



Language, Colonial Oppression and Deceit: The Dual Voice as a Vehicle of Resistance in Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*

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ABSTRACT

The essay explores the role of the dual voice as a technique of resistance and the place of language in representing the identity of the dominated in Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*. It is not surprising that much of Africa's creative imagination has dealt with the issue of colonial oppression, domination and deceit, but very little work has been done on how African characters have appropriated the language and dual consciousness to resist colonial oppression. This paper studies how Oyono's protagonist, Meka appropriates the dual voice to resist and subvert deceit. It is through this mode of consciousness that the protagonist then becomes aware of the hypocrisy of colonial administration and its racial bias, and therefore question and resist its policy. The paper adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic consciousness to explore how language has empowered the protagonist to voice out and resist the French colonial administration. Within the Bakhtian model, one can explore all the issues of identity and resistance. The paper concludes that it is through the device of dual consciousness that enables Oyono, to present his protagonist Meka as a voice that rejects the hypocrisy and deceit of colonial administration in *The Old Man and the Medal*.

Keywords: Oyono, dialogic, resistance, deceit, consciousness, Bakhtin, identity

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1956, Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* is regarded by many literary critics as a typical anti-colonial novel against French colonial rule in Africa. At the surface level, the novel is a narrative that deals with the French colonial administration in the former French colonial territory of Cameroon, and the protagonist of the narrative, Meka who gives away his land to the colonial administration and allows his two sons to fight and die for the French against the Germans during the First World War. The narrative centres on an official summon by the representative of the colonial government M. Foucouni to reward him with a medal for his services to the French colonial government in Africa. For Onyemaechi Udumukwu, in *The Novel and Change in Africa*, the medal given to Meka serves as "an allegory of a deeper form of relationship between Africans and the French colonial apparatus" (107).

When Meka answered the summons at the Administrative Centre., the Commandant M. Fouconi, and the Chief Administrator at Doum tells him why he would be given a medal through a translator:

'You have done much to forward the work of France in this country. You have given your lands to the missionaries; you have given your two sons in the war when they found a glorious death (He wiped away an imaginary tear.) You are a friend.... The medal that we are going to give you means you are more than our friend' (19).

Indeed, there are echoes of dialogic interaction and multiple voices and conflicting consciousnesses as they clash in this novel. It is these echoes and voices that reveal the irony in the text. This justifies my theoretical exploration and the application of the dialogic consciousness as a vehicle of resistance.

It is because of divergent echoes and multiple voices that exist in the novel that makes Mikhail Bakhtin to state that “The language of the novel is a system of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (47). Then Nwanyanwu has noted that “The interaction of world views pervades Bakhtin’s entire philosophy and his theory of novelistic discourse” (117). The paper will therefore explore how Oyono has used the dual consciousness to empower his characters’ resistance to colonial deceit, oppression and domination. The idea of interpenetration of voice in human consciousness underscores Rolf Klopfer’s observation that “[W]hen in dialogue one’s own and someone else’s words and language are brought to unfold simultaneously, then this also means that one’s own language or one’s actually ongoing speaking is being talked about” (25). The dual voice is therefore a technique that the powerless can adopt to contradict the instruments of power as is the case in Oyono’s text. Klopfer’s argument gives a hint to the interpenetration of voices in consciousness.

The concept of dialogic structure or multiple consciousnesses has not been fully addressed in the criticism of modern African novel. Noting this obvious critical lapse Alan Palmer in his book *Fictional Minds* noted that an accurate understanding of the “dialogic activity” could enhance our knowledge of the language structure of the novel and how characters use the inner voice to question an oppressive social system (11). In her remark on the expediency of consciousness in narrative fiction, Violeta Sotirova has this to say “[W]riting consciousness in narrative means capturing the minute details of a fictional mind and presenting them so that they retain the quality of verisimilitude with what we experience in our minds” (8).

In order to accomplish our objective in this work, we will start by recalling the views of Mikhail Bakhtin on the process of dialogic consciousness in the novel and to reveal how Oyono’s characters are able to use this technique to mount a counter discourse against colonial oppression, deceit and exploitation.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin states that “... every novel is a dialogized system made up of the images of “languages,” styles and consciousnesses that are concrete and inseparable from language” (49). The implication of this remark is that the novel accommodates multiple and diverse voices of characters whose ideas clash as in real life, and in the process reveal their conflicting worldviews. Therefore the novel, as Bakhtin has noted in *The Dialogic Imagination* is a narrative which holds up the possibility of “the transfers and switches of languages and voices, their dialogic interrelationships” (50).

Commenting on the phenomenon of plural voices in the novel, Bakhtin argues in *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* that “... dialogic relationships can permeate inside the utterance, even inside the individual word, as long as two voices collide within it dialogically...” (184). The interesting echoes of voices which the novel as a narrative captures makes Bakhtin to postulate that “The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context... the word does not forget its own path...” (*Problems*202). Therefore the dialogic system or the study of multiple consciousnesses looks at how conflicting voices and echoes interact in the revelation of diverse ideologies. It is this quality that makes Oyono’s *The Old Man and the Medal* artistically compact, and the protagonist of the novel, Meka adopts his consciousness to assert his humanity in the face of colonial deceit, oppression and exploitation. Oyono’s style penetrates into the depth the of characters’ psyche, the thinking processes of the protagonist, Meka and other African natives at Doum as they confront the reality of deceit, oppression which the French colonial administration and western religion has foisted on the colonised African subjects; as they are compelled to contemplate on their predicament and reflect on their socio-economic conditions as colonized subjects.

Colonial deceit, oppression, resistance and the resisting consciousness in *The Old Man and the Medal*

The narrative structure of the novel captures the atmosphere of deceit and oppression that characterized the French colonial administration in Africa. The novel opens with Meka in excitement preparing to go and answer an official summons from the Commandant in the colonial Administrative Centre. He is angry with his wife, Kelera for sleeping when he has problems: “How can you sleep when your husband has troubles?” (3). The lexical choice ‘troubles’ in the syntactic frame shows that in his consciousness, Meka is already suspicious of the motive behind the white man’s invitation. And as he leaves his house to answer the call, as if to buttress his suspicion, he tells his wife: ““But if I

don't come back go and tell the priest so that he can see about it, he owes me that at least..." (5). With these words, he departs his village of Doum to the European town. As he stops at Mammy Titi's bar on his way to the Administrative centre, Meka's dual consciousness begins to review the white man's summon. When Mammy Titi asks him: "What has happened to you, Meka?" (6). In response to this question, Meka's answer captures the mockery that his consciousness holds the white man: "White man's bloody nonsense" (6). This response indicates that Meka's consciousness is one that indicts colonial deceit. Mammy Titi's place is where the natives go to drink the locally distilled gin called *arki*. The joke at Mammy Titi's place about Meka donating his land to the catholic mission is very instructive. One of the costumers at the shop remarked: "If they'd taken it away from you, that wouldn't have surprised me" (8). In response to this sarcastic remark, Meka replied: "Well it was a bit of that too" (8). This response activates an active consciousness that now understands the hypocrisy and deceitful nature of the French colonial structure and its religion that has dispossessed him of his land. After this remark, an interesting discussion between Mammy Titi and Meka ensued which reveals how Meka's dual consciousness explodes the colonial deceit, as he declares: "It's very foolish what I am going there for," said Meka, shaking his head in protest. The Government...'
 'The Government?' Said Mammy Titi, in astonishment
 'I mean the Commandant...' (8).

Therefore for Meka, the summons by the Commandant is a deceitful one. Through his choice of words Meka mocks and shows his contempt for colonial rule. Colonial oppression is manifested in the colonial regime's attempt to prohibit native gin. The narrative voice captures this harsh policy: "The natives had been forbidden to distil their own cheap alcohol from maize and bananas to drive them on to the European spirits and the red wine that flooded into the commercial centre" (9). As a result of this harsh hypocritical policy: "Arki became 'as scarce as dog's tears'" (9). Agents of the French colonial administration like M. Varini Gullet had conducted raids on the natives to ensure the ban on *arki*, local gin and the catholic priest, Father Vandermyer had used the pulpit to preach against the local gin. In particular: "The missionary lost no time in condemning the drink from the pulpit... He decreed that every Christian who drank it was committing a mortal sin with each mouthful that he swallowed" (9). This religious dimension had put the protagonist, Meka in a very complicated position as the narrative voice informs: "All this had put Meka in a very awkward situation. Meka was often cited as a model Christian in the Catholic Mission at Doum. He had 'given' his land to the priests and now lived in a small wretched hut in the village..." (9). There is a hint here that Meka was deceived into 'given' his land to the church: "He had had the special grace to be the owner of a piece of land, which, one fine morning, had proved pleasing to the eye of the Lord. A white priest had revealed his divine destiny to him. How could he go against the will of the Lord-who-giveth?" (10).

The syntactic structure relayed in Free Indirect Discourse (FID) reveals Meka's dual consciousness that not only rejects, opposes but also mocks the voice of the white priest. The significance of FID here is that it conveys an ironic mode—the sarcasm and mockery with which Meka recalls the white priest's revelation in his consciousness. Joe Bray has noted that narrative point of view "does affect mental representation" (38). He further posits that Free Indirect Discourse articulates a dual consciousness which subsumes the ironic mode (59). There is a tone of irony and mockery in Meka's voice as he recalls the white priest's 'divine message.' He uses this tone to register his opposition to the religious deceit which has been used to dispossess him of his land. The rhetorical structure is used here to reveal the deceitful strategy which has dispossessed him of his land and inheritance. Again, through the technique of dual consciousness, Meka's rejection of the prohibition of the local gin, *arki* emerges:

So when from time to time Meka paid a call on Mammy Titi it was not without a certain tightness about the heart. He, of all people, should not be giving a bad example. But 'the mouth that has sucked never forgets the taste of milk' he said to himself. How then could he forget the African-gin, drops of which had fallen on his tongue at a time before there was hair on his belly and before he had tasted the sweetness of the Lord?' (10).

This is a clear indication that in spite Meka's been coaxed into surrendering to western religion, in his consciousness he is firmly rooted in his African way of life. Therefore, the full implication of Meka's dual consciousness is that neither colonial domination nor Christianity has succeeded in suppressing completely his African religious beliefs. Therefore as Ousmane Sembene has noted in his monograph *Man Is Culture* that despite the overwhelming influence of colonial rule and the Christian religion the African way of life: "...remain...in the minds of the people and in their daily activities" (6).

M. Foucouni, the Chief Administrator at Doum is an oppressor, who sexually exploits African women. The narrative voice conveys this information: "He lived with an African woman whom he used to hide in the storeroom on the ground floor when he had white visitors; the day before the Governor's arrival he sent her back to the location" (46). This shows the exploitative, oppressive and the racist structure of the French colonial policy in Africa.

Everyone remotely related to Meka had come for the medal presentation scheduled on the '14th of July: "There were also all the villagers who had come to honour their fellow countryman" (69). But in his dual conscious mind Meka mocks the medal presentation:

What colour would the medal be that the Chief of the whites was bringing for him? He had often seen medals on the chests of white men but only from a distance. 'So long as it doesn't look like a catechist's medallion,' he thought. 'So long as it doesn't look like Ignatius Obebe's medallion...' (80).

As the medal presentation ceremony begins Meka begins to see the duplicity of the whole enterprise:

"What was this absurd idea... He had been there an hour already, perhaps longer. Still the great Chief of the whites had not come" (85). His irritation at this moment arises from the pain he felt in his toe. In his consciousness, he questions the fraudulent exercise as the French administrators, M. Foucouni, Gullet and other whites cross in his front: "They are wearing pitch helmets... but I have to leave my head baking in the sun like a lizard" (89). This coming from Meka's consciousness is a damning condemnation of the French colonial insensibility to the feelings of the colonial subjects. His consciousness affirms his human dignity. This is what Ousmane Sembene has called "the moral possession of one's identity..." (7).

The apparent dubious medal given to Meka is ironically captured in the comments of one onlooker who remarked: "I think they ought to have covered him in medals. That would have been a bit more like it! To think he has lost his land and his sons just for that..." (94). This shows that African subjects are consciously aware of the hypocrisy and injustice of the French colonial administration and thus use their dual voice to critique and question it. As a result of this comment Kelera, Meka's wife began to cry and loath her husband. Kelera's moment of lamentation reveals the deceit and hypocrisy which the medal represents in her consciousness:

'Is any wife or mother more wretched than I am? I thought I had married a man, a real man... instead I married an arse-full of shit. My children—sold like the Lord who was sold by Judas.... He at least did it for money. The man who lay with me so that I should bear you did not get a good price for the drops of his seed. Both of you together...priced at one medal... (99-100).

The subject matter of Kelera's lamentation centres on the how her husband has been cheated and deceived by the French colonial structure. The reference to the 'Lord' activates her criticism and suspicion of western Catholic religion through which the French colonial administration has dispossessed her husband of their land and children.

At end of the medal presentation the African invitees who were asked to come to the Administrative centre for the celebration were seen discussing among themselves about the white man's deceit and hypocrisy. This mainly relayed in their consciousness:

One speaker followed another.... Everyone was discontented. These white men Always exaggerated. How could they say they were more than brothers to the natives? The High Commissioner and all the French men in Doum had had seats up on the dais along with the Greeks, who were people who kept Africans from getting rich.... How could they talk of friendship if you could only talk to the High Commissioner as if you were addressing a tribunal? These whites were very funny people. They didn't even know how to tell lies properly and yet they expected the Africans to believe them (111).

This discourse shows that the African subjects are aware of the racist basis of the French colonial policy and therefore use their dual consciousness to oppose it. As Sembene has argued “Man’s persistence in the struggle to survive has created myths which have enlightened zones of his consciousness and which enclose him in that nebulous and uncontrolled consciousness” (1). This is a clear indication the African subjects under colonial subjection make use of the dual voice as a vehicle of resistance and that far from being passive observers that Africans actively resisted colonial oppression while affirming their human, dignity and identity.

The events that followed these active suspicions are justified when M. Varini Gullet, the head of European security bashes in to unceremoniously disperse the invited African dignitaries: “The superintendant says the party is over. You’ve had enough drink as it is. Don’t waste time, just go straight out. Otherwise...” (112). With these words they were thrown out and Meka who had fallen asleep was forgotten inside the building.

After his arrest by the Constables, Meka is defiant to the French colonial administration and its institutions. Through an interpreter he said to M. Varini-Gullet pointedly: “I feel very tired, so tired that I have nothing to say to Gullet... He asks me who I am. Tell him I am a very great fool, who yesterday believed in the white man’s friendship...” (134-135). One can therefore argue that the medal presentation has marked Meka’s transformation. At his interrogation, Meka full of defiance reflected aloud before Gullet: “I am not afraid of the white man” (136). These conscious reflections show that Meka has come to an accurate understanding of his humanity.

As if he has finally found liberation in his superstitious African tradition, Meka’s consciousness, as he was returning back from his ordeal of the medal ceremony mocks Western Catholic religion: “All these superstitions had sprung up again in his mind like a great tide sweeping away the years of Christian teaching and practice” (142). This conscious rejection of western Catholicism is sequel upon his discovery of the dubious and hypocritical nature of western religion.

As Meka finally returned to his house, he recounted his horrific experiences to his kinsmen who had gathered to celebrate his medal presentation by the Chief of the whites. They were shocked and grieved at the turn of events which had left Meka psychologically battered. The experience for everyone summed up the deceitful nature of French colonial transaction in Africa: “I’m finished, he whispered, ‘These whites have very nearly killed me.... Even if I died in another hundred years, I should know I died in Gullet’s prison...’” (145). At this point, for Meka going to receive the medal is like a journey into the underworld. He tells his terrified kinsmen: “I’ve just come back from the road that leads to the ghosts...” (146). Thus the medal presentation and its aftermath is a tragic encounter that has awakened in Meka a strong feeling of resistance to colonial rule and revulsion to western Catholic religion. He shouts down his nephew, Mvondo who has come to celebrate the medal gift like the rest with him at his travails to the embarrassment of his listeners. Mvondo had only interjected: ‘They’ve given him back to us alive... Let us praise the Lord!’ (146). This exerted so much revulsion in Meka that he shouted: “You shut your mouth, shut your rotten mouth, roared Meka... Look at me... all of you. You aren’t men at all except that you have got a pair of balls... The whites have just been taking it out of me and killing me, and what do you do?’ (147). These words reveal that Meka had had enough of western religion which for him represents deceit and hypocrisy. Meka’s question here touches on the issue of human dignity and perception of life. It is a question which touches on the question of dignity under colonial rule. Ousmane Sembene has observed that “man is the finality of life” (1). By this he meant that human beings should constantly assert their human dignity, to claim what he calls “the moral possession of one’s identity: one’s self” (7).

In the light of Meka’s resistance to both colonial rule and religion, one can situate this resistant consciousness within the context of Ousmanene Sembene’s observation that: “Asia, Latin America and Africa have been... dominated by Europe with the support of Christian religion. Today’s conflicts find their justification in that domination, and the men of those countries draw from it the strength for their resistance... (2). Thus, Meka’s speech is used to exalt his humanity and his African identity—his rejection of colonial domination and western religion and their deceptive means. Turning to Mvondo he angrily retorted: “You start talking about the Lord. Since you started sprinkling yourself holy water your wrinkles haven’t disappeared...” (147). In fact Meka’s outburst was also a challenge to his African brothers to believe in their values, in their ancestors and traditions.

Meka’s experience at Gullet’s prison reveal the deceitful nature of the French colonial administration and his vehement rejection of Christianity at this moment serve as a damning indictment of the

colonial structure as well as the deceit which western religion symbolizes in his dual consciousness. Recognizing that it is steeped in duplicity he exploded in indignation when the village catechist, Ignatius Obebe shouted in commiseration: “Praise by Yesoo-Christooss” (147). To this Meka responded: “Fuck off out here! Go on, get out of my hut” (147). After this reaction Meka’s audience could only watch in bewilderment and one of them remarked: “You certainly could not say he was his old self again yet. How could a good Christian like he was not want to hear talk about the Lord?” (147). This observation is remarkable considering the verb form ‘was’ which indicates that Meka has being transformed in the present by his recent ordeal of the medal presentation. The irony is that western religion for now is a distant memory consigned to the past, as colonial deceit and its hypocritical devices has reshaped his present perception. It is, in fact, Nti, who captured and summarized the oppression and exploitation of the natives under colonial domination when he asked the subdued audience: “...all of you who are here, is there anything that really belongs to you in the way our ancestors understood the word since the white man came to this country?” (150).

In a way, Nti’s consciousness here aligns with Meka’s understanding of their oppression in the era of French colonial administration. The structure of Nti’s thought also indicts the deceitful nature of the white man’s colonial engagement in Africa. Nti’s consciousness re-enacts the psychological shock that comes with dispossession of one’s inheritance. The white man’s presence and the imposition of western religion constitute a form of traumatic moment which crystallizes the state of spiritual and physical impotence. One of the listeners Essomba diagrammatically illustrates this oppressive structure of French colonial rule when he laments:

‘I don’t know any more where the whites are going...Nothing which we respect has any importance at all in their eyes. Our customs, our stories, our medicine, our men of judgement, all that is just something to do with their houseboy *and* now they set traps for us like rats....’ (150-151).

Essomba’s discourse highlights some of the despicable features of French colonial policy in Africa. This is a condemnation of the zero tolerance of the French colonial policy to the indigenous institutions. Marginalized, oppressed, exploited and deceived, Bomo, one of the natives in Meka’s house uses his discourse to deplore the deceitful and hypocritical inclinations of the French policy that was founded on deceit. He declares: “I say again what cowardice...To lure people into prison by promising them a medal. I think that’s like stabbing someone behind the ear...” (152).

The above speech in many respects underscores the deceit that characterizes colonial rule. Ferdinand Oyono uses the medal of friendship given to Meka as a metaphor to voice the resistant spirit of African subjects caught up in the trap of colonial domination. The feeling of frustration, loss and resentment expressed by Bomo is motivated by Meka’s treatment by M. Varini Gullet and his Constables shortly after the medal presentation. The unhappiness of the African subjects and their traumatic experiences forms the subject of Engamba’s

next discourse: “I wonder what it is exactly these whites want from us...They have taken everything away from Meka, his land...his sons” (164). This idea of dispossession is also alluded to by Paul Nti when he added rather sadly: “what have we got in this country? Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! not even the liberty to refuse their gifts!” (165). The rhetorical structure of Paul Nti’s dual consciousness and the repetition of the negative sets ‘Nothing’ captures the atmosphere of colonial oppression, exploitation and total domination which colonialism represents.

CONCLUSION

The argument in this paper can now be summed up. The premise is that dual consciousness in Oyono’s narrative serves as a vehicle of resistance to colonial oppression and domination. The paper posited that the French colonial rule in former colonized territory of Cameroon was based on oppression and the hypocrisy of western Catholic religion, as it was practised in the colonial territories of Africa. The African subjects actively resisted colonial domination and religious manipulation in their consciousness as shown by Oyono’s protagonist Meka and other characters that used their consciousnesses to question the obnoxious western imperialist rule and its brand of Christianity.

As has been pointed out dialogic consciousness is a psychological technique used in articulating alternative ideologies and perspectives. Therefore Oyono’s *The Old Man and the Medal* is a narrative

that captures the multiple voices and contrasting ideologies that struggle to define the African humanistic perspective. Thus the narrative uses the multiple consciousnesses of the African characters to subvert French colonial rule, comment and offer their resistance to colonial domination and the deceitful nature of western Christian religion. Using the technique of the dual voice Oyono depicts how social and ideological issues correlate in the narrative. Noticeably, it is the echoes of resistance that permeate the consciousness of Oyono's characters through which they interrogate the French colonial rule in Africa and its Christian religion.

Finally the paper observed that as a narrative *The Old Man and the Medal* appropriated the narrative of consciousness in asserting a counter perspective which is not western. The study within its target has revealed the formation of multiple consciousnesses and how characters in the narrative have used this device to initiate action and articulate alternative view points.

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