blunders, casualness and even considerable human lives, material and financial losses. The balance is very heavy. Some people have qualified colonization as a necessary disease; but it is to note that even the African leaders who have taken the white commanders place, have perpetrated the same exactions and sometimes worse than the white colonizer. That is why Halilou has said in *Destiny's Whims*, even after independences in Africa, only the color of the leaders' skin has changed; but their method of leading people has remained the

same. His statement is true because today in 2015, after 55 years of independence, some African countries are to the embryonic stage. That is to say, they do not develop until now. The outcome of their fiftieth anniversary is practically negative.

The important thing to do between Europeans and Africans, is to be able to forgive each other, so that to maintain cordial relations of friendship and cooperation. If one persists to keep the status quo of relationship metropolis/ colony or developed/ developing countries, it would be difficult to have a worldwide lasting peace. Especially when leaders of certain developed countries have said aloud that in term of cooperation they do not have friends but interests to protect or to preserve. They also affirm that democracy is a luxury for Africa. The world present day socio - politico - economic situation is like an extremely flammable liquid, that, to the least spark, risks to take fire. The different conflicts, riots or attempts perpetrated throughout the world testify it.

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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