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Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1956): The Power Struggles between France and West Africa  
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## Introduction

The changing perceptions of Ferdinand Oyono's (1929-2010) *Houseboy* (1956) reveal the shifting relationship between France and her former African colonies. In order to establish the links between the text and the power dynamics between France and West Africa, I will study the use of language in the text and how it reveals the power struggles that took place during the colonial era. This Franco-African bond brings different territories and people together, ties that are not limited by borders.

The French language acted as a symbol of domination in the colonial period when it signified the power of the colonizers, and only a minority of Africans had the opportunity to learn French. Those in power, the French colonizers and later on the African elite, illustrate the dominance of the French language in *Houseboy* through their use of it in a colonial setting, thus showcasing the level of inequality in a colonized space. During the fall of the French empire, the role of the language transformed into one of resistance during the period of decolonization as Africans proficient in the language became revolutionaries and led independence movements in their countries. Toundi is the central character in the novel and he is able to infiltrate the European world in the colony through his use of the French language, demonstrating its power as a means to acquire cultural capital and climb the social ladder. Finally, the French language has become a symbol of collaboration because it unites France with her former African colonies through *la Francophonie* (OIF)—a political organization that unites French-speaking countries and provides economic and political advantages to the members of the community. This organization in its present form is a more modern phenomenon and its implications in the shift in relations between France and her former African colonies will also be explored in the paper.

## Post coloniality in the Twenty-First Century

I am intrigued by an exploration of the relationship between language and power dynamics in the Euro-African sphere as I have grown up in a world where English and Swahili interacted and have influenced who I am today. Language has the power to define the world one lives in. Swahili is a language that is made up of several words from other languages and in essence brings with it the histories and lives of people from many different parts of the world. Swahili consists of words originating from Arabic, Portuguese and other indigenous African languages and with it a complex interconnected world is showcased. Swahili also developed as a language during the slave trade thus carrying with it to this day the weight of those events.<sup>1</sup> I have also learned more European languages and realized that it has changed my positionality in the world, affecting in the process how I view the relationship between Europe and Africa.

As a millennial, one who was not a part of the colonial period or the post-colonial one that followed at that, my views on language and domination meet as well as converge with the likes of prolific philosophers and writers such as Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001), and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938- ). Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique was staunchly anti-colonial and believed that colonialism destroyed African and diasporic identities.<sup>2</sup> Fanon's ideas are aligned with those of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a world-renowned Kenyan writer. Ngugi argues that European languages that were imposed on Africa continue to affect African societies by diminishing the role of indigenous languages.<sup>3</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor, who became the first president of Senegal embodied more of an

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly. E. Coleman, "A History of Swahili," *The Black Scholar*, no 6 (1971): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41163481>

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York City: Grove Press, 2008), 203.

<sup>3</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. (London: Heinemann Educational, 1986), 16.

assimilationist and cooperative stance as he saw interactions between Europe and Africa as necessities, also finding European languages as advantageous to Africans.<sup>4</sup> I agree with Senghor that there are multiple advantages that come with the Euro-African relationship but I am also in agreement with Ngugi and Fanon and their claims on the dark realities of inequality in a colonial relationship and the racial hierarchies that, at instances, this connection represents. These inconsistencies are precisely why a re-evaluation and reformation of the Euro-African sphere are necessary.

With the theme in question, the evolving relationship between France and West Africa, as one who would be identified as Anglophone by birth, I find that my identity as an English-speaking African who also has the ability to speak French informs my opinion on the Franco-African relationship in ways that are different from how some Francophone Africans would go about addressing this question. The distance I have from French colonial history allows me to view and interpret the Franco-African relationship with less emphasis on the politicization of major conflicts during the colonial period so that I can focus on language and power during colonization and the periods that follow.

### A Short History of French West Africa

Before slavery and colonization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, relations between Europe and Africa existed through trade. During the Renaissance period, countries such as modern-day Angola and the Congo had ambassadors in Italy and Portugal.<sup>5</sup> Although the parties

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<sup>4</sup> “Leopold Senghor,” *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/node/922213>, (accessed May. 10, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Kate Lowe, “‘Representing’ Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402-1608,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, no.17 (2007): 101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25593873.pdf>

involved in this interaction were not regarded as equally powerful, the relationship between the European and African continents began to embody ideas of extreme inequality, dominance, and control during the slave trade when skin color became an official marker of social status. The French formed French West Africa (*l'Afrique occidentale française*) in 1895, and it existed until 1960.<sup>6</sup> French West Africa included parts of modern day Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal and Togo.<sup>7</sup>

The main aim of the French occupation of African territories was the civilizing mission (*la mission civilatrice*), which sought to civilize native populations as well as spread the French language and empire. French occupation increased French influence in the world, and France employed assimilation as an instrument of colonialism. Unlike British and German colonization, the occupied could become French citizens if they met the criteria necessary to be considered an *évolué*, one who was thought of as evolved and conversant enough in the French language and mannerisms. Gabrielle Parker in “Francophonie and Universality: The Evolution of Two Intertwined Notions (1961-2006)” highlights that both territories and minds were sites for subjugation, and language was “the instrument of this conquest,” hence the reason why mastery of the French language was an important aspect of French colonialism.<sup>8</sup> Many educated indigenous people became civil servants for the colonial state and thus were apart of uniting colonial and traditional societies. The French National Assembly had deputies from the French colonies. Representatives included Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first African member of the French Academy (*l'académie française*), an institution that safeguards the purity and use of the

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<sup>6</sup> “French in West Africa,” *University of Pennsylvania—African Studies Center*, [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/K-12/French\\_16178.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/K-12/French_16178.html) (accessed Mar. 10, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

French language.<sup>9</sup> The study of the power of language in political strategies related to domination, resistance and collaboration is important because language has the power to unify, divide groups of people, as well as control who has or does not have access to resources.

### The Civilizing Mission, Religion and Colonial Education

Missionaries in Africa had control over most schools during the colonial period. They were responsible for educating the native population and to do so required major support from their respective colonial governments. The link between the church and the colonial service was the strongest in the education sector because in the French colonies, the Catholic Church participated in the spread of the French language and mannerisms in the colonies. The French colonial system of education differs from others that existed at the time and particularly from that of the British. In the French colonies, French was made the language of instruction while in the British colonies, indigenous languages were more widely used in schools. The use of French in schools immediately created a power dynamic whereby portions of the native population that could speak French were considered civilized and thus rendered closer to the French population in the colony.

Education in the French colonies was also highly selective which helped create the groups of African elites that came to have power in the post-independence period. The government run schools were also the ones that chose who could go on to obtain a higher education in France. Those who went to missionary schools learned to speak French and so

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<sup>8</sup> Gabrielle Parker, “Francophonie and Universality: The Evolution of Two Intertwined Notions (1961-2006)” in *Colonial Culture in France Since the Revolution*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), 563, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/j.ctt16gh82z.55.pdf> (accessed Jan. 3, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> “Les Missions,” *L’académie française*, <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/linstitution/les-missions> (accessed Apr. 8, 2018).

acquired the cultural capital necessary to climb the social ladder in the colony. In this way, the French colonial system produced systems of power that continue to exist many years after the end of French rule in Africa. Unlike life in the British colonies where education was used solely as a mechanism to civilize the Africans, assimilation was considered theoretically possible in the French colonies where “the school was a bridge from African to French culture’.”<sup>10</sup> This bridge is what would allow one to be considered a Frenchman, which was not the case in the British colonies. The enforcement of education with French as the language of instruction thus was a fundamental aspect of power dynamics in the colony, showcasing the dominance of language in colonial life. This division between the local population, and the power of the French language over indigenous ones is shown in Ferdinand Oyono’s *Houseboy*.

### *Houseboy* by Ferdinand Oyono

The novel *Houseboy* portrays major conflicts in French-West African colonial life. Ferdinand Oyono published *Houseboy* in 1956 as *Une Vie de boy*. The novel depicts the life of Toundi, a young man from the fictional town of Dangan in what was the French dominated part of what would become Cameroon. Toundi, the central character in the text, writes two diaries, which make up the plot of this novel. Toundi left his home before he could be circumcised, which was a rite of passage in his village. He goes on to work for Father Gilbert and following the priest’s death he begins to work for the commandant of colony. Oyono positions Toundi, as a houseboy, at the center of interaction between the Europeans and Africans (the indigenous population) in the colony.

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<sup>10</sup> Bob. W. White, “Talk about School: Education and the Colonial Project in French and British Africa (1860- 1960), *Comparative Education*, no.1 (1996), 13–16, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3099598>

In the novel, *Oyono* showcases the power dynamics and conflicts present between the two parties. The book uses the intimacy of household relationships to challenge colonial notions of European superiority and African inferiority. Moral lapses in the decisions made by the colonizers include Father Vandermayer's sadistic and racist tendencies as well as the commandant's wife's affair with the prison director, Mr. Moreau. Everyone quickly knows the personal affairs of those in the colony, irrespective of a character's skin color because regardless of the efforts made to separate the colonizers from the colonized, they remain interrelated. The format of a novel offers readers a view of the balkanization of the colony into European and African spheres. *Oyono* effectively shows the impossibility of completely dividing a territory along racial lines as the different groups interact on various levels and a new world is formed through these exchanges. The characters and the relationships in the novel reveal how the colonial process affected both the colonizer and the colonized. Notwithstanding of the efforts made by the colonial officials to separate the different populations in the colonies, language acted as a connector for better or for worse and is precisely what kept these relationships in place years after the end of the colonial era. The continued use of European languages in Africa is one of colonization's most well-known legacies and was central to the power struggles between the colonizers and the colonized, and *Houseboy* shows us why that is so.

### The Power of a Memoir

The novel presents itself as a memoir told in the first-person narrative for majority of the text. The form of the novel as a memoir allows readers to relate to the text and see the realities of

colonial expansion in Africa.<sup>11</sup> Toundi grows up as the novel progresses and readers are able to go on his journey of self-revelation along with him. The novel begins with Toundi being in awe of the European world, but by the end of the text, he becomes disenchanted by its foreignness.<sup>12</sup> The reader's ability to follow a single character's growth and interactions reveal the creation of a new world, one that cannot be entirely described as either European or African. Toundi also writes in a journal just like Father Gilbert, who is a father figure to him.<sup>13</sup> By writing a memoir, Toundi becomes an *évolué* because he adopts what many deemed at the time as a European practice.<sup>14</sup> The character of Toundi is not portrayed necessarily as intelligent or privileged as the foreign-educated African elites were, but rather it is extraordinarily as a servant that he increasingly becomes a part of French society in the colony. Oyono creates a character that reveals the subversive but powerful role of a servant as Toundi's power lies in his ability to see without being seen. Toundi's role reveals that power was continuously contended for and distributed in many different ways as although he was a servant, he also held some sort of power over those above him.

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Saber, "The Conflicts of Cultures in the African Novels of Chinua Achebe, Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Ferdinand Oyono" (PhD diss., Atlanta University, 1976), 27–29, <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3887&context=dissertations>

<sup>12</sup> Joseph-Delphin Lumbila-Toko, "La Demystification de l'homme blanc : le contact entre l'homme noir et l'homme blanc dans *Une Vie de boy* par Ferdinand Oyono," (PhD diss., Linnaeus University, 2012), 20–21, <http://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:752602/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Anne M Menke, " 'Boy!' The Hinge of Colonial Double Talk," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: 1, no. 3 (1991), 15–16, <http://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1262&context=sttcl>

### The Role of a Houseboy in a Colonized Society

Toundi's role as a servant allows him to move between the European and African spheres of the colony somewhat unnoticed. Several academics discuss the division of a colony into two different spheres and how this separation complicated the colonial mission. Frantz Fanon in his book *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) describes the division of a colonial society into two worlds as a key element of colonization.<sup>15</sup> Part of this division was the imposition of a hierarchy where one group was considered superior over another. For the colonizing power to participate in the civilizing mission, interaction between the two groups was necessary but still highly controlled. The two worlds met frequently and over time created a space that could neither be what the colonized area used to be before colonization, or what the colonizers sought to create. This new world prevents the dissemination of power in clear cut ways, because of the constant interactions in the colony, the goals of the colonizers could not always be put in place according to plan. This variation allowed for the power struggles to take place.

Toundi's full name is Joseph Ondua Toundi, which is a symbol of the juxtaposition of the two formerly balkanized worlds. He is a part of the African community in the colony (his past) as much as he is a part of the Christian and French world (his present and what at first appears to be his potential future). Toundi's role as a houseboy and not as a privileged colonial official allows for a distinctive depiction of what colonial life may have been like for an ordinary African serving the colonial powers. The use of the word "boy" in the term houseboy not only depicts the infantilization of the colonized population and their implied inferiority, but it also allows the readers to sympathize with Toundi, a boy who early on in his life is put in the middle of an adult world.

### An Exploration of the Use of Language and Themes in *Houseboy*

The themes explored in the novel include the power of language, the dynamics between the colonized and the colonizers, morality, the successes and the failures of the colonizing mission, religion, stereotypes, exploitation, as well as the formation and the destruction of identities. The use of a central indigenous African character to showcase the personal hardships of living under colonial rule also sets this novel apart from others in the genre because the readers are exposed to a main character that was still relatively new in emerging literature from the African continent.

The language used in the text directly presents the inequality in power between the colonizers and the colonized. The first instance of this disproportion is how the colonial officers and missionaries fail to learn the local language(s) and instead require those around them to speak French. An embodiment of this characteristic in French colonial rule is the position of the *évolués* (the evolved) in the French African colonies. French colonization made the French language the most important tool of communication in the colonized territories while simultaneously diminishing the role of indigenous languages, particularly in the political and administrative spheres.<sup>16</sup> This group of elites had the opportunity to study in France, and their experiences created a space for the decolonization movement and the emergence of African political leaders.

The importance of language and its connections to power are showcased when the commandant calls Toundi “*Monsieur*.”<sup>17</sup> Although it appears as a sign of respect, a kind gesture even, in reality it is a form of tormenting Toundi. The commandant and his wife quickly discourage any of Toundi’s efforts to seek a better life in the future for himself, a life where he is

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<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York City: Grove Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Félix F Germain, *Decolonizing the Republic: African and Caribbean Migrants in Postwar Paris, 1946-1974*, (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 42–43.

more than a houseboy. The commandant referred to Toundi as Sir because of his wide knowledge of all that was going on in the house. Although the French assimilationist approach to colonization made it appear as though it was possible to become a Frenchman, any effort to become one was mocked by the colonial officials and the rest of the European community in the colony. Toundi's torture and death symbolize the complete impossibility for an African to become French, as in the novel his efforts to become a part of the European world lead to his death.<sup>18</sup>

### Shifts in Perceptions of the Novel over Time

Perceptions of the novel have changed over the years and differ depending on the society that views it. Following decolonization in the African continent, Oyono stopped writing, due to his belief that the problems that existed during the colonial era disappeared after independence.<sup>19</sup> However, the problems never really disappeared; they simply reformed themselves and reappeared under different guises.<sup>20</sup> His role in a highly controversial government does not take away from his writing, but it does raise questions about how politics in colonized territories differ to those of their independent successors. In modern commentary surrounding Oyono and the literature he produced, there have been major discussions surrounding the international dimensions of his writing and how it allows many readers to empathize with the colonial struggles of French African colonies through his discussions of the similarities of the

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<sup>17</sup> Ferdinand Oyono, *Houseboy*, (London: Heinemann, 1966), 98.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph-Delphin Lumbila-Toko, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Shola Adenekan, "Ferdinand Oyono Obituary," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/30/cameroon> (accessed Mar. 3, 2018)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

contemporary issues in the text with those around the world.<sup>21</sup> In the novel, Oyono produces both nuanced and flawed characters, preventing the simplified categorization of one group as good and the other as evil. The multiple dimensions of the power of language presented in the novel are displayed by the translation of the diaries from Ewondo to French.<sup>22</sup> The author's decision to have Toundi write his diary in an indigenous language reveals the continued presence and perseverance of the colonized population while under foreign domination.

### The Creation and Evolution of African Identities in the Colonial Era and in the Novel

Resistance to French colonization in Africa and the diaspora was largely at the hands of a foreign-educated indigenous elite. During the years following World War II, an increasing number of both African students and workers arrived in France.<sup>23</sup> An evident division between immigrant workers and students surfaced. African students in Paris had relationships with the French population and formed academic communities that excluded the African migrant workers.<sup>24</sup> Many of these students created a space for African thought through the Negritude movement, eventually becoming highly regarded politicians and academics in Africa and elsewhere. This movement began in the 1930s in Paris and was created by Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon Damas (1912-1978) to celebrate African history and societies as well as those of the diaspora in an attempt to reclaim the narratives that surround conversations about African identity.<sup>25</sup> The creation of the journal *Présence Africaine* by

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<sup>21</sup> Augustine H Assah, "Beyond the Borders of the Locality: Postcolonial and Universal Dimensions to Ferdinand Oyono's Houseboy," *Annales Aequatoria*, no. 26 (2005), 454, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/25836860>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 455.

<sup>23</sup> Félix F Germain, 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 3.

Alioune Diop (1910-1980) demonstrates Paris' role as a space for the development of African and Caribbean Studies, which included academic investigations on the origin and notions on African and Caribbean identities.<sup>26</sup> The Negritude movement and the actions of the African elites were reactions to foreign domination thus depicting the power struggle inherent in colonization.

Analyses of the native characters' agency in the text explore African identities. The ability of Toundi and the rest of the Africans in the novel to interact with one another in their traditional language(s) without the knowledge of the French officers or other members of the European community is a way of forming discourse outside of what is set by those in power.<sup>27</sup> When Toundi and the rest of the Africans in the town discover the affair between the commandant's wife and Mr. Moreau, they begin to call the commandant in Ewondo, " *Ngovina ya ngal a ves zut bisalak*" (the commandant whose wife opens her legs in ditches and in cars).<sup>28</sup> The segregation of the territory into European and African zones is not capable of preventing intimacy and the circulation of knowledge and information in the colony. The continued use of indigenous languages allowed the colonized to maintain personal spaces that had minimal European intervention.

#### The Internationality of the Life of Ferdinand Oyono and the novel, *Houseboy*

*Houseboy* is one of the most important works of literature published during the colonial era because Ferdinand Oyono's background and eventual work as a diplomat and a government

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Graham T Baden, "Regarding Race, Nation, and Our Future: Critical Analysis—Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*," Graham Baden, <https://grahambaden.com/2014/02/17/ferdinand-oyono-houseboy/> (accessed Mar. 3, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Ferdinand Oyono, 98.

official rather than a writer set him apart and influenced how many people have viewed his work over time.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to study Oyono's perspectives on colonialism because he was able to use the colonial system to his own benefit and eventually became an elite in independent Cameroon. As the son of a colonial administrator and a Christian mother, he saw the German and French colonial systems established in Cameroon from the inside, and his educational experiences took him to the best academic institutions in France—the Sorbonne and L'ENA (*l'école nationale d'administration*). Both institutions have produced the majority of political elites in France as well as in West Africa. Oyono went from being a diplomat to a minister in a government led by Paul Biya, a man that has been president of Cameroon for over thirty years.<sup>30</sup> Unlike other works of literature produced in the African continent at the time, *Houseboy* received more attention within the African continent than outside of it, as it was dynamically anti-colonial, exploring the large role racism and the politics of subjugation played in the colonial project.<sup>31</sup> The use of multiple languages is not the only aspect in the novel that demonstrates its internationality.

In Augustine Assah's "Beyond the Borders of the Locality: Postcolonial and Universal Dimensions to Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*," the presence of French, African (from different territories), Greek, American, and Belgian characters reveals the internationality of the civilizing mission and the colonial experience as a whole.<sup>32</sup> Assah goes further by describing the importance of Oyono discussing several contemporary issues facing the world at the time, which included the "Yellow Peril," the Second World War and the state of life in several world

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<sup>29</sup> Shola Adenekan.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine H Assah, "Beyond the Borders of the Locality: Postcolonial and Universal Dimensions to Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy*," 458.

capitals.<sup>33</sup> By mentioning other crises at the time, Oyono connects the problems in Africa to those elsewhere in the world, widening in the process the understanding of his cosmopolitan readers. Academics and literary critics consider Oyono and his work when looking back at literature produced during the colonial era in comparison it to its modern forms now.

Contemporary African writers and intellectuals reminisce about the urgency African writers had at the time to produce works that gave an African voice to the various plights and perils inside and outside the African continent.<sup>34</sup> Oyono was a member of the rising literati circle of elite, well-educated writers of the period. He was a part of a vibrant cohort that included other West African writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Wole Soyinka (1934- ), and Mongo Beti (1932-2001) who used their societal positions to depict colonial life in ways that assured African narratives were shared. The stories told by these authors counteracted the descriptions of colonial life circulated through the publication of classic novels and poems such as the *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *The White Man's Burden* by Rudyard Kipling.<sup>35</sup>

### Racism during the Colonial Period

In *Houseboy*, Oyono showcases the central role racism played during the colonial era. The two main instances of the juxtaposition of racist and colonial theory are the stylistic comparisons made between Toundi and animals. At first, Father Gilbert treats Toundi “like a pet animal,” and then later on Toundi claims that his role as the commandant’s houseboy places him

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 459.

<sup>34</sup> Dominique Mataillet, “Allons enfants du Cameroun,” *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/98257/archives-thematique/allons-enfants-du-cameroun/> (accessed Mar. 02, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Nicolas Michel, “Boniface Mongo-Mboussa: La littérature africaine a perdu de son pouvoir de subversion,” *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/41314/culture/boniface-mongo-mboussa-la-litt-rature-africaine-a-perdu-de-son-pouvoir-de-subversion/> (accessed Mar. 2, 2018).

in a privileged position as, “the dog of the King is the King of dogs.”<sup>36</sup> These comparisons symbolize the inferior role of Africans in the colonial period. Oyono was a “boy” for some missionaries during his own childhood, and so his depiction of Toundi and the treatment he received from those he served comes from a place of understanding. Another key area in the novel that highlights the paternalistic view of the colonizers over the lives of the colonized was the debate that ensues between Salvain, the headmaster at the local colonial school and the members of the European club when Salvain insinuates that life in the colony is not very different in comparison to life back home in France. Members of the European community attack Salvain for making a statement about how the lack of morality in the colony also exists in Paris. He is called a traitor for claiming, “Young African children are just as intelligent as ours.”<sup>37</sup> This scene explicitly reveals the racial hierarchies that existed within the colonies and the ignorance of the colonizers in understanding the people they subjugated.

#### Language Barriers in Colonial Cameroon

Many acknowledge that during the colonial period, the French language became a privileged tool of communication over the indigenous languages found in the colonial territories.<sup>38</sup> The French language acts as a unifier of West African countries but for many this argument does not appear strong enough to withstand other attitudes that showcase French colonization and the imposition of the French language as an act of systemic violence on African history and society. According to Roland Ndille, the aims of the civilizing mission required the

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<sup>36</sup> Ferdinand Oyono, 16 and 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Nicolas Michel.

enforcement of the use of both French and English in Colonial Cameroon.<sup>39</sup> Ndille argues that in order for the colonized to be truly educated and thus civilized, the assumption that dominated was one that made the subjugated believe that “to be educated meant abandoning their indigenous systems of articulation for that of the colonial master.”<sup>40</sup>

In 1960, the Franco-Cameroon treaty guaranteed French remaining the official language of the territory after independence.<sup>41</sup> Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o would argue that the treaty was an instrument the French used to continue maintaining control over their former African colony. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngugi wa Thiong’o asserts that the imposition of foreign languages as languages of instruction and communication in the former European colonies in Africa acted as a cultural bomb to “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves.”<sup>42</sup> Ngugi contends the use of European languages over African languages in Africa; he and Ndille seem to be in agreement that the use of foreign languages stripped the colonized of a sense of themselves and the continent’s history prior to colonization.

### Language Barriers in Contemporary Cameroon

The use of both English and French in Cameroon continue to cause political conflicts and societal tensions. Following Germany’s defeat in World War I and the imposition of both French and British rule in what is now Cameroon, spheres of English and French influence have

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<sup>39</sup> Roland Ndille, “English and French as Official Languages in Cameroon: The Intentionality of Colonial Representations and the Failure of a Cameroon-Centric Identity: 1884 and After,” *European Journal of Language Studies*, 3, no. 2 (2016), 27, <http://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Full-Paper-ENGLISH-AND-FRENCH-AS-OFFICIAL-LANGUAGES-IN-CAMEROON.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 28.

remained, becoming a physical manifestation of the competition between the French and English languages for domination in the African continent. French and English continue to compete for preeminence in Cameroon, but so do indigenous languages such as Ewondo. Around 15% of the population in Cameroon is able to speak English with the majority of the population being French speakers.<sup>43</sup>

International competition for spheres of influence does not begin and end with language; it also affects the business and political realms. Some English speaking Cameroonians have begun a secessionist movement due to what they view as political and economic discrimination against them.<sup>44</sup> The protesting Anglophone Cameroonians even already have a name for what would become their new country, Ambazonia, and demonstrators hoisted a blue and white flag during protests.<sup>45</sup> French speakers hold positions at the highest levels of decision-making and the parallel legal systems; one French and the other British only further complicate the political and legal situation in Cameroon.<sup>46</sup> Both Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians must come together to work for the development of their nation, but the linguistic divides that act as symbols of other points of difference between the two groups are proving to be too difficult for the discovery and implication of a quick and easy resolution. The continued struggles in Cameroon showcase the power of language in affecting different aspects of political and social life.

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<sup>42</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 2.

<sup>43</sup> "English Speakers Protest in Cameroon, Demand Equal Rights Amid Calls for Secession." *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.com/en/english-speakers-protest-in-cameroon-demand-equal-rights-amid-calls-for-secession/a-40649852> (accessed Apr. 2, 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Moki Edwin Kindzeka. "Cameroon Grappling with Barriers Dividing French, English Speaking Regions." *Voice of America*, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cameroon-tensions-francophones-anglophones/3804039.html>, (accessed Apr. 2, 2018).

### The Evolution of the Franco-African Relationship Following Decolonization

The competition for supremacy over the African continent has spanned from the colonial era to the present. From the 1960s to the 1980s, a new relationship developed between France and her former African colonies. Pretexts that include corruption, nepotism and financial gains encircled the connection. The term *Françafrique* describes this toxic affiliation. This negative connotation originally did not illustrate the relationship; Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1905-1993), the first president of the Ivory Coast, coined the term with a more positive visual of the Franco-African relationship in mind but over the years, perceptions on the term changed.<sup>47</sup> The term *Françafrique* evokes ideas of the corruption of some African leaders and the greed of certain French companies, particularly those dealing in oil and other natural resources in Africa.<sup>48</sup>

This period in African history was difficult because these years also saw the implementation of conditionalities issued by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). These international organizations made stipulations limiting the resources available to spend on the creation of efficient education and healthcare systems in the newly independent African countries. In 1970, the Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation (ACTC) formed in Niamey, Niger.<sup>49</sup> This agency safeguarded the cooperation between

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<sup>47</sup> Christophe, Boisbouvier, "Françafrique: Jacques Foccart, le prince des ténèbres," *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/471170/politique/francafrique-jacques-foccart-le-prince-des-tenebres/> (accessed Apr. 8, 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Geneviève Sagno, "Françafrique: La politique africaine de la France de Mitterrand à Macron," *BBC Afrique*. <http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-42144947> (accessed Mar. 10, 2018). There are several people that represent this period including Jean-Christophe Mitterrand (1946- ), the son of French president François Mitterrand (1916-1996), who was in charge of Franco-African relations under his father's presidency (1981-1995), as well as the Bongo political family from Gabon.

<sup>49</sup> "Qu'est-ce que la Francophonie," Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, <https://www.francophonie.org/-Qu-est-ce-que-la-Francophonie-.html> (accessed Mar. 11, 2018).

francophone countries in the world. As the agency was forming, discussions surrounded the motivations for the creation of this group. Some viewed this agency as an advantageous entity that could benefit everyone involved, but there were also others who were suspicious and saw its creation as the possible return of French power to the continent under the form of covert neocolonial guises.<sup>50</sup> The creation of the ACTC and the OIF depict the continued attempts to safeguard the links created between France and her former colonies in the modern world, and as a result the competition for power remains.

### The Betrayal of Pan-Africanism and Democratic Leadership in Africa

During the 1970s and 1980s, with fears of neocolonialism looming around the African continent, many academic analyses of *Houseboy* appeared that praised Oyono's work in the anti-colonial struggle and linked them to post-colonial problems. The questions Oyono asked remained relevant, even more so than when the novel was originally written. This relevance is due to the behaviors of the newly independent states, which mimicked actions of the colonial state. In *Houseboy*, Oyono criticizes the French colonial system but also the African urgency to drop old traditions and assimilate into French society.<sup>51</sup> African society is critiqued through the character of Toundi, whose enchantment with the French and their way of life is alluded to as leading to his death. This critique against African society remained prevalent in the years following independence due to the emergence of African dictators such as, Mobutu Sese Seko from Zaire/ the Democratic Republic of Congo (1930-1997) and Idi Amin Dada from Uganda (1925-2003), who exploited their people and nations for their own self-betterment, a model many had previously deemed as stereotypically colonial in nature.

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<sup>50</sup> Gabrielle Parker, 564-566.

Following the end of the decolonization era, the image of the enemy of African development and self-sustenance began to shift from the foreign colonizer to the corrupt African official. This shift understandably greatly disappointed many because all the optimism that surrounded hopes of independence had relied on the idea that life in the former colonies would improve after the end of colonization, but that was not necessarily always the case. Kenyan academic Ali Mazrui (1933-2014) was an important African scholar in the period following decolonization, but many of his (African) peers disliked him due to his unpopular opinions on the direction African countries should head towards following the end of colonialism. He encouraged greater participation in the international sector and the formation of global partnerships and identities in Africa, which many who remembered the colonial period with disdain viewed as a betrayal of the decolonization movement.<sup>52</sup> Life after colonization was not free of political issues and many thought that continued relationships with former colonizers were necessary.

### Is *Houseboy* a part of French or Francophone Literature?

In 1997, an international organization for French speaking countries, *la Francophonie*, was created to replace the ACTC.<sup>53</sup> This union maintains ties between France and her former colonies, and it arguably safeguards French power in the world. This entity has economic and technical agreements that are advantageous to its members. An argument exists that the neocolonial relationship between France and West Africa endures, but in the twenty-first century

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<sup>51</sup> Ahmed Saber, 69.

<sup>52</sup> James. N Kariuki, "African Scholars Versus Ali Mazrui." *Transition*, no.45 (1974): 60-61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2935027>

<sup>53</sup> "Qu'est-ce que la Francophonie.

with the changes in governments both in France and the African continent, the relationship appears to have a new potentially more positive trajectory.

The emergence of a strong *la Francophonie* allows the celebration of Oyono's work in the francophone world, as there appears to be an increasing appreciation for francophone literature and studies at large. Following decolonization, the French language has become a tool of communication for hundreds of millions of people around the world, most specifically the middle and upper classes from the former French colonies. The production of increasing amounts of post-colonial literature in French has turned French literature into francophone literature. This term encompasses literature from different parts of the world rather than literature strictly produced in the metropole. Regardless of this development, the formation of an encompassing genre did not end the tensions between the metropole and its former colonies.

#### Is *Houseboy* a part of African Literature?

Aside from its characterization as francophone literature, *Houseboy*'s positionality as possibly also African literature continues to be questioned. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o provides the questions, what is African Literature? And can literature written by African writers in European languages be considered as such?<sup>54</sup> He concludes that African literature must be written in African languages and that literature written by an African writer in a European language may be called Euro-African literature.<sup>55</sup> As someone who grew up several decades after the independence movements in Africa and lives a life that is encircled by both European and African languages, I do not agree with some of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's more fervent arguments. I find that he neglects to highlight African agency in using so-called Western

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<sup>54</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 26–28.

education to alleviate ourselves while remaining loyal to our traditional backgrounds. In my opinion, both can be done at the same time. An example of such an argument is when he claims that, “when it (colonialism) can no longer keep its subjects in slavery, transforms them into docile intellectuals patterned with Western literary fashions, which besides, is another subtler form of bastardization.”<sup>56</sup>

I am Tanzanian, which affects the formation of my judgments, as Tanzania was one of the first African countries to have an African language as an official language. I can communicate effectively in both an African and European languages, which sets me apart from a portion of the current generation of young Africans who cannot speak their mother tongues as well as the language of educational instruction in their countries. As much as I disagree with some of the ideas in *Decolonizing the Mind*, I also agree with others as I can see the errors of members of the African elite that Ngugi criticizes in his book. European languages do offer Africans opportunities to be a part of the globalized world, but African languages should not be shamed either. I can attest that at times, those who can speak a foreign language in an African setting do exhibit behavior that shows that they think that their fluency in a European language makes them more sophisticated than those who cannot speak one. This separation between people from the same societies portrays the continued competition between formerly colonized populations, and how those who obtain an elite education continue to hold positions of power in modern society, thus mimicking colonial distributions of power.

Is *Houseboy* a part of the Acknowledgment and Acceptance of Euro-African Literature?

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 25.

In the footnotes of his book, Ngugi mentions the possibility of the existence of Euro-African literature that is neither purely European nor African.<sup>57</sup> This is a satisfying suggestion of how we may categorize things. Rather than the term Afropolitan, that is used to describe people of African descent with linguistic, economic or social connections to Europe, I prefer Euro-African, as something that describes more than just genetic connections because nothing is pure. Cross-continental connections have and continue to be the norm rather than anomalies. My independent major is called Euro-Africana Studies where I have sought to study the implicit connections between Europe and Africa, and in his work, Ngugi wa Thiong'o showcases the necessity of an acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the history between Europe and Africa. Just as Dangan in *Houseboy* becomes an entirely new world following the French colonization of West Africa, Euro-African interactions continuously create new worlds that are much richer than if they were to continue to be considered separate.

#### The Modern Relationship between France and West Africa: From Sarkozy to Macron

The controversy surrounding the relationship between France and West Africa continued throughout the years of former French presidents Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) and François Hollande (2012-2017), but there is now hope for renewed amicable relations between France and the African continent. In 2017, France elected a new president, Emmanuel Macron (1977- ), who has brought with him new ideas surrounding French politics and policymaking, especially in reference to France's relationship with Africa. The new French president has created a

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 33.

commission for African affairs that includes several Africans.<sup>58</sup> The establishment of this group reveals a true change from the years of the Ministry of African Affairs in the French government and the politics of Jacques Foccart (1913-1997, former informal head of *Françafrique* during President de Gaulle's presidency).<sup>59</sup> Foccart has been accused of helping produce the corrupt relationship between France and Africa during the period immediately following decolonization. The French secret service alongside Foccart have been accused of allegedly participating in the assassinations of Thomas Sankara (1949-1987), a revolutionary leader from Burkina Faso, and that of Félix Moumié (1926-1960), Cameroon's now fallen leader.<sup>60</sup> The creation of the commission shows President Macron's openness in including African perspectives in his considerations relating to the relationship between France and Africa as a whole.

President Macron has also already visited several African countries including Benin and Ghana, which indicates as he highlighted during his visit in Ouagadougou, that France's relationship with Africa is important to him as well as to the French nation.<sup>61</sup> The idea that France needs to maintain strong ties with francophone Africa is very persuasive because the continued dominance of the English language in the world continues to pose a threat to French power. Through *la Francophonie*, France is able to secure its reputation as a world power. President Macron is also trying to form stronger relations with Anglophone and Lusophone Africa as a way of increasing French economic activity all over the continent. The safeguarding of the relationship between France and Africa is important because by 2060, it is estimated that

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<sup>58</sup> Mathieu Oliver, "France—Afrique: Emmanuel Macron dévoile son Conseil présidentiel pour l'Afrique," *Jeune Afrique*, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/469187/politique/france-afrique-emmanuel-macron-devoile-son-conseil-presidentiel-pour-lafrique/> (accessed Mar. 11 2018).

<sup>59</sup> Christophe Boisbouvier.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

85% of the French-speaking population will live in Africa.<sup>62</sup> The continued use of French in West Africa shows the great influence French colonialism had in the region.

### Conclusion

The French language functions as a symbol of French domination in Africa, a tool of revolution, and a sign of multilateral collaboration. French has played multiple roles and had the ability to remain relevant over many years, which is a clear expression of its power. Many people think of the relationship between France and West Africa as one filled with a history of abuse, oppression and even death, but this is a part of a much larger history. Contrary to the ideas surrounding domination, the history and the modern reality of cooperation and shared dreams continue to exist. The West Africa that currently exists results from its relationship with France and vice versa. It is advantageous to study the relationship between these parties with nuance because the balkanization of these spaces prevents the efficient study of the several identities which formed from centuries of interaction between the African and European continents.

As time passes some of the themes in the novel adapt to discussions of contemporary problems such as how do we deal with the oppressors who have the same skin color as ours? How do we fight images of the infantilization of Africans without perpetuating them in the process? These questions cannot be answered simply by reading *Houseboy*, but Oyono does provide a context to study and learn from the actions of an older generation. Through the comedy and the tragedy in the text, we can see the weaknesses within the African population, the errors

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<sup>61</sup> “Macron’s Africa Tour: Security, Business and the New French- African Ties?” France24, <http://www.france24.com/en/20171127-macron-first-africa-tour-new-dawn-french-african-ties-ghana-abidjan-ivory-coast-burkina-fas> (accessed Mar. 11, 2018).

of seeking to become somebody else rather than to be oneself. Although the image of the oppressor has shifted from the colonizer, the conditionality maker and now to the corrupt politician, the battle between local and international powers and the shifting dynamics between Europeans and Africans still take place in the modern world.

I have dedicated the past few years of my time as an undergraduate student at Grinnell College studying the relationship between Europe and Africa. A series of connections that are rich and multidimensional. In my studies, I have been able to slowly but steadily discover how the histories of these two formerly balkanized spaces intertwine through their histories, present realities and futures. Once society stops viewing aspects of this relationship as oppositional and can begin to see the formative nature of this bond, more cooperation in several fields will be able to take place and aid the fulfillment of their interlocked destinies.

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<sup>62</sup> Mamadou Kani Konaté, and Richard Marcoux, “Africa and the Francophonie of Tomorrow: An Attempt to Measure the Population of the Francophonie from now to 2060. *African Population Studies*, 25, no.2 (2011): 221, <http://www.bioline.org.br/pdf?ep11024>

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