



**From Quest to Self Discovery – The Return of The
Prodigal Son in Search of His Identity:
A Reflection on Etienne Goyemide's
*Le Silence De La For t***

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ABSTRACT

Etienne Goyémidé is a novelist and playwright who remained unknown, an underdog of some sort, before the publication of his masterpiece titled *Le silence de la forêt* (The silence of the forest) in 1984. He cut his milk teeth, however, the following year, with the publication of his second novel titled *Le dernier survivant de la caravane* (The last survivor of the caravan), a book which treats as its central theme the bitter contact of the aboriginal Central Africans with the Arab world. In his first novel, which constitutes the central plank of this work, the Central African writer captures beautifully, the traditions of the pygmies of the equatorial forest in his country. It is the story of the Babingas, a despised and neglected forest tribe of the Central African Republic. Who are these people? Where are they? What do they do for a living? Why do they remain in the forest and how is their world different from the rest of us? These are some of the questions bothering our minds and which this paper attempts to answer.

Key Words: Babingas, forest tribe, African cosmology, African culture and civilisation, the identity question, self discovery.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been propagated in Western scholarship the myth of White superiority over the Black man as part of the hegemonic discourse to justify the so-called “civilisation mission” to Africa, which has come with it historical injustices against the continent and its people. Centuries of slavery, colonialism and their corollary economic exploitation and systematic dehumanization of the blacks found rationale in the logic of this myth. Therefore, as should be expected, the colonialists, either as Christian crusaders or economic adventurers, painted a false image of the African continent. They presented the most sordid and ignoble aspects of African geography, her history, her people and, of course, her socio-cultural life. For them, Africa was “the unknown land”, “an empty slate” on which anything could be written, “the dove of peace” which wore “the look of innocence”. Thus, as far as the white man was concerned, the black man was a “savage”, “satan”, a “retrograde”, the “barbarian”, whose origins were obscure and who was neither cultured nor civilised. However, in a counter rhetoric to the dehumanization of the African other by the West, Achebe's words offer

consolation:

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. (Achebe 157)

Hitherto, Achebe, who had been a dogged fighter against the patronizing, imperialist posture and intrigues of the West, declared vehemently through one of his characters in *Things fall apart* that the Europeans were the principal cause of Africa's existential disarray:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 141)

In his *Black skin, white masks*, Frantz Fanon underlined the most negative aspects of human personality, which are propagated by the Whites against the Blacks. To a good segment of Western Society, everything about the Black man is negative. This explains why, in Europe, and the West in general, inferiority is often associated with Black, which is also regarded as obscure, vague, shadowy, and therefore not to be taken seriously. In this stereotypical representation, the black is “the wretched of the earth” (as Fanon would put it). The Negro is simply, of “the other side”.

Given this catalogue of encumbrances and missing links of humanity on the part of the Black man as had been strongly entrenched in the Western psyche and scholarship, the Europeans felt justified in their “noble mission” in Africa, to save the Black man from eternal damnation. This mission soon transformed to a domineering mission, having as its motivating objective, economic exploitation, linguistic immersion and socio-cultural assimilation of the Blacks. The result of this enterprise is that, according to Frantz Fanon, the white man's civilisation and European culture imposed on the Blacks “an existential deviation”, to the extent that what we call the African mind today is purely a construction of the White man. The challenge thus presents itself to the African intellectual, to also use literature as a means of expression, to unmask the myth of the White man, correct colonial falsehood in order to restore the dignity of the Black man and his civilisation. This appears to be Etienne Goyémidé's overriding philosophy in his book *Le silence de la forêt* (the silence of the forest), which serves as the launch pad for this study.

Overview of the text

J'en ai marre, marre. Je n'en veux plus. Je ne veux plus de cette vie où il est si difficile d'être honnête, d'être juste ou simplement d'être soi-même, un homme comme les autres...Même les obscurs planteurs de cacao de Bilolo... ont droit à une vie libre et pleinement humaine. (Goyémidé 42)

I am fed up, fed up. I don't want it again. I am no longer comfortable with this life where it is so difficult to be honest, to be fair or to simply be oneself, a man like others...

even the obscure cocoa farmers of Bilolo... have a right to a free and plainly simple human life. (Our translation)

Indeed, this quotation throws up, straight away, the central problem in *Le silence de la forêt*, that of a man, a top bureaucrat, who decides, all of a sudden, to abandon everything – career, money, wealth, properties and social privileges of his “civilised society” to seek refuge in the world of the “savages” of the equatorial forest and begin a new life among them. It is the resolve of a man who wants to be “free” and who wants to be “a man like others”, free from a world of social injustices and artificial barriers.

Nourished by western culture, Etienne Goyémidé recognises that Western civilisation has the risk of alienating the Blacks in a false cultural construction. This is why he returns with nostalgia to his past in his native community. He presents to us in this trail blazer, the image of virgin Africa, Africa in her innocence and uncorrupted by the west, through his depiction of the life of the Babingas, a forest tribe of the Central African Republic.

In *Le silence de la forêt*, we witness the solitary revolt of an individual against his own society of prejudices. Gonaba, the central character in the novel, is a top bureaucrat who has everything going for him. He is a high-flying public functionary in a newly independent African state. Having acquired first class education in top flight schools in France, which qualifies him to replace a European in the position of Inspector of Schools, Gonaba is, by his training, a man alienated from his cultural roots.

As inspector of schools in the west and south-west regions of the newly independent Central African Republic, this man is at the zenith of his career. In the course of his job, one day, at the village of Bilolo, the inspector of schools has a chance meeting with one Manga, a pygmy in the service of Chief Sobélé, chief of Bilolo. Now, the inspector of schools lives in Bangui, the nation's capital city, where the big men and the “civilised people” live, and who despise the pygmies of the Babinga tribe, whom they refer to as “savages”, because of their forest life.

A tête-à-tête between Manga the pygmy and the inspector of schools one day reveals to the latter the crass ignorance of the so-called civilised people about the real world of the Babingas, their sense of existence, as well as their general world view. Curious about discovering the depth of the hidden world of the Babingas, Gonaba, the school inspector, launches himself into an adventure full of tests, trials, twists, turns, temptations, tribulations and challenges, as he begins a new life among the pygmies. A long walk all alone in the equatorial forest; hunger, thirst and fatigue as he runs short of supplies, as well as total self purification, will be some of the obstacles to surmount in this historic adventure of Gonaba's, as he remarks:

Je vais partir non pas comme une espèce de misanthrope, ou comme un ascète désireux de reconquérir les vertus du bon sauvage, non pas parce que je suis déçu dans mon ambition, mais partir pour mûrir, pour vivre d'autres réalités, d'autres habitudes. (Goyémidé 42)

I am leaving, not like a species of a misanthrope, or like an ascetic desirous of rediscovering the virtues of the good savage, not because I have failed in my career, but I am leaving to enable me mature, to live other realities, other ways of life. (Our translation)

The interesting thing about Gonaba's adventure is that he faces all obstacles with stoicism. His reaction, after his encounter with a huge serpent on his way, indicates his studied perseverance and

resolve in the face of adversity:

Cette rencontre avec le “mamba” ne doit donc pas me faire renoncer à mon projet. Je dois continuer. Il faut que j'aille chez les Babingas. J'ai bien résisté aux multiples épreuves drastiques de la circoncision où on nous apprenait à être de vrais hommes, des guerriers, bref des « durs ». (73)

This encounter with the « mamba » should not make me renounce my project. I have to continue. It is necessary that I go to the Babingas. I have surmounted several drastic tests during circumcision where we were taught how to be real men, warriors, in short “hard men”.

Henceforth, the protagonist has to adapt to the socio-cultural conditions of the Babingas, shed himself of his prejudices against the latter and humble himself, if he must rediscover himself. He also needs to acclimatise himself to his new environment and learn quickly how to assimilate the mores of his hosts.

Il serait malsain et somme toute imprudence de transporter ici les comportements de la bas... Il me faut tout de même établir par tous les moyens un contact linguistique avec ces Babingas qui m'ont recueilli et s'occupent si bien de moi. ... Or, ces pygmées avec toutes les tares que leur infligent nos préjugés d'hommes « civilisés », sont un peuple majeur, avec leurs lois propres, leurs us et coutumes, leur entité linguistique. (90)

It would be mischievous and totally impudent of me to carry over those behaviours to here... It would be necessary, nevertheless, to establish by all possible means, a linguistic contact with these Babingas who have welcomed me and who take so much care of me... Now, these pygmies, with all the ills that our prejudices of “civilised” people ty. (Our translation)

inflict on them, are indeed a great people, with their proper laws, customs and usages, their linguistic identity. (Our translation)

The Babinga people demonstrate their hospitality when they welcome the intruder in their midst. Instead of chasing him away, as one would expect, they give him food and drink, build him a hut and even give him a wife (Kaliwossé). With his wife, Gonaba would have two children, who are: Mayo (a boy) and Léma (a girl). The misfortune of the violent death of his wife, after nine years of his sojourn in the world of the pygmies, becomes the reason for Gonaba's eventual return to his native community. He is thus able to discover not only the better of the two worlds, but also the profound depth of his own existence.

Analytical discourse of the text

Ideologically, Etienne Goyémidé partitions the Central African society into two, that is to say, the people of the city on one hand and the inhabitants of the forest on the other. Symbolically, the “civilised” people in the book could be a veiled reference to the White man of the colonial era, who lived a life of deception and played God. The other world, is the world of “primitive” and “savage” men, the Africans, represented in the work by the despised Babingas of the forest. This situation compares favorably with that of “two Tangas...two worlds...two destinies”, that we read about in Eza Boto's *Ville cruelle* (Cruel town).

Again, Gonaba's long solitary walk in the equatorial forest serves to initiate him into his African roots, so as to enable him better appreciate his environment. He is led to surmount obstacles, like the mamba, the huge bush toads, the solitary gorilla, hunger, thirst, fatigue; and finally, he is caught in a trap set for game by the pygmies, in the course of his sojourn in search of the pygmy settlements in the forest. Gonaba's fate in *Le silence de la forêt* reminds one of Clarence, the protagonist in Camara Laye's *Le regard du roi* (The radiance of the king). Clarence, a White man, loses his fortune to gambling. No longer able to cope with life in his mercantilist European society, he is obliged to seek refuge in Africa, seeking the goodwill of an African king for salvation. Clarence is conducted from the north to the south region of the kingdom in search of the elusive king. While waiting for the king, he has to adapt to the socio-cultural conditions of his hosts, suffer humiliation, purge himself of prejudices against the black race, before he becomes pure enough to see “the king of kings” for his salvation.

So who are the Babingas and why do they live in the forest? What

do they do for a living and how is their world different from the rest of us? How are they organised? What are the things that make them tick, as a distinct people? These are some of the questions we hope to answer in the succeeding pages of this work.

Social Organisation

The Babingas live in small communities of about a hundred persons per community, with a distinct territory in the forest, where they establish temporary camps, being itinerant hunters. There is for each territory an administrative hierarchy charged with the resolution of conflicts in the community. This hierarchy is built around the aged in the community:

Pour qui voudrait absolument découvrir, en ce campement de pygmées, une certaine structure politico-administrative, je dirais simplement que la communauté est guidée par une sorte d'assemblée des sages, dont le personnage central pour l'heure se trouve être Kpignawoulossé... le patriarche du village. (Goyémidé 103)

Whoever truly wants to know, in this pygmy settlement, there exist a certain politico-administrative structure. I would say, simply, that the community is guided by a kind of assembly of the wise, whose central figure at the moment is Kpignawoulossé ... the village patriarch. (Our translation)

We can therefore say that this is a form of direct participatory democracy, which requires the active involvement of all adults in the community. It begs comparison with the administration of the Greek city-states of yore, which are considered as the foundation of modern democracies the world over.

One needs to equally note the charismatic role played by the old man named Kpignawoulossé. He is described in the text as “the village patriarch”. He is at the same time physician, seer and extra-ordinary leader who seems to be all knowing and who drives everything that happens in this pygmy community. In effect, the role played by this octogenarian in *Le silence de la forêt* reminds us of the indispensability of Ezeulu, the famous priest of Ulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God*. The thesis by the Europeans that pre-colonial Africans had no formal, central form

of social organisation before their arrival has certainly been deconstructed, in the light of these realities in *Le silence de la forêt*.

Economic life

The economic life of the Babinga communities is built essentially around agriculture. By reason of the fact that they live in the forest, the forest provides them with their means of subsistence, what they eat, what they wear, places of refuge, leisure, everything. The forest also shapes their way of life, as well as their belief system. Because of their environment, the Babingas are great hunters who live from the by-products of hunting, notably meat in abundance, as well as skins of animals, among others. On their part, the Babinga women cultivate fruits and vegetables. To acquire other necessities of life that they don't produce, the Babingas sell what they have to their neighbours through direct exchange of products, a kind of trade by barter. It can thus be assumed, that people's needs in the community are satisfied, at least, as far as physiological needs are concerned.

African solidarity and community life

Traditional African society is an egalitarian society where everyone is a brother to another and where the problems of the individual are shared by the community. In *Le silence de la forêt*, the author presents to us a community of pygmies fashioned in the image of Africa in the days of “innocence”. The people share food, palm wine, utensils, hunting and farming tools, etc. The traditional African hospitality and solidarity is also to be noted in the novel. As soon as Gonaba is brought in unconscious and without a farthing into this Babinga settlement, after having been caught in a trap meant for big game in the forest, he is fed and catered for and his wounds nursed without anybody asking anything from him in return. The villagers take affectionate interest in him and facilitate his quick acclimatisation to his new environment. This hospitality would last for all of nine years that he live among the people. Perhaps, it is only in traditional Africa that a stranger gets this kind of extraordinarily cordial treatment.

African culture

Dances, chants, folk tales, myths, legends, festivals and ceremonies are indeed some of the ways by which people can reveal their true cultural identity to others. The fact that Africa is rich in culture is true and there is no need to overstretch the point. Etienne Goyémidé did not lose sight of this fact in his narration. The cultural activities that we s of

witness in *Le silence de la forêt* remind us that African traditional life is the same, whether it is among the Wolofs of Senegal in West Africa, the Berbers of the north, the Tutsis and Hutus of East Africa, the Zulus of the south, or the pygmies of Central Africa.

Thus, in *Le silence de la forêt*, Goyémidé takes us to the “festival of utensils”, an annual ceremony in which adult Babinga women renew their cooking pots, water pots, eating and drinking mugs, and other kitchen accessories. We listen to Kpignawoloussé's tale which explains why gorillas do not have tails; that of Touka, his in-law, which explains why the pig is always at refuse dumps in search of something; as well as several marriage festivals and riddles.

Traditional marriage

Marriage has always been a living subject. Whether it is celebrated in the church in front of a priest, or in the mosque before an Imam; whether it is contracted according to traditional rites, one thing is certain: marriage runs the world as a veritable social institution for the cultivation of values, procreation and continuity of the human species. In all African societies, ancient or modern, much respect is attached to this social institution. In respect of this subject, Oben (1996) writes:

Dans certaines sociétés africaines par exemple, le succès ou l'échec dans la vie d'un homme est souvent pesé avec le mariage. Un homme qui a tout achevé mais qui n'a pas d'épouse, devient la risée de tout le monde dans la communauté. C'est le même Jugement qu'on donne à une dame non-mariée. (67)

In certain African societies for instance, the success or failure in the life of a man, is often measured by marriage. A man who has attained everything in life but who is not married, is often the laughing stock of the community. The same fate is reserved for an unmarried woman. (Our translation)

According to the marital customs of the Babingas, as we see in *Le silence de la forêt*, a suitor must necessarily elope with the lady he intends to marry. This is because a Babinga lady never says “yes” to her future husband. Gonaba is at crossroads when he thinks that the lady he loves does not reciprocate the love. It takes the intervention of one of the

most respected women of the community who advises him:

Il faut l'enlever. Oui, allez chez ses parents et l'enlever. Nous sommes ainsi, nous autres femmes babingas. C'est aux hommes de prouver à tout le monde et à nous-mêmes qu'ils veulent de nous, qu'ils nous aiment, en nous enlevant par la ruse ou par la force de chez nos parents. (Goyémidé 114)

Elope with her. Yes, go to her parents' house and elope with her. That is how we are, we Babinga women. It is for the men to prove to everybody and to us that they want us, that they love us, by eloping with us, either by hook or by crook, from our parents' houses. (Our translation)

Before “eloping” with a lover, however, a suitor must necessarily construct a hut outside the settlement, if one is a native, or barricade for some time, the entrance to one's present abode that leads to the outside, if one is a stranger. This is a sign that there is a change in one's social status. Having eloped with one's bride, the couple will have to confine themselves indoors for six days, doing nothing other than to eat, drink, sleep, wake up, engage in fond talk, etc. It is a kind of obligatory intimate courtship recommended for an intending couple prior to marriage consummation. On the seventh day, which is the outing ceremony, the marriage is celebrated in a sacred ceremony, in which the whole community participates in feasting, singing and dancing, as well as general rejoicing.

African Traditional Religion

In order to fully understand the theme of religion in *Le silence de la forêt*, a reference to Ahmadou Hampaté Bâ remark on the subject is pertinent:

L'homme noir africain est un croyant né. Il n'a pas attendu aux livres révélés pour acquérir sa conviction de l'existence d'une Force-Puissante, Source des existences et Motrice des actions des êtres. Seulement, pour lui, cette Force n'est pas en dehors des créatures. Elle est en chaque être. Elle lui donne la vie, veille à son développement et éventuellement à sa reproduction. (Bâ 119)

The Black African is born a believer. He does not need to wait for the revealed books to acquire his conviction of the existence of a Powerful Force, Source of all existence and Driver of the actions of beings. Only, for him (the African), this Force does not reside outside of the creatures. It is in every being. It gives it life, watches over its development and eventually, over its regeneration. (Our translation)

Hampaté Bâ's position in the citation above will certainly challenge the jaundiced opinion of the White colonial adventurers, who maintained that pre-colonial Africans had neither culture nor religion. Indeed, in *Le silence de la forêt*, the author leaves us with the irrefutable impression that the Babingas, just like other Africans, are true believers in a Creator-God. They also believe in specific divinities and values which incarnate certain animals that are considered as sacred. What strikes the reader of this novel the most, is the practice of sorcery and fetishism.

Indeed, traditional Africa does not lack sorcerers, fetish priests and marabouts in great quantity. These are people who are believed to be gifted with supernatural powers. They seem to see, hear, know and can discover everything. They are the ones that are often consulted by those who want to know what the future holds for them and, if possible, reverse ill fortunes. Etienne Goyémidé presents in his novel an old sorcerer in the person of the blind Kpignawoulossé, earlier described as the village patriarch. The wandering Gonaba is surprised at the exactitude with which this blind man predicts the circumstances of his arrival at the pygmy community:

C'est comme s'il lisait une biographie dans un livre.
Cet aveugle, qui n'est jamais sorti de sa forêt équatoriale, m'a parlé de mon village, de mes parents, de ma naissance, de mes frères et sœurs, de toutes mes pérégrinations dans le monde, de mon métier. (Goyémidé 104)

It is as if he was reading my biography from a book. This blind man, who has never gone out of his equatorial forest, told me about my village, my parents, my birth, my brothers and sisters, my many travels around the world, my work. (Our translation)

In the same way, the same blind sorcerer predicts the tragedy which will befall Gonaba, bringing to an abrupt end his sojourn in the Babinga community. With clean water in a clay bowl in between his outstretched legs, the village patriarch forewarns Gonaba about the impending misfortune:

Gonaba, depuis hier je vois des choses étranges.
L'eau de la rivière s'est transformée en sang....
Une pluie de sang est tombée sur ta hutte et en a inondé l'intérieur, où tu prenais ton repas avec ton beau-frère Kpouloungnan et tes deux enfants. Ton beau-frère avait du sang jusqu'à la ceinture. Ta femme en était couverte de la tête aux pieds, tandis que tes deux enfants et toi vous marchiez sans en être souillés. Je cherche à comprendre. ...veille sur les tiens et sur toi. (137)

Gonaba, since yesterday I have been seeing strange things. The water in the stream became transformed into blood....It rained blood over your hut and flooded the inside, where you were eating with your brother-in-law Kpouloungnan and your two children. Your in-law was covered with blood up to the waist. Your wife was soaked from the head to her toes, while your two Children and you were not soaked. I've been trying to understand ...watch over yours and yourself. (Our translation)

Indeed, not long after and, true to his predictions, a violent storm rages over the pygmy community, killing Gonaba's pregnant wife inside the family hut instantly. This unfortunate incident brings to an abrupt and pathetic end Gonaba's nine years' sojourn in the pygmy community, as he decided to quit the settlement and reunite with his long abandoned kit and kin at home.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to show that Etienne Goyémidé's *Le silence de la forêt* is a celebration of African civilisation and cultural values. The civilisation of a people, seen through their culture, reveals their true identity. By artistically presenting an anthropological survey of the Babinga forest tribe, the author lays bare the falsehood in it, the

presumptuousness and stereotyping others. This paper is an attempt to analyse this rich novel about Africa and her traditional values, the theme of human condition, the story of a great quest for self-discovery, as well as a philosophical narrative. Our effort is only a foundation upon which future researches on this work could be built.

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