

## From Colonialism to Imperialism: The Journey Motif in Mongo Beti's *Remember Ruben*

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### Abstract

The situation and the living condition of both the people and the Africa continent are deteriorating by day even after many years of the so much desired political self-independence from the colonizers. Despite the abundant human and natural resources endowed in the continent, the political leaders hitherto depend on aids and grants from the Western powers for the survival of the different independent African countries. The continent and its peoples are ranked among the poorest in the world. However, this study argues that the main cause of this unfortunate situation is as a result of the continued existence of colonialism but in a different form known as imperialism. This started from the kind of independence granted to the African countries by the colonial masters, where they ensured that they planted stooges and puppets as leaders in almost all African countries during the independence. This trend is still on-course in almost all the so-called independent African countries. Certainly, there was resistance by the nationalists in some countries against this agenda by the West but the groups were crushed by the military might of the colonizers. Thus, the journey started by colonizers is still on course in Africa but in the form imperialism (*Journey motif*). It is this kind of situation that Mongo Beti depicted in his novel *Remember Ruben*, highlighting on the struggle made by the nationalists during independence in Cameroon to resist the imposition of puppet that will be indirectly controlled by the colonizers. Beti believes that with an imperial puppet on the helms the independence of Cameroon particular and Africa as a whole will forever remain a mere *chimera*.

**Keywords: Colonialism, Imperialism, Journey motif, Puppet, Resistance.**

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### Introduction

The economic, social and political situation in most African states, particularly Cameroon continues to deteriorate even after many years of the much desired independence from the colonial masters. The African leaders hitherto receives directives from the Western leaders on

how they govern their countries, thus they become puppets in the hands of the Western powers such as the USA, France, Britain and their agencies such as the UN, IMF among others. Therefore, despite the availability of large deposits of natural resources and human labor the continent remains underdeveloped, stagnant and riddled with crisis such as civil wars, and other forms of insecurity.

However, this study exposes that the situation cannot be divorced from the kind of independence the colonizers gave to the African countries when they were handing over to the natives. Thus, they ensured that they handed over, according to Bhabha, H. (1984) to *mimic men*, who are installed to become stooges to the Western powers as African imperialists. The installation of these puppets ushered in another form of colonialism known as imperialism. Therefore, any form of resistance against the imposition of these puppets during the struggle for independence in Cameroon and other African countries was crushed decisively by the colonizers. Hence the continent and its peoples will continue to remain backward and third world until genuine and patriotic leaders are allowed to take over the mantle of leadership through free and fair electoral process without undue interference from the Western powers.

## **Discussions**

In *Remember Ruben* Mongo Beti presents his strong cynicism against the French continuous imperialism in Africa's political system. He represents a new dimension of colonial domination, suppression, exploitation and brutality in their dealings with the African states after political independence. For example, in order to maintain their sovereignty over Africans, they ensure that during independence the mantle of leadership is handed over to a puppet African who will remain answerable to the imperial power in France. Therefore, Baba

Toura was imposed as the first president of Cameroon and a militant group was created in the Institute of 18 June in order to crack down on any form of opposition against the choice of the imperialists.

The novel depicts Cameroon at its early stage of post-independence when the colonizers are still in Fort Negre and the activities of the Greek cocoa traders is still at its peak. Therefore, the French colonial influence and authority are clearly ambiguous by the conflicting powers between the nationalist Rubenists and the African imperialists. More so, in the novel Beti portrays the period before World War II to the declaration of independence and the post-independence periods.

In other words, Beti in *Remember Ruben* presents a comprehensive story of the Cameroon of the war of conscription to the nationalist struggles for independence; to the neo-colonial handing over of political power and the accompanying civil war. It is this war that exposed with clarity the alternative paths lying before the country at a particular moment and the revolutionary path as shown by Ruben in the novel

[...] And at every meeting police agents in uniform or in disguise provoked serious incidents and even opened fire; never during the meeting itself, but always at the end the crowd had begun to disperse in the state of carelessness and disorder which colours the close of popular assemblies (p. 172).

The story of the novel is in two parts, presented in a meander of interrelated tales fused together by a narrative which is told by Mor-zamba, from Ekoumdoum village. The second part which titled “Fugitive and Tormented” portrays the struggle for political independence in

Africa. Here issues of revolution aim at freeing Africans from the shackles of colonial rule. The struggle is spearheaded by a trade unionist Ruben which is a symbolic representation of a real character that existed and fought for the independence of Cameroon in the 1960s.

The novel derived its name from Ruben, whose leadership united the people and established a strong front against the colonizers and their African puppets. He mobilized the people through the circulation of propaganda leaflets and making strong political speeches. Therefore, Ruben succeeds in wooing the people into taking political actions against the colonizers and their African agents.

[...] Despite the threats heaped upon him, to modify his line of conduct, Ruben invited his fellow citizens to organize themselves into groups for self-defence and neighbourhood self-help, known as GAVES; he recommended each GAVE not to exceed ten, or at most twelve, members and remain always independent of the neighbouring GAVES. Never co-ordinating with them, except in an improvised way in cases of urgency, so that the inevitable repression, in seizing a militant from one GAVE, would not at the same stroke penetrate the other self-defence groups (p.166).

Meanwhile, the French colonial administration resorted to the declaration of a curfew, arrests, imprisonments and even murder of the Rubenists' nationalists after exhausting various forms of intimidation against them. But when the pressure for independence became intense, the colonial government arranged an election preparatory to political independence to the colony. However, the Rubenists described the election as a mere nomination and installation of an African puppet Baba Toura, who will be under the absolute control of the French colonial

government. He is seen as an African representative of the French imperial government in Cameroon.

Therefore, Ruben and his members rejected the outcome of the election and vowed to continue the struggle against both the French imperialists and their African representatives. They demanded total independence of Cameroon, which the French government was not willing to grant. In his remarks after the election and the subsequent imposition of Baba Toura on the people, Ruben states that “with Baba Toura, independence will be the pursuit of colonization with the same means” (p.199).

Furthermore, Ruben described the installed president as incompetent and as someone who will be completely dependent on the French imperialism and, these claims were buttressed during the swearing-in of the new president. Thus, Baba Toura in his maiden acceptance speech clearly indicates that the speech was written from the office of the colonial government. Thus, Baba Toura’s inability to control his joy betrays him as he cried aloud and excitedly when he repeatedly says:

Thank you France, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you; yet again, thank you! France, think of us poor little Africans! France, think of us! (P. 164).

In his pamphlet “The Rape of Cameroon”, Beti described Baba Toura, the imperial puppet African ruler as “nothing but a puppet placed in power by France, with the intention of maintaining her economic interests behind the screen of an artificial independence” (p. 21).

Childs and Williams defined imperialism as “the extension and expansion of trade and commerce under the protection of political, legal, and military controls” (*Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, 1997). Therefore, Rubenists’ see the independence with Baba Toura as

the imposed first indigenous president of Cameroon will be a continuation of the French imperialism under the African puppet. This view is contained in the leaflets they shared among the members:

With Baba Toura, that black Gauleiter of de Gaulle, independence will be nothing but the pursuit of colonization by the same means, though perhaps under other forms. This is an independence which corresponds in no way with the objectives pursued by the PPP since its foundation. Our country will enjoy nothing but a nominal independence. Instead of being an instrument indispensable to the full development of the people it will reveal itself, [...] as the collar by means of which the agents of colonialism and imperialism, hiding behind Baba Toura, a new type of chief, will continue to hold him prisoner in his own land (p. 218).

They argued that with the imposition of the imperial puppet on the people will further expose them to the new form of colonialism under their African agent. And that it is an extension of the colonial oppression and exploitation of the colonized people. Thus, the independence will be nothing but a mere *chimera*; that will usher nothing new to them.

The people will continue to walk naked and to die of hunger in a country bulging with resources. If the Nazi methods against which our people are fighting should succeed, those who are using them will not hesitate to extend their field of application... (p. 218).

The Rubenists insisted that the independent people of Cameroon must be allowed to elect their leaders through a free and fair poll. Therefore, they resisted through various forms of struggles against the election rigging that led to the subsequent imposition of the Western

imperial puppet as the ruler of the new independent Cameroon. However, the imperialists ignored them and went ahead to announce their stooge as the winner of what Ruben called a fraudulently conducted election, the result which the opposition nationalists rejected totally.

[...] Enumerated and verified a long series of irregularities and often gross frauds, indicating that the governor had intended to impose a corrupt solution by force. At the end of this indictment, Ruben declared the elections null and void. The same day the governor ordered Ruben's arrest and issued a decree dissolving the Popular Progressive Party and all the organizations which might be termed its sisters, daughters or cousins (p. 198).

Thus, in spite of the installation of an African as the new president and the granting of so-called independence the crackdown on the Rubenists continue by the colonial power-broker M. Sandrinelli in the novel that is determined to wipe out any form resistance against the French colonialism and imperialism in Cameroon.

[...] Sandrinelli, the new policeman, was without doubt a specialist in the smashing of secret organizations, to which he had been able to devote himself in Constantine; it was probable that the transfer of the police officers from North Africa was made in anticipation of a train of violence, set off by the decision to impose Baba Toura at any price; in other words, to achieve a solution by force (p. 202).

Therefore, Ruben and his newly formed Sapaks guerrilla group found the struggle very difficult to execute but they went ahead with the struggle of freeing their land and people from the grip of the imperialists and their African stooges such as Baba Toura. Consequently,

Ruben was arrested and murdered but his death did not put a stop to the struggle. His death dealt a great blow to the PPP and its other sister nationalist movements but that did not put an end to struggle for genuine and not the fraudulent independence the imperialists designed to imposed on Cameroon.

Most people in Kola-Kola think that now (*sic*) Ruben's dead the authorities believe they have elbow-room to dole us out an independence in their own style: first of all, they want to place at the head of affairs a man of their own, a politician whose blackness extends only to his skin. That's already done, really-it's Baba Toura the Biture; with him in office, one step is already taken. As he is invincibly docile, they want to use him as the perfect screen; behind him, they will continue to govern and everything will go on as before. We will have Independence, but nothing will be changed (p. 217).

Subsequently, Abena on his returns from the World War II continues from where Ruben stopped with revolution. He re-organises the group and involved people from the rural areas in order to make the revolution encompassing and effective. Thus, he is more experienced, stronger and has a greater ideology for the revolution. Based on what he met on the ground before the assassination of Ruben, he confronts the imperialists and their African agent Baba Toura.

However, the Rubenist's resistance and struggle against the imperialists' imposition of an African puppet in power after the so-called independence did not stand the more strategic power might of the imperialist. Thus, the struggle failed due to poor planning and proper coordination hence most of the key leaders were arrested and some killed during a cracked

down by the imperial government. These arrests dealt a serious blow to the organization, “for the Rubenist organization, which had been suppressed since his arrest, was now putting itself slowly” (p. 9). Fanon, F. (2007) envisaged and addressed this kind of weakness in political parties by colonized subjects in colonialized nations.

The weakness of political parties does not only lie in the mechanical application of an organization which was created to carry on the struggle of the working class [...]. If we limit ourselves to the organization, it is clear that innovations and adaptations ought to have been made. The greatest mistake, the inherent defect in the majority of political parties in the underdeveloped regions has been, following traditional lines, to approach in the first place those elements which are the most politically conscious; the working class in the towns, the skilled workers and the civil servants- that is to say, a tiny portion of the population, which hardly represents more than one per cent (p. 85-6).

In other words, Beti in *Remember Ruben* documents and reports scenes of the that unfolded in Cameroon during the struggle for political independence, depicting the kind of independence that was granted to the colonized nations, particularly the Cameroon. Thus, it is a criticism against the kind of so-called political independence the French imperial government handed over, a kind that is dubious in the sense that they installed a puppet from among the colonized subjects as a leader in order to keep controlling the people and their resources forever indirectly.

Likewise, Beti accuses those hybridized Africans such as Baba Toura in Cameroon, who connives with the imperial governments and accepts to play the roles of imperial puppets

against the development their nations and people. This kind of scenario is still ongoing in many colonized nations in Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean and, is seems to be responsible for the underdevelopment of these parts of the world. Hence the overdependence of the leaders of the so-called independence countries on the Western world for survival despite, the huge availability of both untapped human and natural resources in these countries.

### Conclusions

Finally, this article demonstrates that in *Remember Ruben Beti* exposes and criticizes the kind of independence the Western colonizers gave to the African countries when they were handing over to the nationalists. Thus, they ensured that they handed over, according to Bhabha, H. (1984) to *mimic men*, who are installed to become stooges to the Western powers as African imperialists. The installation of these puppets ushered in another form of colonialism known as imperialism. Therefore, any form of resistance against the imposition of these puppets during the struggle for independence in Cameroon and other African countries was crushed decisively by the colonizers.

This study has shown that African and its peoples are hitherto has been governed and controlled by the Western world in a new form of colonialism, known as imperialism. The Western imperialists succeeded in supplanting their agents in almost all the African countries during independence, particularly in Cameroon. These Western imposed imperial agents are totally tele guided by from the Europe on how they run their various countries. Hence the continent and its peoples will continue to remain backward and third world until genuine and patriotic leaders are allowed to take over the mantle of leadership through free and fair electoral process without undue interference from the Western powers. It's pertinent to

suggest that Africans should carry on with the resistance against the continuing Western domination and the exploitation of the natural resources with the connivance of selfish and unpatriotic African imperial agents.

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