HUMOUR IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF FRANCIS BEBEY

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D E C L A R A T I O N

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been previously published under any form. All references and quotations used have been acknowledged in the foot-notes and the bibliography.

Signed: A. J. Gbanite (Mrs)

Date: 8th December 1983

D E D I C A T I O N

This thesis is dedicated to my three children, Chinelo, Ekene Jr., and Anaeto, who nearly made it impossible, and to my husband Ekene who goaded me on.

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HUMOUR IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF FRANCIS BEBEY

INTRODUCTION

The word "humour" is very complex and intricate. We frequently hear such statements as "He has a real sense of humour," and "He has no humour whatsoever." Most of us prefer to have the former statement attributed to us. The following question subsequently arises: what then is humour? It is an abstract, elusive thing that the greater part of mankind strives to possess. Being capable of transmitting and appreciating humour is an essential ingredient in Man's quest for relaxation. At sometime or other, we all need to smile and release tension in a huge guffaw. Regardless of race or culture, this need is innate in Man, and is indeed what distinguishes him from lower animals.

Often, we condemn people because according to us, they have a "twisted sense of humour." This means that what seems funny to them could in effect be sad or even frightening to others. According to Mintz:

"The comprehension and appreciation of humour is often particular to a nation, region, or social group."[1] By this, Mintz means that the environmental context affects Man's perception and appreciation of the funny. People in one environment might find something funny due

to their own fixed social norms. Any deviation from these norms can therefore give rise to amusement. However, what might be deviations from the laws of society to some people, might be perfectly normal to another group of people since their own social laws or norms are based on a different set of rules.

Consequently, an Englishman who cracks typical English jokes about the Scots (a constant source of English humour), will not receive much appreciation from a typical African audience, who need to have prior knowledge of the constant playful antagonism between the English and the Scots to be able to appreciate their jokes about each other.

Nevertheless, these nuances in the appreciation of the funny notwithstanding, a general definition of what humour is, can still be obtained.

Langston Hughes propounds that humour is:

> Laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it; of course, you laugh by proxy. You're really laughing at the other guy's lacks, not your own. That's what makes it funny - the fact that you don't know you are laughing at yourself. Humour is when the joke is on you but hits the other guy first - before it boomerangs. Humour is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny but it is, and you must laugh.[2]

From this definition, we can observe that to Hughes, humour and laughter cannot be separated from each

other. Felt humour arouses amusement which can either be expressed as smiling or overt laughter. Felt humour is a spontaneous occurrence which teaches us more about ourselves, because when we laugh at others, we are really laughing at ourselves.

"Humour," as a word, originated from English. It was later absorbed into the French language. However, the French have given it a wider dictionary meaning than the English.

The Dictionnaire Général de la langue française describes humour as "Emprunté de l'anglais 'humour,' 'humour,' Gaiété flegmatique parfois assaisonnée d'ironie."[3]

The Dictionnaire de la langue francaise describes humour as a:

> "Forme d'esprit qui consiste à dissimuler sous une impassibilite apparente une raillerie parfois cruelle, une satire, l'absurdite comique d'une situation."[4]

These definitions from French dictionaries show that 'humour' as a French word encompasses irony, satire and the comic.

So much importance is attached to this humour by Man, that it finds its way into Literature. In fact literary humour has been found to be quite an old phenomenon with writers such as Rabelais, as far back as

the sixteenth century. Consequently, one would not be wrong in saying that humour in literature has been a continuous process, right from the time Man was able to put his thoughts down on paper, and it is continuing to evolve irrespective of race, culture and environment.

Because of humour's way of transcending race and other factors, one would not be surprised that there are African writers who have a markedly funny style of writing. It is to this category of African writers that Bebey belongs. In fact the definition of humour seen in the Dictionnaire de la langue française is quite apt when describing Bebey's work and the type of humour present therein. Consequently, it is on this definition that we shall rely when assessing Bebey's own type of humour, because on the one hand, his work is written in French, and on the other hand, because the French influence is more likely to be present in his works than the English influence.

It is pertinent to state at this juncture, that race and culture seem to give some confining peculiarities to humour. For instance, there is British humour, which as the name denotes, appertains to the British. We hear a great deal about "L'esprit britannique" and "L'humour britannique." The British have always prided themselves on their sense of humour. Even as far back as the seventeenth century, they were of the opinion

that their comedy was superior to that of the French. However, other nations do not accept the superiority of British humour. On the contrary, they regard British humour as cold.

There is also French humour with such writers as Alphonse Allais. The French too have always considered their humour to be infinitely superior to that of other countries especially Britain.

The idea that one people's type of humour is superior to another is not anything new. People from different countries like to consider themselves wittier than their neighbours. This has been a constant source of rivalry between the French and the English, with either looking down on the other. Robert Bernard Martin states that:

> What is so commonly claimed, however, is seldom allowed to one's neighbours. The French, we are told, have no real sense of humour, that of the Germans is of the humblest kind, the Scots (as Sydney Smith has said) require a surgical operation to get a joke into their understanding...[5]

What emerges from this is that Bernard Martin thinks that English humour is superior to that of their neighbours.

Negro-african humour, as a brand of humour exists too, but it is not as universally known and classified as the first two types.

From all these, it is therefore not surprising that a world-wide conference on humour was held in 1976. Out of the symposia presented at this conference, a book was compiled: It's a Funny Thing, Humour. Though this conference was limited to the Western world, it gives an insight into the detailed analysis of humour as a universally appreciated phenomenon and shows that more and more importance is being accorded to humour in all its manifestations.

Humour is greatly appreciated the world over. One question however remains to be answered. Is it rigidly true that,

> "The interpretation of any fragment of experience as "humorous" depends on the recognition from someone, some group or some society, that certain ideas and behaviour are in certain contexts and situations deviant."?[6]

To a certain extent, the answer is yes. But this does not mean that people from different cultures cannot understand or appreciate humour from a culture other than their own. On the contrary, it is a common contention that there are some aspects of humour which are universal. A cross-cultural research was carried out by J.H. Goldstein in an effort to discover if there were any marked differences in humour. Goldstein did not base his study on a particular country but based his work on very many countries including among others:

Belgium, Hong Kong, U.S.A., Senegal, Israel, Zambia, England, France and Germany. The result of this vast research was indeed startling. No significant differences were found between national or cultural groups. The differences found were very few and generally of not much consequence. In fact the agreement found between the different nationals is more striking than the differences.[7]

Thus it can be observed that humour in itself is a rather complex topic since it is closely linked with irony, satire and the comic. As a matter of fact, the four are so interwoven that they have to be looked at together, because by the modern usage of the word, humour refers to almost anything associated with laughter. Bebey is given credit for having a sense of humour which he uses to his best advantage as we shall see further on in this study.

BEBEY, OTHER AFRICAN WRITERS AND HUMOUR

Bebey's literary works - Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio (1967), Embarras et compagnie (1968), Trois petits cireurs (1972), La poupée ashanti (1973), Le Roi Albert d'Effidi (1976), Concert pour un vieux masque (1981),[8] are not equally funny. In fact they can be divided into two broad categories. Le Fils d'Agatha, Embarras and Le Roi Albert fall into the light-hearted category. Into the more serious group fall Petits cireurs and

Concert. La Poupeé cannot really be put into any specific category because while there are some amusing incidents in it, it is on a more serious note than Le Fils d'Agatha and the others in this category.

Le Fils d'Agatha is Bebey's masterpiece as far as humour is concerned. Like most of Bebey's literary works, the story is about a traditional tribal society which does not seem to feel the effects of Westernization. Mbenda, the chief character who is also the narrator of the story, renders an extremely funny account of his conjugal misfortunes. In the process he paints a very realistic scene of life in an African society.

Embarras is another work which is brimming with humour. In this collection of stories and poems, Bebey manifests "a humorous tolerance of human foibles spiced at times with subtle malice"[9] according to Dorothy Blair. The collection consists of eight short stories each followed by a poem that echoes the humorous and at times moralising message in the story. In this work, the writer does not base his stories on a selected African village. On the contrary, he paints pictures of rural Africa, modern Africa and Europe with equal facility and deftness, and portrays the conflicts which could arise when such opposing worlds come in sudden contact.

Le Roi Albert, another work interspersed with

Bebey's verve, is based on a traditional African setting - Efiddi, in the Cameroons. The story revolves around Albert, a rich trader. This particular story seeks to expose the conflict of generations brought about by the love of an older man and a young man for the same young girl. This and the sub-plots are recounted with an exhiliarating spirit by the narrator.

La Poupée ashanti is on a more serious note as Bebey chooses to make an incursion into the world of politics this time. This work is based on the political situation of Ghana in 1959, under the leadership of Doctor Nkrumah. The political allusions here are realistic, though chronologically some changes have been introduced to make for better story-telling.

Within this political cocoon, Bebey weaves the story of a young orphan, Edna, and her numerous escapades. A very beautiful young girl, but with the misfortune of being illiterate, Edna is always at logger-heads with her so-called friends Gin and Angela who are educated. Eventually, though, in spite of Edna's frequent escapades, she marries her educated sweet-heart Spic. In spite of this personal side to the book it is mainly a political novel. According to Dorothy Blair:

> "What we most miss in this latest venture of Bebey is the charm of his ironic humour which is here replaced by a monotonous ponderous facetiousness."[10]

This "monotonous ponderous facetiousness" referred to by Blair is probably brought about as a result of the political dimension of the book. More emphasis is subsequently laid on the historical and political events than on Bebey's naturally-flowing humour.

Then there is the children's story Trois petits cireurs which is not really very funny. It is about three young shoe-shiners who carry out their business in front of a big hotel. Two of them steal a purse containing some money from the car of one of their customers and they think they have not been found out. However, the owner of the car invites the children into the hotel to watch a film and to their utter surprise and chagrin, their theft and the way it was carried out is shown in the film. All the same, the children are forgiven by their "patron" because though they behaved abominably, they unwittingly helped him produce a natural film.

Finally there is Concert pour un vieux masque, a long poem about the voyage of an African mask, which is taken to Brazil where it commits suicide in the alien country. This work too is not very funny.

Bebey's humour is such that it distinguishes him from most African writers. Nevertheless, there are some African writers who do show humour in their works. One of such writers is Ahmadou Kourouma the Ivorian who

is best known for his book Les Soleils des indépendances. It is a satirical work which conveys the occasional humour especially through the quasi-ridiculous chief character Fama, and through the aid of the narrator's personal intervention as regards Fama. The narrator makes his own wry and amusing observations about his principal character as can be seen in the following passage referring to Fama:

> "Avec les pas souples de son totem panthère, des gestes royaux et des saluts majestueux (dommage que le boubou ait été poussiéreux et froissé!)"[11]

Here the funny aspect of the whole situation is the contrast between the majestic and a dirty and rumpled boubou. This form of participation by the narrator is not uncommon in the book. When Fama marries another wife Mariam in addition to his first but childless wife Salimata, only trouble results from such a union. The narrator tells us that:

> "Les injures fusèrent toute la journée, même la nuit, une nuit qui appartenait à Mariam... On se coucha. Mais malheureusement le tara grinçait. Avez-vous déjà couché sur un tara? Il grince, geint comme si vous rouliez dans les feuilles mortes d'un sous-bois en plein harmattan."[12]

Though Kourouma shows some adeptness in amusing his readers there are some African writers who are more prolific as far as this is concerned. These are Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Beti. These two Cameroonians

have really enriched the literary world with their contributions. Their satires are for the greater part based on society in colonial Africa. A typical example is Oyono's Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille in which the author makes use of his infinitely naive chief character Meka to amuse and stimulate the reader while at the same time drawing attention to the social anomalies of the period. The natives are told not to make their native liquor any more and it becomes a criminal offence. This is solely because the whites want the natives to start buying the Western liquor. Gosier - d'Oiseau, the commandant, enlists the help of the priest, who consequently tells the villagers that drinking native liquor is a mortal sin. Meka, however, cannot do without the occasional sip of this alcohol and goes from time to time to have some. So each time he does, he tells Father Vandermayer during confession.

> "Mon Père j'ai étanché ma soif alors qu'elle était tout à fait supportable."

Father Vandermayer, who is surprised at this strange revelation says:

> "Mon frère, étancher sa soif n'est pas un péché, ne sois pas plus rigoureux que les lois de Dieu et de l'Eglise."

After hearing this, Meka takes his communion the next day. The irony of the whole situation is that the priest takes Meka in the literal sense and Meka not wanting

the priest to be disappointed by his behaviour, does not explain further. It is also amusing that Meka assumes that since he has confessed his sins, albeit in a roundabout manner, they have been forgiven, whether the priest knows what he is really talking about or not. So while we frown at the outright condemnation of the native liquor just to get the villagers to consume the western varieties, we are also amused by Meka's simple way of getting round the problem.

From this, we can see that Bebey is not the only African writer with a sense of humour. It is however most unfortunate that most literary critics omit Bebey from their works. The few critics that deign to give him a place in their works rarely pay tribute to the amusing nature of his works which in effect is one of his greatest assets as a writer. Nevertheless, there are some critics who draw attention to this vital quality of Bebey's work. Although Hoyet and Blair do not lay sufficient emphasis on this talent of Bebey's, they have, to a certain extent, recognised his value here. The purpose of this study will therefore be to proceed from where Blair and Hoyet stopped. Thus this study will help to show Bebey's role as a writer with a sense of humour. It will also study to what extent Bebey's

humour is universal, transcending race, culture and geographical barriers.

IMPORTANCE OF SUCH A STUDY

Although humour is a very vital aspect of life, it has been neglected a great deal in spite of the important role it plays in society. It has been particularly neglected in African literature, mainly because most African writers prefer to ignore it completely. They are more concerned with portraying the socio-politico-economic situation of their countries, unfortunately forgetting that:

> "Humour serves as an unmasking tactic and its agents, ridicule, caricature, cartoons and satire can be used to reject an identity proferred by particular persons, groups, institutions or nations."[14]

Bebey, on the other hand, is very much aware of this. He is equally aware of the use of humour to draw attention to an important point.

In this study, it will be necessary to describe Bebey's particular brand of humour, the tools he employs in expressing it, and the effects of this humour on his literary work. This study will also look at the opinions of literary critics on humorous writing. It will also compare Bebey with his contemporaries and try to draw more attention to him as a writer.

A great disservice has been done to him in this respect, perhaps because he has not chosen to go the way of other African writers of today who are more concerned with showing the serious aspects of life with equal gravity. Perhaps, because he does not write in the manner of committed writers like Sembène Ousmane, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and Bernard Dadié, not much attention has been paid to his work in the literary world. This is notwithstanding the fact that many of his themes are important to society as well as the humour he uses.

This study will consequently also serve to show that humour can be and is used to convey important ideas and opinions. It will equally show that humour is an essential phenomenon in our lives and should not entirely be dissociated from literature, bearing in mind the fundamental role of literature which is to give pleasure to the reader. According to Langston Hughes:

> "Like a welcome summer rain, humour may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air and you."[15]

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CHAPTER ONE

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT, THE NARRATORS, THE CHARACTERS AND HUMOUR

Francis Bebey is one of the most versatile and gifted African writers as far as his depiction of picturesque tableaux of the African society is concerned. Almost all his stories are situated either in traditional or contemporary Africa, giving us an insight into the contrasts, joys and tribulations existing in two such varied societies. As Dominique Hoyet states:

> "Ses romans constituent autant de témoignages sur l'Afrique des années précédant ou suivant immédiatement l'Indépendance et s'attachent en particulier à décrire les conséquences culturelles de la rencontre entre l'Europe et le continent africain."[1]

We can see the consequences of this "rencontre" between African and European cultures clearly in Le Roi Albert where the hitherto European phenomenon - the western-style elections are introduced to the villagers. These approaching elections give rise to bitter and violent campaigning between the different political factions and even come close to destroying the relations between the villagers as they become divided between Bikounou and Albert, two of the major contestants for the post of the representative of the region. Apart from the animosity created by being in different political camps, more problems are created by Bikounou who takes advantage of the election period to court many women with the result that many of them got pregnant.

This can be seen from the following statement:

> "En effet, depuis le lancement de la campagne électorale, deux à deux, les seins de maintes femmes d'Effidi et d'ailleurs s'étaient mis à se gonfler..." (Le Roi Albert, p.169).

From this, we can see that these elections do not only affect the social relationship of the villagers, but also have an effect on the women.

Nevertheless, though Francis Bebey gives a representation of African society both past and present, he concerns himself more with the cultural aspects than the political. His preference is markedly for the simple life and customs of the traditional African society. As Hoyet aptly puts it:

> Peut-être peut-on regretter à cette occasion que F. Bebey limite son inspiration à l'évocation parfois nostalgique du passé; certes celle-ci s'inscrit dans le cadre de la révalorisation des cultures traditionnelles africaines, longtemps méprisées ou vues à travers le prisme déformant de l'exotisme.[2]

It is perhaps Bebey's preference for this traditional African society that renders his books almost completely devoid of political protest. "His is a Negritude freed from any complexes, any protest, any hatred or even cynicism,"[3] according to Dorothy Blair.

This assertion brings about a need to ascertain Bebey's political commitment with regard to his literary works.

POLITICS AND NON-POLITICS IN BEBEY'S WORK

In Bebey's novels, especially in Le Fils d'Agatha, though Bebey describes the period when his country was under colonial rule, we rarely feel the presence of the colonial officials. Apart from the brief but vivid and amusing account of Mbenda's encounter with white hunters in his village, which resulted in his being incarcerated, and the episode of the alleged witchcraft of l'oncle Gros-Coeur by the elders of the village, which resulted in their imprisonment, the political overtone which plays an essential role in most other contemporary African novels is singularly and conspicuously absent. Instead, Francis Bebey tends to lay more emphasis on the intricacies of village life and the social norms and values of traditional society.

For example, marriage is fully described in Le Fils d'Agatha right from the moment when the young man expresses his desire to get married till the time the young girl arrives at her new home. When Mbenda decides to get married, he has to inform the elders of his intention as these elders will play an active role in the marriage formalities. Throughout the marriage preparation, we discover that it is the affair of the whole village not just Mbenda's. The elders even contribute what they can towards the expenses incurred, and when Mbenda finally brings his young bride home, his personal friends help him to do so.

All this is because certain traditional values have to be adhered to. Mbenda does not choose his wife himself. His dying father already did that for him at his death-bed. He chose a girl who had not even been born at the time. Edimo, Mbenda's father, had a friend Tanga, and asked him to give his yet-unborn, first daughter to Mbenda.

Apart from having to respect the elders of the village regarding his marriage, Mbenda also has to accept his dead father's wishes.

Nonetheless this does not mean that Bebey's works are completely free from a political overtone. There are some political intricacies in some of Bebey's works and we shall determine to what extent politics plays an active role in them.

In Le Roi Albert Bebey endeavours to portray the initial effects of the elections on an otherwise placid African society. The scenario progresses from mild politicking to a blazing inferno between the different political factions whose leaders are all vying for the same political seat. In this treatment of the election scene in Effidi, Bebey seems to concentrate mainly on the adverse conditions which arise from political antagonism.

The villagers of Effidi believe in their superiority

over the other villages. They consequently believe that only Effidi is worthy of producing the candidate that will represent the region. What then is their chagrin therefore, when the village of Nkool produces the representative! The people of Effidi feel very bitter about Toutouma-le-Syndicaliste's victory especially as the drums of Nkool rub in the defeat of Effidi. The narrator says that:

> "Pendant les jours et des jours, les gens de Nkool parfumèrent la forêt du rire de leurs tambours tapant fort du matin au soir." (Le Roi Albert, p.174).

There is a great deal of enmity bred in the hearts of the villagers during this period as shown by the unprecedented violence between Bikounou's and Albert's factions, culminating in the inadvertent killing of Tobias by Albert's driver. When Albert goes to campaign at Zuabat, Bikounou and his followers arrive on the scene, solely to ruin Albert's campaign. The verbal insults degenerate into a fight between Albert's and Bikounou's supporters. Bikounou escapes and while Albert is trying to do the same, his vehicle is attacked by enemies. In the bid to get away as quickly as possible, the driver departs at top speed and at a bend in the road, unwittingly hits Tobias who is returning from a hunting expedition. Before a hospital can be reached, Tobias dies, a victim of the elections.

In Le Roi Albert, one aspect to which Bebey attaches immense importance is the influence of politics on the traditions of the villagers. With the advent of politics, the community moves "vers un monde nouveau" as the title of the second part of the book announces. The title of chapter nine of the novel is also very significant as it goes further to announce that "un vent nouveau souflait sur le pays." Now what singular quality does this "vent nouveau" possess? It blows away certain aspects of the old traditions and customs and brings with it the social and political changes associated with a new phenomenon - the western-style elections. This is evident when Chief Ndengué has to accept the very painful but inevitable fact that his status as village head will now be secondary to that of the elected candidate of the region. He also has to accept the fact that somebody from another village might, in being the representative, be superior to him.

However, this momentary distraction from typical village life which takes the form of preparations for the elections and the resultant upheavals accompanying these preparations, does not signal the end of tradition in its entirety. When different sorts of people present themselves for the elections, ranging from a certain Tobias who had worked as a night watch-man in the town, to Doumou the small-headed giant, the narrator informs the reader that the people laugh at the unlikely

candidates, but are nevertheless aware that something new is happening to them. The narrator states that:

> En tout cas, il devint clair, au sujet de ces élections, que quelque chose de nouveau se préparait dans le pays. Car pour la première fois de leur vie, les villageois, libérés des contraintes de la tradition - momentanément tout au moins, car quel individu vivant au village peut donc se vanter de s'être libéré complètement et définitivement de la tradition?... (Le Roi Albert, p.134).

The villagers are now aware of this new freedom they have, to aspire to the post of representative of the people. Tradition does not play any role here at all. The person chosen to be the representative will not be hand-picked by the elders as would have been done traditionally. Instead, all the people will vote for whoever they consider capable. All the same, this freedom from tradition notwithstanding, it is only a temporary affair according to the narrator because no villager can be completely free from the clutches of tradition.

In Embarras, the scenario is different because the stories are not confined to the traditional African society as is the case in Le Roi Albert. In Embarras, contemporary Africa and even Europe provide the locale for the short stories. For instance "New Stanley Hotel, 1961" tells the story of a visitor from Paris who has to spend the night in a hotel in Nairobi, and who ends up sleeping in the bath in an attempt to protect his

belongings from theft.

Another short story from Embarras "Le Mot de Martine" has Europe as its setting and tells of a young black man's experience of racism even from his girl-friend - a French girl known as Martine. Because the young Black (whose name we are not told) answers "no" to one of Martine's questions when she expects a "yes", Martine asks:

"Pourquoi fais-tu le nègre important?" (Embarras, p.61). Martine's question shows that she does not think a "nègre" should feel important in any way. With these examples, we can see that Embarras has some stories set in the modern world. Nevertheless, the modernity of the settings in Embarras notwithstanding, political protest is virtually absent.

One of Bebey's favourite themes in Embarras is racism. However, in 1968 when this collection was published, the political problem for Africa was not really that of racism. Most African countries had attained independence at that time, and were free from colonialism. However, they now face many problems. When the colonizers departed, they directly or indirectly did nothing to break the dependence of their ex-colonies on them. Economic ties between these African countries and Europe, instead of growing weaker have grown stronger. Africa has had to depend almost completely on imported

goods. Unfortunately, Africa has become much poorer. Added to this is the fact that export items produced by African countries now cost less whereas the imported manufactured goods cost more.

With the much-sought-after independence of most African States, came political instability. These were characterized by a series of coups d'etat, mostly military, and civil wars that threatened to split countries into two. Examples of countries that have suffered from such civil wars are Zaire (then Congo-Kinshasa) and Nigeria. Claude Wauthier has observed that:

> "The two richest and most populous countries in black Africa, Congo-Kinshasa (later Zaire) and Nigeria were torn by appalling civil wars triggered off by attempts at secession on the part of Katanga and Biafra respectively."[4]

Furthermore, the governing classes are corrupt and exploit the poor masses. This is because many African States are plagued by a series of dictatorial governments which do little or nothing to alleviate the suffering of the masses.

This phenomenon is depicted by Chinua Achebe in his novel, A Man of the People. It appeared in 1966 and set out to satirise life in Nigeria in the early sixties. It is a satirical work about the political thuggery, instability and uncertainty that has befallen

most African States in the wake of the much-desired and acclaimed independence.

Most other African writers were concerned with depicting the political problems of African countries. Among these problems, racism was absent or so minor as to be virtually non-existent, except in the case of South Africa.

In contrast to the other works already mentioned in which Bebey makes mild incursions into politics, La Poupée ashanti is a real political novel since the major theme of the book is the political situation in Ghana at the period of Independence. The political tableau is of Nkrumah of Ghana, known in the novel as "Le Docteur," and the gradual corruption of Nkrumah's party much to the disappointment of the adoring masses.

All these political events are culled from facts in Ghana's political history. However, Bebey shows his uniqueness as a writer by his ability to blend the political and the fictitious in the novel La Poupée ashanti. In Hoyet's own words:

> "Fiction romanesque et Histoire sont étroitement imbriquées dans La Poupée ashanti."[5]

To understand the relationship between fiction and history in La Poupée, we need to take a look at the political history of Ghana under Nkrumah, which

comes up in the novel.

Nkrumah's first start as a politician was in 1947 when he became General Secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention - the only political party then. In 1951, the Governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Charles Arden Clarke appointed him "Leader of Government Business," and in 1956, he became Prime Minister of an all-African cabinet. In March, 1957, Independence was granted, and Nkrumah's party - the C.C.P., became the ruling party. However, according to Trevor Jones:

> "Once at the top Nkrumah's vanity began to swell to grotesque proportions, untempered by the company of equals and encouraged by those who discovered that flattery could serve their own interests."[6]

This type of flattery can be seen in La Poupée where the adulation and hero-worship of the masses is obvious in the affectionate nick-name "Le Docteur," referring to Nkrumah, just as in the present-day Ivory Coast, President Houphouet-Boigny is referred to affectionately as "Le Vieux."

We can determine the time the story takes place from certain details from La Poupée. The narrator informs us that the avenue de l'independance:

> était elle-même un symbole. Elle avait été ainsi baptisée, sans doute parce que partant de l'aéroport, elle conduisait l'étranger arrivant nouvellement dans le pays, jusqu'au centre de la ville en lui faisant respirer

> abondamment l'air d'une indépendance vieillie alors de quelque trois ans seulement, (La Poupée, p.92).

From this passage we can estimate that the time the story takes place is roughly between the end of 1959 and the beginning of 1960. This conjecture is further strengthened when we are told that the "Docteur" was:

> "alors seulement premier ministre car le pays était encore un dominion de la couronne britannique..." (La Poupée, p.92).

So since we know that the Presidential elections took place in August, 1960 when Nkrumah became President, we are probably not far from the truth in our surmise. These political facts are very nicely woven into Edna's story, adding a realistic or historical dimension to the novel.

In this novel La Poupée Ashanti, Bebey allows himself some occasional flashes of his sense of humour and the comic, and these help to render his tableau of society more realistic. This characteristic sense of the funny, is presented to the reader sometimes with the help of the narrators and sometimes thanks to the characters.

THE NARRATOR AS A HUMORIST

In Bebey's works two broad categories of narrators

are evident. One of them is the type we shall call the narrator-character and the other is the omniscient narrator.

The narrator-character can also be called the participating narrator since he plays an active role in the story as a character, and at the same time narrates the events. The narrator-character is typified by Mbenda, the hero of Le Fils d'Agatha. He is one of the most amusing narrators and characters in Bebey's works.

Mbenda recounts his moving story with a great deal of realism and he is infinitely more endearing to the reader on account of his ability to emit humour even in the face of absolute calamity. For instance when Agatha Moudio gives birth to a white child, Mbenda describes his physical appearance and that of his wife as follows:

> C'est que la couleur de ma propre peau approche des meilleures teintes d'ébène. De plus, avec mes cheveux crépus, mes lèvres épaisses et mon nez à la base plutôt généreuse, je suis sûr que le "Nouveau Petit Larousse" d'autrefois n'eût pas hésité un seul instant à me prendre pour modèle de la race noire. Quant à Agatha Moudio, ... elle était ... toute noire, des pieds à la tête. Décidément, c'était bien étrange, cette histoire. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.205).

Here we can observe that though Mbenda knows in his heart of hearts that the child is not his, he can still make jokes about being a typical example of a black man, before concluding humorously that the question of the child's colour is very strange. Mbenda

gives the impression of being very naive to the extent of not knowing that a white child must of necessity have a white parent. He plays on his naiveté by using the words "étrange" and "histoire" to refer to the problem.

Freud affirms that:

> The small contributions of humour that we produce ourselves are as a rule made at the cost of anger - instead of getting angry."[7]

A person who laughs at himself instead of getting angry has the tendency of appealing to others. Mbenda shows this quality of his at its peak when his wife Agatha Moudio gives birth to the white child. In account of this extremely strange phenomenon - both Agatha and Mbenda are black - la mère Mauvais-Regard makes the sinister comment that:

> "Peut-être cet enfant-là aura-t-il un jour une bouche tout en or, comme son père ..." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.205).

This allusion of course is to the white man with gold teeth who has been seen several times with Agatha. We, the readers, know this, but what is Mbenda's reaction to the prediction?

> "Je me précipitai devant une glace en entendant cela et présentai mes dents: deux rangées d'ivoire d'une propreté et d'une blancheur irréprochables." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.205).

In this case, the fact that the hero Mbenda is so naive

as to rush to the mirror to see if his teeth are golden is a jab of wry humour at the narrator's own expense.

Mbenda's humour is free of revolt, despair or protest. For example, when some white hunters come to the village to hunt, the villagers decide that they should receive some sort of compensation from these men Mbenda makes himself the spokesman and, due to his stubbornness and threats, the white hunters eventually give the villagers some money to buy salt with. One of the hunters asks Mbenda's name and promises that Mbenda will hear from him.

Mbenda continues his story:

> Quant aux nouvelles dont m'avait parlé l'homme avec tant de bienveillance dans la voix, tous les miens pensèrent aussitôt que ce serait sans doute un emploi à la ville qui allait m'être proposé... Les gens font de ces déductions... (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.16).

Here our anticipation is being built up by Mbenda and we appreciate the irony of the words "avec tant de bienveillance dans la voix," when we read what happens next. According to Mbenda:

> "En effet, une semaine après cette journée pleine de sel de cuisine et de promesses d'avenir, nous eûmes la visite pour le moins inopinée de M. Dubous le commissaire général de police de Douala."

He goes on:

> Je gagnai quinze jours de prison... Quinze jours de prison, sans jugement aucun, pour avoir osé demander de l'argent pour le sel de cuisine nécessaire à notre communauté, c'était le tarif en ce temps-là. La Loi l'avait prévu ainsi. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.16).

In spite of the injustice Mbenda experiences, he can still recount his story in an amusing way, and without any trace of bitterness. He sees the day of the encounter with the white hunters as full of cooking salt and promises of the future. The irony of it all is that these future promises mature into a fifteen-day stay in prison. Mbenda plays on words. When he says 'La Loi l'avait prévu ainsi" he humorously plays on the French translation of his name which also means the law in French.

From this discussion, it is clear that Mbenda's humour is woven into the web of the narrative with remarkable ease. Apart from the ability to laugh at himself, the narrator also makes fun of his fellow-villagers. For example, when the white hunters arrive in their village Mbenda declares that:

> L'un des hommes était très riche, du moins nous le pensions chaque fois qu'il ouvrait la bouche pour parler, car à la place des deux rangées d'ivoire que le ciel avait sûrement dû lui donner à la naissance, il avait mis deux brillantes rangées d'or ... Quel homme bizarre, nous disions-nous; et avec tout cela il avait de l'or à n'en savoir que faire, au point qu'il le gaspillait volontiers en le transformant même en dents... (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.11).

The amusement here is at the expense of Mbenda and his fellow villagers. They are so simple-minded in their appraisal of the white man with the gold teeth, believing that he has so much gold that he does not know what to do with it other than to make teeth from it.

In Embarras, most of the narrators are of the narrator-character category like Mbenda. This means that though they narrate the story, they are also characters in it. In seven out of the eight short stories in this collection, the narrator is also a character. The only exception is the short story "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police," in which we have an omniscient narrator.

The narrator-character's perception of himself and human nature in Embarras is exceptional especially on account of his humorous presentation and commentaries on life in general and human behaviour in particular. The narrator in this collection of short stories has a more biting wit than Mbenda. While Mbenda's is gentle without protest, the narrator in Embarras makes his protests and condemnations obvious by having recourse to ironic humour. In "Les Revélations de la chambre noire," the narrator is told by his sister not to look into a mirror when someone is being buried or else he will die nine days after doing so.

Following his sister's advice he decides thus:

> "Alors, comme je suis sûr qu'à certaines heures de la journée on n'enterre personne nulle part sous aucun ciel, je me mire, assez longuement pour être certain d'avoir eu ma ration de glace de la journée" (Embarras, p.97).

Here, the narrator pretends to believe that there is a time when all over the world nobody is being buried but he belies this by stating ironically that he makes as much use of the mirror as possible, during this time when nobody is being buried, because this will be his only ration of the mirror for the day.

In the short story "New Stanley Hotel, 1961," the piercing wit is obvious when the narrator recounts the humorous aspect of an uncomfortable night that he spent.

> "... Une recommendation imprimée en lettres capitales, me rappelait que decidément Stanley n'avait pas fait grand-chose pour m'éviter une nuit à même le sol." (Embarras, p.10).

The Stanley mentioned here refers of course to the great explorer and this is what amuses the reader. This is because the narrator in the story consistently informs us that Stanley did not leave any trace of civilisation behind him in Africa. When the narrator wryly comments that Stanley also did nothing to prevent him from sleeping on the ground, he uses one of the stock-in-trade of ironists which is bringing great men down to the level of other human beings. The narrator succeeds in bringing the famous Stanley down to his level, and while amusing the reader, also asks hidden questions

about an explorer who passes without leaving anything permanent behind him.

In the poems which take up the theme of each short story, there is this piercing type of humour as can be seen in the poem "Mensonge" which comes after "New Stanley Hotel, 1961," and takes up the theme of a sleepless night. Even the name of the poem "Mensonge" gives us an insight into what will transpire as we already know that the person recounting the poem already disagrees with whatever idea is projected. This is because the word "Mensonge" means falsehood, so already we know that there is something the narrator disagrees with.

In the poem, he starts off by saying he does not believe in a sleepless night and then informs us that Kadiatou claims to have spent one. In French, the expression for a sleepless night translated literally is "white night." The narrator plays on words, and feigning surprise at the thought of a black woman spending a sleepless night, he gives the impression that he believes she spent the night as a white woman. This play on words and the fake naiveté of the speaker are amusing since he plays on the words "noire" and "blanche" and seems not to know the real meaning of "une nuit blanche."

In "Le Père Noël de Fanta," another narrator-character steals the scene with his amusing account of

his and his family's first encounter with the concept of Father Christmas. This obvious ignorance of the existence of Father Christmas is understandable when one considers the fact that the narrator and his family are living in an African village and the narrator is the first of his family to go to school. Apart from the funny way his father responds to the idea, the narrator himself does not hesitate to show his own shortcomings.

> "En effet, à vingt ans, j'appris qu'il existait un père Noel descendant dans la cheminée la nuit du 24 décembre et laissant des cadeaux dans les chaussures des enfants sages." (Embarras, p.37).

Here, the apparent conviction with which the narrator informs us of his late discovery of the concept of Father Christmas is more amusing when one remembers that such knowledge is of little importance; however, the narrator tends to inflate its importance.

The omniscient narrator sees and knows everything. He tells the story from the point of view of a third person and he does not participate as a character in the events he describes. His sense of humour is not as pronounced as that of the narrator-character. Nevertheless, his sense of humour is obvious especially in Le Roi Albert. We can see the narrator's wit when he describes events and people around him.

For example, on Sundays, Albert has a special

outfit for going to church. Unfortunately, the village children find his mode of dressing funny and make fun of him. The parents punish their children for insulting such a dignitary especially on "le jour du Seigneur!" (Le Roi Albert, p.26). However, according to the narrator,

> "étant donné ses occupations à la ville, le roi ne pouvait jamais se faire moquer un jour autre que le jour du Seigneur..." (Le Roi Albert, p.26).

It is amusing to note the way the narrator assumes that Albert might prefer to be laughed at on other days, if it were not for his work in town.

The omniscient narrator also displays an appealing simplicity as we can see in the following passage from Le Roi Albert in which the narrator condemns his fellow villagers:

> "On ne possède pas une boutique au centre commercial sans posséder également, quelques personnes aimant l'argent et qui constituent un véritable service de renseignements..." (Le Roi Albert, p.20).

Here the narrator employs ironic humour to make fun of his fellow villagers. According to Norman Stokle:

> "Bebey's narrators are blessed with a sense of humour and a predilection for irony, and they make free use of both to protect themselves or their friends, demolish enemies, uphold village customs, or simply to amuse."[8]

We can see how the narrator 'demolishes' his fellow villagers especially when he describes them as people who love money and who are ready to give information. This is funny because the insinuation is that it is the money that makes them so eager to give information to Albert. This is consequently an open condemnation of the villagers' attitude of sponging on the more successful ones among them.

The narrator in La Poupée is also omniscient and occasionally makes some funny statements. One of the tools he uses is personification combined with the characteristic simple-mindedness of Bebey's characters and narrators. Inanimate things are given life and this enhances humour. For instance, in La Poupée, the narrator states:

> "Mais le scandale guettait, patiemment, au fil des jours, le moment d'éclater. Il a l'habitude de faire ainsi, et d'assurer avant d'éclater que son éclosion fera nécessairement scandale." (La Poupée, p.40).

Here scandal is invested with life, and chooses the right time to break open so that there will be a scandal.

As we have said before, of the eight short stories in Embarras, only "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police" has an omniscient narrator. The narrator's humour can be seen in his witty commentaries and assessments of situations. For instance he comments on

Monsieur Neuf's method of operation regarding his duty as a policeman in West Africa:

> Aujourd'hui je pense que M. Neuf connaissait tout simplement son métier et que tout policier devrait pouvoir montrer son nez sur les lieux dès le premier coup de téléphone lui apprenant que le comptable de la Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale a été surpris en train de roder près du coffre-fort de son propre bureau aux heures de travail... Ou encore qu'un blanc vient de gifler un noir, mais qu'au lieu de recevoir respectueusement la gifle, le nègre a eu un air mécontent qui n'a pas du tout plu au blanc.
>
> Toutes ces irrégularités, tous ces crimes, Monsieur Neuf accourait à leur rencontre chaque fois qu'ils se produisaient. (Embarras, pp.77 & 78).

Here we can see that, though the narrator appears to believe that M. Neuf is doing the right thing by arresting a black bank cashier for moving about his desk, or a black man for looking unhappy when slapped by a white man, he is in reality condemning such an action. We can tell this from the words "toutes ces irregularités, tous ces crimes" referring to this very normal behaviour of the Blacks. The words are ironically used and because we the readers understand that the narrator means the exact opposite of what he is saying, we find the spicy irony amusing. According to Norman Stokle, one of Bebey's favourite ironic devices consists of defending the manifestly indefensible.[9] This happens in this scene from "Assisastanas" where the narrator seemingly defends M. Neuf's absurd arrests

but this has the effect of showing how incongruous they are.

In Le Roi Albert, the narrator is also omniscient. He also has Bebey's unique sense of humour since he is occasionally the author's mouth-piece. This leads us to an important aspect about the narrators and their humorous relation to the author.

Studying the narrators and ignoring the author is a futile endeavour since in effect the author creates the narrator and bestows him with speech, thought and animation.

Wayne Booth states that:

> "In practice no author ever manages to create a work which shows complete impartiality."[10]

Thus we cannot completely detach Francis Bebey from his works. The implied author emerges from the way in which the story is told in a novel. The implied author is not automatically the narrator because, by definition, the role of a narrator is simply to recount the events or happenings in the novel. Sometimes the narrator can either be a dramatised first-person character in the novel or an anonymous more or less omniscient voice. The narrator, whether impersonal or dramatised, can be very close to the implied author depending on the authorial strategy of the novel. Conversely, there can

be an ironic distance between the implied author's point of view and the narrator's. But, either way, the narrator's viewpoint more or less helps the reader to identify the values and outlook of the implied author. Apart from the narrators, the characters also amuse the reader.

THE CHARACTER - HUMORIST

It is important to note that Bebey's characters do not have a very pronounced sense of humour. They are occasionally comic but they are generally not very witty.

However, some of these characters have a sharp wit and this can best be seen in Embarras. In "La Pie voyageuse" where the chief character is also the narrator, his speech is occasionally humorous.

When the narrator and a young girl arrive in Cologne, she says to him:

> "Regarde, il pleut."

He then replies with a quip:

> "Oui, c'est vrai il pleut... C'est peut-être de cette eau que l'on vend de par le monde en flacons de luxe?" (Embarras, p.71).

Here, the narrator feigns simple-mindedness by pretending to believe that "eau de Cologne" is produced from the rain that falls in Cologne. Knowing that this

question comes from an educated young man, we are able to appreciate the ironic effects of the question.

Even in Le Roi Albert, though Albert is serious-minded, he does give vent to the occasional amusing statement. When Belobo asks if Albert hears a voice seeking to him in the night, Albert answers:

> "La nuit, tu sais Belobo, la nuit, j'ai un grand défaut: je dors. Oui, je dois te l'avouer, au plus profond de la nuit, je dors profondément... Et je ronfle, je ronfle, si fort que tout le monde sait que le roi Albert est maintenant entré dans le royaume du someil."

At this Belobo asks:

> "Et comment sais-tu que tu ronfles, puisque tu dors?"

Albert replies:

> "Je sais que je ronfle, parce que parfois, cela me réveille." (Le Roi Albert, p.57).

From this dialogue we can see that Albert has a sense of irony when he claims that his greatest fault at night is that he sleeps. He also has a sense of the comic when he states that his own snores wake him up.

Bebey's humour has a certain quality - it appears to have a universal dimension. This universal dimension is not only on account of the various settings of the stories - traditional Africa, contemporary Africa and even Europe, but also on account of its appeal to a universal readership. This is because Bebey does not limit himself to situations which are purely Camerounian.

Bebey's critics who acclaim his pronounced sense of humour are not only Camerounians. Critics like Dorothy Blair and Dominique Hoyet, as well as Bebey's wide and varied readership, appreciate and understand his humour due partly to the skill with which Bebey can make use of different settings, adapting them to suit his humour. This can further be explained by the following simplified diagram showing the humour process:

THE HUMOUR PROCESS

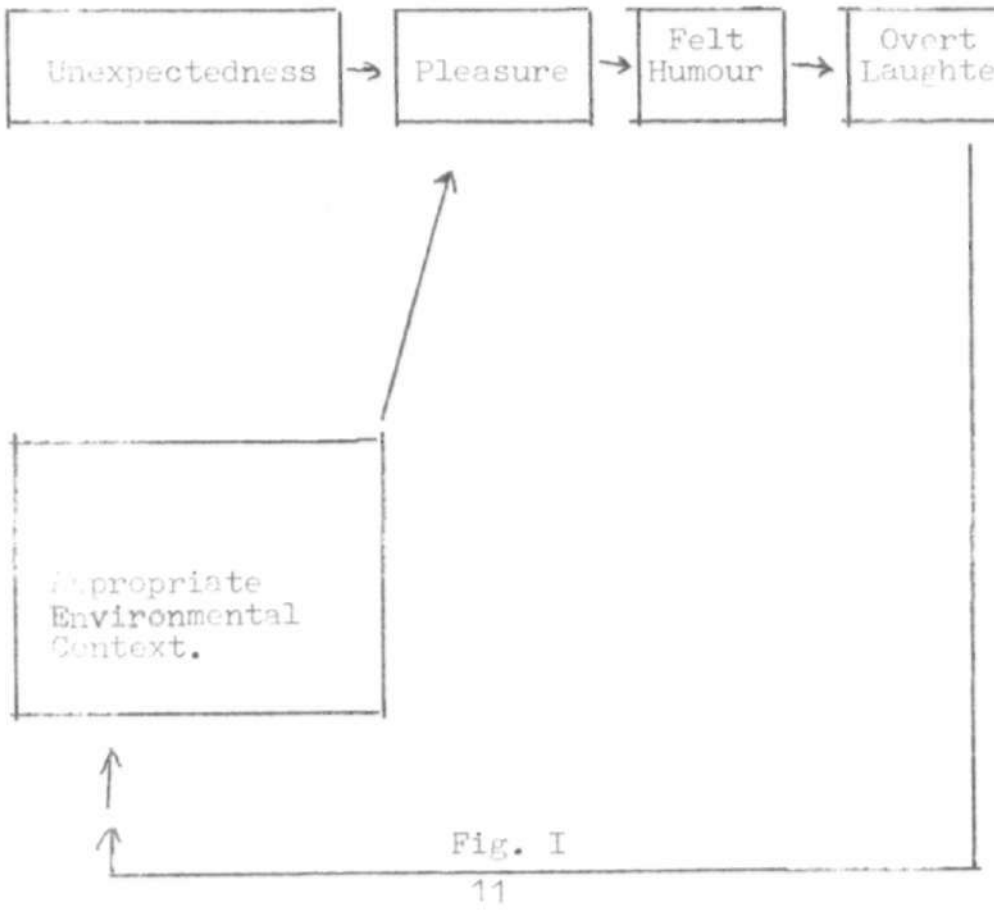


Fig. I

11

From this diagram, we can see that given an appropriate environmental context which Bebey provides

with his various settings, and given a certain degree of unexpectedness which does not lack in Bebey's works, the resultant pleasure develops into felt humour and even overt laughter. This can be seen in La Poupée where the narrator first draws the scene for us in the following passage before introducing the degree of unexpectedness which gives rise to the felt humour.

> Quelle Afrique! Sur une des places publiques, voici un groupe de parieurs autour d'une roulette improvisée... Les guetteurs sont réputés pour leur faculté toute spéciale de déceler les gendarmes en civil. On dit quelquefois qu'ils abusent de cette faculté, mais comme personne ne va jamais demander à un homme en civil s'il est un gendarme deguisé, le métier de guetteur continue de fournir d'importantes sources de revenus aux guetteurs des roulettes de Nima. (La Poupée, pp.71 - 72).

The setting here is Africa, with a group of gamblers round a gambling wheel. There are also some men watching out for any policemen in civilian clothes. First the narrator introduces the unexpected by making the allusion that these warchmen misuse their ability to recognize policemen in mufti. Then the narrator concludes humorously that since no-one is ready to ask someone in civilian clothes if he is a policeman, these "guetteurs" make a lot of money from their job. He implies that sometimes these people do not really see any policemen but claim to have done so in order to collect their money.

Although Bebey does not make politics the main theme of his literary works, it still plays an active role in some of his works such as La Poupée and La Roi Albert. This notwithstanding, Bebey has a great sense of the comic and with the help of his narrators and characters, creates very amusing scenes that are part of his universal charm as a writer.

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CHAPTER TWO

TYPES AND METHODS OF HUMOUR EMPLOYED BY BEBEY

Laughter and smiling are the final products of felt humour and they help the individual to relax. Francis Bebey thus makes himself one of the masters of laughter since he has made a great success of soothing and relaxing us with the laughter and smiles which result from the varied and revealing aspects of the humorous scenes in his books. Our main objective in this chapter will be to study the intricacies of Bebey's manipulation of humour. This will be done by examining the different types of humour that Bebey makes use of as well as the methods he employs to achieve the desired results.

GENTLE HUMOUR

Sometimes Bebey's works show that he has a sense of humour that can best be classified as gentle. But then one would ask, what type of humour is this gentle humour? It is gentle in the use of words and expressions to give rise to the much desired unexpectedness that is such a vital aspect of humour. Conspiratorial asides also add spice to this humour because they develop a playful link between the narrator and the reader. This is because the reader is made a participant by the way the narrator comments on situations and asks the reader questions. For example, in La Poupée when the narrator wants to remind us of the day Tante Princess' bicycle broke down he calls the reader into the scene by saying:

> "Rappelez-vous ce jour ou l'humour avait totalement fait défaut lorsqu'une panne de bicyclette l'avait obligée à marcher à pied pour se rendre chez Mam." (La Poupée, p.180).

The words "rappelez-vous" playfully invite the reader to come and bear witness to the events.

Le Fils d'Agatha is full of this gentle humour characterized by soft insinuations and conspiratorial asides from the participating narrator Mbenda, and this can be observed in the following sentence:

> Ce n'est pas qu'on refuse obstinément de vendre la terre - je me demande du reste ce qui resterait de terre aux gens de chez nous s'ils réussissaient à tout vendre à l'étranger venu de Syrie ou d'ailleurs - mais on aime bien voir tout le village au courant des transactions... (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.110).

In this instance the narrator brings in his personal opinion, "je me demande du reste... d'ailleurs," and this contrasts delightfully with his assertion that the villagers do not refuse to sell their land. Here the thoughts of the narrator are rendered funnier both by the gentleness of presentation and by the subtle contradiction. This is very common throughout Bebey's works though it is more pronounced in Le Fils d'Agatha.

In Le Roi Albert the narrator's gentle humour is occasionally conveyed by means of subtle contradiction as in the following example:

> "Bikounou allait demander ce qui se passait, lorsqu'une deuxième gifle, tout aussi magistrale que la première, vint avec fracas rétablir l'équilibre sur la joue gauche." (Le Roi Albert, p.83).

The contradiction can be seen in the ironical statement that the second slap restores equilibrium to the left cheek. It is ironical because we know Bikounou is still trying to recover from the first slap when he is given the second one.

The effect of this type of humour is that it succeeds in stimulating the reader's sense of humour without necessarily being overtly critical. This does not mean that the message hidden behind the humour is not conveyed. On the contrary, this type of humour is as effective as the other types Bebey makes use of and this can be attested to from "Le Mariage d'Edda." Here, the obvious aim of Bebey is to show the simple-mindedness of the narrator-character and this emerges when the narrator says:

> Mais qu'est-ce qu'ils avaient donc eu, eux aussi, à me donner une natte posée sur le sol froid? Il est vrai qu'elle n'était pas mouillée, comme je venais de le prétendre, mais il est vrai que j'avais chez moi un lit de bambou que j'aurais pu faire porter par mon fils. (Embarras, p.19).

Here, humour serves as an unmasking tactic, used in this way, to reject the identity proferred by the narrator,[1] because though the narrator wants to give

the impression that he is right in asking why he had to sleep on a "wet" mat, his comic statement exposes him for the naive individual he really is. He accepts that really the mat was not wet, but that he does have a bamboo bed at home and could have asked his son to carry it to Zaabat for him to sleep in. The narrator's way of expressing himself as we can see is comic, and it is amusing to imagine his son carrying a bed on his head all the way to Zaabat.

SUBTLE HUMOUR

Occasionally Bebey employs subtlety to amuse and inform the reader. In this case, the narrator does not seem to be making open fun of the characters and situations, because the barb is cleverly hidden under the mask of humour. This subtlety abounds throughout Bebey's works but is most evident in Embarras. According to the publisher's blurb on Embarras:

> "Les lecteurs se délecteront de cet humour subtil qui parcourt tout le livre comme un fil d'argent et le rend scintillant de rires malgré les drames et les péripéties des héros." (Cover of Embarras).

In spite of the problems of the narrators in Embarras their subtle humour amuses the reader a great deal. Here, a sense of humour combined with subtlety give rise to felt humour. After all, what is the art of being subtle? It means being crafty evasive, delicate.

These are the qualities that Bebey combines in his writing while utilising that power to amuse which is so much a trademark of his.

This subtlety also arouses the reader's participation because certain words utilized by the narrator tend to awaken a subtle complicity between the narrator and the reader. Directly eliciting the reader's participation with words like "vous" and "nous" is part of Bebey's art. For instance in Le Roi Albert, the the narrator states:

> Quand on sait combien le jeune homme tenait à sa place dans un bureau, on l'excuse sans peine de sa placide colère devant l'apathie des vieux imbéciles. En pareilles circonstances, il vaut toujours mieux laisser agir les autres sans nous mêler d'une affaire qui risquerait de devenir dangereuse pour nous. (Le Roi Albert, p.31).

The narrator is subtly condemning Bikounou's abject cowardice. Bikounou does not relish the idea of a white priest coming to the village church to lecture the villagers on "la personalité africaine." This question of the African personality arises because the villagers have been singing in Latin, whereas the white priest believes that they will be able to pray and understand better if they sing in their own language.

After the service, Bikounou is really angry with those he calls "vieux imbéciles" who, according to him, allow themselves to be insulted by the priest. The

narrator informs the reader that Bikounou likes working in an office very much and that is why he keeps quiet. However, he further comments that in such circumstances it is better for one to keep quiet instead of getting into trouble. It is this ironic commentary that, in reality, derides Bikounou and shows immediately that the narrator is initially only pretending to understand Bikounou's reason for keeping quiet.

This type of humour enables the narrator to say things with a seemingly "straight face" while he is in effect questioning certain ridiculous situations. For instance, in Embarras, the narrator of "Le Père Noël de Fanta" describes the effect of Christmas on children living in African towns in the following words:

> Et dans les villes, les enfants des noirs civilisés se sont mis... à croire à un père Noel dispensateur de cadeaux variés, tel que le train électrique dont tout le monde ne saura pas se servir à la maison, ou la poupée rose aux cheveux ensoleillés... ou le cygne blanc, ou encore le chalet suisse couvert de neige, toutes sortes de choses inventées dans les pays tempérés pour le bonheur des enfants des tropiques. (Embarras, p.41).

In this case, incongruity, which is one of the basis for humour, is combined with an amusing subtlety. What after all could be more incongruous than the incredible fact that children in the Tropics can be made happy by receiving toys most of which cannot be identified with the African way of life? But in spite

of these absurdities, the narrator asserts with apparent seriousness "inventées... pour le bonheur des enfants des tropiques."

Under this cloak of subtlety, Bebey however, hides a singularly critical mind. Hoyet states that:

> "Bebey critique l'ethnocentrisme européen de l'époque coloniale, qui dévalorisait la culture africaine,... en imposant une politique d'assimilation."[2]

We can see an illustration of the adverse effect of assimilation on African children in the story "Le Père Noël de Fanta." For example, they believe in Santa Claus, though this does not have any vital connection with their lives in Africa. They also look forward to toys that represent a culture and tradition utterly alien to theirs, like the white doll with golden hair and the Swiss chalet covered with snow.

This criticism of ethnocentrism is seen too in Le Roi Albert. One remarkable instance is where the narrator describes Toutouma le Syndicaliste's absorption in a school book which describes everything except Africa to the young African students. The descriptions include climbing the Mont-Blanc, eating beef in the Charolais, waiting for Father Christmas to come down the chimney and playing with a snow-man in the Winter. (Le Roi Albert, pp.66 - 67).

This is a book meant for children in Africa and the narrator shows his condemnation of such a book in the cynical way he says that the book speaks to African children of all sorts of things except Africa. In this way, Bebey shows the absurdity of a book that teaches children how to climb the Mont-Blanc when such a thing is not relevant to their culture.

ACIDIC HUMOUR

Bebey, apart from gentleness and subtlety, has also "un sens aigu de l'humour acide,"[3] according to Brigitte Stokle. This acidic trait is characterized by its sharpness. Voltaire sometimes shows this acidity in his work Candide. He employs the same weapon to achieve similar goals. Candide tells the story of a young man known as Candide who is strongly suspected to be the illegitimate son of the "Baron de Thunder-ten-tronckh's sister. He lives in the château and is educated by Pangloss - believed to be the greatest philosopher in the province. Mademoiselle Cunégonde, daughter of the baron, also profits from Maître Pangloss' lessons.

However, one day she gets unexpected lessons of a different nature, while watching Pangloss and her mother's chamber-maid in a little forest. In the following passage everything becomes clear:

> Un jour Cunégonde, en se promenant auprès du château, dans le petit bois qu'on appelait parc, vit entre des broussailles le docteur Pangloss qui donnait une leçon de physique expérimentale à la femme de chambre de sa mère, petite brune très jolie et très docile. Comme Mlle Cunégonde avait beaucoup de disposition pour les sciences, elle observa sans souffler les expériences réitérées dont elle fut témoin; elle vit clairement la raison suffisante du docteur, les effets et les causes, et s'en retourna toute agitée, toute pensive, toute remplie du désir d'être savante, songeant qu'elle pourrait bien être la raison suffisante du jeune Candide qui pouvait aussi être la sienne.[4]

From this we can see that Voltaire is making a mockery of Pangloss' teaching by applying high-sounding words that Pangloss no doubt uses in teaching like "physique expérimentale," "raison suffisante," "effets et causes" to Pangloss' sexual encounter with the chamber-maid. Here Voltaire is satirizing metaphysicians like Pangloss who use high-sounding words unnecessarily. As W.F. Barber puts it:

> Behind the satire,... there lies a rational critique. In ridiculing and attacking these human follies and cruelties, Voltaire is by implication demanding more intelligent standards of conduct, greater rationality and a keener sense of reality as well as more charity from his fellow men.[5]

This critical assessment of Voltaire's aims and objectives can also be suitably applied to Francis Bebey, more especially when he uses acid irony in Le Fils d'Agatha. The narrator-character Mbenda states

that:

> Depuis la mort de Dicky nous étions tous convaincus que l'oncle Gros-Coeur était un sorcier redoutable, et nous le redoutions comme il se devait... Un village de chez nous a toujours besoin d'un homme à redouter, qui soit enfermé des pieds à la tête dans le secret de la magie noire... Eya était en prison. Il fallait donc nécessairement quelqu'un pour le remplacer et l'oncle Gros-Coeur était tout indiqué pour cela. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.120).

Here we can discern that the narrator wants to deride his fellow villagers who are prone to accuse people of witchcraft. The narrator also implies that since Eya the notable "sorcier" is in prison, someone else has to be suspected whether he is guilty or not. Here the narrator uses irony at the expense of the villagers, especially as he appears to believe what he is saying when he uses the words "il fallait nécessairement quelqu'un pour le remplacer." However we know that this is only a pretence by which he can expose the villagers' superstitious beliefs and the way they implicate innocent people.

This type of humour is occasionally employed by Montesquieu in Lettres persanes. The people who had previously admired the Persian in his native attire, now that he is dressed in Westernized clothes exclaim:

> "Monsieur est Persan? C'est une chose bien extraordinaire! Comment peut-on être Persan?"[6]

In this case, the narrator ridicules the stupidity of the people through their question "comment peut-on être Persan," as if a Persian can only wear his native attire to be able to be identified as Persian. The irony of the situation is that the same people now believe that because one is dressed like them, one can no longer be of another race. It is a scarcely-veiled criticism of narrow-mindedness.

Embarras is full of this acid irony and sarcasm, as can be seen in the following passage:

> "Evindi, menottes aux poignets, se fit promener dans la ville, courant derrière un gendarme à bicyclette. Il est vrai que le cycliste n'allait pas à toute allure." (Embarras, p.92).

The second sentence is very short but carries a great deal of weight due to its acidity. In fact, the shortness of this sentence contributes to its impact, as does the triviality of the statement compared to the gravity of the situation. With this acid and humorous allusion to the fact that the bicycle Evindi is chained to is not moving at top speed, the narrator succeeds in showing his criticism of the obnoxious treatment meted out to Evindi.

Bebey uses irony when he is criticizing certain major faults of society such as discrimination. This can be observed in Le Roi Albert where the narrator

declares:

> Monsieur Delmot... contrairement à tous ses prédécesseurs ne se contentait pas de donner des ordres en ajoutant 'sale nègre' chaque fois qu'on lui disait qu'on n'avait pas bien compris; il s'approchait de chaque ouvrier, examinait le travail de chacun, relevait les défauts et aidait à les corriger, sans jamais faire remarquer combien les ouvriers noirs étaient bêtes - , tant il est vrai que pour être ouvrier et bête à la fois il faut nécessairement être noir.
> (Le Roi Albert, p.65).

Here, though Monsieur Delmot is highly praised, the sharp contrast between him and his white colleagues only serves to show the discriminatory attitude of the latter towards the African workers. The narrator derides this feeling of superiority on the part of the white engineers over the black workers. The author's irony is aimed at the racist view that to be a worker and stupid at the same time one must also be black.

Even in La Poupée, there are some rare flashes of acidity. This acid irony is sometimes conveyed by aid of personal opinions proferred by the narrator as we can observe in this brief portrait of Edna's father:

> Le père d'Edna avait quitté le domicile conjugal peu avant la venue au monde de l'enfant, prétextant qu'il n'était pour rien dans la grossesse de sa femme. Les mauvaises langues... n'omettaient pas de mettre l'accent sur le fait que "Brother Danko" avait attendu près de huit mois avant de constater qu'il attendait de la même manière que quelqu'un qui ne serait jamais le père de l'enfant à venir. Si

> jamais il vous arrivait un jour d'attendre la naissance d'un enfant je vous conseille de vérifier dès l'aube qu'il sera bien le vôtre. (La Poupée, p.34).

Danka, Edna's father, waited till his wife was eight months pregnant before he finally became aware that the child was not his. The narrator mocks at Danka before giving the funny advice that if ever you are expecting a baby, you should verify immediately whether the child is yours or not.

According to David Cohen, "to be able to see oneself with a little irony is generally considered to be an excellent quality."[7] Bebey appears to subscribe to this assertion as can be observed from his books in which he occasionally uses irony to convey his views. Hoyet states that:

> "Reprenant le procédé de la feinte naïveté utilisé par Montesquieu dans Les Lettres Persanes, Bebey établit par le biais de l'ironie une complicité souriante entre l'auteur et le lecteur."[8]

As we have seen in many places in Bebey's novels, this false naiveté is one of Bebey's favourite ways of using irony to good effect.

There are many instances where this irony serves as a means to an end and they proliferate in Embarras. In the short story "Révélations de la chambre noire," the narrator was told that looking in a mirror when

funerals were in progress could be fatal since souls could be seen in the mirror on their way to heaven at such times. The narrator later had the misfortune of looking in his mirror at eight o'clock in the morning instead of at his usual time of seven. He fell ill, and this is how he presents it:

> Vous ne savez pas quel effet cela peut vous faire, lorsque vous vous dites que vous allez mourir demain, alors que tout le monde vous voit en bonne santé aujourd'hui. Il vous faut faciliter les choses, et faire dire après votre dernier soupir que vous êtes mort à la suite d'une fièvre, ou de quelque chose d'autre. Moi, j'avais choisi une bonne typhoïde, qui me garda plus d'un mois à l'hôpital. (Embarras, p.98).

Here, the narrator, in line with his superstitious beliefs, thinks he will die within nine days. This is because he looked into his mirror at a time when souls are supposed to be going to heaven. He comments ironically about the illness that befell him after he had looked into the mirror. He humorously attributes it to the fact that since he was telling people he would die, the best way to do it was to be sick first. He consequently "chose" a nice typhoid fever which hospitalizes him for more than a month.

Occasionally, the narrator uses mordant irony as is the case when Fanny presents Mbenda with his first illegitimate child. The narrator describes the way his in-laws demanded a goat and some wine and he is

not at all pleased with this state of affairs especially as he knows the child is not his. However, after being advised by le roi Salomon, he decides thus:

> Mais je pris la résolution d'obéir aux conseils du roi bâtisseur: je tournai mes yeux vers l'avenir, les écarquillant largement, avec l'espoir puéril de voir ce que portaient les flots mouvants de l'insondable. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.146).

Because le roi Salomon tells him to turn his mind from what has passed and to look at what the future will bring, Mbenda plays on this piece of advice. He pretends to take le roi's words literally that:

> "tes yeux n'ont pas besoin de regarder derrière, puisque tu les as devant. Derrière il y a l'adultère de ta femme... Devant... C'est là que tu dois regarder..." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.146).

Mbenda sarcastically states that he opened his eyes wide with the childish hope of seeing what the future would bring.

Sometimes too, the sarcasm can be seen in the narrator's choice of words. In "La Pie voyageuse," the narrator mimics the young French girl, Betty's way of talking and her childishness. To do this, he makes use of repetition especially of the word "et." This ironic proliferation of "et" conveys the atmosphere created by Betty when she is talking. It shows that her level of intelligence is child-like because children

usually repeat themselves indiscriminately. It also gives us an inkling of Betty's loquaciousness. However, the narrator's sarcasm culminates in the way he states that Betty's father has only been absent for a few months while he, the narrator, has not seen his relatives for years:

> "Plusieurs mois sans voir les siens, ô Seigneur... alors que moi je n'avais encore mis que quelques années sans voir les miens." (Embarras, p.70).

The narrator uses the force of contrast to show how ridiculous the situation is. Betty complains that she has not seen her father for some months. To show his sarcasm, the narrator says he has only spent some years without seeing his own people. The word "only" is used in a sarcastic sense.

METHODS EMPLOYED BY BEBEY

Francis Bebey utilizes varied methods to convey the comic. Firstly, by making use of personal intervention, he makes the stories more interesting and funny. Through the narrator he makes conspiratorial asides which are little remarks expressing the narrator's opinion. On account of the incongruity of these remarks in relation to the situation, they arouse the amusement of the reader. For instance, in Le Fils d'Agatha, when Mbenda discovers his wife's affair with his friend he declares:

> "Toko se disait mon ami... N'empêche que c'est lui qui se chargea de faire proprement le premier enfant de ma femme." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.142).

This affirmation in itself does not produce an amused response, but then the narrator goes on to inform the reader that:

> "Les amis et les femmes sont ainsi." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.142).

With this statement, we cannot help seeing the funny side of the situation, especially as we know that Mbenda, though at the receiving end of the affair, wryly and humorously makes the comment.

Even where the narrator is not an active participant in the chain of events, he intervenes, at random throughout the story. This fact can be borne out in the short story "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police." Here the narrator makes witty appraisals of situations. When the narrator talks about Monsieur Neuf, the police officer, he says:

> Cet homme qui vous connaît, vous et vos manières, ressemble beaucoup à une fenêtre perpétuellement ouverte de votre chambre. Mais peut-être aimez-vous exposer l'intimité de votre chambre à tous les passants? Si oui, vous aimez sûrement Monsieur Neuf. (Embarras, p.87).

The narrator seems to be talking directly to the reader by the use of such words as "vous" and "votre."

He uses a simile to describe M. Neuf, comparing him to a bed-room's open window. But then he asks the reader an amusing question: perhaps he likes exposing his bed-room to passers-by? If he likes this, then he certainly likes M. Neuf. The narrator could very easily have said "you will not like M. Neuf," but the way he puts it serves to heighten the reader's appreciation of the narrator's sense of humour.

Secondly, Bebey utilizes a deceptive naiveté to achieve the desired effect. This technique is reminiscent of Montesquieu in Lettres persanes. Most of Bebey's narrators and some of his characters seem to be naive but this is just a camouflage, behind which they hide their true selves. We the readers find that the incidents are more amusing because of this false naiveté.

Mbenda is the most typical case of the narrator-characters who seem deceptively naive. When l'oncle Gros-Coeur is accused of being a wizard and is consequently on the verge of being killed, Mbenda makes the following statement:

> Le spectacle sous l'arbre continuaient. Je me demande comment l'oncle Gros-Coeur n'était pas encore mort; vraiment, par moments, son incroyable résistance physique me donne sérieusement à croire qu'il devait posséder quelque pouvoir magique, sinon du genre dont on l'accusait du moins d'un genre plus inoffensif, plus... protecteur pour lui-même. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.115).

Here the naive villager is speaking and seriously wondering whether l'oncle Gros-Coeur is not really a sorcerer since he does not die in spite of all the punishment inflicted on him. Further on, however, Mbenda states that le roi Salomon, Gros-Coeur's accuser, is singularly absent when the other elders are caught. This is because he did not participate in attempting to make Gros-Coeur confess, but avoided the scene of the incident completely. Mbenda assesses the situation in the following words:

> Et pourtant c'est vrai; le promoteur de toute cette affaire, le seul homme de chez nous qui eût jamais l'occasion de rencontrer la fameuse grenouille sorcière, celui-là dont l'imagination alla jusqu'à faire croire que cette grenouille avait la tête de l'oncle Gros-Coeur, oui, je vous dis, le roi Salomon ne fut point emmené avec les autres au cours de cette rafle. (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.116).

At this juncture, it is no longer the naive villager but a critical person who highly doubts the feasibility of the king's story. We can discern Mbenda's gradual disbelief of le roi Salomon's story from the words "le promoteur de cette affaire," and especially when Mbenda asserts that it is le roi's imagination that made him see a frog with l'oncle Gros-Coeur's head. This initial quasi-naiveté presents the character as a simpleton until a subtle insinuation suggests that this naivete is deceptive. This is particularly the case in Le Roi Albert where the narrator feigns baffled

incomprehension at the names of the Europeans in his neighbourhood. In the narrator's own words:

> Des magasins... dont on disait qu'ils appartenaient à des Européens, et qu'arboraient leurs enseignes d'une manière assez curieuse avec des 'is' des 'as' des 'es' et des 'os' terminant les noms des propriétaires... Un seul 'vitch' était représenté. Yavrontolovitch, dont on pouvait se demander d'où il était bien sorti lui. Bellam et Fatta, Gouda et Moktar, Bagdad et Chimmi complétaient la liste des commercants portant pignon sur l'avenue. (Le Roi Albert, p.18).

However, this naiveté disappears when the narrator goes on to explain that the Arabo-Helenic invasion was ended by a certain Rannel who also had his shop in the area. This unexpected knowledge shows that the narrator is not really as inexperienced as he seems, since he can classfy the traders into two groups - the Arabs and the Greeks, and since he can discern that Rannel is neither.

Bebey also endows his characters with names which provide a hint of the light-heartedness of the villagers who created the names. Dominique Hoyet says that:

> "L'auteur se fait aussi l'interprète de l'humour populaire qui affuble certains membres de la communauté de surnoms cocasses... attestant ainsi la bonne humeur et la joie de vivre villageoises."[9]

L'oncle Gros-Coeur, le Vespasien, la mère Mauvais-Regard, le roi Salomon, La Loi are all names designed to convey an atmosphere of bonhomie and fun as regards

both the villagers who created these nick-names and the characters thus nick-named. These names show that the villagers have a sense of humour especially where we know the origin of some of these names. Le Vespasien is so called because he is the only one in the village who possesses a type of scooter called Vespa. Le roi Salomon is called in this way because of his wisdom. Here he is being equated with the biblical King Solomon. La mère Mauvais-Regard is so called because a look from her is believed to be capable of casting a spell on people. As for La Loi, his name was translated literally from the vernacular into French by his cousin Okeke when the white hunters came to the village, and this nick-name stuck.

Finally Bebey's technique as a novelist also contributes to his way of amusing his readers. This is because Bebey allows himself a lot of freedom while writing. He does not confine himself to any rigid rules. Most other African writers also have this characteristic, though some of them still want to stick rigidly to tradition. For the most part, however, according to Charles Larson, "a number of traditional techniques and conventions are often missing from the African novel or are noticeably altered."[10] Bebey's novels fall into this group but this does not detract from his literary expertise. Unlike novelists such as Alioum Fantouré and Mongo Beti, whose major pre-

occupation is political satire of certain contemporary regimes in Africa, Francis Bebey does not indulge in sustained social and political criticism. According to Norman Stokle:

> "Bebey does not scream his indignation from the roof-tops or shout propagandist slogans. His artistic instincts are too sharp for that. Instead he shows these vices and injustices as they occur in every day life... His most effective tool is irony..."[11]

We can see then that Bebey's irony is effective as an instrument for denouncing vices and injustices.

Bebey's characters too do not conform rigorously to any fixed standard. Some of them are not even psychologically and physically well-developed. Such characters as Fanny are weak and this tends to give more weight to the main characters who are more or less those who most solicit an amused response to their adventures.

Even the structure of the stories is governed by a liberty characteristic of Bebey. The plots are occasionally interrupted by digressions and interventions from the narrator as we have already seen. This liberty seems to add to the success of the story because the important and the not-so-important can be mingled thus giving the impression of life-like occurrences and characters. This method of giving equal importance to little and major events also creates more

room for the writer to show his sense of humour.

In addition, Bebey's language imitates everyday speech. The interventions are, for the most part short with many exclamations and interjections. Take, for example, the narrator's account of Mbété the witch-doctor's antics:

> Puis Mbété se mit à faire sortir un râle qui me donna l'impression au bout d'un certain temps que l'homme dormait... et qu'il nous avait oubliés. Nous oubliés! quelle pensée idiote! Nous oublier, c'était oublier qu'il n'avait rien à manger chez lui pour la journée. Quelle pensée idiote! ... (Embarras, p.104).

Here we can see how the narrator uses exclamations like "quelle pensée idiote!" to convey the right atmosphere, that of everyday speech.

Moreover, most of Bebey's books have an African flavour. Though they are written in French, they sometimes seem to be translated almost literally from African Languages. Furthermore, Bebey's translation of African expressions into French, as well as his way of interspersing his work with African proverbs and imagery, appeal a great deal to the reader. Expressions such as "on ne refuse pas l'eau de la rivière parce que le vase dont on dispose est plein de trous," (Le Roi Albert, p.98) appeal a lot especially when we discover that as a title it is very suitable for the chapter whose title it is.

In this chapter, the villagers debate on whether Albert or Bikounou should marry Nani. However, Bikounou has already brought disgrace on the village by getting drunk, together with his friend Féfé, and allowing himself to be arrested by the inhabitants of the Village-des-Palmiers. One of the villagers of Effidi - Bomba, declares that neither Albert nor Bikounou should marry Nani. This is because the drums of Nkool ridiculed Effidi when Bikounou was arrested.

Nevertheless, the chief of Effidi - Ndengué solves the problem with the proverb "on ne refuse pas l'eau de la rivière parce que le vase dont on dispose est plein de trous." He means that water from the river should not be refused just because the water-jar is full of holes. Instead these holes should be patched up, or if one prefers to change jars this is also possible. What he means is that Effidi should still go to Nkool to ask for Nani's hand in marriage, but since Bikounou has disgraced the village, Albert (the new water-jar) will be the suitor. So we can see how apt this proverb is as a title for this chapter because it summarises the main theme of the chapter which is that Albert is the suitor chosen eventually by the village elders.

From our discussion so far in this chapter, we can see that Bebey's humour is varied. He also employs many methods to convey the comic. We have seen how

irony, gentle, and subtle humour, give his work greater appeal. Bebey's favourite methods also enhance the interest of his works. Thanks to his use of personal intervention, deceptive naiveté, funny names and simple language, Bebey succeeds in showing that he is a real master of the intricacies of humour in literature.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ADVANTAGES OF LITERARY HUMOUR - BEBEY'S EXAMPLE

> "La littérature africaine est d'abord africaine et exprime l'esprit, la culture de civilisations africaines."[1]

This assertion of Roland Colin's could very conveniently be applied to Bebey's works since he shows quite a marked fondness for African culture in his books. For instance, Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio is based on the life of villagers in a rural part of the Cameroons. Le Roi Albert d'Effidi describes life in Effidi and its environs and the effects of the western type of elections on the villagers. Even Embarras is about village life in some stories like "Le Mariage d'Edda;" modern-day Africa like "Le Père Noël de Fanta;" and Europe like in "Le Mot de Martine."

Bebey's preference for culture and tradition is expressed in a light-hearted manner as we have seen in the previous chapters. Some people, however, disapprove strongly and vehemently of this manner of writing. Such people claim, among other things, that humour has certain disadvantages in literature. These include an absolute scepticism, a non-seriousness and a non-commitment.

Our aim in this chapter will therefore be to look at the arguments proferred by some of these critics and to test them against Bebey's writings.

COMMITMENT IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

> "Peut-on passer sous silence le travail forcé, les souffrances dues aux humiliations ressenties et la lutte quotidienne pour vivre?"[2]

Nicole Medjigbodo, one of the advocates of radical commitment in African literature, asks this question. She strongly believes that a writer's greatest weapon is his pen and that he has to use it to fight for the political, social and economic betterment of his people. She therefore thinks that no writer should dissociate himself from commitment. Yaw Kantanka Boafo also holds similar views. He believes that African writers cannot evade being committed. Consequently, he launches a vehement attack on Oyono for failing to be a committed writer. To Yaw Boafo, the novel Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille is a failure since it is not an authentic African literary work of combat.[3] The insinuation is therefore that to be successful, an African literary work should of necessity be committed. Glissant, on the other hand, holds quite a different opinion:

> Selon lui, politique et littérature ne peuvent être actuellement ni separées ni confondues. L'œuvre littéraire a certes une signification politique mais l'on doit refuser de faire de la politique en écrivant. Il regrette donc que la littérature noire actuelle soit trop souvent une littérature de combat.[4]

Thus, we can see that Glissant believes that while

politics and literature can neither be separated nor mixed up one does not have to see literature entirely in a political light. Politics can be a part but not the whole of literature. Thus critics who think the contrary have greatly neglected most of the advantages that can be derived from humour in literature. Literature should be expressed freely in whatever manner the writer thinks fit. Ignoring or condemning a certain writer just because he does not conform to certain fixed standards is therefore tantamount to doing him and the literary world a great disservice since no matter how little it is, different writers have their own quota to contribute to mankind. In this respect, humour and its functions in literature have been greatly neglected. We intend here to examine the positive aspect of humour in Bebey's works.

BENEFITS OF HUMOUR IN LITERATURE

Humour in literature has indeed enormous benefits psychologically, socially and even politicially, contrary to the erroneous beliefs of the critics already mentioned.

Psychologically, literature and humour serve in relaxing the reader. Literature is an effective means of conveying humour since most people seek pleasure when they are reading. Bebey provides this pleasure while at the same time keeping the reader informed. F. Zillman

affirms that:

> "Looking at the available evidence then it would seem that humour, provided that it is not overtly intense and arousing, can indeed effectively combat undesirable emotions and their behavioural consequences."[5]

Thus while subduing emotions that are not advantageous, humour also serves socially since the behavioural consequences of these undesirable emotions are subdued in the process. As Kwabena Britwum writes in relation to laughter in Une Vie de Boy:

> "Le rire est ce qui permet de contrebalancer le malheur sans pour autant l'abolir."[6]

Laughter helps offset misfortune but does not completely do away with it. However, by laughing one gets respite and can then think about correcting any difficulties or problems. This is because laughter permits one to be detached from the problem and be able to survey it from a distance with the ultimate goal of rectifying these setbacks where this is possible.

This we can see from Mbenda's example. By wryly and humorously commenting on his unfortunate experiences with Fanny and Agatha, resulting in two children that are not his, he avoids giving vent to anger and frustration which would have been natural but disastrous. His wit, however, helps him contain his emotions to a certain extent. As for the reader, while smiling, he

also learns from Mbenda's reactions that the occasional light-heartedness does not harm. As Franz Rosenthal states:

> "The definition which would appear... the most plausible one connects humour with the relief felt at the momentary lifting of one of the many restrictions which the physical and social environment imposes upon man."[7]

Consequently, we see that when Man is weighed down by societal and physical demands, humour can provide necessary relief.

It follows therefore that from Francis Bebey's books, we derive a lifting of the societal restrictions that bog life down. Though this lifting of restrictions has only a temporary effect, it helps relaxation a great deal. Thus, in spite of the intrigues in Bebey's books, in spite of the misfortunes that befall Bebey's heroes, we are still able to laugh on account of Bebey's exceptional flair for humour.

Socially, too, humour has many advantages. It can serve as a form of social control, since according to Christ Powell, it:"

> "is concerned with ideas/behaviours in some ways separate from, or deviations often in conflict with normal order."[8]

This means the things that give rise to felt humour, are usually things that run counter to socially

accepted norms. Consequently, while amusement is felt at the situation, and also because of the ridicule or caricature of the situation, the reader is also led to ask himself questions regarding the consequences of abnormal behaviour. This, as a result, serves to limit such happenings. Thus, when Mbenda informs us that Fanny:

> "se mit à grossir du ventre, sans me prévenir... lentement, mais sûrement." (Le Fils d'Agatha, p.142).

He is wittily commenting on the deviation from social norms and expectations that Fanny and Mbenda's friend Toko are guilty of in having an affair and providing Mbenda with a daughter that is not his. Hence while seeing the humorous dimension of certain situations, we also become aware of the negative aspects of such happenings. This can also be seen in certain situations in Le Vieux Nègre et la medaille where the writer seeks to show, among other things, the negative effects of Meka's naiveté. Meka is naive in his excessively generous attitude to the Church even though he lives in a miserable hut in the village. In the narrator's own words:

> Meka était souvent cité en exemple de bon chrétien à la Mission catholique... Il avait 'donné' ses terres aux prêtres et habitait une petite case misérable au village... Il avait eu la grâce insigne d'être le propriétaire d'une terre qui, un beau matin, plut au Bon Dieu. Ce fut un père blanc qui lui révela sa divine destinée.[9]

Here Cycno, like Bebey, uses irony and piercing wit to expose Meka's simple-mindedness, gullibility and the incongruity of his behaviour. Meka is extremely gullible in the way he believes what the white priest tells him and accepts the fact that his land is wanted by God. Meka gives the priests all his land, and then goes to live in a wretched little hut. This incongruous behaviour is further emphasized by the ironic statement that the white priest revealed Meka's divine destiny to him (that his land was wanted for the church).

Humour can consequently help to correct certain societal deviations, since when we laugh at others we are also laughing at ourselves. Thus when we laugh at Meka for believing the "revelation" of the white priest regarding Meka's "divine destiny," we are also laughing at all other naive individuals who allow themselves to be grossly exploited in such ways.

As an instrument of criticism, humour does serve a purpose which seems to be ignored by most advocates of literary commitment. Humour shows a critical mind and a critical way of assessing people and situations as we can observe from the manner in which Bebey treats certain vital issues in his books. The use of irony and sarcasm show a mind that asks questions and makes efforts to find suitable answers. That is partly why Voltaire, who makes ardent use of such processes, is

considered one of the great thinkers of his century.

Bebey's critical mind questions several retrogressive obsessions of the villagers. Such strong beliefs are mainly superstitious, ranging from belief in the supernatural world to belief in witchcraft.

The latter - witchcraft - forms one of the commonest topics in Bebey's books and the same can be said for black magic. In Le Fils d'Agatha, the narrator states that:

> Dans ce monde étrange de la magie noire les noirs sont de loin supérieurs aux blancs. Ils possèdent tout ce que ces derniers possèdent dans la vie ordinaire et bien plus encore: des bateaux, des trains, des avions, des maisons à étages, et que sais-je encore... La seule loi de leur milieu, c'est de ne pas révéler leur science, et de ne pas en faire profiter ceux qui ne sont pas de leur confrérie. Il faut que tout reste secret, sinon, ce n'est plus de la magie, cela se comprend bien. (Le Fils d'Agatha, pp.139 - 140).

Here Bebey uses irony to ridicule African witchcraft. This he does by showing how ridiculous is the belief that African witches and wizards are rich in the world of black magic but poor in real life. Eya and his wife la mère Mauvais-Regard in Le Fils d'Agatha are very poor villagers, but their village counterparts believe that they have riches in the world of black magic.

Bebey also laughs at the way the young women's behaviour changed in Le Roi Albert. He at one stage attributes this change to the elections. According to

the narrator;

> Depuis le lancement de la campagne électorale, deux à deux, les seins de maintes femmes d'Effidi et d'ailleurs s'étaient mis à se gonfler... Les seins sont capricieux. Ils mûrissent la tête haute, ils meurrent le ventre plat et l'oeil pointé vers le sol dur de la moisson déjà terminée. On savait que Bikounou-le-Vespasien n'était pas totalement étranger à ces nouvelles proéminences, lesquelles s'accompagnaient d'ailleurs, par on ne sait quelle coïncidence, d'un alordissement progressif du ventre. (Le Roi Albert, p.169).

In this case, the narrator is criticizing the behaviour of the women-folk during this election period. The ladies are seduced by Bikounou and this leads to pregnancies. However, the language with which this turn of events is described drives home the point in a witty manner.

A critical mind can also be seen at work in Embarras, where the author humorously but consistently questions white supremacy over blacks, as well as racism, maltreatment and exploitation. "Le Mot de Martin," "La Pie voyageuse," and "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police," are the most striking short stories in this respect. In "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police," exploitation and maltreatment are evident. Because of Evindi's colour, he finds himself excessively punished for a crime which whites had been committing and getting away with. Eléna, the wife of the Greek, Assisastanas, is young but bored. When the young, handsome, black

barber Evindi starts frequenting Assisastanas' home, this is ostensibly to cut Assisastanas' hair. However, behind the scenes, Evindi carries on an affair with Eléna which is eventually brought to light by the inquisitive M. Neuf, the police commissioner. Because of Evindi's "crime" he has to be punished though the narrator makes the following observation:

> "Mais peut-être que si Evindi avait été blanc, le grec n'aurait meme pas pensé à le punir." (Embarras, p.85).

So if Evindi were white he probably would not have been punished for his liaison with Eléna. As it is, however, Evindi is sent to prison where he spends a month and is given regular beatings. At the end of his stay in prison, he is sent to do forced labour at Dizangué. The narrator comments ironically on this in the following words:

> Nous étions alors en guerre contre les barbares de l'Axe, et notre plantation d'hévéas avait besoin de main d'oeuvre... Mais qu'il me soit tout de même permis de réhabiliter ce criminel, aujourd'hui, puisque nous avons gagné la guerre: la contribution d'Evindi dans notre victoire contre les nazis, n'est-ce pas là un fait important à mentionner? N'oublions pas non plus que tout le mérite de cette bonne action revient à Monsieur Neuf, puisque c'est lui qui envoya Evindi aux travaux forcés pour un temps indéterminé. Vraiment, les citoyens de mon pays ne savent pas combien ils doivent à M. Neuf. (Embarras, p.92).

In this case, the narrator uses sarcasm to drive home his message. He is presumably an African but he talks

about the war as if it really is his. Then he states ironically that because "they" were at war their plantation needed workers. Consequently, Evindi is to be commended for his work on the plantations which contributed to the victory over the Germans. We can further sense the sarcasm when the narrator declares that M. Neuf should also be given credit for the defeat of the Nazis since it was he who sent Evindi to work on the plantations. The extent of the ridicule is further heightened by our knowledge that the narrator is claiming a war neither he nor his compatriots initiated but are nevertheless forced to fight.

Thus, we can see that Bebey shows a critical mind in his condemnation of certain aspects of African tradition as well as a criticism of racism, social exploitation and social deviations from the accepted norms of society. He does this and at the same time amuses his reader. It is up to us to sort out the grain from the chaff, because as Rabelais says, it is necessary to "rompre l'os et sucer la substantifique mouelle."[10] We should break the bone and suck the marrow as Rabelais says, because Bebey's works have more to offer than just laughter. It is up to the reader to discern the kernel of meaning behind Bebey's humour while at the same time appreciating Bebey's sense of irony and the comic.

MERITS OF HUMOUR AS AN AGENT OF CRITICISM

As we have seen, humour can effectively be used to criticize certain things which society frowns upon. Nonetheless, it has the benefit of not creating a situation of absolute and total criticism. Humour is a medium by which criticism can conveniently be effected without the writer having to be overtly critical or dogmatic. This is what Bebey does with noteworthy ease. The result is that he develops a subtle way of informing the reader without boring him unnecessarily because the occasional humour has the effect of perking up the reader's imagination and spirit.

IMPORTANCE OF LAUGHTER IN BEBEY'S WORKS

Bebey's constant witticism in his works brings us to a very important question: why does he choose this mode of approach when there are others which could be adequate? To answer this question, we have to bear in mind the importance of laughter in Bebey's novels.

Bebey has a sense of humour and a sense of the comic both of which give rise to laughter. Bebey attaches a great deal of importance to this laughter. In fact it is so important that in Le Roi Albert, a whole chapter is entitled "Du Rire par paquets entiers" (Le Roi Albert, p.172).

In this chapter, which is strictly about laughter, the narrator creates a transition for the next chapter

"Les Tams-Tams de Nkool." All the explanations of laughter are really guiding us to the chapter on the tom-toms. These are used to make fun of the village of Effidi because Nkool has produced the representative for the region in the person of Toutouma-le-Syndicaliste. From this chapter "Du Rire par paquets entiers" we can discern that to Bebey, laughter is a very good thing; it is also very healthy. He does not like the type of laughter that arises when one is in danger or when something sad has happened. This nervous type of laughter is one of the African mannerisms which non-Africans find extremely difficult to understand.

Bebey defines the type of laughter that interests him as being:

> "Sain et pur, direct qui part d'un éclat déclenché par un événement, un incident de la vie quotidienne." (Le Roi Albert, p.172)

Laughter is pure, and an event or incident can cause it. This can be seen in all Bebey's works, but a comic scene in Embarras et Compagnie probably typifies Bebey's sense of the comic at its best. This is in the story "Le Mariage d'Edda," where a young man decides to get married. The villagers choose to go to Zaabat in search of a wife for Edda, but things turn sour right in the middle of the discussions. Suddenly two women from the two negotiating villages, start insulting each other. One of the women from Zaabat suddenly stands up

to warn another one from Meloundi:

> "Ecoute, toi, si tu me coules encore des regards de ce genre, tu vas voir ce qui va t'arriver. Je te le dis! n'est-ce pas que je te le dis? Si tu..." (Embarras, p.25).

Then the other woman replies:

> "Et toi? Avec quoi m'as-tu vue, sinon avec tes yeux de sorcière que tu me coulais comme si je t'avais jamais fait quelque chose de mal?" (Embarras, p.25).

From these insults, the situation develops to an almost unbearable level, with the husbands of the two women dragged into a comic verbal battle. During this war of words, each of the two men tries to prove his superiority by listing his possessions. These enviable possessions range from a cocoa farm to an umbrella, an Aïda lamp, an accordion, a bicycle and the trump card - a colonial hat. The man from Zaabat is the owner of this hat, and this possession, much envied by many, but possessed by few, makes him the victor of a protracted heated argument. As the narrator says:

> L'homme de mon village qui avait soutenu ce match jusque-là se tut, ce qui voulait dire qu'il n'avait plus rien qu'il pût faire 'voir' à son adversaire. Il était battu, et c'était normal: l'autre, avec son casque colonial, avait tout naturellement atteint le sommet. (Embarras, p.29).

The narrator further adds to this funny scene by his spontaneous commentaries. After the defeat of his fellow villager he declares:

> "Allez donc répondre quelque chose à un Zaabat possesseur d'un casque blanc qu'il porte au jour du quatorze juillet." (Embarras, p.30).

This colonial hat is revered by the villagers because the colonial masters wear it. Anyone who therefore has such a prized possession is thus considered to be superior to his fellow villagers and this explains why the whole village of Meloundi, takes the defeat as that of the whole village and everyone of them leaves for Meloundi immediately.

In Le Roi Albert, the narrator goes on to define the type of laughter he favours. It is the type that is given freely. However he further goes on to say that:

> "Si j'étais marchand, moi, je vendrais du rire en paquets, en godets, en sachets, par bolées, par cuvées, par poignées, par cuillerées, par écuellées, par assiettées, par cruchées, par terrinées entières, par stères et decistères. Je deviendrais riche. Qu'est-ce que ce serait drôle!" (Le Roi Albert, pp.172 - 173).

Here the narrator wishes he were a trader so that he could become a dealer of laughter, selling it in all sorts of containers. From this sale of laughter he declares that he would become rich. And indeed in his novels, Francis Bebey makes himself a real seller of laughter.

According to the narrator, laughter is a very refreshing phenomenon and this can be observed in the

chapter entitled "Les tams-tams de Nkool." It is here that the reason for the previous chapter "Du Rire par paquets entiers" is fully explained. The villagers of Nkool laugh at those from Effidi because the latter lost the elections to the former. The narrator states that:

> "Les gens de Nkool parfumèrent la forêt du rire de leurs tambours tapant fort du matin au soir." (Le Roi Albert, p.174).

He goes on to say that:

> "Pour cela, et peut-être rien qu'à cause de cela, la langue des tambours s'était délicée, leurs dents desserrées, dès que Nkool avait eu de quoi distribuer du rire à la ronde." (Le Roi Albert, p.174).

From this, we can deduce that to Bebey laughter is something to be distributed, something to be shared with everybody. It is not a thing that one can store in oneself, solely for one's use.

Le Roi Albert appears to be full of these kinds of laughter because when Nani and Myriam have ended their discussion of marriage, the narrator says:

> "Les deux jeunes filles partirent d'un éclat de rire en se tenant par la main et tirant chacune de son côté. Puis elles reprirent leur marche du pas souple de personnes allegées par le rire." (Le Roi Albert, p.49).

In this case it is obvious that to the narrator, laughter lifts one's mental burden as it does to the two young girls Nani and Myriam after their discussion

on marriage.

Even in La Poupée, which seems to have a more serious undertone than the other novels, the narrator expresses his views on laughter. These views are likely to be Bebey's own opinion about laughter since the same idea recurs in both La Poupée and Le Roi Albert.

The narrator of La Poupée ashanti while describing a typical market scene states:

> "Le jour avait commencé à décliner peu à peu. Le rire et la moquerie font passer le temps si vite." (Le Poupée ashanti, p.7).

It is clear from this statement that for Bebey, laughter is a necessity. It is given freely to anyone who wants to share in it. It is very refreshing, satisfying and a form of relaxation, and Bebey would make himself a seller of laughter if this were possible.

This leads us to an assessment of the man Bebey. What type of person emerges from his works? Bebey is a very witty person with a sharp sense of humour. He is acutely aware of the ridiculous, the funny and the absurd and expresses this accordingly. He believes that laughter is a sure way of passing the time but he is also very aware of the way laughter and ridicule can help to contain social deviations. From the study of his works it appears that Bebey agrees with Freud that:

> "the small contributions of humour that we produce ourselves are as a rule made at the cost of anger - instead of getting angry."[11]

This can be proved by such characters as Mbenda who do not allow themselves to sink in self-pity, but comment on their problems in a humorous manner.

Bebey makes maximum use of the advantages provided by irony, the comic, and satire to create a basis for constructive criticism of societal restrictions and deviations, with a view to getting them rectified, since "as far back as Plato and Aristotle, laughter was considered the proper corrective of the excessive, the ridiculous, and the ludicrous."[12]

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C O N C L U S I O N

Humour is a phenomenon that few people have ever really bothered to try to understand. Almost everybody takes it for granted; oblivious of the fact that humour is not just laughter - it has a much wider horizon than the general concept of sheer lightheartedness. Here, we shall examine humour in general, and the greater possibilities it offers in literature.

Humour as we have seen is an abstract phenomenon, but it can be said to be the ability to see things as funny or ridiculous. Thus one who has this ability is said to possess a sense of humour and anybody who can appreciate and depict the amusing side of things is a humorist.

An unwarped sense of the funny is considered a virtue by many people. Everyone wants to be considered as having a good sense of humour, but naturally, not everybody possesses it. To be able to create humorous situations is also very difficult because it requires a sense of humour to do this. This is because to be able to amuse others one must be aware of what causes amusement. Thus, though one does not necessarily have to be a humorist to have a sense of humour, one must of necessity have a sense of humour to be a good humorist.

Humour is not a characteristic of any particular group of people, or race but a universal feature which

distinguishes Man from the lower animals. Whenever a human being comes across anything that seems funny to him, he expresses his amusement by either smiling (which is a sub-laugh) or by outright laughter. However one's appreciation of what is funny might vary according to one's culture and environment. This is because different peoples have different social ideas. Therefore what is comic to one group is not necessarily amusing to the other. Thus the environment which determines socially acceptable norms, also influences our perception of what is funny. Consequently, a European who cracks jokes about bigamy to an African audience might meet little or no appreciation of his humour due to the fact that in the typical African environment marrying more than one wife is a perfectly normal action.

Humour in literature can take many forms. Sometimes it even stretches into satire and irony. Satire is a piece of writing that riducules a person or people. It occasionally produces an amused response from the reader. It is this type of satire that cannot totally be separated from humour in the general sense. This is because humour is loosely described as anything pertaining to laughter. Consequently, any satire that does produce laughter or a related response is a form of humour. According to Matthew Hodgart:

> Satire, although its content is often the harshest realities of human existence, is

> meant to make us laugh or smile. The smile, one assumes, is a sub-laugh, a laugh inhibited by good manners, or not fully called out by the situation. But what is laughter?... The primary cause is probably relief from tension...[1]

Satire is usually a harsh caricature of an individual or individuals; its aim is to ridicule. Northrop Frye goes even further in linking humour and satire by stating that:

> "Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack."[2]

Therefore, for satire to be really successful, humour must be present and there must be a victim. However, satire usually depicts extreme portraits of individuals in order to subject them to ridicule.

Humour based on fantasy or the grotesque is important in satire as can clearly be seen in George Orwell's Animal Farm where animals are invested with speech, thought and action. However, the novel, simple as it may seem, has satirical intent. The novel is really a satire of socialism. The animals on Farmer Jones' farm expel the farmer and his men and take over the farm and the pigs emerge as the leaders of the revolution. They preach equality and hard work, but eventually prove to be harder slave-drivers than human beings, maintaining their superiority over other animals,

which is confirmed by the oft-quoted remark in the novel: "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others."

Irony too cannot be completely severed from humour. Irony appears in two forms: verbal irony and situational irony. Verbal irony is saying the opposite of what is obviously true.

Situational irony, on the other hand, is the apparent mockery in a situation. For instance, when somebody steals money that was initially going to be given to him, if he is found out by the person who would have given him the money, the situation is described as ironic. Both verbal and situational irony can be amusing depending on the context in which they appear.

Humour and its functions in literature appear to have been neglected a great deal by literary critics. Socially, humour is primarily used to expose social ills. This is brought about when fun is made of things that go contrary to societal expectations. This brings about an amused response, but apart from the amusement, humour also serves as a form of social control. This is because humour has the effect of ridding society of ills, because by mocking any unusual behaviour, laughter results. When we come across satirical attacks on these abnormal situations, even if we cannot immediately rectify them, we can still make efforts not to be guilty

of such things. As Ronald Knox aptly put it:

> "For humour, frown upon it as you will, is nothing less than a fresh window of the soul. Through that window we see, not indeed a different world but the familiar world of our experience distorted as if by the magic of some tricksy sprite."[3]

Hence, we can observe that humour does not portray anything that is totally alien to human experience. These things might be in the realm of fantasy and thus be a distortion of facts, but the basis is usually human experience. We might not, at that particular time, be guilty of the abnormal behaviour that is being ridiculed, but we are occasionally aware of the fact that, given different circumstances, these experiences might become ours. Consequently, we are really observing ourselves through the medium of humour, and when we laugh at others, we are usually conscious of the fact that we are laughing at ourselves. In this case, irony and satire, which we have already examined are very useful as a means of correcting social ills. Satire in particular makes an ideal basis for criticism.

Humour also has some political advantages. Here again, satire plays an important role. By painting satirical pictures of stereotyped individuals, satire helps to expose their negative political activities. For example, in the African context, satire helps to expose the way Africans continue to extol and hero-

worship their leaders, shutting their eyes to any faults he might have, till such a leader becomes a dictator. Satire can also help to draw attention to the different types of governments present in Africa, and how some of them are not beneficial to the people. It can also depict the colonial realities as is the case in Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille by Ferdinand Oyono.

Francis Bebey is one of the African writers who show a keen awareness of the many possibilities and opportunities offered by humour. In his works, he has shown a remarkable skill in depicting the comic. His humour pervades his works especially Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio, Embarras et Compagnie, and Le Roi Albert d'Effidi. La Poupée Ashanti is not as comic as the others but one finds in it flashes of Bebey's humour. This humour is characteristically light-hearted and it is almost free from bitterness or despair. It is occasionally ironic and sometimes it even borders on the satirical. Bebey has a piercing wit. This is usually because he is aware of the power of irony. Consequently, he uses the narrators to convey this irony by making them utter statements that are obviously the opposite of what they mean.

Sometimes, Bebey's humour is gentle especially in Le Fils d'Agatha where the narrator humorously comments on his experiences without any trace of serious protests.

The detachment with which he looks at the trying temptations he is faced with, enables him to surmount his difficulties without giving in to despair.

Bebey also shows a mastery of the power of words to give a maximum humorous effect. This can be observed in the way Bebey's characters bestow nicknames on themselves. These nicknames are usually comic because of the way they often sum up in a humorous manner, the behaviour, esteem, or possessions of these characters. For example, la mère Mauvais-Regard is believed to be a witch, and Bikounou-le-Vespasien, is the proud possessor of a Vespa scooter. This method of bestowing comic names on characters can also be seen in the comic caricature of the police officer in Ferdinand Oyono's Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille. This officer is nicknamed Gosier-d'Oiseau by the villagers, on account of his extremely long neck. Comic names help to heighten the jocularity of the villagers, but also to satirize some of them. According to Matthew Hodgart:

> "It is impossible not to agree with Freud that behind even the harmless jokes we make there is some desire to score off someone else, to humiliate by ridicule, and in other words, to satirize."[4]

Thus we can see that to Matthew Hodgart and Sigmund Freud, even the most harmless jibes are really aiming at someone. We can observe this in some of the names that these villagers are stuck with. These names tend to

satirize them, by making fun of any physical or behavioural deficiency that they might possess. The same applies to the white police officer Gosier d'Oiseau whose neck is equated with that of a bird.

Bebey's sense of humour can be seen mainly through the narrators. These narrators usually recount the story with a great sense of the comic. The narrator's sense of humour is often apparent when he intervenes in the course of a story or event. He gives his own amusing opinion of situations, however uncalled for such information may be. These personal interventions sometimes take the form of conspiratorial asides between the narrator and the reader, with the narrator calling on the reader directly, to participate in what is going on. The narrator does this by directly asking the reader ironic questions like in "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police" where the reader is asked if he likes exposing his bedroom to passers-by. In this way, the narrator is conspiring with the reader against M. Neuf the police-officer, by drawing the reader's attention to M. Neuf's habit of prying into other people's affairs. These asides and the way they are framed are designed to amuse the reader.

Sometimes the narrators and characters appear somewhat naive. This means that they seem to be simpletons but in reality, they have a discerning mind.

We are able to detect that their naiveté is only a pretence, by the way they use irony to criticize certain things. A typical example is Mbenda who makes apparently naive commentaries on life. However, he betrays this apparent naiveté by his wordly-wise, ironic comments on certain negative aspects of the villagers' superstitious beliefs such as belief in witchcraft.

Occasionally, Bebey's sense of humour can be seen in the comic scenes he paints as well as the comic characters that are depicted. Some of the characters are comic in the way they are described like the giant Doumou who has an enormous body but a tiny head. Others are comic in their behaviour, for example the narrator-character in "Le Mariage d'Edda."

Bebey's technique as a novelist also largely contributes to heighten the comic strain in his novels. His writing is not constricted by any rigid pattern and is consequently more suitable for the creation of comic scenes. His language is made more natural by the use of day-to-day expressions, proverbs, and aphorisms and all these create a natural background for his sense of the funny to emerge clearly.

Bebey's sense of humour is best seen when he applies it to African culture whether modern or traditional. He depicts the traditional African society

as being governed by the elders of each village. The chief is usually the head of this traditional society and he works in conjunction with the elders. It is he who normally invites the participation of the other elders into the discussions to solve village problems. The result of these discussions is normally made known to the other members of the society and they are expected to respect any decision thus taken.

Marriage is also carefully and humorously described in Bebey's novels. A young man has to consult the elders when he wants to get married. His marriage is the affair of the whole village. Even the expenses are shared with everybody contributing what he can towards alleviating the financial burden of the suitor. When the marriage is eventually contracted, the husband and wife are expected to produce children, and if this is not the case, the wife has to bear the brunt of it. This is because her husband will probably marry another wife in order to have children. Mbenda vividly and humorously describes his own marriage, and also draws attention to an important aspect in African marriages, couples are expected to produce children. However, Mbenda's two marriages have an ironic twist-in both marriages, children are born, but none of the children is his. However, on le roi Salomon's advice, Mbenda accepts these children.

Another theme that constantly shows Bebey's wit is African superstition. Bebey thus throws more light on African superstitious beliefs, which sometimes lead to innocent people being accused of witchcraft, and being lynched as a result of this suspicion. This nearly happened to Eya in Le Fils d'Agatha. Even people who deny being witches, occasionally want to profit from the sense of power that witch-craft gives them over their neighbours. Thus la mère Mauvais-Regard who constantly denies being a witch, suddenly decides to protect Mbenda's wife Fanny, from evil spirits. She performs all sorts of rituals with Fanny so as to give her adequate protection.

At the very least, African sorcery is shown to be a very profitable enterprise once it is used for other people's so-called protection as Mbété the witch-doctor proves in "Les Révélations de la chambre noire." By ridiculing the people who allow themselves to be deceived by Mbété's rites, the author is also criticizing all those people who allow themselves to be defrauded by such charlatans.

Bebey's humour emerges too when he writes about the conflict between tradition and modernism. The younger generation gradually gets estranged from the older generation. This is mainly due to education and other Western influences like living in the towns, as

can be seen in Bikounou-le-Vespasien's case. Bikounou no longer has respect for the older villagers whom he calls "vieux imbéciles."

Francis Bebey's sense of the funny can also be observed in his treatment of racism. This is seen in Embarras, where Bebey sometimes denounces the brutal treatment meted out to Africans by the colonial officials as we can see in "Assisastanas et le commissaire de police." Sometimes too, Bebey implicitly condemns the casual racism of the narrator's European friends.

Bebey's humour is also seen in his treatment of Christianity in his novels. This can best be seen in Le Roi Albert where Belobo is the satirized version of the African catechist. He is portrayed as an extremist, strongly believing that the souls of all the inhabitants of Effidi and its environs have been entrusted to him. He believes that it is his duty to see that these souls get to heaven. He consequently chides the villagers when he feels they are making undue use of God's name. He believes in manifesting his piety and this he does by praying ostentatiously.

Francis Bebey's singular verve and profound understanding of human nature appear throughout his works. He shows a very critical mind by the way he uses irony and satire. His use of irony and satire shows that there are issues that he considers abnormal,

and he seeks to expose these abnormalities to his readers in a very interesting manner. We have also tried to show how Bebey is able to make maximum use of his unique sense of humour to the betterment of African society and mankind as a whole.

It is however, extremely unfortunate that Bebey's great talent has been grossly neglected by critics and scholars. Too little has been said about the writer Bebey, and hardly any attention has been paid to this very interesting aspect of his literary genuis - his profound sense of humour. This study has consequently sought to bring out what constitutes Bebey's distinctive contribution to African literature, which is his comic genius.

We have also tried to analyse the different aspects of Bebey's comic art with the primary view of showing how advantageous is a sense of humour in literature. A sense of the comic can be used to focus the reader's attention on certain important issues; it can also be used to rectify any social transgressions and amuse the reader.

Francis Bebey has succeeded in doing all this, and at the same time painting very realistic pictures of life in general.

It is hoped that this thesis has helped to throw

some light on the writer Francis Bebey, and that it has shown that his is a comic genius that further needs to be explored by scholars of African literature.

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