

5 A ‘jazzy literature’: Cultural hybridity and multilingualism in Mongo Beti’s *Trop de soleil tue l’amour*

Inger Hesjevoll Schmidt-Melbye

Trop de soleil tue l’amour (1999), written by the Cameroonian Francophone author Mongo Beti (1932–2001), displays an interesting cultural *mélange*. One of the characters from the novel describes Cameroonian society as ‘[un] vrai patchwork d’ethnies et de cultures, tour de Babel linguistique de surcroît’.¹ With over 230 different languages and linguistic and cultural traces left by no less than three European superpowers, Germany, France and Great Britain, Cameroon is in fact one of the most multilingual countries in the world.² The creolized language ‘Camfranglais’ is an illustration of the linguistic diversity that characterizes everyday Cameroonian life. Beti is one of the many African authors who received their education in Europe and profited from their knowledge of colonial languages. That being said, Beti was for all of his life a politically involved author who protested against all kinds of injustice. We can therefore hardly speak of Beti’s literary writing without mentioning that his relationship to the culture and language of the former colonizers in his native country remained complex and problematic during his whole authorship.

The novel in question, built around a crime plot, illustrates modern Cam-

1 A ‘true patchwork of ethnicities and cultures, and even more so, a linguistic tower of Babel’ [my translation]. In Mongo Beti, *Trop de soleil tue l’amour* (Paris: Editions Julliard, 1999), p. 99. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically by page number after quotations in the text.

2 In 1993, Carole de Féral noted 239 different languages in Cameroon. Ten years later, Ambroise Queffélec estimated the number at 248. In John Kristian Sanaker, Karin Holter, and Ingse Skattum, *La francophonie – une introduction critique* (Oslo: Unipub, 2006), p. 208.

eronian society in the wake of colonization. It touches on a number of serious topics such as corruption, torture, alcoholism, sexual abuse, dictatorship, nepotism and espionage. But the solemnity is mediated through a cynical tone, gallows humour and irony, and Beti's literary characters are all somewhat stereotyped. Throughout the novel enigmas appear in the form of strangers and unexplained events. Zam, the protagonist, is a journalist who regularly drowns his sorrows in alcohol and risks his life investigating political injustice. Together with his beloved Bébète, with whom he has a complicated relationship, he unmasks a plot against him. Although the thematics of the novel is clearly an interesting object of study in and of itself, I will be focusing on Beti's narrative style, which is characterized by linguistic creativity and literary innovation. I have chosen as my starting point the following question posed by the Italian Africanist Itala Vivan, which in my opinion is relevant both to studies of hybridity and multiculturalism in general, and to Beti's ideological and aesthetic position in particular:

If hybridity used to be not only negative but an absolute monstrosity, if [...] at present we acknowledge that hybrid is beautiful and hybrid is also good, for it is part of the morality of anti-racism, *what is the aesthetics of all this?*³ [my emphasis]

According to Vivan, hybridity in art has become more and more accepted, even praised, and multicultural authors can be said to have contributed politically to this development. But as she puts it: *What is the aesthetics of all this?* Is there always an ideological motivation to the use of linguistic techniques such as code-switching and various forms of self-translation as well as a literary style characterized by a mix of several cultures' aesthetic conventions? Could this *métissage* benefit from a less political interpretative scope? I will try to sketch some answers to these questions by looking at passages from *Trop de soleil tue l'amour*, passages that demonstrate a few of the many strategies Beti uses to incorporate elements from different cultural contexts.⁴ I will argue that rather

3 Itala Vivan, 'African Thresholds: Hybridity through the Looking-Glass', in *Seuils/Thresholds*, special issue of *Anglophonia: French Journal of English Studies*, ed. by Christiane Fioupou (Toulouse: PUM, 2000), pp. 91–101 (p. 97).

4 For each original citation in French, I offer an English equivalent. I have tried to translate as literally as possible, and to imitate the different language registers used by Beti, but I have had to find a balance between this and representing the meaning of the textual fragments.

than Bakhtinian hybridity-as-fusion, we are dealing with a juxtaposition of elements (a patchwork) where elements join together in an interplay reminiscent of that found in improvised music.

A constant play with French language and culture

Beti's European formation becomes visible in passages where he alludes to writers and aesthetic works from the French canon, or when he employs non-standard forms of the French language such as Old French. But the novel is first and foremost marked by an extensive use of slang or vulgar language, applied in a particularly creative way, such as when one of the characters tell another: 'tu n'es qu'un minable mac merdique qui veut me soutirer du fric'⁵ (p. 103). The rhythm created by the alliteration, the assonance and the end rhyme in French makes the statement sound musical and childish despite its vulgar content. In fact, the novel in question contains children's language as well, although employed by grown characters in patronizing ways, as when Eddie asks Zam 'Tu as bobo?'⁶ (p. 42), or when the narrator alludes to Zam's dysfunctional relationship: '[Bébête] se tenait avec obstination auprès de Zam comme un toutou apeuré'⁷ (p. 57). Beti even makes use of outdated French slang expressions like 'nib de nib'⁸ (pp. 76, 165).

Beti also lets his characters play with French words to emphasize certain aspects of the story. The unpleasant Frenchman Georges Lamotte, who exploits young girls, has probably not been given his name accidentally – among other things, the word *motte* can refer to the female genitalia. Moreover, as 'motte de beurre' means a piece of butter, Lamotte's surname can be said to invoke an unpleasant or greasy side to his character. Thus, when Eddie repeats 'Lamotte, Lamotte, Lamotte-de-beurre. Oui...', the reader can possibly tie the pun to the neocolonial presence in Cameroon, here represented by Lamotte (p. 181). Moreover, Beti creates a meta-level comment on the use of the French language among Cameroonians. In the following passages, it is explicitly indicated that a certain word or expression belongs to a variety of the French language

5 'you're nothing but a pathetic shitty pimp who wants to squeeze out my dough'.

6 'Have you got a boo-boo?'

7 '[Bébête] held stubbornly on to Zam like a scared doggie'.

8 'nothing, nix'.

used in the Cameroonian society where the story takes place: ‘un axiome local selon lequel la bouche qui mange ne parle pas’, and ‘Et avec lui, un peu c’est souvent beaucoup, et même *très beaucoup* comme nous disons ici’⁹ (pp. 198, 155). This explicit linguistic awareness reminds the reader of the fact that even though Beti writes fluently in French, his identity as well as his aesthetic expression is far from culturally homogenous.

Literary crossroads and code-switching

Beti’s literary style is furthermore marked by an interesting mix of European writing conventions and African oral elements, which involves for instance an extensive use of repetition. When a character reports having insisted on something by repeating it, the repetition seems more or less natural even to non-African readers: ‘Il peut beaucoup t’aider, beaucoup, beaucoup, beaucoup. Tu as compris, *j’ai dit* beaucoup, beaucoup, beaucoup. Pourquoi tu ne comprends pas ça, ouais! Salut’¹⁰ (p. 167: my emphasis). At other times, however, this stylistic device attracts more attention when appearing directly in a European language, without any explicit reference to the repetition: ‘C’est ça la fonction publique, papa. C’est tranquille, tranquille, tranquille’¹¹ (p. 178). Another feature of the African oral tradition is the creative use of metaphors and rhetorical figures, often connected to fauna and flora. In the following example, Beti describes the hostility that Zam displays towards his best friend at a certain point in the story by using a simile involving the braying of a donkey – at the same time exploiting the similarity between the French verbs *brailler* and *braire*: ‘Zam lui braillait aussi fort qu’âne qui brait’¹² (p. 227). Beti also uses code-switching between French and his mother tongue Éwondo, examples of which are imported directly and remain untranslated in the French text. The interjections ‘Aka’ or ‘Ékyé’ are particularly recurrent throughout the novel, each comprising several possible significations, depending on the context. By doing this, Beti accentuates the geographic location of the novel.

9 ‘a local idiom saying: the mouth that eats doesn’t talk’; ‘And when it comes to him, a little means often *beaucoup* [a lot], or even *très beaucoup* [more than a lot], as we say here’.

10 ‘He can help you a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot. Do you understand, *I said* a lot, a lot, a lot. Why don’t you understand that, huh! Bye!’ [my emphasis].

11 ‘The public sector is like that, papa. It’s relaxed, relaxed, relaxed’.

12 ‘Zam bawled at him as strongly as a donkey that brays’.

From time to time, footnotes are employed to explain or to translate linguistic or cultural elements supposedly unknown to French readers, i.e. '–Yë mabissi!' translated into French as 'Rien à foutre!'¹³ (p. 14). Furthermore, many other languages make a brief 'guest appearance'. As readers, we are taken aback when words in Spanish, Italian and Latin are interspersed among the French of the novel. At times these words appear with no particular marking, while at other times they are written in italics or even accompanied by a meta-comment: 'Il procédait [...] par des incursions oratoires qui retentissaient comme autant de pronunciamientos', 'Bon sang, mais bien sûr qu'elle avait une double vie *cosi fan tutte*', and 'Il y a la méthode, le *modus operandi* comme on dit en latin'¹⁴ (pp. 196, 175, 55). Although several of these textual examples are established international expressions, they add more color to an already colorful linguistic landscape. The reader's attention is furthermore drawn by references to surprising cultural contexts such as Haiti and Chile, and Beti even lets one of his characters make up a language from Siberia.

However, it is the English language that occupies the second most important position in the novel. In some dialogues, the use of English seems more or less natural, as when the character in question uses a fixed expression: 'Tu es [...] en quelque sorte *the right man at the right place*, tu comprends ça ?'¹⁵ (p. 121). In other passages, however, only one English word is inserted in the French phrase, for no apparent reason other than putting multilingualism on display: 'Because, moi, je veux savoir' and 'Je m'en vais. Bye-bye'¹⁶ (pp. 113, 140). According to the Cameroonian specialist in African literature, Paul Bandia, the elements borrowed from the English language in *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* 'contribute [...] to the heteronomy of the text by undercutting the dominance of the French'.¹⁷ In this light, the apparently accidental use of English words can be said to have both political and aesthetic significance.

13 'I don't give a shit!'

14 'He proceeded [...] with oratorical incursions which resounded like pronunciamientos'; 'God-damit, but of course she led a double life, *cosi fan tutte*'; 'It's the method, the *modus operandi* as they say in Latin'.

15 'You're [...] in a way *the right man at the right place*, do you understand that?'

16 'Because I, I want to know'; 'I'm off. Bye-bye'.

17 Paul F. Bandia, *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2008), p. 158.

For the Cameroonian people, obviously, English is just as much a colonial language as French. Still, it seems to me that the English words and expressions are given a more ‘respectful’ treatment in the novel than the French ones. In other words, while the French language is put to work in many varied ways, the English language is less ‘tampered with’. This is actually rather logical, considering that Beti had a more profound knowledge of French, but also that he probably had a less ambivalent relationship to English. The French colonial administration in Africa was known to impose more extreme assimilation politics than their British counterpart, and there is thus reason to think that for many Cameroonians, there are fewer complications and sensitive associations tied to the English elements than to the French. However, I believe that it is also possible to see the incorporation of elements from different languages in the French phrases as a way of breaking down traditional hierarchies. In contrast to many other African Francophone authors, Beti does not ‘violently’ subvert the French written language.

A trifle with the narrative framework

Beti adopts an ironical approach to his own work and demonstrates, by virtue of his daring literary style, that the traditional conventions associated with the novel as a genre can be stretched quite far to make certain points. On several occasions, for instance, he makes fun of his own characters. One example of this is when Ébénezer, a fraud and a pimp, is introduced in this particularly shrewd way: *l’homme à l’éternelle saharienne de bonne coupe, appelé Ébénezer, un prénom comme on n’en fait plus [...]'*¹⁸ (p. 203). A few pages later, Beti repeats this negative assessment of the name, and in so doing simultaneously alludes to the naming tradition in African discourse. The subtle insertion of meta-comments reveals Beti’s play with different aesthetic traditions: *‘Sitôt dépouillé de son éternelle saharienne de bonne coupe, le sieur Ébénezer, un prénom comme on n’en fait plus, même chez nous [...]'*¹⁹ (p. 209). Names traditionally occupy an important place in the oral tradition in several African

18 ‘this man with the perpetual safari jacket with a nice cut, who was called Ébénezer, a first name never used nowadays [...]’.

19 ‘As soon as he was disposed of his perpetual safari jacket with a nice cut, mister Ébénezer, a first name never used nowadays, even here [...]’.

cultures, and they can be employed either to praise a person or to mock him. By insisting on the archaic character of the name 'Ébénezer', the narrator's comment could therefore be seen as simultaneously humoristic and political. That is, the remark 'même chez nous' could be interpreted as a subtle and ironic comeback from a colonized and traditionally mistreated country, insinuating that Cameroon is undergoing a process of modernization which surpasses even that of France.

In other passages, the ridiculing is even more obvious, as when ironic remarks are placed in footnotes. Once again, Ébénezer is viewed in an unfavorable light, this time when he talks about an alleged encounter between the Cameroonian president and Margaret Thatcher. The following comment appears in the footnote presented by the presumed authorial voice: 'Chronologie approximative, sinon carrément douteuse, Margaret Thatcher ayant abandonné le pouvoir en 1990. Mais qu'attendre d'autre de l'homme à la saharienne de bonne coupe?'²⁰ (p. 194). Some pages later, this happens again: Ébénezer makes another, and this time much more serious, mistake when he talks about a contemporary political development and states that it is happening 'cinq mille ans après Toutankhamon'²¹ (p. 200). The reader is then informed that 'Ce type est décidément brouillé avec la chronologie'.²²

These interventions in the novel lead us to problematize the narrator's position. Does he situate himself within or without the fictional framework? In my opinion, Beti's play with narrative levels corresponds to the Bakhtinian idea of opposing authority, and his exploitation of narrative techniques can be seen not only as a political contribution intended to weaken the continuing presence of imperial powers in post-colonial African countries, but also as a parody of the narrator's superior and omniscient position which was for a long time so dominant in the European literary tradition. Once more, we observe that Beti's authorship is both politically defiant and aesthetically sophisticated.

20 'Approximative chronology, if not straight out dubious, considering that Margaret Thatcher had abandoned power in 1990. But what else could you expect from this man with the perpetual safari jacket with a nice cut?'

21 'five thousand years after Tutankhamun'.

22 'That guy is clearly confused when it comes to chronology'.

A 'jazzy literature'

As we have seen, Beti's narrative style consists of a constant play with all kinds of linguistic, literary and cultural references, as well as letting his writing in a European language be influenced by the African oral tradition. We shall now see that the novel also contains a significant number of references to musical phenomena, especially jazz and blues. Zam is a passionate jazz fan, and he namedrops a lot, showcasing his knowledge of jazz artists and songs: 'j'allais oublier Ella scatant dans un *Take the A train* étourdissant'²³ (p. 8). However, the jazz and blues references are not randomly scattered in order to make the text seem more international and 'educated'. There are several occasions when these elements are truly *appropriated* by the characters, as when, towards the end of the novel, Eddie adapts the song lyrics of 'Back O'Town Blues' to Zam's situation by replacing the pronoun 'I' with 'she': 'comme un vrai bluesman qui pleure sans retenue: – *But she was'nt* [sic] *satisfied, she had to run around*. Tu entends ça? jamais contente!'²⁴ (pp. 158–59). I suggest that the prominent position given to musical elements in the novel could be understood as another possible way of breaking down hierarchies, this time between the genres of literature and music.

Beti's jazzy cultural mélange could be interpreted in terms of the Bakhtinian idea of *intentional hybrids* that 'shock, change, challenge, revitalize or disrupt through deliberate, intended fusions of unlike social languages and cultures'.²⁵ However, rather than thinking in terms of Bakhtin's *fusions*, I believe that the different languages and varied linguistic contexts in Beti's novel ought to be characterized as separate pieces that are merely placed next to each other. Just like the clearly demarcated fabrics in a patchwork, these pieces give the impression of not really being stitched together. Moreover, while it is true that Beti can be said to cast an auto-reflexive light upon translation, interpretation and multilingualism, he actually abstains, in most cases, from translation, and

23 'I almost forgot Ella scatting in an astonishing *Take the A train*'.

24 'like a true bluesman who cries, unrestrained: *But she was'nt* [sic] *satisfied, she had to run around*. Do you hear that? Never happy!'

25 Pnina Werbner, 'Introduction: The dialectics of cultural hybridity', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), pp. 1–26 (p. 5). The wording is Werbner's.

appears rather to indicate that not all words or expressions *can* be translated. In other words, even if Beti can be said to blur the boundaries between cultures, I think we can state that it is a more a question of juxtaposing them than of *fusing* them, because each language and culture gets to keep its distinctive qualities. This brings to mind the Greek post-colonialist Nikos Papastergiadis' reading of Bakhtin:

[T]he 'doubleness' of the hybrid voices is composed *not* through the *integration* of differences but via a series of dialogical counterpoints, each *set against the other*, allowing the language to be both the same and different.²⁶ [my emphasis]

If we follow the idea of a jazzy literature, Beti's narrative style can be seen as an allegory of the improvisation of a jazz band, where the attention is drawn towards one instrument at a time, giving each of them the opportunity to 'shine'.

Conclusion

Beti's literary production thematizes differences between cultures and the tragic results of conflicts and miscommunication, which are presented through a fascinating mix of languages, discourses and various perspectives on art and on human life. Beti writes in a style that could serve to remind us of the infinite possibilities residing in cultural encounters. Even though his hybrid narrative form seems to be triggered initially by political injustice, I suggest that it is possible to put aside this aspect and concentrate on finding out what happens to a literary text when different languages and cultures meet. I think that writers like Beti, whether we prefer to call them cross-cultural, inter-cultural or something else, offer a kind of aesthetic experience that calls into question our traditional perception of art. By offering such a great number of facets and perspectives, Beti can be said rather to adhere to the African oral tradition or to postmodern ideas of literature in the Occident, where the principle of dialogue

²⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, 'Tracing hybridity in theory', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, pp. 257–81 (p. 267).

is valorized, than to older, classical Western works, where the author was seen as the sole creator of the text. It is interesting to note that one of the characters in the novel is described as ‘une espèce de sergent Garcia africain’²⁷ (p. 119). Sergent Garcia is a French artist who defines his own style as ‘salsamuffin’, a true mix of different musical genres. I therefore interpret ‘une espèce de sergent Garcia africain’ as an allusion to an Africanization of something that is already hybridized, a possible metaphor of the cultural mélange in the novel as a whole.

I propose that by means of Beti’s refreshing literary attitude, he invites us to draw inspiration from new contexts, and to oppose the general human inclination to categorize and exclude. I suggest that the aesthetics to be found in such a ‘patchwork of cultures’ precisely resides in the mixing of conventions. In my opinion, this approach offers more of a challenge to the reader than if the author had presented a more harmonious fusion of cultures, for with the classic metaphor of a melting pot would have been more appropriate. Beti instead tears apart our comfort zones, the reader’s familiar sphere, and forces us, if not to fully take in the quality of each cultural context, at least to notice their existence. Throughout *Trop de soleil tue l’amour*, Beti never once conceals the complicated issues of life, nor does he simplify the complexity of a multicultural community. However, despite his sharp political involvement, he manages, in *Trop de soleil tue l’amour*, to depict the multicultural modern world more than *judging* its state.

The novel’s mixing of cultures could either lead to a feeling of ‘unhomeliness’ as described by Freud and the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, or it could create the sensation of possible new homes, filled with yet unexplored ideas. We can become more involved in political questions or we can simply appreciate the hybrid style and enjoy the musical and multicolored literary language, without forgetting that the undertones remain blue in a story such as *Trop de soleil tue l’amour*. I will leave the final words to one of Beti’s own characters: ‘Il n’y a rien à comprendre dans la vie. Il y a le feeling, un point c’est tout. Le feeling, tu sais ce que c’est? C’est comme dans le blues’²⁸ (pp. 41–2).

27 ‘a kind of an African sergent Garcia’.

28 ‘There is nothing to understand in life. It’s all about the feeling, that’s it. The feeling, you know what that is? It’s like the blues’.

Bibliography

- Bandia, Paul F., *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2008).
- Beti, Mongo, *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (Paris: Editions Julliard, 1999).
- Papastergiadis, Nikos, 'Tracing hybridity in theory', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), pp. 257–81.
- Sanaker, John Kristian, Karin Holter, and Ingse Skattum, *La francophonie – une introduction critique* (Oslo: Unipub, 2006).
- Vivan, Itala, 'African thresholds: Hybridity through the looking-glass', in *Seuils/Thresholds*, special issue of *Anglophonia: French Journal of English Studies*, ed. by Christiane Fioupou (Toulouse: PUM, 2000), pp. 91–101.
- Werbner, Pnina, 'Introduction: The dialectics of cultural hybridity', in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, ed. by Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed, 1997), pp. 1–26.

