JEAN PLIYA AND BENIN REALITY:

A THEMATIC STUDY

BY

David AKAACHIR

1980

JEAN PLIYA AND BENIN REALITY:

A THEMATIC STUDY

by

David AKAACHIR

Thesis presented to the Department of French, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in French.

U. Idolebi
External Examiner

Micheline Hanin
Internal Examiner

Dr. Y.M. MAIANGWA
Head of Department

This work is dedicated to

my dear wife Wanger.

D.A.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Jean Pliya himself whom despite his heavy literary, academic and administrative responsibilities at the Université Nationale du Bénin still spared his valuable time to give me all the help that I required during my brief stay with him. The interview which he granted me has been particularly useful in the compilation of this study.

I would also like to thank Dr Y.M. Maiangwa, Head of the Department of French, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, for the assistance and encouragement he gave me throughout this work; Dr Unionmwan Edebiri of the University of Lagos for sending me a copy of one of his published articles on Jean Pliya; Mr Marcos Olu Marius for his useful contribution to my study; Dr Micheline Harris for her indefatigable energy and zeal in supervising the work; Mr R.O. Ladipo for his useful advice; Messrs. Moses Chukwu and Emmanuel Mase for the typing of the scripts.

I equally thank all others who have helped me in many other ways for the production of the work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

		PAGE
Acknowledgements		iii
Table of Contents		iv
Introduction		1
CHAPTER ONE:	Tradition as a vital Force	15
CHAPTER TWO:	Attack against Assimilation to the West	40
CHAPTER THREE:	Exposure of Social injustice and other ills	69
CHAPTER FOUR:	The Quest for Happiness	96
CHAPTER FIVE:	Women in Benin Society	118
Conclusion		142
Notes		148
Bibliography		159-165
I.	A Comprehensive List of Jean Pliya's Publications	159
II.	Translations of Jean Pliya's Works	160
III.	Articles on Jean Pliya	161
IV.	General Works	162
Appendix		166-167
	Jean Pliya - Biographical References	166

I N T R O D U C T I O N

In a three-page article titled "Writing in Dahomey today" Irene D'Almeida writes:

> Writing in Dahomey started in the thirties after the first generation of intellectuals completed their studies.[1]

The second generation, according to her, are those people "born in the 30s but whose works appeared after Independence."[2]

Born on July 21, 1931 at Djougou in the north of Benin,[3] Jean Pliya belongs to this second literary generation.[4]

Though a geographer by profession Jean Pliya made his début into literature with "L'Arbre fétiche" which in 1963 won for him the first prize in the competition organized by the Preuves review in Paris. Another short story "La Chambre noire" by a Congolese author Sylvain Bemba also shared the same prize. In the course of our interview with him in July 1978, Jean Pliya himself affirmed how the success of "L'Arbre fétiche" provided him with the necessary stimulus to continue to write:

> Le concours de la nouvelle auquel j'ai participé a été pour moi comme un test pour voir si les principes auxquels j'adhérais en lisant ou bien en étudiant la littérature et le style étaient valables pour me permettre d'écrire correctement. Et quand j'ai eu le prix de la nouvelle je me suis dit: 'Ah! donc, ces principes-là ce n'est pas mal.'[5]

Preuves also published this story in number 159 of their review in 1964.

The publication of "L'Arbre fétiche" was followed by three other stories: "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" - published in number 64 of Afrique in February 1967, "La Voiture rouge" - in number 6 of L'Afrique littéraire et artistique in August 1969, and "Le Gardien de nuit" - in number 75 of Présence Africaine in 1970. In 1971 all the four stories appeared in one collection under the title of L'Arbre fétiche[6] edited by Éditions CLÉ in Yaoundé.

However, Jean Pliya did not confine himself to short stories. In 1966 his first play titled Kondo le requin[7] was published by Les Éditions du Bénin, Cotonou. His second theatrical work La Secrétaire particulière[8] was published in 1970 by the Éditions ABM, Cotonou.

Jean Pliya's second collection of short stories Le Chimpanzé amoureux[9] was published in 1977 by the

Éditions Saint-Paul, Issy les Moulineaux, and comprises: "La Palabre de la dernière chance" which according to the author had been completed since 1971, "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" which had earlier appeared in number 21 of L'Afrique littéraire et artistique in 1972, and "Le Rendez-vous" which won a prize in the literary competition at the Cotonou Trade Fair of 1970. The story was later published in number 81 of Présence Africaine in 1972.

Jean Pliya has also made other publications outside the literary field.[10] We shall be referring to some of them in the course of our study.

When one examines them from the point of view of their settings one discovers that the literary works of Jean Pliya extend over a fairly long period of time. They fall into three categories. One of them is situated in the pre-colonial period; two have their settings during colonialism, and the rest belong to the post-colonial era.

The one remarkable feature of Jean Pliya's works is that they are for the most part based on facts. Their subject-matter ranges from historical reality to the author's personal experiences and observations of the life around him. But in making this point we do not mean to say

that imagination has no place at all in our author's works, for one can hardly imagine a work of art being composed outside the realm of imagination. By following the order of the three categories of setting already pointed out we shall now give some brief background information which we consider as useful in the composition and, in certain cases, the success of Jean Pliya's literary works.

Kondo le requin is a three-act historical drama portraying the courage with which the Abomean King Gbêhanzin fought in his attempt to save his kingdom from falling into the hands of the invading French forces at the close of the nineteenth century. The author who is also a historian has no doubt been fascinated by Gbêhanzin's role in Benin's history as he even refers to the monarch elsewhere as "un personnage unique dans l'histoire."[11] To write his play Jean Pliya himself confesses that he had to make painstaking documentation drawing from both historical records and oral tradition.[12] His great-grandfather who died in 1950 when the author was nineteen was the descendant of the Migan, King Gbêhanzin's Prime Minister. Also, Jean Pliya got some of his information from his own mother-in-law who was the

great-granddaughter of King Gbêhanzin.

Kondo le requin was received with enthusiasm. It won the "Grand Prix de Littérature d'Afrique Noire" in 1967. It also won the second prize in the competition organized by the French Radio Corporation (O.R.T.F.). This historical drama was given much public esteem when it was staged in the Ivory Coast. For the Benin audience the play continued to earn deep appreciation so that eventually it was translated into "Fon", the author's mother-tongue, by a Benin Roman Catholic priest. Jean Pliya recalls how the "Fon" translation of his play was staged with perfection by a non-professional and almost illiterate group of actors:

> Kondo le requin, la première pièce de théâtre que nous avons écrite, a bénéficié d'une remarquable traduction en langue "fon", celle même du peuple d'Abomey où a vécu le Roi résistant Gbêhanzin. Grâce à cela nous avons eu la joie d'entrevoir ce que pourrait être un véritable théâtre populaire en Afrique. Des acteurs choisis dans le peuple des travailleurs: ouvriers, paysans, certains illetrés, d'autres analphabètes, mais parfaitement maîtres de leur langue maternelle et de la culture traditionnelle, ont su rendre avec une vérité extraordinaire le message de ce drame historique. Le public populaire a mieux participé et réagi. Il s'exprimait spontanément, apostrophait les acteurs, pleurait, riait, grinçait des dents.[13]

Outside this dramatic work of national resistance Jean Pliya also delves into his personal experiences. We are in the world of "Le Gardien de nuit" and "Le Chimpanzé amoureux". The author himself has affirmed that both stories have been inspired by his childhood memories.[14] Linking this affirmation with the information we get in reading: "A dix ans, l'homme que j'admirais le plus s'appelait Zannou" (p. 67) in "Le Gardien de nuit" we can situate the story as taking place in 1941. We also know the date of the events in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux": "Nous étions en 1943" (p.9). Despite the fact that the two narratives have their settings in the colonial period the author is however more concerned with portraying the impact of the traditional village life, and it is only in "Le Chimpanze amoureux" that we hear of the villagers' complaints about the White man's exorbitant demands and the tragedy that followed his arbitrary conscription of innocent Africans into his army during the Second World War.

But these childhood experiences however rich they may appear do not form the most important aspect of the Benin author's works. The remaining works which are mainly inspired

by the author's observations of the life around him constitute the bulk of his literary productions. They deal mostly with the social problems of post-colonial Benin. We have already seen how with "L'Arbre fétiche" Jean Pliya made his début into literature. This story recounts the tragedy that befalls Dossou who defies tradition by cutting down a fetish iroko-tree. The author claims that his story has been inspired by what had actually taken place at Abomey. But at the same time he specifies that the interpretation that Dossou's death is a punishment from the gods is a view held by the fetish worshippers.[15]

"L'Homme qui avait tout donné" is another story that is based on an actual happening. Jean Pliya himself affirms that while he was Deputy of Abomey he heard the story of a certain Fiogbé who had been publicly flogged by revenue officials for failing to pay up his taxes promptly.[16] The author builds his story around the character of Fiogbé and uses him to show certain aspects of social injustice in Benin.

"La Voiture rouge" which has a poor and hungry little boy for its hero is not however inspired by Jean Pliya's childhood. But while the author denies being the hero of

the story he affirms at the same time that to make his narrative appear real he had one of his sons in mind while writing it.[17] Yet, it would be wrong to apply the author's claim to the letter for all his children are much better off than the Mensavi we meet in the story. Jean Pliya thus uses this narrative to depict the plight of children of poor parents around him.

The satirical comedy La Secrétaire particulière which attacks corruption and other malpractices in Benin's public service is the sum-total of the observations made by Jean Pliya when he held the post of Director of Cabinet in his country's Ministry of Education.[18] Despite the poignant and virulent nature of its attack, the play has received wide acclamation having been successfully staged in the People's Republic of Benin, Togo, the Ivory Coast, Rhanda, Burundi, Zaïre and Nigeria.

The story titled "Le Rendez-vous" depicts the tragedy of an urban girl who seeks to realize her dreams of material happiness by selling herself to her rich lovers. It appears to have been inspired by the author's careful observation of the Benin female teenagers as they dream of a society in which they would attain self-emancipation.

And, in "La Palabre de la dernière chance" Jean Pliya warns against the dangers of political organizations or regimes adopting repressive measures in pursuance of their objectives. This story also highlights the need for happiness for everybody.

As can be seen Jean Pliya exploits two literary genres: the short story as well as drama. The Benin author has reasons for this. First, as regards the short story genre Jean Pliya is quite convinced of the fact that the art of story-telling has always won tremendous popularity among Africans. It is true that in French-speaking West Africa the professional story-teller known as the "griot" enjoyed a special monopoly in the perpetuation of this art. In Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba for example the Senegalese author Birago Diop claims that it was from the mouth of a certain griot called Amadou Koumba that he had heard the stories which he eventually decided to put down into writing. Bernard Dadié from the Ivory Coast has also exploited the art of story-telling with remarkable success. Though one might argue that both Diop and Dadié write "contes" while Jean Pliya writes "nouvelles" the fact still remains that these

two forms of story-telling can be traced back to the same origin. Moreover, Jean Pliya himself views his "nouvelles" as possessing the basic requirement of a "conte" when he declares:

> Les nouvelles que j'écris j'essaie d'y mettre le suspense comme dans un conte.[19]

Another important reason why Jean Pliya writes short stories is the desire to respond to the readership capacities of his public. Since his works are destined for the African public the Benin author expresses what he considers to be the taste of this public:

> La nouvelle correspond aux besoins du public africain qui n'aime pas lire de longues choses. Et, nous sommes issus en Afrique d'une civilisation du conte et des "short stories"[20]

It is also quite obvious that because of the brevity of its form the message carried in the short story is concise and condense thus producing a poignant impact on the mind of the reader in a manner quite unrivalled by the long rambling account given in a novel. The writer of short stories therefore aims at exploiting this advantage.

As to why Jean Pliya is also a dramatist there is one main reason. He regards drama as the most effective weapon for a writer who considers himself committed to

the defence of a cause:

> Nous nous sommes converti au théâtre lorsque nous avons senti l'appel de la vocation qu' Aimé Césaire assignait à l'écrivain. "Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n'ont pas de bouche. Ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s'affaissent au cachot du désespoir....."[21]

According to Jean Pliya drama should be a reflection of the society. It should aim at expressing the aspirations and problems of the milieu from which it originates. A play that fulfils these objectives can thus be regarded as a living witness of how much its author is committed towards his people. Speaking about <u>La Secrétaire particulière</u> Jean Pliya in an interview with Bernard Ahua declared:

> Lorsque j'ai écrit <u>La Secrétaire particulière</u>, je ne m'engageais pas pour de vagues idées, mais bien pour une cause concrète. J'ai voulu dénoncer au public un défaut de mon milieu que je connais et que j'ai eu le temps d'observer. Mon propos consistait à dire au public: "Attention, voilà comment dans tel ou tel cas, les choses se passent."[22]

Thus, for Jean Pliya drama becomes a corrective weapon.

Elsewhere he expresses the following view:

> Le théâtre offre la possibilité justement de transmettre rapidement un message quand vous croyez que vous avez des choses à dire à vos compatriotes ou à vos contemporains, et des leçons à leur donner, des appels pour qu'ils soient attentifs à telle situation qui ne va pas.[23]

One can therefore see that perhaps the most important reason why Jean Pliya makes use of both drama and the short story genres is that they provide him with the most effective means of communicating with his public.

There already exist some articles on Jean Pliya out of which we have been able to read the following: "Jean Pliya, écrivain dahoméen,"[24] by Alain Ricard, "L'Espérance tacite de Jean Pliya, écrivain dahoméen,"[25] and also "Jean Pliya: Portraitist of Benin Society,"[26] by Unionmwan Edebiri, "Deux écrivains béninois: Richard Dogbeh, Jean Pliya,"[27] by Adrien Huannou, "Jean Pliya: Le Chimpanzé amoureux,"[28] by Moudjib Djibril. Also, in his translation of the collection L'Arbre fétiche into English, Wendy S. Charles gives some useful bibliographical information about Jean Pliya.[29] However, it must be pointed out here that these critics are more concerned at this stage with simply presenting Jean Pliya and his works to the general public. They do not therefore go deep into his subject-matter.

Our intention in this work is to make a fairly detailed study of what we feel are some of the major preoccupations of Jean Pliya in his literary works. The study has been

divided into five chapters with each chapter embodying one particular theme. Chapter One titled "Tradition as a vital Force", will reveal how for many Beninois tradition is an important virile force which cannot be ignored even in a modern nation. In our second chapter, "Attack against Assimilation to the West" we shall try to show how Jean Pliya is critical of those people who having undergone Western influence tend to discard their traditions and become virtually "Westernized". In a way this chapter is to be seen as a complement of chapter One. Chapter Three is "Exposure of social injustice and other ills". This is perhaps the central theme in the works of Jean Pliya, for the Benin author sees himself first and foremost as the spokesman of those who are oppressed. Elsewhere he says:

> Il y a des choses qui sont imposées ou bien qui nuisent aux populations qui ne peuvent pas parler. Et j'ai pensé que moi je peux être leur porte-parole.[30]

Chapter Four treats "The Quest for Happiness". This theme should be seen as an antithesis and complement of the third chapter, for it shows how in place of social injustice Jean Pliya stresses the need for both the individual as well as the community to be happy and suggests active participation

on the part of all to achieve this goal. We have devoted Chapter Five to the study of women. One discovers that there is always a place for women in every one of Jean Pliya's works. We have therefore considered it necessary in this final chapter to treat this under the theme of "Women in Benin Society".

Obviously, one is bound to find other themes in the works of Jean Pliya. We would like to remark here that in making our choice we have limited ourselves to those themes that strike us most in our author's works.

In our presentation of the works in each chapter we shall try as much as possible to follow the chronological order of their publication unless otherwise stated. This is to ensure that there is a consistent approach throughout our study.

CHAPTER I

TRADITION AS A VITAL FORCE

Much of what can be referred to as tradition in the works of Jean Pliya is based upon animism or fetishism. R. Grivot, a one-time French Administrator of the former Dahomey defines animism briefly as "le culte des forces de la nature."[1] The aim of this chapter however is not to discuss how animism functions. We are only concerned with portraying how Jean Pliya views this mode of belief as constituting a formidable force in the average Beninois' interpretation of the world around him. We shall also treat other aspects of tradition.

In "L'Arbre fétiche" the fetish tree is the symbol of tradition. Jean Pliya's choice to write about a fetish tree in his first work is by no means accidental. In reality over the centuries one important aspect of fetishism in Benin has been expressed by the designation of certain trees commonly regarded as being sacred. Many of such trees known as "fetish trees" existed all over the country, and it was even customary to appoint some members of the community to see to the protection of such trees. The French explorer, Édouard Foà even makes mention of a certain fetish tree situated at Whydah:

> L'arbre fétiche de Whydah fut longtemps célèbre dans le royaume; il était considéré comme possédant un pouvoir surnaturel illimité... C'était un baobab immense dont le tronc mesurait à sa base plus de 15 mètres de diamètre... Tous ceux qui voulurent le photographier ou le dessiner d'après nature avaient été arrêtés par les autorités et forcés de payer une forte amende. Il y avait un poste de fétichours habitant tout près de lui et chargés de prendre soin de son emplacement.[2]

Jean Pliya's "L'Arbre fétiche" depicts the crisis that develops between tradition and modernism. This crisis is brought about by colonization since the colonizer brings along with him modern ideas and techniques which are at variance with the traditional pattern of life. The story has its setting at Abomey and one can see that the Benin author is interested in showing the rich cultural past of this ancient city with its fetish cults which modern observers very often tend to ignore. It is these cults which make Abomey quite distinct from a modern city like Cotonou which the author refers to as "une ville sans passé." (p.9)

However, it is important to note that while modernization spearheaded by colonization may have succeeded in various ways in upsetting some aspects of the traditional pattern of life in Abomey the fact still remains that the fetish cults have in spite of all this managed to survive:

> La vie qui anime la cité le long de la rue principale semble donner le ton. Cependant, dans le secret des couvents fétichistes, et dans la tête des vieux alourdie de sagesse, la force mystérieuse, qui soutint l'ardeur des rois demeure vivace. Si vous vous promenez dans les quartiers disséminés dans la verdure, vous remarquerez que les venelles poudreuses ont des détours curieux... Et si, étonné, vous demandez à l'un des nombreux enfants aux yeux intelligents que vous rencontrez la raison de ces coudes brusques, il vous répondra sûrement que la paillote sordide abrite un fétiche et que l'arbre sacré symbolise un ancêtre (p. 8)

The phenomenon just painted by Jean Pliya is common in those places in Benin which still have vestiges of the past. Abomey is unique in the sense that it is being portrayed in the story as a receptacle of tradition and modernism, a meeting point of the old and new. At the same time, Jean Pliya is very much concerned with highlighting the traditional aspect of a city which in spite of its modern outlook appears by and large as a repository of tradition such as one finds in the villages. The author is interested in pointing out the animistic aspect of Abomey which would normally attract the attention of a foreign visitor. That such animistic cults form an important element of the Beninois' beliefs and practices which do not escape the notice of a foreigner has been expressed by two Benin historians, Adolphe Akindélé and Cyrille Aguessy as follows:

> La religion primitive des peuplades du Dahomey est le culte des "Vodoun", appelé communément fétichisme ou animisme. L'étranger qui traverse un village du Dahomey est frappé par le nombre des bosquets sacrés, petits groupes de paillottes assis à l'ombre des cases de chefs... Ces objets divers indiquent l'habitat des divinités adorées par les habitants: les "Vodoun."[3]

The balance between tradition and modernism in "L'Arbre fétiche" is upset with the construction of the new road. Paul Lanta the municipal works engineer appears as an agent of modern change. In only one sentence Jean Pliya gives the true portrait of this young man's character:

> Moderne jusqu'au bout des ongles, il pensait que la jeunesse actuelle ne devait s'incliner devant aucun obstacle. (p.9)

Having been brought up entirely in the modern city of Cotonou Paul Lanta is virtually cut off from the traditional beliefs of the country folk. In this way he is quite distinct from Mèhou the old prisoner, native of Abomey, a city which as we have already seen still maintains strong links with Benin's past traditional values.

Imbued with an exaggerated desire for modernism Paul Lanta insists that the fetish iroko-tree be cut down in order to build a modern city. He therefore regards fetishism as an out-moded form of superstition which must be discarded in a modern age:

> En plein xx^{e} siècle, nous ne pouvons plus croire aux fétiches. Sans quoi, malgré notre indépendance, nous n'édifierons jamais une nation moderne et civilisée. Nous devons abattre cet arbre pour cause d'utilité publique, et rien ne nous arrêtera. Il faut donner à la ville d'Abomey un aspect neuf et moderne. (p. 15)

The words of Paul Lanta are a reminder of the pathetic situation in which Benin finds itself today. Attempts to modernize by discarding one's traditional values only succeed in creating instability.

The tragedy in "L'Arbre fétiche" is brought about by Paul Lanta's total refusal to understand the traditions of the people of Abomey. Had he shown some respect for the country's beliefs he would not have been so adamant in his approach. The possibility was quite open to the works engineer to let the new road by-pass the fetish tree, thus avoiding a possible clash with the people's beliefs. Unionmwan Edebiri suggests a compromise stand on this matter and deplores the destruction of the iroko-tree, which is for him a symbol of African civilization:

> Jean Pliya ne croit pas que la nouvelle voie passe immanquablement par la destruction de nos traditions et croyances. Le mariage forcé des civilisations africaine et européenne doit aboutir non pas à l'abdication ou à la démission de celle-là mais à son enrichissement.[4]

By refusing to understand the reality around him Paul Lanta can be likened to Doctor Pangloss in Voltaire's Candide.

Such people are not ready to learn from life because of their personal pride. It is with a note of irony that Jean Pliya tells us about the attitude of the astounded yet uncompromising Paul Lanta who is not ready to accept the possibility that tradition could be a force to be reckoned with judging from Dossou's tragic annihilation by the fetish tree:

> M. Lanta, stupéfié par les événements, ne comprenait pas. Il ne pouvait pas comprendre. (p. 26)

Vengeance is at the basis of the encounter between Dossou and the fetish tree. We learn in the story that at the age of fourteen Dossou had fallen from a tree and received a compound fracture on his right leg. Henceforth he took to wood-cutting:

> Abattre des arbres signifiait désormais pour lui assouvir une vengeance personnelle, régler un compte avec l'instrument dont le destin s'était servi pour le rendre infirme. Ses bras ne savaient manier que la cognée. (p. 18)

Dossou may prove to be an able woodcutter judging from his past performances but the task which he is now being confronted with is not an easy one. Anatole the security guard warns him of the danger he would be facing by attempting to cut down the iroko-tree widely regarded as the symbol of the ancestral gods. Dossou's insistence on felling the tree thus shows his flagrant violation of tradition.

At this point the confrontation between Dossou and the fetish tree assumes the dimensions of a veritable combat between two antagonizing forces: nodernism versus tradition. The tree ceases to be an ordinary tree and is referred to as a "puissant adversaire" living in well-protected surroundings. Its cracked trunk is compared to the skin of a crocodile, a reptile that is noted for its ferocity especially towards human beings. To gain access to the tree the entangled lianas have to be cut down and the author uses the word "déshabiller" as if he were referring to a human being. All this shows that Dossou is involved in a struggle against a formidable superhuman force embodied in the fetish tree. The combat is bloody as can be seen by the images evoked by the author:

> Les mouvements du bûcheron, calmes et puissants au début, devenaient fébriles. Ses yeux s'injectaient de sang. Il prenait l'arbre à partie comme dans un combat singulier. A mesure que le support s'amenuisait, il était comme possédé d'une frénésie meurtrière et se sentait engagé dans une lutte sans rémission. (p. 23)

On the other hand Dossou too is being presented as a formidable enemy. He has strong physique and is described as "un véritable athlète au cou de taureau" with his "biceps noueux," and "mains calleuses" as well as possessing a "poigne de lutteur." What is more, the woodcutter is armed

with that sacrilegious instrument, the axe with which he hopes to demolish his arch-enemy.

It is an irony of fate that when Dossou approaches his tragic end he nourishes the feelings that he is going to emerge as the victor in this singular combat with the iroko-tree:

> Convaincu de sa propre puissance et certain que l'arbre pencherait dans la direction qu'il lui avait imprimée, il allait et venait d'un groupe à l'autre, se pavanait, s'amusait de la consternation générale, flatté du regard admiratif des prisonniers. (p. 24)

One can see that Dossou like Paul Lanta ignores totally the supernatural qualities attributed to their enemy. The two men fail to realise that by seeking to destroy the fetish tree they are in fact trying to dismantle the country's traditions, and this actually means a declaration of war against the supernatural forces.

At the end of "L'Arbre fétiche" the vengeance mission is reciprocal, yet this needs further clarification. First of all Dossou can be said to have scored a partial victory by felling the fetish tree, thus accomplishing his vengeance mission. On the other hand the victory scored by the tree over Dossou appears to us to be overwhelming. Though the tree is cut down this does not mean the total eradication of Benin's traditional values. While the forces

of modernism are silenced by Dossou's tragic death the traditional forces assume greater dimensions in their insatiable quest for vengeance. "Heviesso" the god of thunder expresses his indignation by spitting out fire. Furthermore, Dossou's corpse is refused burial and thrown in the open air to serve as food for jackals and vultures as the fetish worshippers contend that even the death of the woodcutter is not sufficient punishment for his crime of deicide. This provides us with ample proof that for many Beninois, tradition is sacred and this fact has been stated by Unionmwan Edebiri:

> The ordinary Beninois who continues to cherish his traditional beliefs, will regard the woodcutter as as a desecrator whose death is not only a natural and direct consequence of, but also an instantaneous and exemplary chastisement for his foolhardiness and irreverence.[5]

"L'Arbre fétiche" thus reveals the dangers of trying to sacrifice tradition for modern progress in a society where the majority of its members are by and large traditionalists. The story provides a good example of how tradition is viewed as a living force ready to retaliate when its position is being threatened by an external force.

Since "Le Gardien de nuit" presents similar features to "L'Arbre fétiche" in its approach to tradition we consider it pertinent to treat the story here as a normal sequel to

our discussion so far. In both stories we find that the supernatural forces are actively at work in their quest for vengeance the moment they feel that their position is being threatened by forces from without. But whereas in "L'Arbre fétiche" vengeance is carried out in a direct confrontation in "Le Gardien de nuit" it becomes an indirect affair. In the latter story it is not the actual offenders who are punished but their progeny. Innocent children are made to suffer the consequences of their parents' guilt. By guilt here we mean the violation of the norms pertaining to witchcraft as shown in "Le Gardien de nuit." This form of retribution appears to be very common not just in Jean Pliya's Benin; similar cases occur elsewhere in the traditional African societies. Among the Tiv people of central Nigeria this was the customary way of punishing the adults who had violated the norms of witchcraft. Jean Pliya's story has two distinct parts which need to be examined separately.

In the first part the action is centred around David who is taken ill following the destruction of three owl fledglings under the roof of his father's house. Two distinct attitudes towards tradition are being manifested here. On the one hand there is David's mother who is more

inclined towards modern healing techniques as she gives her child Western drugs much to the annoyance of Tante Goussi. The latter is a staunch believer in traditional medecine and contends that:

> Les Blancs ne savent pas guérir toutes les maladies des Noirs. (p. 73)

When a traditional healer is consulted he discloses that David is bewitched. Tante Goussi's advice comes to materialize for it is the traditional healer that cures David's benign illness. Though this is only an isolated case we nevertheless consider the healer's therapeutic success to be significant. It shows that African traditional healing methods can in certain cases prove to be more effective than Western medicine. There is therefore a tacit suggestion on the part of Jean Pliya that the Black man should develop confidence in his traditional therapy.

The second part of the story is more complex. There is yet another case of bewitchment, and this time the victim is Cicavi, Zannou's daughter. When consulted a local soothsayer reveals that a sorceress is behind everything. As a matter of fact Zannou had captured an owl in broad daylight, killed it and gave out one of its feathers to the sorceress in question. He had therefore made a serious mistake for the feather he gave to the sorceress meant

that he gave back life to his enemy as the soothsayer points out:

> Quand on tue le hibou messager d'un sorcier, celui-ci, avec une seule plume peut reconstituer l'oiseau et poursuivre son oeuvre de mort. (p.83)

The words of the soothsayer express the basic concept which many African peoples have about owls as messengers of sorcerers and sorceresses. This belief is very common among the Tiv people as reported by R.M. Downes:

> It is a Tiv belief that the lives of some men are bound up with night animals and birds, and there is a very strong suggestion that disembodied spirits also clothe themselves in the bodies of night birds of which the owls are especially to be noted. There is danger for the soul if the animal or bird was hurt or killed and, of course, for the person of whom it is a part for the soul is the man; it is of value and may be trapped if its place is known.[6]

In Jean Pliya's story Ayélé the sorceress revenges the death of her messenger-bird by causing the death of Cicavi through bewitchment. Zannou also retaliates by killing the sorceress through witchcraft. Cicavi dies because the nature of her illness is serious, not benign as was the case with David. With the death of Ayélé and Cicavi the revenge process is complete for he who causes the death of another must pay back dearly by either his own death or the death of his offspring. Such is the general

principle governing witchcraft as well as fetish cults as we have already seen in "L'Arbre fétiche".

There is another important aspect of "Le Gardien de nuit" which makes it similar to "L'Arbre fétiche". We have already remarked how David's mother in "Le Gardien de nuit" is a modernist in her use of Western drugs. We realise that she is not the only character in the story with modernist tendencies. Her husband manifests yet a deeper degree of modernism. Not only does he own a shop at that time in a storeyed building, he also does not seem to believe in witchcraft. Though he appears sympathetic to Zannou'p cause as the latter carries out his revenge against Ayélé he does not actually believe in the powers attributed to witchcraft. According to him Ayélé is only "une empoisonneuse de premier ordre" but the soothsayer immediately corrects him contending that it is not a question of poisoning but of sorcery. However, one remarkable feature of "Le Gardien de nuit" is that though David's parents appear as modernists they do not openly flout their country's traditional beliefs as Paul Lanta and Dossou do in "L'Arbre fétiche".

It can be seen that in "Le Gardien de nuit" Jean Pliya paints a world in which witchcraft prevails. The picture

is sombre. It shows a terrible world in which human beings destroy one another with utmost cruelty in accordance with the norms of witchcraft. This sad situation only helps in confirming the words of David's healer that "la méchanceté des hommes est sans bornes." (p. 75)

From the world of sorcery we shall now move into an entirely different aspect of tradition which emphasizes the need for the corporate existence of a community coupled with the desire to live in harmony with the past. This is the world of Kondo le requin. In this play tradition means respect for the customs of the land and paying due homage to the ancestors. The King's role is political as well as spiritual. He rules over his people and sees to it that the people live in accordance with the rules laid down by the ancestors and the gods. However, it can be observed in the play that King Gbêhanzin, though a staunch traditionalist, is constantly modifying his attitude towards tradition in accordance with the dictates of circumstances. This evolution regarding the King's approach towards tradition marks the two important stages in Kondo le requin which we shall hereby treat separately.

The first part of the play stretches from the time of the arrival in Abomey of a French mission led by Bayol and

runs up to the scene where the new King is enthroned. The future King, known as Kondo before his enthronement, is portrayed as a strict traditionalist. He spends the entire night preceding his installation meditating on the tombs of his predecessors. He is quite aware of his heavy responsibilities as King. When he is installed as King, Gbêhanzin promises to honour his deceased father by offering abundant human sacrifices as the custom desires. Elsewhere, Jean Pliya reveals how for any new King the offering of human sacrifices to his predecessor was regarded as the first test to prove whether his rule was acceptable to the ancestors:

> Sa première responsabilité consiste à rendre à son prédécesseur et aux ancêtres un culte digne, lors de grandes cérémonies renouvelées chaque année. Sans l'accord des ancêtres, il n'est pas vraiment Roi.[7]

Human sacrifices as seen here thus serve as an important link between the living and the dead. The belief that both the living and the dead form part of the same human community sharing the same life is very common in Africa. It is also a theme exploited by many African writers. In his poem "Souffles" Birago Diop states explicitly that "les morts ne sont pas morts".[8] Léopold Sédar Senghor expresses the same belief when he speaks about "(les) Morts,

qui avez toujours refusé de mourir, qui avez su résister à la Mort"[9]

It is against this background that one can appreciate fully an important area of conflict between the Abomeans and the French as exposed in this early part of the play. The French call for the cessation of the practice of human sacrifices which they consider as barbaric. Kondo rejects the French demand by protesting vigorously to Bayol:

> Je ne puis discuter avec vous quand vous insultez mes ancêtres et critiquez les sacrifices qu'on leur offre. (p. 15)

The second part of Kondo le requin stretches from the enthronement ceremony to the end of the play. From the moment of his installation Kondo receives new important directives as monarch from Agassounon the chief consecrator:

> Kondo!...tu vas recevoir maintenant les attributs de ta souveraineté. Assecis-toi sur le trône de Houégbadja dont tu es le successeur désigné par les dieux... Chausse les sandales de Houégbadja. Mets tes pas dans ses héroïques empreintes pour protéger la terre du Danhomè et toutes ses coutumes. (pp. 22 - 23)

The new King fully understands the challenge before him. The first words he utters soon after his installation reveal that he would be known first and foremost as a warrior King determined to keep intact all the borders of his kingdom:

> "Gbê han zin aï djrè". Le monde tient l'oeuf que la terre désirait et dont l'éclosion sera un signe des temps. J'accomplirai de grandes choses... Tel le requin féroce, je sèmerai la terreur sur la côte danhoméenne et malheur aux bêtes des mers qui s'y hasarderont. (p. 24)

The new King thus lays emphasis on land. That is why he defies the oracle's advice that he should not go to war in order to justify what he considers to be his mission. He has chosen "Hêssou" which is courage and rejected "Hêssi" which stands for fear. When Akplogan, the Minister of Cults and Guardian of Traditions asks him whether his decision to go to war does not indicate his hostility towards the ancestors the King's reply is:

> Je défends leur honneur et cette terre qui le garantit. (p. 44)

Gbêhanzin's great asset as a strategist is his ability to make sure that tradition suits the prevailing circumstances. In a war situation the King chooses to rely upon his army rather than anything else:

> Je ne trouverai pas de solution au sein de cette assemblée de courtisans, ni dans les temples des fétiches. Seuls mes guerriers m'aideront à sauver le Danhomè... car si la cadence d'un tam-tam change il faut que change aussi le pas des danseurs. (p. 61)

In this the King's attitude contrasts sharply with the uncompromising and orthodox position of the ancestors about whom Guèdègbé expresses this viewpoint:

> Les ancêtres et les fétiches ne varient pas d'opinion au gré des circonstances. (p. 41)

That Gbêhanzin now views tradition in an entirely new perspective can be seen in the scene of the White hostages. The reception of the hostages by the King has dual significance. In the first place, it is symbolic of the possible reconciliation that can exist between the two warring factions, the Abomeans and the French who stand for two different cultures. Secondly, the scene is important as it helps in defining what Gbêhanzin understands by tradition. In the course of his interview with the White hostages the King touches the shoulder of one of them. The Abomeans assembled there consider the King's gesture as a violation of the customs. Akplogan protests publicly arguing that it is wrong for the King whom tradition regards as sacred and most powerful to touch a foreigner. Gbêhanzin defends his action by evoking what he has often regarded as the core of tradition:

> Toucher un Blanc ne déshonore pas les ancêtres. Laisser arracher par des étrangers la terre où ils reposent, voilà la suprême honte. (p. 58)

These are words of a person who has gone through an important change in the course of this play. The Gbêhanzin who speaks now is not the same person who at the beginning of the play had refused to shake hands with Bayol out of his bigotry for tradition.

The preservation of the ancestral land from foreign occupation as has been seen is Gbêhanzin's most important preoccupation. The King would at all costs pursue this objective rather than remain a slave to tradition:

> Comment puis-je vivre tranquille si en me rendant esclave des traditions, je laisse les armes démoniaques des Blancs dépeupler le Danhomè? J'ai voulu sauver notre terre pour que nos enfants vivent demain la tête haute. Si mes amis me quittent à cause de mon choix, j'accepte la solitude. Je ne renierai pas mon honneur pour ma tranquillité. (p. 97)

In the closing scenes of Kondo le requin tradition is given full amplitude for it is viewed from the spiritual point of view. This is made possible due to the transformation that has taken place in Gbêhanzin's character. The intransigence and callousness which were characteristic of the King at the beginning of the play now give way to true respect and understanding of the opinions of other people. When Guèdègbé tries to prostrate before the King the latter tells him to remain standing "comme un homme libre". Gbêhanzin who now becomes more humane than ever before abolishes the practice of human sacrifices:

> Il ne faut plus que coule le sang, pas même celui des esclaves et des prisonniers. Les ancêtres n'ont plus que faire de nos sacrifices humains. (p. 109)

As his favourite son, Ouanilo addresses him as "le maître de l'univers" the King's reply is:

> Maître de l'univers? Je suis un homme, Ouanilo. (p. 101)

In these final scenes of the play images of "coeur" abound. Faced with an impending military defeat by the French, Gbêhanzin begins to see things not from the material point of view but rather from the spiritual angle. Thus, to stop the invaders from violating Abomey and other sacred places Gbêhanzin gives orders that these places be burnt down, for as the King argues:

> Pour sauver l'honneur de mes ancêtres je ferai n'importe quoi. Et puis l'âme du Danhomè n'habite point les murs, ni les toits, ni même les reliques sacrées. Tant que battra le coeur d'un vrai Danhoméen, le palais peut brûler, le Danhomè vivra. (p. 87)

With regards to his abolition of human sacrifices the King contends that:

> Ils (les ancêtres) goûteraient mieux le pur hommage des coeurs fidèles unis pour la grandeur de la patrie. (p. 109)

Though accepting the fact that the French have won a military victory over him Gbêhanzin nevertheless remains convinced that morally he has not been vanquished, for according to him:

> Seuls les gens à courte vue me croient vaincu. On n'est jamais vaincu que par soi-même. Mon coeur continue de battre à grands coups victorieux. Je demeure en état d'invincibilité. (pp. 99 - 100)

All is not lost for the Abomean in his heart still carries

on with the struggle to win back his identity. Like a true Abomean Gbêhanzin pledges to fight on:

> A mon destin je ne tournerai plus le dos. Je ferai face et je marcherai. Car la plus belle victoire ne se remporte pas sur une armée ennemie ou des adversaires condamnés au silence du cachot. Est vraiment victorieux, l'homme resté seul et qui continue de lutter dans son coeur. (p. 107)

Gbênhanzin as seen at the end of Kondo le requin has made important innovations to tradition. This does not however mean that the King has departed from tradition. On the contrary his love and respect for the customs of the land are much deeper. This can be seen in these words of Guèdégbé addressed to the King towards the end of the play:

> Votre fidélité honore nos morts et ils acceptent que vous leur présentiez des offrandes. (p. 106)

Perhaps the greatest homage that is being paid to Gbêhanzin as a great innovator of tradition is that coming from Djikada, one of the King's wives:

> Je crois que vous n'avez commis aucune faute. Vous êtes plutôt l'égal de Dada Tégbéssou qui a renové les traditions, allégé les coutumes et permis à ses sujets de voir le Roi à visage découvert. Tégbéssou n'a pas été pour autant un sacrilège. (p. 97)

In Kondo le requin Jean Pliya shows tradition as an important way of life of a people. It is the respect for tradition and the love of the land which harbours it that causes the Abomeans to rise en masse against the French invaders. The play also stresses the need to ensure that

tradition is always geared to suit the prevailing situation of the community.

The innovation of tradition to suit the demands of the community is also portrayed in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux". This is seen in the author's intention. Jean Pliya dedicates his story to the youth of Africa wishing that they remain:

> à la fois enracinés dans leur terroir et tendus vers la conquête de la science et de la fraternité universelle.

The author thus suggests that tradition should be used as the springboard of modern development. In other words this is a plea for the welding together of tradition and modernism. This is made possible for the little boy who is the hero of the story combines his love for tradition with his quest for Western education.

The action in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" takes place in two different milieus with each milieu having distinct characteristics. On the one hand we are presented with a typically rural environment. We are plunged into the African village life where tradition has its roots. Here there is peace and harmony among all the members of the community. People see themselves not as isolated individuals but as people bound together by the same parentage. When the little

schoolboy comes home on holidays it is everybody who comes out to welcome him as he reports on one of such occasions:

> Tout à coup, retentirent des cris de bienvenue "Kouabo! Kouabo!"[10] répétés de-ci de-là, comme par des milliers d'échos. Les parents surgirent de tous côtés, se précipitèrent vers moi et m'entourèrent gaiment. Les mains rudes des hommes m'écrasaient les doigts. Les femmes me donnaient des accolades. (p. 7)

Though everybody in this village community is regarded as important the elders are however given special treatment as required by tradition. This is because the elders are considered to be the custodians of tradition. Thus, the little schoolboy who has just arrived in the village is taken to grandfather's hut after everybody has finished welcoming him. It is while the boy is seated in grandfather's hut that prayers are offered to the Supreme God as well as the ancestral gods for leading the boy home in good health and making him as wise as the White man. For his part the schoolboy also pays due respect to tradition. After drinking some water from a bowl he pours part of the water on the ground in order to appease the spirits of the departed ancestors.

The other milieu depicted in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" is the urban life. Here one discovers that there is little or no place at all for tradition to thrive. It is for this

reason that the schoolboy is always yearning to return to his own village in order to be integrated into the traditional life of his people.

"Le Chimpanzé amoure-ux" also treats at its tail end the question of African traditional medecine. When Sènami becomes unconscious after her ordeal with the chimpanzee it is the traditional healer who is called upon to perform the task of reviving the girl. We are impressed by the remarkable science with which the healer carries out his examination of the mental condition of the girl. He passes sound judgements on the state of his patient like a modern Western-trained doctor. That he succeeds in reviving Sènami is significant in dispelling the misconceived belief among some people today that our traditional healers are mere quacks.

One can see that in "Le Chimpanze amoureux" Jean Pliya paints the village as the reservoir of tradition. We have also seen that the narrator of the story is more attached to his traditions than he is to the modern life of the city.

On the whole, the role played by tradition in the works we have examined in this chapter cannot be overemphasized. As a general rule we have seen that traditional values have their stronghold in the villages rather than in the urban

areas with the exception of Abomey. Furthermore, there is the important fact that as much of tradition in the works of Jean Pliya is based upon the fetish cults, people with modernistic tendencies - generally acquired from their Western education - tend to overlook its importance. The only exception to this is in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" where the hero of the story is a synthesis of modern and traditional values. We consider this to be of special significance in interpreting the author's general attitude to tradition. Often, Jean Pliya makes a juxtaposition of tradition and modernism, and he does so with the aim of welding the two value-systems together. This has been amply shown in "L'Arbre fétiche". Even in a work like Kondo le requin which has a very strong traditional flavour, the Benin author suggests the need to innovate tradition to suit the prevailing circumstances.

CHAPTER II

ATTACK AGAINST ASSIMILATION TO THE WEST

While one finds in the works of Jean Pliya people who cling firmly to their traditions, as seen in the preceding chapter, there also exist certain people who attach great importance to foreign values introduced by colonialism. This latter group of people tend to deny their cultural identity by preferring Western values to their traditional values. Such an assimilation very often extends to cover even the domain of politics. The present chapter will try to show how Jean Pliya's works are critical of this form of assimilation to the West.

Albert Tévoedjrè, who is a Beninois, defines political and cultural assimilation with reference to Africa as follows:

> L'assimilation politique et culturelle se traduit par la volonté systématique de détruire chez l'Africain tout ce qui peut le rattacher à son passé. Il apprend dans les écoles françaises qu'il n'a pas d'histoire, que ses aïeux sont des Gaulois et que les anciens chefs de son pays ne sont que des sauvages et des barbares. Le drapeau français devient son drapeau, le français sa langue maternelle. Demandez-lui son passeport ou sa carte d'identité, vous y découvrirez qu'il est de nationalité française.[1]

Though not all the things mentioned by Albert Tévoedjrè can be found in Jean Pliya's works the most important thing however is that the two men are both against the idea of

assimilation to the West. But it must be stressed here that whereas Albert Tévoedjrê appears to lay the blame of assimilation on the colonial masters Jean Pliya criticizes the African himself for adopting this form of assimilation as we shall see later.

Even in a work like "L'Arbre fétiche" where tradition appears to be predominant there are still certain elements of cultural assimilation. By his education and mentality Paul Lanta is a good example of an assimilated Beninois. He is portrayed as being meticulous in matters of dress and we discover that his dress is purely Western in outlook:

> Il (Paul Lanta) s'habillait toujours de façon recherchée: pantalon de tergal aux plis impeccables, chemise de nylon et cravate de soie rouge, mocassins à boucles en fer à cheval. (p. 9)

Yet, it is not only in matters of dress that the young man's appearance differs from that of most of his countrymen. We come to know that his style of living is quite different from that of an ordinary Beninois who continues to maintain strong links with his neighbours no matter whether they are educated or not. As to Paul Lanta he frequents only young graduates, lives in the residential district of the city and shuns the company of elders. In this way he appears to have more affinities to the West than to Benin.

Even in the execution of his official functions Paul Lanta proves to be rather thorough in his dealings with others. His love of issuing commands in a peremptory manner to his subordinates can only be likened to that severity of some of the former colonial masters in their treatment of the Africans whom they regarded as inferior beings. Like the White colonialists of the past Paul Lanta refuses to listen to his subordinates' point of view. When the prisoners protest over the idea of cutting down the fetish tree he immediately threatens them with sanctions. As a government functionary Paul Lanta is imbued with a sense of his own importance and that is why he tends to look down on the illiterate traditionalists. This again is colonial mentality and it is very common among some of Jean Pliya's educated characters. And yet, this is not a peculiarity of Benin; it is the problem of modern Africa. In his search for technical and scientific skills to carry out development projects in the continent the Western-educated African tends to break with his traditional values thus creating the impression that modern progress is incompatible with African values. About a decade prior to the publication of "L'Arbre fétiche" the Senegalese writer Cheik Hamidou Kane had raised a

similar problem in L'Aventure ambiguë. In this novel the Chief of the Diallobé makes known what he considers to be the negative effects of Western education on the Diallobé people:

> Si je leur dis d'aller à l'école nouvelle, ils iront en masse. Ils y apprendront toutes les façons de lier le bois au bois que nous ne savons pas. Mais, apprenant, ils oublieront aussi. Ce qu'ils apprendront vaut-il ce qu'ils oublieront?[2]

Curiously enough, one finds that even among the illiterate people there are those who attach undue importance to Western values. Dossou is one of such people. One of the reasons why this woodcutter is determined about felling the fetish tree is his burning desire to please his prefect or "commandant". This he hopes might lead to his being employed as a civil servant. Another possibility is that he might eventually be decorated with a medal, for after all the White "commandants" had promised him a medal five years ago for cutting down a baobab-tree at Covè, a task which nobody else could accomplish.

We shall at this stage examine Jean Pliya's use of the word "commandant" which appears in several places in some of his works. We have already seen that Dossou refers to his prefect as "commandant". In the first place "commandant" is a colonial term being the short form for "commandant de cercle". In their policy of direct administration of their

former colonies the French made use of these "commandants de cercle" who were usually White officials. Because of their rigorous enforcement of French policies in the colonies the "commandants de cercle" were generally hated among the Africans. It is ironical that when the colonies gained their Independence from France many of their Black leaders continued to behave exactly like the former "commandants de cercle" and some of them were even flattered to be addressed as such. Elsewhere, Jean Pliya expresses his dissatisfaction with this neo-colonialist attitude of the ruling elite of Independent Africa:

> Malheureusement la plupart des gens qui ont accédé au pouvoir après l'indépendance ont continué tout simplement à vouloir imiter la manière de gouverner des Blancs, puisqu'on continuait toujours de les appeler "commandants" comme on appelait les Blancs, et ils étaient contents. Or, au temps des colons ils voyaient comment les commandants se comportaient. Ils n'ont pas essayé d'oublier ce que les colons avaient fait, et c'est en cela qu'ils se ressemblent.[3]

It is clear from the words above that the author is strongly against the tendency whereby an individual deliberately falsifies his true political or cultural identity and assumes the personality and style of administration of a foreign power which he considers to be superior to his. This after all is what cultural and political assimilation are about.

As regards Dossou, one does not have to blame him for wishing to please his "commandant". The reproach which one can make against him is why he should attach so much importance to such decorations like medals. In the first place, it is a known fact that decorations of this nature are relics of colonialism. The former colonial regimes in Africa were known to have introduced the system whereby medals and other forms of decorations were awarded to those Africans considered to have rendered invaluable services towards the promotion of the colonial cause. While such awards and decorations might have made sense to the colonial masters they did not satisfy the true needs of the African recipients. Yet it is ironical that certain Africans were flattered by such awards and used them as a way of showing their personal importance in the society. They regarded themselves as favourites of the White man. As time went on some African writers began to ridicule this form of assimilation. Ferdinand Oyono even makes it the subject of his novel, Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille which was written and published towards the end of the colonial rule in the Cameroon. Oyono presents a situation where Meka the hero of the novel goes through various kinds of physical endurance, despite his old age,

before he is decorated with a medal by the Big White Chief. The satire here is highlighted especially as Meka is known to have lost his sons and land to the White man only to be compensated with a medal! However, Meka himself does not view things in that light; on the contrary he considers his decoration as a special honour and boasts of his self-importance:

> Qui prétendait que les Meka étaient finis? N'en était-il pas un, lui, un Meka, le seul indigène de Doun que soit venu décorer le Chef des Blancs?... Et ça, tout le monde le savait, tout le monde avait vu comment la main même du Haut-Commissaire avait épinglé la médaille sur sa poitrine.[4]

Jean Pliya's Dossou who appears boastful in his anticipation of a medal award has very much in common with Oyono's Meka in their attitudes regarding this form of colonial indoctrination.

If assimilation to the West is to be interpreted as meaning the superiority of the Western culture to the African culture then in Kondo le requin Jean Pliya shows the folly of such a belief. Throughout the breadth and length of this historical drama the author tries as much as possible to portray the cultural and political attitudes of both the French and the Abomeans of that period. The overall posture of Bayol's mission as seen at the beginning

of the play gives one some idea of how the French often considered themselves as leading a "civilizing mission" during their colonial campaigns in Africa. All through this opening scene Bayol in his sternness and haughtiness of manner creates the impression that the French are civilized while the Abomeans are mere savages. He refers to his Abomean hosts as "nègres (...) qui ont besoin d'être civilisés". (p. 12) The French representative establishes a kind of master-servant relationship between himself and the Abomeans, for as he declares:

> Je ne puis traiter à égalité avec des barbares avides de sang. (p. 13)

Obviously, when Bayol talks of the Abomeans as a blood-thirsty people he has the practice of human sacrifices in mind. As seen in the previous chapter, human sacrifices constituted at one stage an important element in the Abomean tradition. However, it would be wrong to condemn the Abomeans as uncivilized for their shedding of human blood as such practices were known to have existed even in Europe. Bayol's concept that the Abomeans are uncivilized and barbaric reflects the general views held by some White people about the Africans especially during the colonial era. For instance, the French historian Édouard Foà in his book titled Le Dahomey, which he dedicates to General

Dodds who captured Abomey for France, makes the following observation about the Abomeans of that period:

> Il faut se rappeler que nous avons affaire ici à des peuples sauvages, qui ne connaissent pas encore aujourd'hui aucune de ces conventions nombreuses, dont l'ensemble porte le nom de civilisation.[5]

The scene of the White hostages confirms that the destruction of human life through sacrifices is not a practice that is peculiar only to the Abomeans. As Le Père Dorgère rightly points out Europe too is known to have passed through trying periods in its history when its inhabitants were sacrificed for one reason or another:

> Il y a longtemps déjà, nos ancêtres les Gaulois faisaient des sacrifices humains. En Espagne pour fêter l'arrivée de l'épouse du Roi Charles III à Madrid, on a brûlé treize hommes et six femmes. Mais cela ne se fait plus maintenant. (p. 56)

It means then that if the Abomeans can be described as barbaric for their practice of human sacrifices the French in their turn cannot escape the blame that they too had been barbaric in the past having committed the same atrocities themselves. There is therefore no justification for the French to start moralizing to the Abomeans. What Jean Pliya seems to suggest here is that given the necessary time and opportunity, the Abomean culture is capable of

evolving before arriving at a refined stage similar to that already reached by the Western cultures.

Kondo le requin also treats the problem of assimilation as it is related to freedom. The struggle against the French invasion as portrayed in the play is a struggle for freedom on the national level as well as on the personal level. The Abomeans express their opposition to assimilation by fighting to forestall the French occupation of their kingdom. They know that an assimilated person is one who has lost a certain degree of his personal freedom. He ceases to be a true representation of his culture by assuming the personality of a foreign culture. It is to avoid such a situation that Gbêhanzin insists upon going to war against the French. The King is quite aware that French penetration of his kingdom would pose a serious threat to the customs of the land. This can be seen in his rhetorical question:

> Si nous laissons ravir la terre des aïeux, le vainqueur ne remplacera-t-il pas nos coutumes par les siennes qu'il juge naturellement supérieures? (p. 97)

On the other hand the French forces in their occupation of Benin promise an era of freedom and peace. The Abomeans are therefore faced with the difficult task of choosing between Gbêhanzin's idea of freedom by resistance and the

French concept of freedom which promises an end to further bloodshed. Many Abomeans defect to the French side while a few others prefer to remain loyal to Gbêhanzin. By surrendering themselves to the French the Abomean dissidents are thus faced with the risk of loosing their national and personal freedom. The French offer of freedom may appear very attractive from the outset but it could also be another way of luring the Abomean into assimilating completely the French culture. Such fears have been strongly expressed in a nutshell by Gbêhanzin in that famous tirade which summarizes what Jean Pliya means by assimilation to the West. In a direct reference to the dissidents the King declares:

> Je les plains... Le goût de la soumission les rendra bientôt ridicules. On les affublera de chéchias rouges; ils s'étrangleront avec un licou comme les Blâncs, car ils penseront déchoir en s'habillant à la mode de chez eux. On chargera la poitrine des meilleurs comédiens de médailles multicolores. Eux, fous qu'ils sont, se croiront devenus les égaux de leurs maîtres. Quand un homme renie sa dignité est-il encore quelque chose? Ah! s'ils pouvaient préférer aux vains titres de gloire, aux douceurs offertes par les conquérants, la noblesse de l'homme libre ou celle du guerrier mourant pour la liberté! (p. 103)

It can be observed from the words just quoted that through the mouth of Gbêhanzin, Jean Pliya attacks not just the idea of an individual gradually losing his self-dignity;

but he also condemns in unequivocal terms cultural imperialism which is a well known problem today. This view has already been expressed by Alain Ricard with reference to Gbêhanzin's tirade:

> N'est-ce pas là une mise en cause de l'impérialisme culturel, tout à fait d'actualité? A travers le conflit du passé, Jean Pliya pose le problème d'aujourd'hui. Aussi, nous voilà bien au-delà de la déploration tragique, au nom toujours d'une certaine image de l'homme, où dignité et liberté comptent plus que tout.[6]

It is significant that at a time when many of his followers abandon him to join ranks with the French, Gbêhanzin becomes involved in a dialogue with his son Ouanilo who is only about ten years old. We consider this to be important, for in this play Ouanilo appears as the symbol of the future generations of Benin. The future generations should try to avoid the mistakes of the present generation and that is why Gbêhanzin advises his son about the need to beware of the snares of the White people. Thus, concluding his tirade the King tells Ouanilo:

> Quel que soit ton avenir, méfie-toi des flatteries des Blancs. Ils te gâteraient le coeur. Ne recherche que leur savoir. Là réside le secret de leur force et l'explication de notre défaite. Puise à cette source jusqu'à satiété, mais garde-toi de devenir un eunuque dont on ne sait s'il est homme ou femme, Blanc ou Noir. (pp. 103 - 104)

At this point we would like to remark that the conflict

which opposes the French and the Abomeans in Kondo le requin may be considered as a struggle between two civilizations. Nevertheless, the military victory won by the French should not be interpreted as signifying the annihilation of the Abomean civilization by the French civilization. The fact is that the Abomean civilization though threatened from without continues to exist since its standard-bearer Gbêhanzin and his few loyal supporters still maintain that national and personal freedom which the dissidents have lost. In this way Jean Pliya's Gbêhanzin also merits the following remarks which Joseph Djivo makes about the historical Gbêhanzin:

> Vaincu sans doute par les armes, il est resté jusqu'au bout invincible dans la liberté.[7]

In sum, Jean Pliya in Kondo le requin stresses the need for the individual as well as the community to strive towards maintaining their cultural and political identity as that is the only way to preserve that freedom which is denied to those who become totally assimilated to a foreign culture.

In "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" Jean Pliya puts into evidence some of the characteristics of assimilation already advanced in Kondo le requin. In that story there are two protagonists, Fiogbé and the engineer, each of whom has a

distinct life style which reflects his cultural background. This can be noticed even from their dress. Fiogbé appears in his traditional "boubou" while we discover that the engineer is: "habillé à l'européenne, le nez surmonté de verres cerclés d'or." (p. 48) Our attention is immediately focused on the engineer's dress which already indicates that the man is assimilated to the West at least in that respect. Soon we get to know him more, taking note of his attitude to others, more especially the illiterate people. From the start it looks as if the engineer is someone who mixes freely with even the ordinary people judging from the manner he volunteers to help Fiogbé out of his difficulties. But soon we begin to have our doubts. This is the engineer who enters the pharmacy, ignores the long queue of clients and goes straight to the pharmacist to be attended to. Conscious of his self-importance he does not even have the politeness to excuse himself before the waiting clients. Equipped with his Western education and a good position in life the engineer like Paul Lanta in "L'Arbre fétiche" appears to look down on others as can be seen even in his dealings with Fiogbé. He is always in a hurry as he tries to get rid of the farmer. In his first meeting with Fiogbé the engineer becomes impatient as the

farmer showers praises on him for his kindness. He immediately leaves the farmer standing there with his daughter gaping as he hurries away to dash off in his car. Even in his own house the engineer is always trying to dismiss the farmer each time the latter calls on him. This attitude of the engineer only helps in confirming that culturally he has very little in common with Fiogbé.

There are also other aspects of the engineer's life style which point to the fact that he is assimilated to the West. Like Paul Lanta he too lives in the residential district of the city. He has a beautiful new house which on first seeing, Fiogbé classifies as one of the houses reserved only for the Whites and cannot believe that the engineer could occupy such a house. Yet his daughter Phina corrects him with a naïve but hard truth as to why the engineer as a Western-educated Black man has the right to live in such quarters:

> Maintenant, les nègres qui ont étudié en France vivent comme les Blancs. (p. 53)

Phina is proved right for one discovers that the engineer's house and its surroundings are marked by a strong European flavour. There is a green garden with well-trimmed lawns as well as a beautiful fountain. The engineer thus lives in this Western-styled quarters and is cut off from the village

people. He refuses to identify himself with the problems of these villagers who for the most part are the custodians of the traditional values. This is shown in his nonchalant attitude to Fiogbé's invitation demanding him to go out and meet the villagers in their interior bush and speak to them about their rights. However, as Fiogbé's invitation borders also on the problem of social inequality we shall treat it in detain in the next chapter.

Furthermore, assimilated as he is, the engineer has employed the services of a certain number of domestic staff as is usually done in the Western society. He has a gardener, a servant as well as a maid who also nurses his child.

Even in matters of food the engineer adopts a Western attitude. In that first visit Fiogbé pays him the engineer offers his host some rum which is an alcoholic liquor introduced into Africa by the Europeans. However, what baffles us most about the engineer's attitude to food is to be seen in the scene of Fiogbé's last visit to his house. Fiogbé arrives at the time when the engineer is dining in the company of his wife. We discover that the couple does not invite Fiogbé to join them at the table. Instead, the engineer engages in a conversation with his host and has no

scruples at all. While such a behaviour is accepted as quite natural in the West it is much frowned upon in the traditional African society where the practice of sharing one's meals - no matter how meagre they may be - with any visitor or passer-by is widely appreciated.

"L'Homme qui avait tout donné" thus shows the shortcomings of a Western-trained African intellectual who has lost contact with his traditional values. Such an intellectual lives in a secluded world as he creates a small Europe around himself and ceases to see himself as forming part of the traditional environment.

Another example of an educated African who prefers Western values to the African tradition is further illustrated in La Secrétaire particulière. Mr Chadas the Head of a government department is Westernized as seen even from his dressing habits. He always appears in European suit and has the curious habit of constantly adjusting the position of his tie. It is quite evident that Mr Chadas becomes virtually a slave to these foreign conventions of dress although he himself is not ready to accept this fact. At a certain moment we see him complaining seriously about the heat in his office yet he considers it improper for him to take off even his coat for, according to him:

> Un patron doit donner le bon exemple, jusqu'à l'héroïsme inclus. Certains ne diront esclave des manières de Blancs. Bah! J'en ai entendu d'autres. (p. 35)

These are the words of a man who claims to be leading an exemplary life of self-discipline; but as we shall soon discover Mr Chadas only pretends to be what he is not. There is nothing heroic about his mania for Western dress. Instead, his attitude portrays him as a person who foolishly undergoes all sorts of hardships to try to appear exactly like people whose culture and environment are quite different from his own.

One is surprised to find that Mr Chadas insists that even his subordinates in the office should follow his example and appear always in Western dress. He is furious when Jacques the mail deliverer reports for work in traditional dress. But Jacques defends his action by recalling what Mr Chadas himself had said the previous night during a union movement meeting. The Departmental Head was known to have called for a revival of the country's traditions in the speech he made on that occasion. However, Mr Chadas rejects Jacques' interpretation of his speech arguing that he (Mr Chadas) had spoken of "coutumes" and not "costumes". One can see how Mr Chadas is always preaching what he himself does not seem to appreciate fully. In fact, both "coutumes" and

"costumes" form an integral part of a people's customs and thus they should not be viewed separately. However, it would appear that Mr Chadas does not reason in this way and that is why he condemns Jacques' attitude while advancing what he considers to be valid arguments in favour of the wearing of Western dress. We see him here sermonizing to Jacques on the need to copy the French way of life:

> Indépendance ne veut pas dire laisser-aller. Ne savez-vous pas que le Français est notre langue officielle? Comment voulez-vous parler la langue française sans porter une cravate? ... Nous qui nous piquons de civilisation française, nous devons en copier le meilleur aspect, le plus visible, c'est-à-dire le costume. (pp. 16 - 17)

We consider these words as having far-reaching implications more especially as they are uttered by a member of the ruling elite in a country that has just emerged from the colonial rule. The most unfortunate thing about all this is that Mr Chadas speaks in a dictatorial manner as he promises to apply sanctions against Jacques should the young man come to the office again in traditional dress. Virginie the new employee to the office compares Mr Chadas' action to the arbitrariness of the colonial period. The Departmental Head feels the prick of this remark and retaliates:

> Je n'aime pas les employés qui ont réponse à tout et comparent le régime actuel au régime colonialiste. Ils sont dangereux. (p. 17)

One can see from this that like all leaders who exercise dictatorial powers Mr Chadas is not interested in dialogue. Like Paul Lanta in "L'Arbre fétiche" he insists at all times that his orders must be obeyed no matter how unreasonable they may be.

The female personnel in the office are also affected by Mr Chadas' orders. The Departmental Head insists that they should always put on "une robe à la mode autant que possible". (p. 17) Nathalie takes to wearing short dresses in order to satisfy the demands of Mr Chadas. Incidentally, the mania for short dresses was the vogue in France in the early 60s. Like many a modern African woman Nathalie ends up by copying this fashion from the West. In traditional Africa however, such dresses are considered to be indecent and they portray the wearer as a person of loose morals. Virginie who, though a modern girl, does not go about in short dresses is frowned upon by both Nathalie and Mr Chadas. By dressing decently to the traditional taste Virginie is constantly being jeered at especially by Nathalie who at a certain moment tells Jacques the need for Virginie to change her style of dress:

> Elle (Virginie) pourrait mieux s'habiller au lieu de porter des robes du temps de nos grand'mères. (p. 33)

It is an irony that in those closing scenes of the play when Nathalie is no longer on good terms with Mr Chadas the young girl is seen dressed decently in flowing wrappers like Virginie. Nathalie does this purposely to express her anger as she feels that Mr Chadas no longer acts as her god-father. Yet we consider the young girl's gesture - even though motivated by wrath - as being a significant step towards the restoration of an important aspect of tradition which had hitherto been neglected by her.

The French language is also being used in the play as one of the criteria for determining whether an individual is cultured or not. Certain speakers of the language look down on those who cannot speak it. A glaring example of this is where the Farmer and the Lady meet outside Mr Chadas' office. Both of them are there as visitors but the Lady who speaks good French considers herself to be more civilized and therefore more important than the illiterate Farmer who has no claim to this important instrument of French culture. The Lady insists that she must be attended to before the Farmer in spite of the fact that the latter had been waiting there for quite a long time before her arrival. When the Farmer addresses her in his mother tongue which she definitely understands the Lady answers back by using strong abusive French terms against her interlocutor. She even

succeeds in seeing Mr Chadas while the Farmer is kept outside still waiting. The "civilized" Lady takes precedence over the illiterate Farmer in accordance with the norms of "civilization" as interpreted by the Orderly:

> Vous (le paysan) pouvez attendre encore...
> Selon la bonne règle des gens civilisés,
> les femmes d'abord, les enfants ensuite
> et les hommes après. (p. 42)

In that same scene the girl in mini-skirt and the ex-serviceman in his worn out colonial uniform despise the Farmer because they both have a cultural privilege over the illiterate rustic Farmer. Apart from serving as a good example of how Western culture even though badly assimilated can be wrongly interpreted as being superior to the traditional African culture, this scene also provides us with an instance of social injustice which we shall discuss in the next chapter. At the same time we would like to stress again the fact that not every speaker of French in this play looks down on the illiterate people. Virginie and Denise are striking examples of Western-trained intellectuals who mingle freely and even identify themselves with the aspirations of people who have little or no education at all. Jean Pliya deliberately makes use of these two highly educated young girls to serve as models of educated Africans who have assimilated only the good elements of Western culture

while at the same time showing respect for their traditional values.

The scramble for government jobs is also evident in La Secrétaire particulière. People who normally scramble for such jobs are those who believe that a government post is more important than any other local occupation like farming. This explains why the Orderly in the play, by virtue of the fact that he is a government employee, looks down on the Farmer whom he addresses in rude terms:

> Ne sais-tu pas où tu te trouves et à qui tu parles? Ignores-tu l'importance d'un planton? Ne sais-tu pas que sans moi, personne ne peut entrer ici? Je suis la porte d'accès de ce grand service. Et puis je suis fonctionnaire. Entends-tu cela? Sais-tu ce que signifie fonctionnaire? Salaire garanti pour la fin du mois, travail ou pas travail. Je suis plus puissant que le chef de ton village. (p. 45)

Two attitudes of colonial indoctrination come out clearly in the Orderly's speech. The first attitude is that it was the former colonial masters that introduced the idea of a civil service into Africa as an important means of securing white-collar jobs for the few educated Africans. In doing this the colonial masters made no attempt to encourage the other traditional trades like farming that flourished in Africa bacore their arrival. The educated African therefore began to feel that apart from government employment, all other occupations including farming were not decent enough

for his status. R. Grivot mentions this attitude as being particularly common among the educated youth of Benin even in the days when that country was still a colony:

> Mais pourquoi un Dahoméon "certifié", comme on dit encore, c'est-à-dire muni de son certificat d'études, ne retourne-t-il pas aux champs une fois son diplôme acquis? C'est une des énigmes de l'Afrique et particulièrement du Dahomey. Les élèves ont quelque tendance à se considérer comme "élèves à vie" comme certains phénomènes parmi les étudiants du quartier latin. Beaucoup estiment au-dessous d'eux de faire autre chose que du papier et inadmissible en tout cas de reprendre la houe du paysans qu'ils méprisent, bien à tort.[8]

Things reached a stage where even the semi-illiterate like this Orderly here had all their aspirations on the acquisition of government jobs. Another aspect of indoctrination in the Orderly's speech is his contempt for the African institution such as the chieftaincy. This again can be traced back to the history of French colonial rule in Africa. The French policy of direct rule aimed at assimilating the African to the French culture had no respect for the chieftaincy institution. Even in areas where such traditional institutions had existed before, the French preferred to rule independently without having recourse to them. The result was that by the time the former French colonies gained their Independence many of the educated Africans in these new nations regarded the chieftaincy with

contempt. As a matter of fact, most of these educated - and in many cases quasi-educated Africans - were to be found in the civil service. The Orderly is seen here expressing what can generally be regarded as the colonial mentality of the assimilated government functionaries towards their local chiefs.

Another instance in this play of a person who shuns farming in search of a government job is the ex-service man. Having been demobilized after serving in the colonial army the ex-service man now feels that he is too important to go back to the farm. And, since he has finished spending his gratuity there is no other alternative left for him than to roam about in search of a white-collar job. It is possible that before joining the colonial army the ex-service man might have been a zealous and diligent farmer. Yet, his brief career as a colonial soldier makes him adopt a hostile attitude towards farming. Moreover, he henceforth becomes a great admirer of the French and their way of life. At a certain moment he goes as far as condemning anybody who takes up arms against the French:

> Quand on lutte contre les Français on est mauvais citoyen et sauvage. Moi j'ai fait guerre contre zallemands. Tous les Blancs sont pas même chose. (p. 43)

Thus, for the ex-service man the French people are the paragons of civilization..

It becomes obvious that the ex-service man is a person living in the past. He enjoys parading the streets dressed in his old military uniform. His kepi constantly reminds him of those days he passed in the French regiment. It thus establishes a psychological link between him and his cherished former colonial masters:

> Quand je porte képi moi grand quelqu'un.
> Quand moi enlevé, moi rien du tout. (p. 47)

Jean Pliya's ex-service man displays his medals and war decorations to show that he is important. He is also very fond of quoting his regimental number and sees nothing wrong with his attitude of substituting an army number for his name. This is the tragic consequence of an ill-assimilated culture. It shows how semi-illiterate people very often go to extremes as they try to copy what fascinates them. We have already seen this tendency manifested in the character of the Orderly.

La Secrétaire particulière is hence a play which ridicules the attitudes of certain people who by their actions and utterances portray themselves as slaves to the Western culture and mode of behaviour.

In "Le Rendez-vous" Jean Pliya presents yet another character who detaches herself from her traditional values and becomes infatuated with the European way of life.

Camille is a slavish imitator of the West especially in matters of dress. She feels that the local dress is not sophisticated enouch for her and so she gets all her dresses supplied by French stores, "Les Galeries Lafayette." There is a sharp contrast between Camille and Solange her friend even from the way they dress. Like Virginie in La Secrétaire particulière Solange is seen wearing the traditional African wrappers.

As we have already seen in some of the works already treated in this chapter people with little education are usually very prone to assinilating rapidly many aspects of Western civilization. Camille can be said to be one of such people. Unlike Solange, Camille has not been able to complete her studies for we learn that she had been expelled from the college. Yet, despite her nediocre educational background it is she who aspires to live like the Whites. She is fond of kissing her friends each time she meets them, a practice that is very common among certain European women. In fact, Solange even feels that Camille overdoes this European mannerism and at one moment she tells her friend:

> Tu es plus blanche que les Blanches...
> En multipliant les baisers de façon mécanique,
> ne crois-tu pas qu'on les déprécie? (p. 44)

The irony is that all those who become slavishly assimilated to the West never see anything strange with their behaviour. On the contrary they even try to defend their actions. Camille says: "Je suis de mon temps et dans le vent" (p. 44) thus revealing that it is the desire to be modern that makes her behave the way she does. In this respect she is like Nathalie in La Secrétaire particulière. The terrible experiences these female modernists go through in their lives is already an indication that there is something wrong with their approach to life.

Like several of Jean Pliya's works "Le Rendez-vous" condemns a situation whereby an individual in the name of modernism tries to deny herself of her cultural identity by basing her hopes and aspirations on a foreign way of life.

The phenomenon of assimilation to the West as we have already seen in this chapter is not confined to the intellectuals alone. In certain cases the semi-illiterate and even the illiterate are also involved. The fact is that assimilation is a way of thinking by which the individual aims at attaining what he feels offers more prospects of a happy existence. But very often one may have some misconceptions on what actually constitutes a better way of life. The fundamental message of Jean Pliya in this regard is that no one culture can claim the monopoly of representing

the true civilization. At the same time the author is not against the idea of the important role all cultures can play in the formation of a truly universal Black man:

> Je souhaite que l'homme Noir ne s'enferme pas sur lui-même, qu'il ne se coupe pas des autres civilisations.[9]

We are not far from the domain of acculturation which appears inevitable in a world where ideas and people circulate more freely everyday in this modern age. The danger here is that - and it is what Jean Pliya implies - even while accepting the ideas and way of life of other cultural groups one should always try to be critical in one's approach. This is necessary to avoid the unpleasant situation in which an individual becomes slavishly attached to another culture.

CHAPTER III

EXPOSURE OF SOCIAL INJUSTICE AND OTHER ILLS

Jean Pliya's major commitment as a writer is to defend the interest of the oppressed people. His area of concern in this respect is the post-Independence Benin society. As a keen observer of his milieu he does not fail to pinpoint the wide social gap and the general malaise existing between the elite and the predominantly peasant population. Prominent among the elite are people who by virtue of their education occupy official posts. They are economically better off than the farming population which is usually illiterate and poor. Members of this elite exercise considerable influence and very often they use their positions to victimize the less privileged people. It is this unhappy situation that Jean Pliya criticizes.

"L'Homme qui avait tout donné" presents a clear picture of social inequality in Benin. The two most important social classes are being represented in the story. On the one hand there is the engineer who has been highly educated and is well-to-do. He belongs to the privileged group of people. On the other hand we have Fiogbé who is illiterate and poor. He forms part of the underprivileged folk.

To highlight the social gap between the engineer and Fiogbé, Jean Pliya also paints the living conditions of the

two men. The rich like the engineer live confortably in beautifully designed quarters situated in decent areas of the city. The poor like Fiogbé live in nasty surburbs that are quite unsuitable for human existence. The author furnishes us with a meticulous description of one of these surburbs:

> C'était le royaume des insectes suceurs dont les noirs essaims grouillaient sur les tas d'ordures et dans les maisons. Les mouches souillaient les ustensiles de cuisine, les aliments, s'acharnaient sur les plaies des enfants et, parfois, s'engouffraient dans leur bouche. Les chiens agacés tentaient de les happer. Leurs crocs claquaient vainement. Le jour, les piqûres des moucherons et des taons vous irritaient l'épiderme; la nuit, le stylet des moustiques et leur vol acéré vous interdisaient le sommeil. (p. 54)

This is perhaps the most gruesome tableau of human misery ever painted by Jean Pliya. Fiogbé's hut is also being described as "vétuste et branlante". "Une odeur de misère" emanates from the hut. In the interior we find the old man's ailing wife lying on a "grabat". This is a clear example of how the underprivileged people are being subjected to various kinds of hardships. This is so because the new administration that has taken over from the colonial regime does not live up to its promises.

Since the new political leadership falls short of its expectations the peasant population has become the victim of

poverty. Fiogbé realizes that even though the farmers never fared well in the previous regimes - namely, the pre-colonial and the colonial - their social and economic condition has deteriorated with Independence. Henceforth the country goes through a slump and naturally it is the poor farmers that are worst hit. Yet, in spite of all this the government still insists that the peasants continue to pay up their normal taxes as if nothing had gone wrong.

The severity and corrupt manner in which revenue officials go about collecting taxes from the poor also comes under bitter attack in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné". One has the impression that the populace simply live to pay taxes to the government. We learn that on one occasion Fiogbé had been stripped almost naked and tied to a mast where he was publicly flogged by his tax-collector on the grounds that he (Fiogbé) had failed to pay up his taxes when they were due. Yet, we learn that on the day following his flogging the poor old farmer went to the tax-collector and offered him a turkey-cock imploring for his patience. But even if Fiogbé cannot be spared from the rigours of taxation there is however no justification for his continual payment of taxes in the name of his deceased son. This is no doubt a blatant form of social injustice. During the colonial era such acts of injustice might have been condoned but now

with Independence one expects such malpractices to be rectified. It is in the light of this constant sapping of the poor's meagre resources that elsewhere in the story the author reveals Fiogbé's impression about the new era:

> A son avis, l'indépendance conduisait les paysans à la déchéance. (p. 52)

Fiogbé as one can see here despite the fact that he is an illiterate person is being depicted as a man of sound judgement. He appears to be a shrewd observer of the society around him and is able to tell whether things are getting better or worse for the underprivileged people.

The plight of the poor in the face of excessive taxation is not the only social malpractice that is highlighted in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné"; the story also reveals the injustice and suffering that the poor encounter regarding the provision of public health facilities. The well-to-do enjoy free medical services in the country's health institutions while the underprivileged people who have through taxation and labour contributed immensely to the setting up of such amenities are denied the free use of them. This makes the domain of public health a source of public scandal. Yet, it is is not only the injustice involved here that is disheartening; the sufferings that such a system entails need also be taken into consideration. Fiogbé spends a lot of his time

and energy to procure a medical examination for his wife. He pays six hundred francs for this, and has to pay another two thousand francs to cover the cost of the drugs prescribed by the doctor. The poor farmer cannot afford to settle the bill because of his meagre resources. And yet it is necessary that his wife should regain her health for moral as well as economic reasons. We learn that it was through sickness that Fiogbé had lost his elder son "le plus vigoureux cultivateur du village". It would therefore be unbearable for the farmer to lose his wife in a similar manner at a time when he needs her support and services most.

In the light of all this we do consider Fiogbé's weeping in front of the pharmacy as a public outcry of the poor against social injustice. The engineer's response to the farmer's lament is spontaneous. He immediately settles the old man's pharmacy bill and drives off not waiting even to be thanked. It appears that the engineer's behaviour is motivated by his desire to have a clear conscience. He is quite aware of the fact that the underprivileged prople such as Fiogbé have been denied a fair share of the country's resources and public amenities. The engineer therefore refuses to take any gifts from Fiogbé for according to him such an action would only contribute towards widening the social

gap between the rich and the poor. He affirms categorically that "l'homme ne doit plus être un loup pour l'homme". (p. 62) In his own heart the engineer dreams of a fair society in which everybody would be reasonably catered for. His words to Fiogbé reveal his conceptions:

> Grâce à vous, bien des gens comme moi sont devenus des privilégiés et vivent confortablement. Par justice, nous devons établir une société qui puisse vous assurer le vivre, les soins médicaux et la sécurité. Sans cela, quelle serait l'utilité de notre science, maintenant surtout que nous-mêmes sommes responsables de notre pays? (p. 62)

The words of the engineer remind Fiogbé of those sweet yet unfulfilled promises already made by politicians of post-Independence Benin. In reality the engineer is like these politicians for one discovers that he too has that power to convince people easily. We consider his refusal of Fiogbé's gifts as only a manoeuvre aimed at convincing the farmer of his assumed innocence in the face of social injustice. But by refusing to take Fiogbé's gifts the engineer seems to forget that this means that he is in fact breaking that bond of friendship based on generosity which he is known to have established with the farmer. But even as regards the question of generosity the farmer appears to be more magnanimous than the engineer. The latter is prepared to give just a small fraction of his income to the farmer. For his

part Fiogbé offers his benefactor all that he possesses in life: his only chickens, then his only goat, and finally his only daughter Phina. That the engineer should refuse categorically to receive at least one of Fiogbé's gifts is unfortunate. We share Alain Ricard's point of view when he considers the engineer's refusal as a communication gap between the intellectual and the farmer and he calls it a "triste métaphore de l'incompréhension entre le monde paysan et le monde urbanisé dans l'Afrique d'aujourd'hui."[1]

The plight of the poor calls for immediate attention so that justice might prevail; unfortunately the engineer is not fully prepared to take up this challenge. He has chosen the facile approach of generosity whose shortcomings are quite obvious as he himself points out:

> Des actes généreux isolés ne servent à rien. Il faut s'organiser pour donner à tous les démunis les moyens de vivre comme des hommes sans tendre la main. La justice nous en fait un devoir. (p. 63)

However, the engineer like many an intellectual is a man of words but not a man of action, and herein lies the main difference between him and the farmer. Fiogbé is interested in concrete actions, not sweet words. He tries to test the engineer's sincerity by inviting him to go into the villages and tell the poor people how they have been maltreated by the political authorities in the country. According to Fiogbé,

the engineer is best suited for such a task since he possesses all the requirements of a privileged person. But alas! the intellectual is afraid of becoming actively involved in the struggle for justice. In his usual manoeuvres he sends away Fiogbé from his house for the last time while offering him yet another gift of one thousand francs. It is significant that just at this moment in the story the engineer begins to have a guilty conscience. He starts to wonder whether he is not really trying to evade his responsibilities as an enlightened member of the society who should strive for justice for everybody. The engineer questions himself whether he has not in his own way been "un loup pour les autres". Yet, in spite of his troubled conscience the engineer is not ready to accept Fiogbé's earnest call for the political struggle for justice; instead he dismisses the farmer. Jean Pliya explains why he ends his story on such a dramatic note:

> J'ai arrêté l'histoire là où l'ingénieur a démissionné... Oui, il a démissionné l'ingénieur. Son histoire est finie. L'autre (Fiogbé) lui a offert beaucoup de chances pour s'engager dans la lutte politique. Mais, l'ingénieur tient trop à sa tranquillité. C'est un intellectuel qui cherche le confort de sa bonne conscience. Il n'est pas un homme engagé. Il a peur de l'engagement.[2]

There is no doubt that the author frowns at a situation whereby an intellectual refuses to use his privileged position to defend the cause of justice. Commenting on the need to ensure social

justice Jean Pliya says with particular reference to this story that:

> Tout paysan tout enfant malheureux dans la rue est un appel pour nous à nous engager pour que cela change.[3]

"L'Homme qui avait tout donné" can also be viewed as a story which shows the selfish attitude of the well-to-do towards the poor. The engineer is aware of the social ills in the country but he is not ready to fight for their eradication as long as he himself is not a victim of such ills. On the other hand Fiogbé whose financial problems seem to have been partly solved by the engineer does not consider himself to have already won the battle for justice. Having received some enlightenment from his benefactor Fiogbé feels that other unfortunate people in the villages should also be made to hear that same message which he has just received. Unfortunately the engineer is not prepared to carry out such a mission and herein lies the moral superiority of the farmer over the intellectual.

Another example of the selfish attitude of the privileged people in their treatment of the underprivileged is to be seen in the scene in front of the pharmacy. Following the orders of his employer an employee of the pharmacy drags Fiogbé brutally from the establishment on the grounds that

the old man's weeping is a nuisance and disgrace to the Blacks. Madame Dupont the White pharmacist could be right in ordering for Fiogbé's expulsion but at the same time one cannot overlook the haughty manner in which the whole operation is being carried out. It shows the hostile and unsympathetic attitude of the rich towards the poor.

Thus, while portraying the presence of social injustice "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" at the same time reveals that much of this social malaise is due to the failure of the well-to-do to strive for the well-being of the under-privileged people.

Whereas the ills of the society are even made a subject of discussion in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" in another story "La Voiture rouge" Jean Pliya simply presents the situation and leaves the reader to pass his own judgements. The social disparity between the rich and the poor is amply shown in that shopping scene at the "Monoprix". As usual the author juxtaposes the two main social classes, the privileged and the underprivileged. The former are characterized by their ostentatious way of living. At this Christmas shopping trip to the supermarket they continue to pile up their purchases. The author uses two expressions: "les bras chargés" and "les bras encombrés" to refer to their exuberant style of shopping. Even the children of these

rich shoppers are coddled. A striking example of this is the married couple with their child dressed in a sailor suit. The father of this little boy buys everything his son can point his finger to. On the other hand the underprivileged represented here by the wandering and hungry ragamuffin Mensavi become dismayed at this marked difference between the rich and the poor.

Mensavi and his parents live on the verge of a society which disowns them. Nobody takes the trouble to find out about their desolate environment with the view to ameliorating it. Not only is this family badly fed, but they cannot even afford to clothe themselves decently. Yet, it is from such a milieu that Jean Pliya chooses his hero. By this the author aims at informing the public that there are people in Benin society who live in deplorable conditions and such people should not be ignored. In fact, Jean Pliya has even stated that his intention of writing the story has been to "troubler les gens".[4]

The usual unsympathetic and selfish attitude of the well-to-do towards the needy population is also being portrayed in "La Voiture rouge" in both the scene of the White man and his dog as well as in that scene where Mensavi is expelled from the "Monoprix" by an employee of the supermarket.

That the White man should let loose his dog on the harmless little players of "Caletta" is yet another instance of the White people's inhuman treatment of the poor Africans in those works of Jean Pliya with a post-Independence setting. We have already seen the ruthless attitude of Madame Dupont towards Fiogbé in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné". Incidentally, among this group of works by our author it is only in these two stories that we see White people. In "Le Rendez-vous" we only hear of another White man, Monsieur Terrix. He too is presented in bad light for we learn that he has succeeded in seducing Camille with a promise of marriage. When the young girl becomes pregnant he immediately drives her away from him. All this helps in stressing the fact that any solution to African problems can only be obtained from the Africans themselves. As to "La Voiture rouge", in reference to the scene of Mensavi's expulsion from the "Monoprix", Adrien Huannou considers the act as an example of how the well-to-do in every human society are always preoccupied with maintaining a monopoly of their privileges to satisfy their egoism and pride.[5]

Surprisingly enough the poor despite their very meagre resources appear to be generous and are not selfish like the rich. When Mensavi comes into possession of the fortune that has dropped from the "Chambord" he uses it judiciously.

Having tried in vain even at the risk of his own life to give the fallen package back to its rightful owner Mensavi is filled with the desire to share his new fortune with other people. He goes into the cathedral and throws some sweets as gifts to the child lying in the manger. Like Fiogbé the little ragamuffin appears to be more magnanimous than those rich shoppers in the "Monoprix" who are only concerned with satisfying their selfish interests.

On the whole "La Voiture rouge" may best be summarized as a story which condemns the callousness of the rich to the plight of the poor and needy.

From a criticism of the society in its general perspective Jean Pliya delves into his country's bureaucratic system and pin-points the malpractices that exist in it. We are in the world of La Secrétaire particulière. This play falls within the category of what Alphamoye Sonfo would classify as plays inspired by the society.[6] In fact one discovers that the author's conception of his comedy even supersedes the narrow aspect of the Benin milieu. Jean Pliya dedicates his play not just to his god-daughter Léocadie Sidi Ganda but also to all Africans, who according to him, are:

> victimes de leur légitime désir de travailler et de s'épanouir dans une société juste, pacifique où l'homme vive libre et ne soit pas un loup pour l'homme. (p. 4)

We have already seen this idea of man being "un loup pour l'homme" expressed in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné". But in La Secrétaire particulière the author treats the problem of social injustice in a wider scope. This is a drama in which corruption, nepotism, hypocrisy, intimidation as major aspects of social ills are attacked.

Mr Chadas misuses his position as Head of a government department to amass wealth by taking bribes. Before his employment in Mr Chadas' department Jacques had to offer two turkey-cocks and drinks to the Head. Virginie tests Mr Chadas' integrity by offering him a bottle of whisky and she is surprised to find out that her gift is received with much appreciation. This shows how corrupt Mr Chadas is even though the man himself does not accept this fact. He is basically a hypocrite. As he preaches to his subordinates what he calls "les règles primordiales du parfait fonctionnaire" Mr Chadas at the same time tacitly makes allowances for corruption which he pretends to be condemning:

> Il faut du zèle au travail, la conscience professionnelle, le désintéressement, la haine de la corruption. Bien sûr, la générosité est une qualité louable, et aussi le dévouement envers les chefs, enfin, à l'occasion, la reconnaissance pour les services rendus.... (p. 14)

There can be found certain ambiguities in the speaker's words. When Mr Chadas speaks of the need for an individual to show

gratitude for services rendered one would find it difficult to believe that this does not imply the offering of bribes. Ambivalent as he is Mr Chadas plays with words in an attempt to cover up that cankerous aspect in him. When he wants to take or give a bribe the Departmental Head starts by condemning such an act and then finally ends up by putting forward reasons to justify his "honest" intentions. Jacques tells us that Mr Chadas had employed this sort of tactics in taking bribe from him. We witness with our own eyes Mr Chadas using the same manoeuvres in receiving Virginie's bottle of whisky. Also, in that scene where his scandal with Nathalie comes out into the open Mr Chadas tries in vain to stop further publicity to the affair by proposing a bribery deal to Denise so as to dissuade the barrister from taking a legal action against him about the scandal:

> Je déteste la corruption. Mais si quelques billets de banque peuvent régler la situation de Nathalie, nous pouvons nous entendre. (p. 85)

That Mr Chadas should try to give a bribe to Denise in order to cover up his scandal does not come as a surprise to us. Earlier in the Avocè Holonon affair the Departmental Head, though guilty of knocking down his victim with his car, had succeeded in using money as a weapon to win his freedom. With 10,000 francs Mr Chadas intimidated the plaintiff into abandoning the legal action taken against him.

Avocè Holonon is an example of the poor who lack the necessary courage and resources to fight against the injustice meted out to him by Mr Chadas. In a way Denise who is Avocè Holonon's counsel is also Mr Chadas' victim. As he emerges triumphant from the Avocè Holonon affair, Mr Chadas becomes confident that with money he can always win justice on his side. That is what prompts him to offer bribe to Denise. But this time Mr Chadas' evil machinations fail, for Denise - now Nathalie's counsel - publicly unmasks the villain:

> Ainsi, vous croyez que l'argent peut tout arranger et vous voulez vous en servir comme une éponge pour laver vos vilenies. Qu'avez-vous fait pour mériter l'argent que vous possédez? Tout homme riche, tel un voleur, l'est toujours aux dépens de la société et des miséreux. (p. 85)

The greed for bribery is not confined only to those who are highly placed in government service; even those at the bottom of the bureaucratic pyramid do engage in it. The Orderly is portrayed as being corrupt for he uses his official position to victimize the Farmer. This government functionary insists that he cannot attend to the Farmer unless the latter gives him a bribe. In his presentation of the character of the Orderly Jean Pliya reveals the mentality of small people occupying official positions. Such people are characterized by their pompous attitude as they try to assert their authority. They will do everything in their power to prove that they are important before those who require

their services. Devoid of the rigours of a solid formal education these petty employees use the most crude means for realizing their goals. Thus, the Orderly is very blunt in his demand for a bribe from the Farmer:

> Si tu tiens à voir le patron, ne viens jamais ici les mains vides... Pas de cadeau, pas de planton. (p. 45)

The Farmer is not attended to because like his counterpart in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" he belongs to the underprivileged class of people. The other visitors to Mr Chadas' office are given preference over the Farmer because they wield some kind of influence: the female visitors because Mr Chadas takes special interest in women, and the ex-service man by virtue of the fact that he had fought in the colonial army. As he appears in his army uniform the ex-service man commands respect in the eyes of the semi-illiterate Orderly. And yet, the Farmer occupies an important position as counsellor of his village Chief. That he should be tossed about by the Orderly explains the contempt which government functionaries manifest for African traditional institutions as we have already explained in the second chapter.

In his presentation of the character of the Farmer Jean Pliya raises at the same time the problem of human suffering among the Benin populace. The author prefers to let his Farmer remain anonymous. We consider this to be significant for the Farmer here is a symbol of the vast majority of the poor who continue to suffer patiently in their interior villages without the government even taking notice of their hardships.

The Farmer in La Secrétaire particulière is as much critical of the post-Independence era as his counterpart in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné". Both men highlight the fact that the change-over from colonialism to Independence has not yielded good results for the peasant population. In their aspiration for power the Black politicians had promised that the reign of oppression that had characterized the colonial period would give way to a period of justice and equal rights for everybody the moment they assumed office. Judging from the experience he has in the play the Farmer comes to realize that far from bringing about justice and

equal rights for all, Independence has only succeeded in making some people more important than others. Exasperated by this unhappy situation the Farmer asks:

> Ah! qui me disait qu'avec le départ des Blancs le temps de la justice est venu? (p. 46)

It should however be noted that nowhere in his works does Jean Pliya maintain that colonialism is more benevolent than Independence. What the author has always emphasized is that instead of improving the social and economic condition of the poor Independence has worsened the situation as the Farmer in the play rightly remarks: "Plus la situation change, plus les paysans souffrent". (p. 42)

But it would be ridiculous to regard the Farmer as expressing the author's views in every one of his utterances. We must not forget that the Farmer reacts angrily to the bad treatment he has received. He is infuriated by the fact that he has already spent much money for his two trips to see Mr Chadas. Unfortunately, he is now being humiliated and abused outside the Departmental Head's office. Disillusioned, the Farmer asks the ex-service man when Black rule would give way:

> Toi qui connais les secrets des Blancs, quand reviendront-ils et quand finira l'Indépendance? (p.44)

The Farmer's remarks here are particularly significant since they reveal that as long as the new ruling elite of Benin continue to encourage social injustice the oppressed poor will continue to yearn for the past colonial regime irrespective of how cruel it might have proved to be.

Another kind of social ill that comes under attack is nepotism and all forms of patronage. This malicious practice appears to have eaten deep into Benin's public service. Thanks to it certain people are given employment not because of their merit but simply because they are related to an influential person. We learn from the mouth of Mr Chadas that even the Orderly holds a government post because he is a relative of a certain minister.

Closely linked with nepotism is the system of patronage. There is the growing belief among certain people that to be successful in the civil service one needs to have 'godfathers' solidly behind one. Mr Chadas who owns his official position as a result of patronage adopts a nonchalant attitude to the notion of academic merit as a prerequisite for a successful career in the service:

> Moi,... sans diplôme reconnu par les universités, j'ai fait mon petit bonhomme de chemin. Et aujourd'hui je suis haut perché et je sais commander. Avoir des relations, être malin et débrouillard, en cela consiste l'habileté suprême. (p. 16)

Mr Chadas even goes as far as applying the system of patronage in his department. He acts as godfather to Nathalie, his private secretary with whom he gets involved in an unhealthy relationship. Because of the undue attention she receives from her patron Nathalie begins to look down upon her colleagues in the office. Armed with Mr Chadas' support she makes life difficult for Virginie who has refused to be patronized in this way. Virginie believes strongly in the principle of success based upon merit and that is what creates a conflict between her and people like Mr Chadas and Nathalie. Thus, in the proposed examination the Ministry intends to conduct in order to weed out incompetent typists in the service Mr Chadas predicts disaster for the diligent Virginie while promising success for the indolent Nathalie his protégée:

> Tu passeras ton examen comme tout le monde et tu réussiras. Dans ton genre tu es une élite... Laisse-moi faire... J'ai le bras long, Nathalie, et je sais m'en servir. (p. 57)

It is an irony that such dishonest public servants like Mr Chadas should continue to flourish in spite of their deplorable practices. This is made possible because the whole fabric of the public service appears to be wanting starting from the very top. The dishonest ministers are responsible for the low ebb of moral integrity in the service. In what turns out to be his last promotion as a government Executive Mr Chadas reveals the secret behind his success:

> Et voilà que grâce à l'excellente idée du ministre des diplômes et de la qualification professionnelle, j'avance de deux échelons par intégration. A dire vrai, je sais bien me débrouiller. Le système "D", voilà le secret de la réussite. (p. 60)

Besides this, we also know that Mr Chadas is the protégé of the Minister of Proletarian Affairs. There is irony here for this particular Minister does not appear from the beginning to be representing the genuine interests of the proletariat. His first visit to Mr Chadas' office leaves much to be desired. The Minister tacitly condones his protégé's irresponsible behaviour until such a time that Mr Chadas' scandal with Nathalie is made public. From that moment the Minister has no better choice than to denounce his protégé before everybody there:

> Je vous défends de me considérer comme votre protecteur. Dès cet instant je ne vous connais plus... Votre cas dépasse mes compétences. La justice suivra son cours. (p. 91)

Nevertheless, the Minister of Proletarian Affairs does not escape public blame. His denunciation of Mr Chadas though spectacular as it may look comes rather late. Had his protégé's moral decadence not been uncovered it is possible that the Minister would have continued to act as a god-father to him.

The social ills evoked in La Secrétaire particulière are problems which by and large are not peculiar to Benin alone. They are the perennial problems of the new Independent

nations of Africa. It is ironical that Africa's agonies should begin to loom at a time when she assumes the control of her destiny. Henceforth the enemy of the continent is not really the former colonial powers but the Africans themselves; this fact has already been explicitly stated by Aimé Césaire:

> Le temps de la décolonisation sera plus difficile pour le monde noir parce que nous n'avons pas seulement à nous dresser contre un ennemi commun plus ou moins aisément discernable, mais à lutter en nous-mêmes contre nous-mêmes. Il s'agit d'un combat spirituel qui ne fait que commencer.[7]

In sum, La Secrétaire particulière shows how an African by his corrupt practices can become an enemy of his own nation. The comedy thus assumes greater importance since it treats problems that are of special interest not just to Benin but also to other Independent States of Africa. The play is also unique in showing that the victims of social injustice are not only the poor illiterate folk. In certain cases even the privileged educated people who are sympathetic to the cause of the poor are made to suffer in the hands of a selfish and corrupt ruling elite.

With the exception of La Sécrétaire particulière the works that we have discussed so far in this chapter are dominated by their depiction of illiterate folk drawn from very poor family background. In "La Palabre de la dernière chance" all the protagonists have acquired a certain level

of education. Through an intellectual discussion they try to find solutions to problems that preoccupy them. In a way they form part of the Benin elite. Though the narrative has its setting in post-Independence Benin, in reading it, we are reminded of Jean Pliya the intellectual activist of the late 1950s who together with Albert Tévoedjrê founded a movement known as "Le Mouvement de Libération Nationale" (M.L.N.) as reported by the Benin historian Maurice A. Glélé:

> Le Mouvement de Libération Nationale (M.L.N.) de tendance spiritualiste (était une) formation politique, créée en mars 1959 par MM. Albert Tévoedjrê et Pliya Jean, (et) avait pour mots d'ordre: Indépendance inconditionnelle du Dahomey et Unité Africaine... Le M.L.N. s'employa à faire de l'éducation civique; il organisa de cours et des conférences en collaboration avec le Secrétariat Social de Porto-Novo sur les thèmes tels que "Le Socialisme", "Les pays sous-développés..."[8]

It would however, be wrong to identify "Le Mouvement de Libération Nationale" (M.L.N.) with "Le Mouvement de Patriotes Incorruptibles" (M.P.I.) that is mentioned in Jean Pliya's story. This is because the M.P.I. has a communist outlook as opposed to the spiritualistic tendency of the M.L.N. The only common factor between the two movements is that they are both political organizations formed with the purpose of rallying round the people for a definite cause. As to the M.P.I. we learn through one of its members, Sovi that it is "un mouvement politique en gestation depuis quelques

années et qu'animaient de jeunes cadres décidés à tout changer." (p. 83)

The policies pursued by the M.P.I. reflect the composition of its membership. This is a political movement that is dominated by intellectuals: people who are more concerned with theorizing with words than with the improvement of the lot of the oppressed people whose interests they claim to be defending. Their watchword is always political stability and they are ready to adopt any form of brutal measures to achieve their aims. Guy Landry Hazoumé, a Beninois himself, condemns this attitude of the intellectual activists in his country while pointing out the futility of their policies:

> Leurs conceptions et leurs tentatives seront inévitablement marquées par l'échec, dans la mesure où elles ne débouchent pas nettement sur nos masses populaires; et où, deuxièmement, elles nient le maintien, dans notre société, de structures d'exploitation économique coloniale et l'existence révoltante de faits d'injustice et d'actes collectifs d'oppression.[9]

The radical policies of the M.P.I. do not discourage Sovi from joining it. The young man sees this political organization as an important springboard for eliminating social injustice by getting rid of the new bourgeoisie who exploit the poor. In joining the movement Sovi tries to find a meaning to his own life by becoming a militant. Convinced about this objective his friend Michel also

promises his adherence to the M.P.I.

There is in "La Palabre de la dernière chance" much insistence on the individual as well as the community, with the latter receiving more attention since Africa itself is fundamentally a communal society. Yet this is not to say that the individual's role can be ignored. Thus, by laying emphasis on the importance of the community while playing down on the rights of the individual the M.P.I. ceases to represent the true aspirations of the African society. This can be seen from the dramatic expulsion of Sovi from the movement and the turning down of Michel's application for membership on the grounds that the latter attaches undue importance to the prerogatives of the individual.

Michel appears to be expressing the author's views when he states the need to bring about social justice as follows:

> Il faut organiser la société selon des lois saines et justes, neutraliser les profiteurs et les parasites, dénoncer et combattre les freins intérieurs et extérieurs à l'indépendance nationale. (p. 87)

This means that in the final analysis the individual should be given maximum opportunity to develop his potentialities to the full. Commenting on this aspect of the story Jean Pliya declares:

> Si l'individu est plus développé dans une société, et si la société est bien organisée pour ne pas écraser l'individu, je crois que nous aurons des sociétes formidables et que l'Afrique sera vraiment le continent de demain.[10]

In "La Palabre de la dernière chance" the author as a one-time militant casts a critical look into the politics of an African society. He stresses the need for our political regimes to uphold the rights of the individual as well as of the community so as to build a just and humane society. In a way, the story proposes a new image of our societies, and Moudjib Djibril is right when he considers the narrative as presenting "une vision neuve de l'avenir de nos pays sous - développés".[11]

All the works that we have discussed in this chapter show that it is very often a selfish elite that constitutes the main threat to the preservation of justice in our societies. Therefore, to bring about a change for the better there must be an ardent desire on the part of this elite to re-dedicate themselves to ensuring justice for the underprivileged. This is the only way to eliminate human suffering which very often is the consequence of social injustice. If the Benin author insists so much on the need to eradicate human hardships it is because he himself admits being very passionate about this:

> Notre peuple, nos peuples africains souffrent beaucoup, si bien que dans tout ce que j'écris je ne peux pas manquer d'évoquer la souffrance des gens.[12]

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEST FOR HAPPINESS

While revealing the injustice and other malpractices that plague the Benin society, the works of Jean Pliya also show the ardent desire to be happy. Children who occupy an important place in our author's world seek happiness. Other characters pursue the same objective either on the personal level or through political means. This chapter unlike the preceding one does not limit itself to a particular group of works, since the quest for happiness is to be found in virtually all the works of Jean Pliya. In addition, due to the nature and scope of the present chapter the works treated in it are not necessarily presented in their chronological order of publication.

Childhood in the works of Jean Pliya is essentially a period of happiness. Through playing and active participation in the life around them, children in our author's works satisfy much of their psychological and social desires. They become more or less adventurers constantly trying to explore the world around them. "La Voiture rouge" which was the earliest to be published among the childhood stories presents a hero who is noted for his love of small adventures. Mensavi has those inner resources of character which Jean Pliya himself refers to as "une grande richesse intérieure".[1]

This proves to be a great asset to a boy who otherwise would have perpetually been haunted by his poverty.

By his liveliness Mensavi derives some kind of pleasure which enables him to contain himself under difficult conditions. He is quick in improvising means of finding solace when he meets with distress. The incident of the spinning-top and the severe thrashing he receives from his father does not make the boy to retire to a corner and become sulky. On the contrary, he leaves his home and joins the company of his ever laughing friends Aboki.

The scene at the public tap reveals how very often children derive much satisfaction from very little things which adults tend to overlook. In spite of his bruised skin Mensavi still finds immense pleasure in getting himself immersed for a long time under a running tap:

> Mensavi se pencha sous le robinet d'eau. L'eau tiédie par le soleil s'écoula limpide, comme une baguette de cristal. Elle brûla les écorchures du dos; mais bientôt elle devint un baume rafraichissant. Mensavi gigotait dans une pluie de gouttelettes, riait aux éclats. Son camarade lui frottait le torse. (p. 34)

But there is another important aspect of the Mensavi-Aboki relationship: it is the joy that children often get by living together in a group. Even the "Caletta" play ought to be viewed as a practical manifestation of this kind of joy.

Significantly enough the author refers to the "Caletta" players as "les joyeux lurons". Mensavi and his friend get themselves integrated into the "Caletta" dance in order to participate in this form of collective happiness.

In some of Jean Pliya's works the poor seek not just their personal happiness but also the happiness of other people around them. This is evident in the closing scene of "La Voiture rouge" where Mensavi picks up the packet that has dropped from the "Chambord" . The little boy's reaction is spontaneous as he immediately thinks of the possible ways to use his newly acquired fortune for the happiness of others:

> Il s'enfonça dans la nuit scintillante de mille feux de joie. Il sourit aux étoiles qui palpitaient et aspira une bouffée d'air frais. Il eut envie de courir et de danser. Il désira partager son bonheur. (p. 43)

Mensavi's acquisition of the coveted red car marks an important development in the story. There is a remarkable change in the boy as his good fortune makes him view things in an entirely new perspective. He imagines himself living in an ideal world of happiness:

> Le voilà soudain plus heureux qu'un roi, plus fortuné que le président de la République qui vit là-bas, dans son colossal palais de marbre et de verre, sous la garde des gendarmes chamarrés. Avec d'infinies précautions, il retourna la voiture, la caressa. (p. 42)

The story ends on a note of happiness and this is being highlighted in the proverb "A chaque jour suffit sa joie." The author thus cleverly modifies a well known French proverb by replacing the word "peine" with "joie". This also underlines the fact that this story should be considered first and foremost as a Christmas narrative. As in any typically Christmas narrative it is the atmosphere of joy that prevails at the end. That the story ends with the word "joie" is of particular significance as it helps to show that the satisfaction which the hero obtains in the final analysis overshadows all the difficulties he is known to have encountered in the past.

"La Voiture rouge" is thus unique for in it the concept of happiness is not based simply upon material possessions but also upon the heart. Mensavi succeeds in making his own happiness. He does not wait for other people to do everything for him since he is constantly struggling in his heart for a happy existence. Because his sense of joy is founded upon his inner self he triumphs by rejoicing in the end.

That childhood experiences constitute a vital aspect of a person's life is being portrayed in "La Palabre de la dernière chance". Michel and Sovi make important references

either to their own childhood or to that of others. As a child Michel faces certain difficulties especially with his cruel father whose constant vociferations always haunt him. Furthermore, he is exposed to hunger and misery. This makes his childhood very similar to that of Mensavi. Like the hero of "La Voiture rouge" Michel too possesses that spirit that endures and emerges victorious not letting his unhappy experiences to cloud his happy vision of life.

Apart from his own childhood Michel examines the childhood of others and tries to compare it with his personal experience. In that scene of his car-breakdown which he revives in his discussion, Michel reflects on a scene he had witnessed in which joyful children were playing on a thick cushion of sand. We have already remarked how the mere act of playing together in a group constitutes a very important source of happiness for children. The scene which Michel tries to revive is therefore not an exception. According to him a wrong orientation given to such children in school would only succeed in distracting them from the true path of happiness.

> Ils (les écoliers) tâtonneront trente ans, quarante ans, toute leur vie, ignorants des premières lettres de l'alphabet du véritable bonheur. On les aura instruits, disciplinés, mariés, mais il leur faudra redécouvrir par eux-mêmes, aux prix de souffrances inutiles, l'essentiel de la vie qui ne réside point dans la multitude des idées et des connaissances,

> mais plutôt dans une orientation correcte
> du regard ou du coeur pour édifier en soi et
> dans les autres la paix et l'harmonie.
> L'histoire de ma propre vie aurait été
> certainement plus belle, plus positive, plus
> riche si j'avais compris plus tôt la leçon. (p. 75)

The last sentence in the citation shows that the speaker himself is in love with this kind of happiness which is pure and founded upon innocence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in a way Sovi wishes his own rebirth as that would enable him to regain such happiness.

"La Palabre de la dernière chance" also presents a good example of how with changing circumstances a happy childhood can turn into a gloomy one. The danger here is that it is the latter aspect that seems to get the upper hand in determining the individual's view of life. This is the case with Sovi. He starts off by experiencing a happy life as a little boy in his native village of Dota. The moment he is taken to school in an urban centre at Glekpa he loses that happiness. Sovi attributes this change in his fortune to the cruelty of his guardian's wife. We learn that this woman imposes severe hardships on the boy. Yet, one can also see that part of the boy's unhappiness can be explained by the fact that he has been uprooted from his immediate environment. However, Sovi's sad childhood experiences somehow contribute to his search

for happiness later in life through political struggle and we shall be examining this later in the chapter.

The quest for happiness as it affects children in "La Palabre de la dernière chance" is hence based on the generally accepted notion that childhood is a period of innocence. The story suggests that since an individual's life is determined in his formative years as a child there is need for every child to be given adequate attention during that delicate period.

The ardent desire on the part of a child to participate in the communal life of the village so as to attain happiness is depicted vividly in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux". By his stay in the city in pursuit of Western education the narrator of the story feels that he has lost that freedom and happiness of the village life. However, this loss is only partial for during holidays he has the opportunity to come home and partake in the communal joys of the village. A particular example is given about the enthusiasm with which the boy welcomes his grandfather's suggestion that they should go out to harvest palm-nuts and survey animal traps. The schoolboy considers this as the most appropriate way for him to enjoy his holidays in the village:

> Je venais de passer neuf mois confiné dans une salle de classe. J'avais la nostalgie des joyeuses séances de labour, de la surveillance des épis contre l'assaut des moineaux mange-mil et des singes, des riantes journées de moisson qui s'achevaient par des ripailles et des danses effrénées. L'invitation de grand-père me comblait. Quelle meilleure occasion pouvais-je trouver de me retremper dans la vie de la campagne? (p. 15)

The role played by Western education in this story is nevertheless constructive since it enables the schoolboy to view his rural environment in a completely new perspective. Had our hero spent all his life in this kind of atmosphere he would perhaps not have developed so much interest and enthusiasm for this type of simple life. As an occasional visitor everything appears new to him and constitutes an important source of joy. For example, when he accompanies grandfather, Uncle Vigan, and Tossou to the palm-tree plantation, the boy makes known his intense joy for finding himself once more in the countryside:

> Une profonde jubilation m'agitait comme si je découvrais cette campagne pour la première fois. (p. 16)

Thanks to his Western education the hero becomes sensitive and observant of his environment. His vivid description of his uncle's operations in the harvest scene is done with mastery. He actually identifies himself completely with his uncle whose agility is a source of joy for him. The words used by the narrator in describing his

uncle's manoeuvres on the palm-tree reveal his admiration for the scene:

> En quelques instants, il s'éleva jusqu'au bouquet de palmes. Son corps se profilait sur le décor des houppes vertes entre lesquelles brillaient des pans de ciel clair. En équilibre sur la corde tendue, il arracha d'abord les branches mortes; puis,à grands coups réguliers qui faisaient vibrer l'arbre, il détachait d'énormes régimes hérissés de piquants. La terre feutrée de mousse en résonnait sourdement. Tossou et moi les entassions dans la hutte en prenant garde de ne pas nous blesser les doigts. (p. 17)

What is important here is that the narrator is not passive; he also participates in the harvest. This is what enhances his joy even more.

Harvest season has usually been a time for jubilation in most parts of Africa. For little children this is usually an exciting period. The schoolboy in Camara Laye's autobiographical novel, L'Enfant noir is shown as a great admirer of harvest time. Laye's hero even tells us that at Tindican where he spends his holidays, harvest is actually made an annual festival. In a typically rice harvesting scene the boy narrates his admiration for his uncle's dexterity:

> Mon jeune oncle était merveilleux dans cette cueillette du riz: il y devançait les meilleurs. Je le suivais pas à pas, fièrement, et je recevais de ses mains les bottes d'épis.[2]

In both accounts the heroes actively take part in what they

describe and come to appreciate the joy of working in a team.

When describing this type of village childhood happiness as manifested in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" one could continue to cite many other examples of African authors who have highlighted much of this in their works. Another important example to give is that of Léopold Sédar Senghor who has always manifested his profound homage for his native Joal where he spent his childhood days in an atmosphere of happiness and calm. This explains why Senghor often refers to this period as his "royaume d'enfance".[3] Thus, for many African writers including Jean Pliya the childhood period is looked upon with a certain nostalgia, for as the Benin author confirms while identifying himself with the hero of "Le Chimpanzé amoureux":

> L'enfant que nous avons été ne meurt jamais en nous.[4]

Leaving behind the world of childhood we shall now examine the approach of adults to happiness. As has already been indicated in "La Voiture rouge" the well-to-do tend to seek happiness through selfish means. This is evident in La Secrétaire particulière. On the other hand one also finds people who believe that it only through conscientious work and personal integrity that they can gain access to a truly happy life. Such people seek not just their personal

happiness but also the happiness of other people around them. For this reason the characters in the play can be divided into two main camps: the Chadas-Nathalie camp which is self-seeking and the Jacques-Virginie camp which works for the well-being of everybody.

In the Chadas-Nathalie camp it is Mr Chadas who manipulates situations to suit his personal desires. Since the man is more interested in bodily pleasures than in doing his official work he uses his office as a place for courting Nathalie. He caresses Nathalie's hips and hugs her when he is supposed to be seriously at work. Nathalie herself takes this as a normal routine. She never protests. In fact, on one occasion she expresses her total approval of Mr Chadas' behaviour towards her:

> Si vous n'étiez pas si gentil, j'hésiterais à vous croire. Je suis fière de travailler avec vous. (Elle se rapproche de M. Chadas. Celui-ci lui prend la main) (p. 20)

And Mr Chadas' reply to Nathalie on this occasion reveals his total lack of discretion as regards public morality:

> Merci, ma chérie, ma belle Nathalie. (Il l'attire vers lui.) (p. 20)

This serves as a good example of the typical love scenes between Mr Chadas and Nathalie during office hours.

Naturally this kind of atmosphere is not conducive to serious work, neither does it augur well for the future of

those who engage constantly in such a behaviour. When Nathalie announces to Mr Chadas her pregnancy, one would expect the Departmental Head to assume full responsibility for the outcome of his liaison with Nathalie. Unfortunately, the man receives the news with sadness. There is a certain irony here as we discover that what Mr Chadas had considered to be his means of procuring happiness now turns out to be disastrous for him. Nathalie on the other hand questions the rationale behind her lover's change of attitude towards her:

> Tu as tout exigé et obtenu de moi. Et quand je t'annonce les conséquences de tes actes, tu changes de mine. (p. 76)

This shows how selfish Mr Chadas has been all along. At the same time it also reveals Nathalie's selfishness. For as long as her liaison with the Departmental Head is not yet beset with problems she approves of the man's actions. We have seen her collaborating with Mr Chadas to mar the happiness of people like Avocè Holonon and Virginie. Now that she discovers her lover's insincerity she is the first to start hurling abuses at him. In the final analysis it can be justifiably said that both Mr Chadas and Nathalie are selfish in their pursuit of personal happiness.

However, with Jacques and Virginie the situation changes. The relationship between these two is based on equality and

respect for each other's opinions. They both believe in personal happiness but they pursue it through honesty and hard work. The two have much devotion to their official duties, thus creating a contrast with the nonchalant attitude of Mr Chadas and Nathalie.

Since Jacques feels that he shares more or less the same ideals with Virginie he falls in love with the girl and makes a marriage proposal to her. For Jacques, such a union would be an accomplishment of what he considers to be the peak of his bliss. The moment he receives the young girl's consent Jacques is overjoyed:

> Oh! Virginie. Je veux clamer mon bonheur à tous les horizons. Laissons exploser notre joie. Célébrons notre succès et l'éclosion de notre amour. (p. 93)

One also notices in the course of the play that Virginie is aware of the fact that marriage is a challenge and should be viewed as a solemn act of engagement by the couple to live in unity and happiness. That is why she reminds Jacques of this noble ideal:

> Il faudra nous attendre aussi aux difficultés... Par la fraîcheur des pluies, par la chaleur des midis flamboyants, par la douceur des nuits étoilées, blanches de lune, nous irons joyeux et confiants, appuyés l'un sur l'autre. (p. 93)

The end of La Secrétaire particulière is hence significant as it announces important future projects for Jacques and Virginie. It is also opportune that at this juncture when the old illegitimate couple Chadas - Nathalie is discredited the author proposes a new and legitimate couple Jacques - Virginie to replace the old one. This development is symbolic of the replacement of facile ill-founded happiness with that happiness which is founded upon righteousness.

La Secrétaire particulière thus treats the issue of the quest for happiness from a rather puritanical point of view. The author uses his play to condemn among other things sensualists as Robert Cornevin has rightly pointed out.[5] The final image one gets in this drama is one of a young man and woman striving to attain a certain perfection and happiness through marriage.

In "Le Rendez-vous" there are also two different approaches to the search for happiness. One of them is through sensuality and materialism. In contrast to this there is also a conscientious approach to the question. Camille represents the former tendency while Solange stands for the latter one.

Living in a dream world Camille searches for happiness through a loose way of living. She has numerous lovers at

a time and none of them appears to satisfy her quest for a happy existence. She therefore passes from one to another. At each instance she creates a scandal; yet she never experiences any moral scruples since her motto is a complete negation of that discretion that is supposed to mark a decent lady, for she continues to maintain the principle of:

> Faire ce qui me plaît, profiter du bon temps et oublier mon enfance. Et, puisque les hommes sont tous des menteurs, les tromper à mon tour. (p. 36)

Camille's frivolity is manifested even in the nature of her employment as a barmaid. By this she seeks a facile approach to happiness. Working in a bar is not a suitable post for any decent lady as it exposes her very often to men of dubious characters who are out to mislead the gentle sex. That is how Camille herself is being misled by Monsieur Terrix and her present Black employer. Though she has vowed to make men her victims she never really makes one; rather it is men that make her a victim on each occasion.

In fact, coming from a poor family background Camille does not take account of this reality and lives above her means. She spends most of what she earns on expensive Western dresses. Infatuated with the idea of procuring her personal happiness she does not think even of the well-being of her aged mother.

Even in matters of marriage Camille puts her personal interests first. The image she forms of her future husband is that of a typical bourgeois who has the necessary comforts of life by Western standards:

> Camille songeait à un mari qui posséderait une voiture confortable et qu'elle mènerait à sa fantaisie. Bien sûr, elle vivrait dans les jolies villas climatisées du boulevard de France ou de la Patte-d'oie. Qui pourrait deviner en elle la fille d'une marchande de poissons? (pp. 39-40)

Bacause she has stayed in the city and tried to copy the Western style of living we are not surprised to find that Camille has a similar mentality to that adopted by many Western adolescent girls towards the choice of a husband. Her attitude fits well into the pattern which Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson report about in a typically European society:

> The common adolescent fantasy of marriage and family life follows closely the lines of the popular image... The large majority of girls who think about the status characteristics of their later lives hope for a middle-class pattern. They choose this pattern irrespective of present social class position - that is, whether or not they have experienced it at first hand in their parents' home.[6]

The search for happiness through materialism makes Camille place all her confidence in Koffi. From appearances this young man possesses those things that Camille cherishes. At the end of that scene between the two lovers at the beach

Koffi makes a vague promise of a solemn engagement with Camille and the latter jumps to a conclusion in her mind that her dreams of a marriage between her and the young man would soon be realized. This is a period of bliss for her:

> Camille redevint joyeuse. "Qu'il est gentil! se dit-elle. Il pense déjà à s'engager pour la vie." Rayonnante, elle embrassa Luc et ils se remirent en marche... Jamais Camille ne dormit aussi bien. Elle se réveilla tard, s'habilla de rose et se rendit aux Trois Caballeros. En fin d'après-midi, pressée de partagér son bonheur tout neuf, elle alla chercher Solange à la sortie de l'atelier. (pp. 57 - 58)

With Solange the picture is quite different. Though this young girl too aspires to some kind of happiness she does not try to achieve this goal through moral laxity and materialism. The contrast between her and Camille is even seen from her style of dress, for she wears what she herself sews and not imported dress from Europe. In this way Solange derives personal satisfaction. She finds her career as an apprentice dressmaker to be very useful. Her firm belief in the necessity of hard work to earn one's living distinguishes her from Camille whose main concern is to profit from other peoples' labour without she herself putting in concrete work for the good of the society.

Solange's quest for happiness does not make her selfish like Camille. She is very much interested in the happiness

of the latter. That is why she constantly warns her friend the moment she considers her to be heading towards disaster. Convinced as she is about the need for hard work, Solange expects her friends to appreciate this principle as the corner-stone of human happiness. The scene of Faustine's wedding **ball** reveals her moral attitude to others. While Camille tells Faustine to "profiter de son bonheur", Solange's words to the bride are: "Heureux ménage ot nombreux enfants". Whereas Camille would like to assess marriage in terms of the facile joys the bride can derive from it, Solange thinks also of the challenges that lie ahead.

"Le Rendez-vous" can be summarized as a story which reveals that the quest for happiness through immorality generally results in disaster for the individual concerned. We have already seen this happen in La Secrétaire particulière in the Chadas-Nathalie affair. The narrative also shows that happiness even when pursued on a personal level should not make the individual selfish, for a truly happy person is the one who takes into account the interests of other people.

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter the search for happiness is sometimes being pursued through political means. Kondo le requin underlines the need to keep a kingdom intact from foreign attacks in order to ensure its people's happiness. King Gbêhanzin puts up a stout resistance against the French

invasion so that he would not feel ashamed but find joy after death in the midst of his departed soldiers. Addressing the latter the King says:

> Je ne veux pas qu'aux portes du pays des morts le douanier trouve des souillures à mes pieds. Quand je vous reverrai, je veux que mon ventre s'ouvre à la joie. (p. 108)

But soon there is dissent among Gbêhanzin's subjects as French victory becomes imminent. By joining ranks with the French forces the dissidents seek a short-term solution to happiness for themselves. Aware of the danger he is now faced with Gbêhanzin modifies his position and asks even his remaining loyal subjects to surrender to the enemy who has proposed an era of happiness:

> Là-bas, on dit que déjà renaît la joie. (p. 108)

The King's change of attitude is motivated by his desire to secure immediate happiness for his people. Yet at the back of his mind Gbêhanzin knows that the Abomeans would not obtain permanent happiness before the end of French rule. Had not Gu᷈dǯgbé forecast such an end earlier in the play?:

> L'Étranger occupera le Dánhomè, longtemps, longtemps avant de repartir au-delà des mers. (p. 40)

In "La Palabre de la dernière chance" we see a deliberate effort on the part of the protagonists to bring about happiness through a political struggle. As the narrator rightly points out even the oppressed masses vote for political parties

"au nom d'une promesse de bonheur". (p. 68)

Sovi who believes in collective happiness as opposed to individual happiness feels that it is only by getting himself involved in the political struggle in his country that he can realize his ideal. This leads to his joining one of the neo-colonial parties. However, the moment Sovi discovers that the leaders of this party adopt policies that are based upon compromise and opportunism he renounces his membership.

Yet, Sovi does not give up the hope of seeking happiness for the people through politics, for according to him "seuls des hommes rigoureusement organisés bâtiront des lendemains enchanteurs." (p. 87). Hence he invites his friend Michel to follow his example by joining a new political organization the "Mouvement des Patriotes Incorruptibles" (M.P.I.). Sovi thinks that this organization is progressive enough to succeed in attaining its goals.

The dramatic expulsion of Sovi from the M.P.I. together with the refusal to grant Michel's request for membership of the organization comes as a surprise. The managing committee of the movement considers Michel's belief in individual happiness to be incompatible with the movement's objectives. Members of this committee do not even give a

chance to the two friends to defend themselves before their expulsion. This reveals the intolerant attitude adopted within the leadership of the M.P.I. Michel expresses his doubts about the success of the organization:

> On nous a chassé de la voie du paradis imaginaire au nom duquel s'édifiera sans doute un enfer de cauchemar. (p. 93)

Though the action taken by the M.P.I. managing committee against Sovi and Michel is unfortunate, in a way it yields a positive result. Instead of deepening the differences that exist between the two friends in their concept of happiness the expulsion order brings them closer together than ever before. By buying a lottery ticket eventually Sovi thus modifies his attitude to life since he now believes in the idea of chance or luck for the individual, thus sharing similar views with his friend Michel. This does not however mean that Sovi has now rejected entirely the idea of collective happiness. Rather, his new posture portrays him as more compromising than he was before the expulsion order was passed on him and his friend.

The degree of compromise that exists henceforth between Michel and Sovi appears to be a deliberate attempt by Jean Pliya to emphasize that since in Africa there is much importance attached to both the individual and the community it follows then that the quest for happiness should be directed to serve

the needs of the individual as well as the community. It is this basic reality that the M.P.I. has failed to recognize. In the final analysis Michel himself discovers that the most essential thing is that there is in every heart that yearning for happiness:

> Tout en aspirant à ce bonheur dont, seuls les prétendus naïfs ou idéalistes ont le secret, les hommes en groupes se contentent des mirages et suivent plutôt ceux qui leur offrent une caricature de bonheur. Cette drôle de logique me déroute un peu, mais ne me décourage pas. D'une certaine manière, elle atteste la réalité de cette quête inlassable de joie semée au coeur de chaque individu et qu'une éducation erronnée fait souvent avorter. (p. 95)

Jean Pliya in "La Palabre de la dernière chance" thus denounces all the dictatorial policies pursued by political organizations or regimes which stand in the way of the people's search for happiness. Both the individual and the community should be given the opportunity to realize their well-being and aspirations.

That the quest for happiness continues to be given more attention by our author is evident judging from the predominant place the theme occupies in his latest published works. This quest may prove to be a difficult task. But does the author not give us much encouragement through these words of the narrator in "La Palabre de la dernière chance?":

> Pour rendre les hommes heureux, nous n'avons pas le droit de nous décourager. (p. 95)

CHAPTER V

WOMEN IN BENIN SOCIETY

In many of Jean Pliya's works women are often seen playing important roles. This is significant in a world where very often men tend to dominate women. However, the Benin author does not view his female characters as an opposing force to men; rather he presents them as the natural complements of men. The main objective of this chapter is to show how in the works of our author women are seen performing several vital functions. Jean Pliya is not a pioneer in the handling of the women theme. Other African writers such as Sembène Ousmane and Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia have preceded him. Nevertheless, Jean Pliya's approach interests us for he is able to combine with mastery the depiction of women in their traditional roles in the home as well as portraying the modern Benin woman's new outlook to life.

In Kondo le requin two types of traditional women are depicted. There are women with military functions known as the Amazons. There are also housewives. Since the author bases his play mostly on historical facts it is pertinent that he should include the Amazons in his drama. This is important especially when one takes into account the military

prominence of these women in Benin's history as reported by Édouard Foà:

> L'armée dahomienne se divise en deux catégories bien distinctes: l'élément permanent et l'élément provisoire. Les amazones composent le premier, et le deuxième est formé par tous les sujets du roi, appelés au moment de la guerre.[1]

In his play Jean Pliya emphasizes the bravery of the Amazons noted for their total commitment to the cause of defending the Abomean Kingdom. Writing his play in the early 1960s, a period characterized by a growing sense of nationalism among the Africans, the author uses this drama to demonstrate how the fight against colonialism should be regarded as a task that does not concern only men but also women. In other words, the play shows how women alongside with men can present a united force in the national struggle against imperialist aggression.

The Amazons possess that forceful character that can be found only in the most courageous male warriors. They are always prepared to continue fighting till they win or get themselves killed. As celibates, the cutlass which is their weapon serves as a husband to them. While some of Gbêhanzin's male lieutenants are afraid of going to war, the Amazons are solidly behind the warring King and fight gallantly throughout the duration of the conflict. One cannot fail to appreciate

the courage especially of one of these Amazons Naga who with her bare teeth succeeds in slaughtering one of the invaders at Zogbo.

In his depiction of the Amazons the author of Kondo le requin is much concerned with portraying the brute physical attributes of these singular women whose raison-d'être lies in the art of warfare. There is nothing attractive about these warriors. We have got to accept them as they are even if they lack that tenderness that one would expect to find among the female sex. Just as in the historical reality Jean Pliya's warriors have a functional role to play as they rally round the King especially when national security is at stake. This is the essence of the oath taken by the Gahou Femme on behalf of all the Amazons at the time of Gbêhanzin's enthronement:

> Pour votre gloire, ô maître du monde, nous renonçons à la maternité et faisons voeu de chasteté. Comme des papillons, nous danserons jusqu'a la mort autour de votre lumière brillante. (p. 27)

Apart from the warring Amazons there are also other women in the play who deserve some attention: the King's two favourite wives Etchiomi and Djikada. The two queens are seen in close association with their husband as they give him the necessary moral support he needs in the administration of the kingdom. That they are important to

the King in both private and public life can be explained from the fact that the dramatist consecrates an entire scene to these queens seen in company of their husband. The King has just returned from one of his military expeditions. In spite of the petty jealousies and rivalry between them, the two favourite wives work together as in a team trying to reinvigorate him by massaging and telling him how much they have remained deeply attached to him. The insertion of this scene no doubt helps in relieving at least for a while the tension in a play where an atmosphere of war appears to dominate most of the time. Furthermore, it reveals how even such an apparently severe King like Gbêhanzin can still yield to the tenderness of a loving wife.

On the whole Kondo le requin is a play in which women are given reasonable attention. The drama highlights Jean Pliya's idea of the necessity of women working alongside with men in different spheres of life thereby dispelling the myth that women can be useful or active only in the home.

In "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" two categories of women are presented: traditional women who live in poor social conditions like Fiogbé's wife, and also modern women

such as the engineer's wife who are well-to-do and appear to have a reasonable degree of freedom in their matrimonial life.

Phina is the image of a traditional daughter. The girl's total obedience and submission to her parents singles her out as the model of a traditional African girl. In accordance with African customs, Phina's father takes certain important decisions all alone without consulting her even though she is his regular and indispensable helper (especially now that Fiogbé's wife is bedridden through illness). Yet, Fiogbé receives full co-operation from his daughter even though the latter is embarrassed by the offers her father makes to the engineer. Phina's obedience is put to the test when Fiogbé decides eventually to give her as a wife to the engineer. Certainly, according to African tradition, nobody questions Fiogbé's authority to choose a husband for his daughter, for we are told that Phina herself places her destiny in the hands of her father:

> De nombreux prétendants briguaient sa main...
> En fille obéissante, Phina attendait la décision
> de son père n'osant avouer sa préférence. Le
> choix de son père serait le sien. (p. 56)

However, it should be noted that even the most obedient girl in the traditional African context would receive the news of such a sudden match with shock. Yet, Phina does not

put up any opposition to her father's will even at such a critical moment. She tries to conceal her surprise by hanging her head in her usual submission. In the final analysis the author succeeds in making us wonder about the rationale of a system which fails to take into consideration the views of the girl to be given in marriage.

On the other hand, Phina's situation is not quite different from the general lot of African girls. Like her counterparts elsewhere in the continent, Phina has no freedom while still residing in her father's house. She has to wait patiently until the moment she gets a husband; only then would she become a little bit free to express her opinions. Mambou Aimée Gnali considers this condition of a girl in certain African societies to be in sharp contrast to that of the American girl:

> Aux États-Unis, la jeune fille s'émancipe avant le mariage et se range après. En Afrique, c'est l'inverse. Avec le mariage s'ouvre une ère de liberté: telle une jeune fille qui ne sortait jamais chez ses parents querelle son mari pour une soirée manquée; telle autre, que ses parents parvenaient tout juste à vêtir, exige de son mari une nouvelle toilette à chaque fête, voire tous les dimanches.[2]

Mambou Aimé Gnali's views are applicable and valid for African women irrespective of whether they are educated or illiterate like Phina.

The engineer's wife who belongs to a different social

condition manifests those tendencies of an emancipated woman. During one of Fiogbé's visits to the engineer she is seen dining in the company of her husband. She finds Fiogbé's offer of Phina as wife to the engineer as something ridiculous and this explains her sudden outburst of laughter when the offer is made. She shares similar views with her husband on polygamy. The engineer is known to have put forward a strong argument in support of monogamy:

> J'ai une seule épouse et n'en veux point d'autre... La polygamie humilie la femme et compromet l'éducation des enfants. (p. 61)

The engineer and his wife are by their education products of the West. They are modernists who frown upon polygamy from the social point of view. One has also to note that critics of polygamy in Africa today try to defend their position by sometimes making references to their religious education as has been indicated by Nicolas Atangana:

> La seule raison qui nous éloigne de la polygamie est l'éducation à la fois dans la famille, à l'école et à l'Église. En dehors de l'éducation pas de changement notable, toute campagne tapageuse menée par la presse et les lois demeurera vaine.[3]

The opposition shown by the engineer's wife to polygamy appears to be the general tendency of the modern Benin woman to a system which she considers to be a threat to her rights in the marital home. In an opinion survey he conducted inside Benin, Claude Tardits gives the views of a Benin housewife

on a polygamous household:

> Toutes les femmes préfèrent vivre dans un ménage monogamé ou bien la polygamie du mari leur est égale, à condition qu'elles vivent seules dans leur maison et que les autres femmes vivent ailleurs.[4]

"L'Homme qui avait tout donné" hence presents women in both their traditional and modern roles. As a traditional girl Phina is submissive and performs her daily chores thereby bringing much relief to her aged parents. On the other hand the engineer's wife represents a new tendency as a modern Benin woman who sneers at what she believes to be outmoded customs.

"Le Gardien de nuit" which can be regarded as a family story touches slightly on the mother-child relationship. David's mother shows her concern about her ailing child. But she becomes easily irritated when Tante Goussi shows her disapproval of the Western drugs which she (the mother) administers to the ailing David. Yet, it would be incorrect to consider the mother as being radical, for she continues to live under the shadow of her husband without necessarily becoming subservient to him.

It is in the character of Tante Goussi that Jean Pliya succeeds in presenting an illiterate woman with remarkable foresight and experience. She is a highly intelligent woman gifted with the capacity to hardle situations with such a

mastery that would baffle many a tactless woman. She presents a contrast to David's mother. Nevertheless the approaches of both women towards healing techniques could be taken as an example of the possible co-existence between traditional and modern medecine.

But what Tante Goussi can be best noted for is her prudence and love for order in life. She knows that living in a world where sorcery abounds calls for vigilance as the individual has always got to forestall those evil forces that are always working to destroy even innocent people. It is for this reason that she recommends that the feathers of the owl killed in broad daylight by the night-watchman should not be thrown carelessly about, adding that it would be imprudent to let an outsider get hold of any one of them for fear of possible evil consequences. Her advice is not heeded to, for Ayélé the sorceress is given one of the bird's feathers and this is enough for the witch priestess to inflict tragedy upon Cicavi the night-watchman's daughter. Thus, throughout the length of this story Tante Goussi acts as the voice of tradition.

Ayélé the witch is clever and possesses those wiles that persons of her category usually use to entice their victims. As a food-seller, Ayélé is sure to use her trade to make victims. When she intrudes into the night-watchman's hut to

give the latter his usual ration of food it is only with the pretext of knowing whether her spell on Cicavi has worked. Now sure of her success she does not stay longer in her victim's hut for fear that her evil intentions might be read from the show of good humour on her face which she struggles to conceal. She is by no means a courageous woman. This is evident from the way she reacts in her final agony. When she finds herself face to face with the irate night-watchman, now determined to take revenge upon her, Ayélé easily subnits and implores her adversary for mercy. Her plea goes unheeded and the sorceress dies amidst her unsuccessful efforts to pronounce a sentence of doom upon her foe.

One of the characteristics of "Le Gardien de nuit" resides in the distinct personalities of these three female characters: Ayélé is strongly rooted in tradition, Tante Goussi calls for the need to respect the traditional norms, while David's mother could be taken as a good example of a modern Benin woman who feels that Western medecine certainly has a place in Benin.

In La Secrétaire particulière, Jean Pliya puts on the scene women who play important roles in the public service. The main female characters have received some degree of Western education. They are all vocal. The author makes use of his

comedy to bring women into the limelight. Elsewhere, he explicitly states this intention:

> L'objectif de la pièce c'était surtout de donner la parole aux femmes.[5]

Nathalie the heroine of the play has a poor educational background and lacks initiative. Aware of her incompetence in the performance of her office work she takes refuge in Mr Chadas. Nathalie is a girl who knows her master's weaknesses and goes about exploiting the situation to her own advantage. Full of self-importance the Private Secretary behaves exactly like Mr Chadas for whom she acts as spokesman.

If Nathalie were a girl of foresight she would have saved herself a lot of trouble. But as it is she cannot escape sharing part of the blame for the disaster that follows her love affairs with Mr Chadas. We are surprised to see that this girl who has virtually become Mr Chadas' accomplice should be the first to condemn the man in their hour of crisis. In the end it is Mr Chadas who is made to pay for his guilt while Nathalie goes off almost unscathed as if she has no need to atone for her wrongdoings. One gets the impression that it is perhaps the author's preoccupation with unmasking Mr Chadas' guilt that makes him to overlook the equally destructive role played by Nathalie in the play. Or does Jean Pliya feel that his heroine's disgraceful

pregnancy resulting in her repudiation by her Don Juan provide sufficient punishment for the girl's nefarious role in the comedy? Marcos Olu Marius, lecturer in the Faculty of Arts at the Université Nationale du Bénin who is presently preparing an anthology of Benin writers, wonders whether the failure of the author of La Secrétaire particulière to make a strong condemnation of his heroine is morally justifiable:

> L'auteur en innocentant Nathalie ne semble-t-il pas encourager une catégorie de jeunes filles un peu légères et toujours prêtes à jeter la pierre à leur séducteur après une triste expérience?[6]

To ensure security both for herself and her expectant child one would have thought it appropriate for Nathalie to accept as a last resort the proposal put forward by her mother that she should marry Mr Chadas following her pregnancy. After all the young girl faces the danger of losing her office job having failed the qualifying examination for her post. But Nathalie rejects outright the idea of such a marriage on the grounds that she is "une fille moderne", a criterion which makes her too precious to condescend to the level of marrying the polygamist Mr Chadas. To a mother who belongs to an entirely different generation this argument appears very ridiculous. She is all the more puzzled when her daughter discloses her desire to commit abortion. At this moment the mother comes to the conclusion that there is really

something wrong with her daughter's approach to life. Yet we should bear in mind that Nathalie's radical attitudes towards the problems of polygamy and abortion reflect an important tendency among the modern African girls and needs special attention in our ever-changing world.

If Nathalie is noted for her negative role in this comedy, her office colleague Virginie plays a constructive role. It might well be argued that Virginie's virtues are due to the different nature of her education. She is known to have been educated by the nuns and, this as she herself admits, is important to her:

> J'ai été éduquée par les soeurs. Elles m'ont donné le respect de moi-même. (p. 38)

But that alone should not be used to determine Virginie's virtues, for it is also true that some people with a rigorous religious background have turned out later to be rascals. Virginie as we know is just returning from Europe after her studies and this also helps in explaining her ingenuousness. As a young graduate she is completely out of touch with the realities of life, for she is seen making constant references to her school instruction.

However, Virginie's ingenuousness is a great asset in determining her uprightness. Her presence is necessary in proving that there can still be found one or two righteous

people in a world where moral decadence seems to prevail. Virginie's moral, academic and technical competence makes her superior in all respects to Nathalie and Mr Chadas. She faces her office task with courage and determination and refuses to be engulfed in the vicious system of things set in motion by Mr Chadas. Her courage distinguishes her from the Departmental Head who is always trying to evade his responsibilities. Being sure of her capabilities, Virginie does not seek any special favour from Mr Chadas as the incompetent Nathalie is known to have done.

On the other hand, Virginie's attitude towards the marriage institution presents a rather interesting case that needs to be examined closely. Her radical approach to marriage is the natural phenomenon of her sophisticated Western education. Consequently, she adopts the European concept rather than the African one. This young graduate is vigorously opposed to the idea of a bride-price:

> Je ne suis pas à vendre. Si mon fiancé veut payer pour moi la dot, je refuserai tout net. (p. 31)

And yet, one cannot ignore the fact that in most parts of Africa this economic aspect of marriage which Dorothy S. Blair conveniently refers to as "the marriage market"[7] continues to hold even today. Virginie's refusal to comply with this agelong African custom should be seen as representing

the general trend of behaviour common among many educated girls of Africa today. Through their education these girls feel liberated and become actively involved in determining their marriage destiny, an attitude which is completely lacking among the traditional illiterate girls such as Phina in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné". The Cameroonian dramatist Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia also sets on the scene his Juliette who manifests certain tendencies similar to Jean Pliya's Virginie. In fact, Virginie in her opposition to the commercialization of the marriage institution is only echoing the words of Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia's heroine in Trois Prétendants.... un mari, a play which its author is reported to have written since 1956.[8] Yet, there still exist some important differences in the demands of each of these two girls. Juliette appears to be less radical than Virginie, for unlike the latter she does not opt for the abolition of the bride-price, she only insists that the question of who pays the largest amount as bride-price on her should not be the determining factor in her parents' choice of a husband for her:

> Je suis donc à vendre? Pourquoi faut-il que vous essayiez de me donner au plus offrant? Est-ce qu'on ne peut pas me consulter pour un mariage qui me concerne?[9]

It can also be observed that in Jean Pliya's play Virginie views marriage purely as an affair between two people: the bridegroom and his bride. Her decision to marry Jacques is a spontaneous response to the young man's marriage proposal. This again is entirely a European concept which reduces marriage to the level of the two partners involved while playing down the family background of these two individuals which incidently constitutes a dominant factor for marriage in Africa. This helps to explain why Virginie overlooks the importance of a bride-price since in her own concept of marriage the families or parents of both the bridegroom and his bride have no role to play. This is a complete departure from what happens in most parts of Africa, for as J.A. Sofola the Nigerian sociologist rightly points out in the African context the paying of the bride-price is vital in complementing that bond of friendship that links the family of the bridegroom to that of the bride:

> Marriage in Africa is a union of lineages for the purpose of procreation, companionship, assistantship. This contrasts with marriage in Western societies in which emphasis is placed on the union of the two individuals that are immediately concerned. Also in Africa the so-called bride-wealth is paid by the family of the bridegroom to the family of the bride and not vice versa as in Western societies. This wealth may take different forms in different places but it serves the purpose of giving sanction and legality to the union.[10]

In spite of her radical views on the question of marriage we are surprised to find that unlike most highly educated girls in Africa, Virginie does not adopt a snobbish attitude in her choice of a husband. We consider her proposed marriage with Jacques as being particularly significant. Such a union would not have been conceived but for the confidence which the young girl has succeeded in inspiring in the timid Jacques. The young man's timidity before Virginie stems from the fact that he has a poor educational background and feels that he cannot therefore dream of winning the hand of Virginie. The latter dispels Jacques' fears about paper qualifications which she dismisses as being mere "ridicules préjugés". Jean Pliya thus makes use of Virginie as a model for the modern African girls to emulate. The author's message here is quite clear: the mere fact that a girl is well educated should not prompt her to seek to marry only a man whose level of education is not below her own.

Denise the barrister is another female protagonist in the play whose role needs to be stressed. Besides, it should be noted that having a young girl as barrister in the sixties anywhere in Africa was not common. This explains Mr Chadas' incredulity when Denise first introduces herself to him:

> Vous voulez plaisanter. Une jeune fille avocate. Allez le raconter à d'autres. (p. 23)

However, it must be remarked here that the speaker's incredulity only helps in showing how certain men tend to underestimate the true capabilities and worth of women. And, one can see that it is women like Denise who stand firmly to defend the poor. The barrister's role here can be likened to that of a knight-errant protecting the weak and the oppressed with indefatigable courage and honesty. When she fails to have Mr Chadas prosecuted in the Avocè Holonon affair she does not get discouraged in her constant search for justice. Instead she waits patiently for an opportune moment, and this comes about when Mr Chadas' scandal with Nathalie is brought to the open.

Denise's strong desire is that the society should be swept clean of malpractices. At the same time she envisages this taking the form of a purification:

> Ah! que n'ai-je le pouvoir d'assainir la société d'un coup de balai? (p. 86)

One might even add here that her dream is realized with the arrest of Mr Chadas at the end to face the course of justice. Without the barrister's help such an arrest would not have been possible.

There is in La Secrétaire particulière deep solidarity between the female protagonists. Denise and Virginie are

united in their struggle against the depraved Mr Chadas. Later in the play Nathalie disengages herself from Mr Chadas' camp and seeks protection under the umbrella of Denise and Virginie. The Private Secretary who has become victim of the Departmental Head henceforth receives both moral and physical help from Virginie and Denise. The latter even offers Nathalie a place in her own office. This satirical comedy is thus significant for its championing of the cause of women.

Like La Secrétaire particulière, "Le Rendez-vous" is focused on adolescent girls. There is also opposition between the type of girl who dreams of living an emancipated life; on the other hand there is the girl who learns to live in a natural manner attached to the traditional norms. Camille represents the former tendency while Solange stands for the latter.

Camille has no respect for her aged mother. She behaves exactly as she likes. Her search for self-emancipation leads her into indiscriminate love adventures. Her tragic end as a result of her sad love experience with Koffi is a clear sign that her concept of life is based on illusion. Like Nathalie, Camille plays a negative role in this story. Nevertheless, her presence is necessary for through her,

Jean Pliya reveals the tragedy of our female youths in the urban centres today as they search for ways to realize their dreams about life.

With Solange the picture is quite different. Like Phina, Solange proves to be an obedient daughter. When she is invited by Camille to attend the wedding ball of their friend Elagnon Faustine, Solange automatically decides to ask for her own father's permission first. Though Camille teases her on this occasion of behaving like a child Solange justifies her attitude by telling Camille that she (Solange) still depends on her parents.

Solange proves to be a sincere friend. She is constantly seen advising Camille not to lose her head in sensitive situations. Had her friend listened to her advice she would not have committed suicide after all. And when the tragedy takes place, Solange as a girl endowed with imagination ponders over the coverage the affair would receive in the press. In the final analysis it is she who plays a positive role in the story as she makes relentless efforts to calm down Camille's bereaved mother.

An overall view of "Le Rendez-vous" thus shows that while many a modern African girl tends to run after shadows there are nevertheless those who continue to reconcile

themselves to the realities of life.

Two women of importance are presented in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" though not in contrast as in the preceding story. There is first of all grandmother and then, Sènami. One discovers that "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" is unique in its presentation of the importance of maternal love. The hero, a schoolboy is deeply attached to his grandmother. When he leaves the city to spend his holidays in the village, it is his grandmother who receives him with the deepest emotion worthy of a devoted grandmother. The old woman is described by her grandson in very tender terms:

> Menue comme une fillette, avec son sourire et ses gestes apaisants, c'était la personne la plus douce du monde. (p. 8)

Grandmother is a symbol of peace. She is an embodiment of those authentic traditional values which the schoolboy is gradually losing contact with due to the nature of his Western education. The old woman therefore helps to fill that vacuum created in the boy's education. The little boy needs her tenderness to compensate for the hectic and disconcerting effects created by his stay in the city. One finds in this story that the author highlights that love and tenderness often ascribed to an African mother. Several other African writers have done the same thing. Prominent among them is Sembène Ousmane in his short story "Le Voltaïque".

Camara Laye has successfully exploited the grandmother love theme in his L'Enfant noir. In that novel too the author is very much concerned with showing the grandmother as compensating for what her grandchild has lost in the latter's pursuit of Western education.

Grandmothers are not appreciated simply for their tenderness towards their grandchildren. There is also another important factor which they are noted for - the traditional wisdom which makes them understand situations better than people of tender age. In "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" it is grandmother who first suggests that the young chimpanzee's peculiar movements at the sight of Sènami could in fact mean that the animal has fallen in love with the young girl. She is proved right as subsequent events in the story indicate. It is also grandmother who advises the schoolboy on what feed should be given to the captured chimpanzee.

Jean Pliya also presents another type of woman in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" who does not fall within the domain of a mother. Sènami the beautiful girl whose neck is as smooth as polished marble, is being introduced into the story for the weaving of the drama surrounding the captured chimpanzee. The author insists very much on portraying her physical charm and beauty. This is however done with a purpose. Sènami's presence is intimately linked with the drama of the chimpanzee.

The young girl has to be presented in such a manner as to make her physical attraction felt even by the chimpanzee. Her role in the narrative is therefore mainly functional. And yet the Sènami-chimpanzee drama should not be regarded as a mere piece of diversion which the author inserts into his story. The chimpanzee is in love with Sènami but the latter is not aware of this love. Jean Pliya paints here a situation which is very similar to what the Romantic writers were very fond of expressing in their works. In "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" it is the beauty and charm of an innocent girl that is the cause of the agony and death of the chimpanzee that can be rightly described as being a victim of unrequited love. The chimpanzee finds itself in a cruel world that fails to understand and satisfy one of its basic needs. Thus, one can see that the Sènami-chimpanzee drama can also be used to portray human situation.

Whatever may be the ramifications the author has made in "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" it should however be taken first and foremost as a family story. To present a balanced account of the family in a typically African village, Jean Pliya realizes the importance of creating lively female characters who contribute in no small measure in enhancing the glamour of the village.

Thus, Jean Pliya in his works, very often presents contrasting pairs of women. It is either the traditional woman and the modern one; or, in certain cases the morally upright woman and the guilty or licentious type. In this chapter we have tried to portray the attitudes and the diverse roles played by all these groups of women irrespective of whether they have been positive or negative. This is because they all represent the divergent facets of the female population. In general, Jean Pliya is sympathetic to the cause of women. At the same time the author proposes his own image of an ideal Benin woman. Such a woman is one who through a good education becomes vocal not only in matters relating to her personal welfare but who also participates actively in the building of a stable and sane society. In this way Virginie and Denise are perhaps the best realization of our author's dreams.

C O N C L U S I O N

> Je suis surtout préoccupé par un message... sensibiliser les gens... pas de divertissement.[1]

This is how Jean Pliya summarizes the main objective of his plays. The author's assertion could be extended to all his works, as each of them carries a message. The Benin author's message is a moral one. His works are mainly didactic. Nevertheless, Jean Pliya does not see himself as a preacher of morals,[2] neither do we attribute to him such a role. And, as we can see in this study nowhere does he try to impose what he feels to be morally right upon his public. He only exposes situations and it is left to the public to draw a certain moral from situations so exposed.

For an African author who feels that he has some message to propose to his countrymen drama and the short story are perhaps the best literary genres he can exploit. That is why even at the beginning of this study we have stated clearly Jean Pliya's reasons for using this approach. A quick review of his plays and short stories reveals the nature of the message each one of them carries.

In Kondo le requin Jean Pliya's vision is directed towards creating in the Beninois the zeal for patriotism. Gbêhanzin defends his country because he considers this

as an important moral duty which he owes to his people:

> Je ne veux pas inclure dans la brillante histoire du Danhomè un épisode de lacheté. (p. 44).

The message in this play is of a socio-political nature. It is national honour and glory that precede all other interests. The individual makes personal sacrifices for the interest of the nation at large.

La Secrétaire particulière reveals the problems of corruption and nepotism practised even by those who occupy important positions in Benin's public service. One discovers in this play Jean Pliya's attitude towards the unpatriotic people such as Mr Chadas. In very clear terms the author condemns Mr Chadas through the mouth of Virginie and that of Denise. These two girls yearn for a fair society, and this is a good manifestation of the love they have for their country. In a way their fight for a better society can be compared with Gbêhanzin's partiotism. They are all as courageous from the moral point of view as the hero of Kondo le requin.

Apart from the need for patriotism as shown in La Secrétaire particulière the play also carries another important lesson: the denunciation of general moral laxity. In place of this the author proposes moral uprightness which is to be found in honesty and personal integrity. This strong

moral appeal for patriotism or the need for righteousness characterizes the dramatic works of Jean Pliya. The view that drama should be didactic is not new:

> Il ne faut pas que la multitude sorte du théatre sans emporter avec elle quelque moralité austère et profonde,[3]

Jean Pliya's short stories are as didactic as his theatrical works. Each one of these stories carries a message centred upon a particular problem which the author considers as being of special interest to the Benin public. Sometimes the problem may be that of the traditional beliefs as can be seen in both "L'Arbre fétiche" and "Le Gardien de nuit" in which case the author seems to suggest the need especially for modernists to understand, and if necessary, respect the beliefs of the traditionalists. When it comes to the question of social inequality as it is being manifested in "L'Homme qui avait tout donné" and "La Voiture rouge" Jean Pliya advocates a society based upon justice in which the poor cease to remain in perpetual social bondage at the mercy of the affluent class of people. In certain cases the Benin author proposes a new approach to life based upon ensuring happiness to his countrymen. This is the message of "La Palabre de la dernière chance", "Le Chimpanzé amoureux" and "Le Rendez-vous". This in brief is the nature of the

moral issues raised in the seven short stories. Jean Pliya's short stories are didactic in their aim, thus conforming to what Léopold Sédar Senghor says about the moral aspect of all forms of story-telling in Africa:

> En Afrique Noire, toute fable, voire tout conte, est l'expression imagée d'une vérité morale, à la fois connaissance du monde et leçon de vie sociale.[4]

When viewed as a whole it can be observed that there is a certain unity of purpose that binds together all the literary productions of Jean Pliya. Apart from the fact that they all have their settings in Benin, they also treat the Benin society from a basically moral angle. This last aspect is of vital importance especially for a writer like Jean Pliya who strongly believes that a work of art should always reflect the society from where it originates. And as we observed earlier our author does not consider himself as a moralist. That is why in all his works he treats his subject-matter with a reasonable degree of objectivity. He is 'outside' avoiding to intrude his own personality in what he writes. This enables him to present his vision of Benin society from the point of view of a realist. Thus, even if the author himself does not speak to us directly his characters are there to communicate with us, and it is by using our judicious critical powers that we are able to

discern who among them are expressing more or less the author's viewpoint.

One of the most interesting characteristics of Jean Pliya's works is that they all express a certain optimism in their presentation of the Benin situation. Whatever be the nature of the problems the young nation may be facing, the author is constantly offering possibilities of a change for the better. Kondo le requin terminates on a note of hope as seen from Gbêhanzin's advice to his remaining loyal subjects:

> Levez la tête, séchez vos larmes, Ceignez vos pagnes pour la longue marche. (p. 110)

For the King "la longue marche" indicates a period of struggle which would ultimately usher in freedom. In La Secrétaire particulière the hope for a new lease of life is heralded by Mr Chadas' arrest and the proposed marriage between Jacques and Virginie. A general note of optimism also prevails in the short stories. Even the most tragic ones tacitly imply that the present difficulties can be eventually overcome.

To conclude, we would like to remark that when discussing the Benin situation, Jean Pliya is indirectly talking about other places in Africa. In fact, his final message is one of self-reliance and solidarity among all Africans:

Je souhaite que l'homme noir fasse
confiance à son propre génie.[5]

Coming from a writer who draws his inspiration from mother Africa, these words carry much weight.

N O T E S

INTRODUCTION

1. Irene D'Almeida, "Writing in Dahomey today", Afriscope, 4, No. 10, (October 1974), p. 48.
2. Ibid., p. 50.
3. Since December 1975 the Republic of Dahomey became known as the People's Republic of Benin. We have therefore used the name "Benin" throughout this study even though all the works being treated here were written when the country was still called "Dahomey".
4. We have given in the Appendix a résumé of important dates in Jean Pliya's biography.
5. Subsequent citations from this interview will be indicated in the notes as simply "Interview".
6. In this study we have made use of the 2nd CLÉ edition of L'Arbre fétiche (1974). All future page references to any one of the four stories in this collection refer to this edition.
7. Subsequent page references to this play refer to this edition.
8. In this study we have made use of the 3rd CLÉ edition of La Secrétaire particulière (1977). All future page references to this play refer to this edition.

9. Subsequent page references to any one of the three stories in this collection refer to this edition.
10. For a detailed list of Jean Pliya's other publications, see the end of this study.
11. "Interview"
12. "Interview"
13. This is contained in a paper titled "Le Rôle du théâtre dans le développement culturel en Afrique" which Jean Pliya read at a Seminar organized in Abidjan (June 20 - July 20, 1978).
14. "Interview"
15. "Interview"
16. "Interview"
17. "Interview"
18. "Interview"
19. "Interview"
20. "Interview"
21. "Le Rôle du théâtre..."
22. Fraternité Matin, 27 June 1978, p. 7.
23. "Interview"
24. L'Afrique littéraire et artistique, 27, (février 1973), pp. 2 - 9.
25. L'Afrique littéraire et artistique, No. 37, 1975, pp. 9 - 13.

26. Ba Shiru, 8, No. 1, 1976, pp. 1 - 10.

27. Recherche, Pédagogie et culture: regard sur les littératures africaines 2, 33 (janvier - février 1978), pp. 22 - 23.

28. Afrique nouvelle, 18 mai 1978, p. 22.

29. The Fetish Tree (L'Arbre fétiche): Introduction, Translation and Notes, "Mémoire de Maîtrise d'Anglais", Université Paul Valéry Montpellier, September 1974.

A comprehensive list of publications on Jean Pliya is given in our bibliography.

30. "Interview"

CHAPTER I

1. R. Grivot, Réactions dahoméennes (Paris: Éditions Berger - Levrault, 1954), p. 112.
2. Édouard Foà, Le Dahomey (Paris: A. Hennuyer, Imprimeur - Éditeur, 1895), p. 228.
3. Adolphe Akindélé et Cyrille Aguessy, Le Dahomey (Paris: Éditions Maritimes et Coloniales, 1955), p. 43.
4. Edebiri, "L'Espérance tacite de Jean Pliya", p. 10.
5. Edebiri, "Jean Pliya: Portraitist of Benin Society." p. 1.
6. R.M. Downes, Tiv Religion (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1971), p. 50.
7. Jean Pliya, Dahomey, Afrique occidentale (Éditions St Paul, Issy les Moulineaux, France, 1970), p. 82.
8. This keeps appearing as a refrain in the poem. See Birago Diop, Leurres et lueurs (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967), pp. 64-66. The poem had earlier appeared in one of Birago Diop's stories, "Sarzan" in Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba (Paris: Fasquelle, 1947).

9. Léopold Sédar Senghor, "In Memoriam", Poèmes (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 7.

10. "Welcome" in the Fon language (our translation of the author's note).

CHAPTER II

1. Albert Tévoedjrê, L'Afrique révoltée (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), p. 14.
2. Cheik Hamidou Kane, L'Aventure ambiguë (Paris: Julliard, 1961), p. 44.
3. "Interview"
4. Ferdinand Oyono, Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille (Paris: Julliard, 1956), pp. 103 - 104.
5. Foà, Le Dahomey, p. 53.
6. Ricard, "Jean Pliya, écrivain dahoméen", p. 6.
7. Joseph Djivo, Béhanzin, héros national du Danhomé", Balafon, 39, avril 1978, p. 40.
8. Grivot, Réactions dahoméennes p. 21.
9. "Interview"

CHAPTER III

1. Ricard, "Jean Pliya: écrivain dahoméen", p. 4.
2. "Interview"
3. "Interview"
4. "Interview"
5. See Huannou, "Deux écrivains béninois...", p. 23.
6. See Actes du Colloque sur le théâtre négro-africain (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), p. 69; where Alphanoye Sonfo asserts that African dramatists draw their inspiration from four sources: religion, the traditional oral literature, the society, and history.
7. Quoted in Actes du Colloque sur le théâtre négro-africain, p. 216.
8. Maurice - A. Glélé, Naissance d'un état noir (Paris: Librairie Générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1969), p. 323.
9. Guy Landry Hazoumé, Idéologies trabalistes et nation en Afrique: le cas dahoméen (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972), p. 217.
10. "Interview"
11. Djibril, "Jean Pliya, Le chimpanzé amoureux", p. 22.
12. "Interview"

CHAPTER IV

1. "Interview"
2. Camara Laye, L'Enfant noir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 60.
3. This term appears frequently in Senghor's poems. See for example, Poèmes (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 116, 128.
4. "Interview"
5. See Robert Cornevin, Littératures d'Afrique noire de langue française (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), p. 217.
6. Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson, The Adolescent Experience (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc; 1966), p. 233.

CHAPTER V

1. Foà, Le Dahomey, p. 255.
2. Mambou Aimée Gnali, "La Femme africaine, un cas: la Congolaise", Présence africaine, No. 68 (1968), pp. 24 - 25.
3. Nicolas Atangana, "La Femme africaine dans la société" Présence africaine, No. 13 (avril - mai 1957), p. 139.
4. Claude Tardits, Porto-Novo: les nouvelles générations africaines entre leurs traditions et L'Occident (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1958), p. 63.
5. "Interview"
6. In my discussion of Jean Pliya's works with him on July 8, 1978 in Cotonou, Marcos Olu Marius, himself a Beninois, read that extract from his anthology still in manuscript.
7. Dorothy S. Blair, African Literature in French (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 126.
8. Ibid., p. 127.

9. Guillaume Oyônô-Mbia, Trois prétendants... un mari (Éditions CLE, Yaoundé, 1976), p. 20.

10. J.A. Ṣofọlá, African Culture and the African Personality: What makes an African Person African (African Resources Publishers Co. Ibadan, 1973), p. 6.

CONCLUSION

1. "Interview"
2. "Interview"
3. V. Hugo cited by Bakary Traoré, Le Théâtre négro-africain et ses fonctions sociales (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), p. 113.
4. L.S. Senghor, Préface aux Nouveaux Contes d'Amadou Koumba (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), p. 17.
5. "Interview"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. A COMPREHENSIVE LIST OF JEAN PLIYA'S PUBLICATIONS

i) Literature

a) Books

- Kondo le requin. Cotonou : Les Éditions du Bénin, 1966. ORTF-DAEC, 1969.
- La Secrétaire particulière. Cotonou: Éditions ABM, 1970. Yaoundé: Éditions CLE, 1973.
- L'Arbre fétiche. Yaoundé : Éditions CLÉ, 1971.
- Le Chimpanzé amoureux. Éditions Saint-Paul, Issy les Moulineaux, 1977.

b) Scholarly papers

- "Réflexions sur les problèmes de la création théâtrale: les rapports entre l'auteur, le metteur en scène et la troupe théâtrale," presented at the Inter-African Seminar on the theatre, Abidjan (June 20 - July 20, 1978).
- "Le Rôle du théâtre dans le développement culturel en Afrique," presented at the Inter-African Seminar on the theatre, Abidjan (June 20 - July 20, 1978).

ii) Geography/History

a) Manuals

- Le Dahomey, l'Afrique, le monde, in collaboration with A. Mondjannagni, A. Journaux, F. Pelissier, Caen: Imprimerie Ozanne, 1965.
- L'Histoire de mon pays, le Dahomey, a history manual for the "Cours Élémentaire". Porto-Novo : Imprimerie Nationale du Dahomey, 1967.

- Le Dahomey, l'Afrique Occidentale et les Civilisations du Monde, for the "Cours Moyens," Editions St Paul, Issy les Moulineaux, 1970.

b) Pedagogical aids

- "Carte murale de Géographie" in collaboration with M. Mondjannagni Alfred, Editions M.D.I. St Germain-en-Laye, 1962.

- "Les Rois d'Abomey," an audio-visual pedagogical document. Paris : edited by l'AUDECAM H. No. 8, 84 Avenue V. Hugo, 1972.

iii) Dietetics and Health

- Alimentation de Santé en Afrique Tropicale, in collaboration with Rose Pliya, Paris: Éditions de la Revue Vivre en Harmonie. 1974.

II. TRANSLATIONS OF JEAN PLIYA'S WORKS

ADOKONOUN, Barthélémy (l'Abbé) has translated Kondo le requin into "Fon".

CHARLES, Wendy. S. The Fetish Tree translated with Introduction and Notes for the award of the degree of Master of Arts at the Université Paul Valéry Montpellier, September 1974.

III. ARTICLES ON JEAN PLIYA

AHUA, Bernard. "M. Jean Pliya: le problème des langues nationales peut-être résolu par le théâtre." Fraternité Matin, 27 juin 1978.

ANONYMOUS. "La Secrétaire particulière." Daho-Express, 20 avril 1970.

ANONYMOUS. "Jean Pliya: un auteur engagé" Entente Africaine, No. 5 octobre 1970.

ANONYMOUS. "Arts, Lettres et Spectacles," Fraternité Matin, 23 avril 1974.

BHÉLY-QUÉNUM, Olympe. "Kondo ou la tragédie du roi Béhanzin." Afrique actuelle, No. 25, février 1968.

DJIBRIL, Moudjib. "Jean Pliya : Le Chimpanzé amoureux." Afrique nouvelle, 18 mai 1978.

EDEBIRI, Unionmwan. "L'Espérance tacite de Jean Pliya, écrivain dahonéen." L'Afrique littéraire et artistique, No. 37, 1975.

EDEBIRI, Unionmwan. "Jean Pliya : Portraitist of Benin Society." Ba Shiru, 8, No. 1, 1976.

EDEBIRI, Unionmwan. "Jean Pliya, nouvelliste." Daho-Express, 21 juin 1974.

HUANNOU, Adrien. "Deux écrivains béninois: Richard Dogbeh, Jean Pliya." Recherche, Pédagogie et culture: regard sur les littératures africaines 2, 33, janvier-février 1978.

RICARD, Alain. "Jean Pliya : écrivain dahoméen." L'Afrique littéraire et artistique, 27, février 1973.

ROBINET, Françoise. "Le Concours de la nouvelle." Preuves, février 1964.

IV. GENERAL WORKS

AKINDÉLÉ, Adolphe, et al. Le Dahomey. Paris : Éditions Maritimes et Coloniales, 1955.

ATANGANA, Nicolas. "La Femme africaine dans la société." Présence Africaine, No. 13 avril - mai 1957.

BANHAM, Martin et al. African Theatre Today. London : Pitman Publishing, 1976.

BLAIR, Dorothy S. African Literature in French. Cambridge: University Press, 1976.

BRUNET, L. et al. Le Dahomey. Paris : Augustin Challamel, Editeur, 1900.

BURNESS, Donald. Shaka King of the Zulus in African Literature. Washington D.C.: Three Continents, 1976.

CORNEVIN, Robert. Littératures d'Afrique noire de langue française. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976.

_____ Le Théâtre en Afrique noire et à Madagascar. Paris : Le Livre Africain, 1970.

D'ALMEIDA, Irene. "Writing in Dahomey today." Africscope 4, No. 10, October 1974.

DIOP, Birago. Les Contes d'Amadou Koumba. Paris : Fasquelle, 1947.

——— Leurres et lueurs. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1967.

——— Les Nouveaux Contes d'Amadou Koumba. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1958.

DJIVO, Joseph. "Béhanzin, héros national du Danhomé" Balafon. 39 avril 1978.

DOUVAN, Elizabeth et al. The Adolescent Experience. New York : John Wiley and Sons, Inc; 1966.

DOWNES, R.M. Tiv Religion. Ibadan : Ibadan University Press, 1971.

Etudes dahoméennes. Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, mai 1965.

Etudes dahoméennes. Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, No. 12 Tome 1, avril 1968.

FOÀ, Édouard. Le Dahomey. Paris : A. Hennuyer, Imprimeur - Éditeur, 1895.

FREY, (colonel) Côte continentale d'Afrique. Paris : C. Marpon et E. Flammarion, Éditeurs, 1890.

GLÉLÉ, Maurice - A. Naissance d'un état noir. Paris : Librairie Générale de Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1969.

GNILI, Mambou A. "La Femme africaine, un cas : la Congolaise." Présence Africaine. No. 68, 1968.

GRIVOT, R. Réactions dahonéennes. Paris: Éditions Berger - Levrault, 1954.

HAZOUNÉ, Guy L. Idéologies tribalistes et nation en Afrique : le cas dahonéen. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1972.

HERSKOVITS, M.J. : Dahomey. New York : Austin Co., 1938.

KANE, Cheik Hamidou. L'Aventure ambiguë. Paris : Julliard, 1961.

KESTELOOT, Lilyan. Anthologie négro-africaine. Verviers : Éditions Gérard et Co. Belgique, 1967.

------ Black Writers in French. Translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1974.

LAYE, Camara. L'Enfant noir. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1966.

MARIUS, Marcos O. Anthologie d'écrivains béninois (Unpublished).

MANTET, Jacques. Panorama de la littérature noire d'expression française. Paris : Fayard, 1972.

ORTOVA, Jarmila. "Les Femmes dans l'oeuvre littéraire d'Ousmane Senbène." Présence Africaine, No. 71, 1969.

OYONO, Ferdinand. Le Vieux nègre et la médaille. Paris : Julliard, 1956.

OYONO-MBIA, Guillaume. Trois Prétendants ... un mari. Yaoundé : Éditions CLE, 1976.

PAGEARD, Robert. Littérature négro-africaine. Paris : Le Livre Africain, 1966.

SENGHOR, Léopold Sédar. Poèmes. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1973.

SOFOLA, J.A. African Culture and the African Personality : What makes an African Person African. Ibadan: African Resources Publishers Co., 1973.

TARDITS, Claude. Porto-Novo : les nouvelles générations africaines entre leurs traditions et l'Occident. Paris : Mouton et Co., 1958.

TÉVOEDJRÈ, Albert. L'Afrique révoltée. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1958.

Théâtre négro-africain (Le) : Actes du Colloque d'Abidjan - 1970. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1971.

TRAORÉ, Bakary. Le Théatre négro-africain et ses fonctions sociales. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1958.

A P P E N D I X

JEAN PLIYA

BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1931 July 21	:	Born at Djougou (People's Republic of Benin).
1946 - 1951	:	Receives his secondary education at Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and in the Ivory Coast.
1952 - 1957	:	Receives his higher education in the University of Dakar (Senegal), then in Toulouse (France).
1957	:	Gets married while still in France.
1958	:	Death of his first wife.
1959	:	Leaves France for Benin.
1959 (March)	:	Jean Pliya and Albert Tévoedjrè found "Le Mouvement de Libération Nationale" (M.L.N.).
1959 - 1960	:	Teaches at the Lycée Béhanzin in Port-Novo.
1961 - 1963	:	Director of Cabinet of the Minister of National Education.
1963	:	Minister of Information and Tourism.
		His first literary work "L'Arbre fétiche" wins first prize in short story competition organized by the Preuves review.
1964 - 1965	:	Deputy of Abomey and also First Secretary of Benin's National Assembly.
1965	:	Takes up teaching again. He leaves Benin together with his family for France for health reasons.
1966	:	Publication of Kondo le requin.

1967 : Kondò le requin wins the "Grand Prix de Littérature d'Afrique Noire".

1968 : Kondo le requin wins second prize in competition organized by the French Radio Corporation (O.R.T.F.).

1969 : Leaves France with his family back to Africa. Teaches Geography at L'Université du Bénin in Togo.

1970 : Publication of La Secrétaire particulière.

1971 : Publication of L'Arbre fétiche.

1972. : Returns to Benin where he teaches at l'Université Nationale du Bénin, Cotonou.

Becomes vegetarian for health reasons.

1974 Jan. 21: He is "chevalier dans l'ordre des Arts et Lettres".

1975 : Becomes Deputy Vice-Chancellor of l'Université Nationale du Bénin.

1976 : Obtains his "Doctorat de 3^{e} Cycle" in Geography.

1977 : Publication of Le Chimpanzé amoureux.