

2011

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Recommended Citation

Kapanga, Kasongo Mulenda. "Ferdinand Oyono." In *Contemporary African Writers*, edited by Tanure Ojaide, 232-35. Vol. 360. Dictionary of Literary Biography. New York: Gale, 2011.

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Ferdinand Oyono

(14 September 1929 – 10 June 2010)

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BOOKS: *Une vie de boy* (Paris: Julliard, 1956); translated by John Reed as *Houseboy* (London: Heinemann, 1966);
Le vieux nègre et la médaille (Paris: Julliard, 1956); translated by Reed as *The Old Man and the Medal* (London: Heinemann, 1967);
Chemin d'Europe (Paris: Julliard, 1960); translated by Richard Bjornson as *Road to Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1989);
Ferdinand Oyono: Écrivain camerounais, edited by Roger Mercier, Monique Battestini, and Simon Battestini (Paris: Nathan, 1964).

Ferdinand Oyono was a Cameroonian statesman and a Francophone novelist of the first generation of African writers who became active after World War II. He entered the literary scene at a time when writers such as his fellow Cameroonian Mongo Beti and the Senegalese Sembène Ousmane and Léopold Sédar Senghor were at their peak. Oyono and Mongo Beti are known as “the forefathers of modern African Identity” for their anticolonial novels.

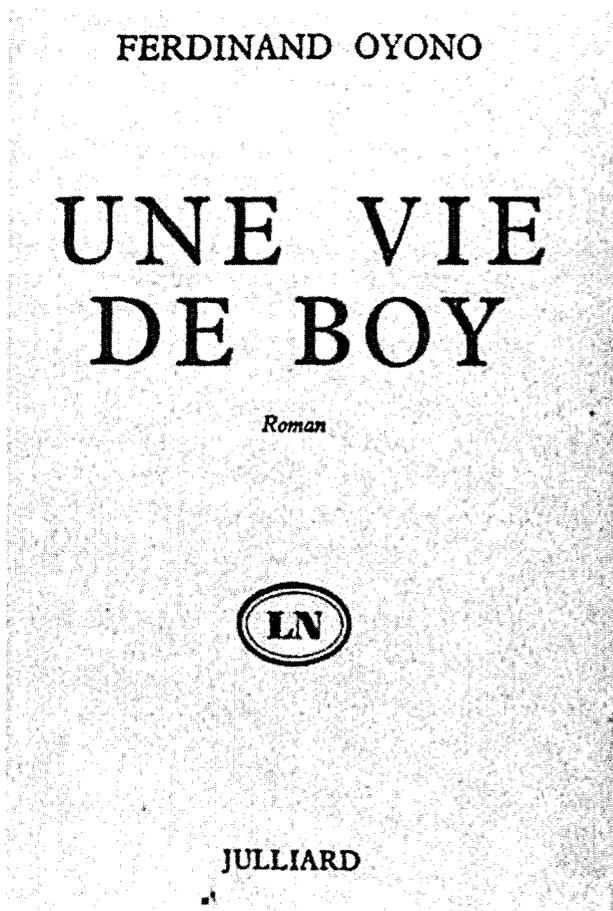
Ferdinand Léopold Oyono was born on 14 September 1929 in the village of N’Goul’emakong, south of Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, to Oyono Etoa Jean Oyono, an administrator under the German and French colonial governments, and Mvodo Belinga Agnes Oyono. He started his education in Yaoundé at age ten and was sent to France to study in 1950. He completed his *baccalauréat* at a *lycée* in Provins in the Seine-et-Marne department, studied law and economics at the Sorbonne, and completed a degree at the *École Nationale d’Administration* in Paris. As a student he acted on stage and television and also published his first two novels, *Une vie de boy* (1956, *A Life of Boy*; translated as *Houseboy*, 1966) and *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956; translated as *The Old Man and the Medal*, 1967).

On his return to Cameroon in 1959 Oyono joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was a



Ferdinand Oyono (from <http://www.lexpressplus.com/L-auteur-du-Le-vieux-negre-et-la-medaille-tire-sa-reverence_a4749.html>)

member of the Cameroonian delegation to the United Nations when the country was admitted to the organization in 1960. That same year he published his third and final novel, *Chemin d’Europe* (translated as *Road to Europe*, 1989). He was a special envoy to Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Morocco in 1961–1962. Between 1963 and 1974 he was an ambassador to Liberia, the Benelux countries, the European Common Market, France, Italy, Tunisia,



Covers for the 1956 original edition and the 1966 English translation of Oyono's debut novel (Librairie du Bassin; Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

Morocco, and Algeria. As Cameroon's permanent representative to the United Nations from 1974 to 1982 he took an active part in formulating policies to fight against the apartheid regime in South Africa. At various times during this period he chaired the Security Council, the UNICEF Board, the Security Council's Political Committee, and the Council on Namibia. From 1982 to 1985 he served as ambassador first to Algeria and Libya and then to the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries. In 1985 he was called home by President Paul Biya and appointed to several cabinet posts: secretary-general of the presidency of Cameroon in 1985–1986; minister of town planning and housing from 1986 to 1990; minister of foreign affairs from 1992 to 1997; and minister of culture from 1997 to 2007. He published no books after *Chemin d'Europe*; a long-announced novel, "Le pandémonium," never appeared. Oyono died on 10 June 2010.

Richard Bjornson observes in *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and*

National Experience (1991) that Oyono's novels "focus upon the dilemma encountered by Africans who choose to pursue assimilationist dreams of 'becoming somebody' in the colonial context." The three protagonists in his novels discover the futility of such a pursuit. Debunking the assimilationist principles that France had made the centerpiece of its colonial policy, Oyono advocated instead the path of equity based on human dignity, mutual respect, and cultural collaboration.

Une vie de boy is set in the fictional city of Danganin in the Bulu district of south central Cameroon. It is written as a series of diary entries in the Ewondo language by Joseph Toundi Ondoua, who leaves his village to escape his abusive father and becomes a houseboy for the missionary Father Gilbert and, later, for the French commander, Décazy, and Décazy's wife. He initially admires the Europeans for their power; he believes that his status as a servant to a white household will protect him from his father's harsh treatment because "the dog of the king is the king of dogs." He gradually discovers the

Ferdinand Oyono

Chemin d'Europe

RENÉ JULLIARD

Cover for Oyono's last novel (1960), translated as Road to Europe in 1989, about a young man's ambition to move to France (Thomas Cooper Library, University of South Carolina)

colonialists' intent to consign him and his people to a permanent status of inferiority and childhood. The French colonists subject Africans to inhuman treatment, humiliation, a debasing voyeuristic gaze, and arbitrary judgments. Toundi demystifies the belief in European superiority with humor, wit, and rational thinking.

A first-rate observer, Toundi realizes that none of the whites of his acquaintance rise above moral mediocrity. Décazy, for example, is repeatedly humiliated by his wife's affair with the prison director, Moreau. And yet, Toundi is in a no-man's-land: he remains a child in the eyes of Ewondo society because he left his village before his initiation to full manhood through circumcision, but he is also an outsider to the white world. Toundi's discovery that, like himself, the commander is uncircumcised fur-

ther reveals the white man's vulnerability. Nevertheless, Toundi continues to try to identify with his oppressors. But his hope of promotion into the world of privilege is dashed when he is falsely charged with complicity in the theft of a cash box by Sophie, the black mistress of the French engineer, Magnol. In the end Toundi flees to Spanish Guinea, where he dies after giving his journal to an anonymous compatriot. The compatriot translates it into French and publishes it. The book ends with a call to Africans to use literature to uncover the negative aspects of the colonized societies.

Le vieux nègre et la médaille is the story of Laurent Meka, an old villager who is decorated with a medal of friendship in recognition of his service to the French. In Meka's mind the honor is a reward for his sacrifices: he renounced his traditional religious practices and embraced Christianity; he donated his ancestral land to the local Catholic mission; and two of his sons died defending France in World War II. It is Bastille Day, and the medal is presented by the local French commander, Dom. Meka celebrates by drinking French wine; he gets drunk and passes out in the African Culture Center. Awakened by a raging storm, he cannot find his way home and wanders into the European section, which is off-limits to Africans. Thus, just a few hours after the ceremony, Meka is arrested for drunkenness, thrown into jail like a petty criminal, and beaten. The police chief does not recognize him as the recipient of the medal. Through this humiliation he finds out how superficial the recognition is of his service to France. His civic privileges, his religious affiliation, and his adopted French manners cannot shield him from the degrading restrictions of the *Code de l'indigénat* (Indigenes Code). On his release the next day, Meka vows to return to his ancestral values to recover his dignity and to salvage his shattered identity.

Chemin d'Europe is an "autobiographical" account by Aki Barnabas of his dream of going to France. The son of a gardener at the Catholic mission, Barnabas was intended by his family for the priesthood as a means of enhancing their social status but is expelled from the seminary on suspicion of homosexuality. The break between the father, who trusts the colonial system, and the son, who resents seeing his talents used to enhance his family's prestige, is complete. Barnabas sees his father as a "grotesque buffoon" exploited by the colonial system. He adopts a duplicitous attitude, hypocritically pleasing anyone who might be able to assist him in reaching his goal of traveling to France. With feigned simplicity, he collaborates with the French anthropologist

Cimetierre, who subjects him to degrading behavior for the sake of collecting exotic specimens. To impress the administrator who grants scholarships to France, he shamelessly overpraises French culture—without, however, achieving a positive result. He collects money from other Cameroonians on the false promise that he will come back as their savior after his studies in France. He has almost given up when he is recruited by Madame Gruchet to join a revivalist church, the Renaissance Spirituelle (Spiritual Renaissance). Barnabas simulates piety for his new faith and thus secures the trip that has been his life-long ambition. The road to Europe opens up for Barnabas, but at a great cost: the loss of his dignity and the denial of his culture.

According to Bjornson, Oyono's three novels "constitute a remarkable anatomy of the assimilationist dream." Oyono's radical condemnation of the duplicitous nature of colonial discourse is counterbalanced by recognition of the weaknesses of African traditional societies, especially the weaknesses that made Europe's incursion into the continent easier than it should have been. As Bjornson puts it, "like the false promises of colonialism, the allure of traditional values is deceptive, for they too can beguile people into misinterpreting the true nature of a harsh world." Oyono's protagonists finally come to the realization that they have been duped.

Ferdinand Oyono's reputation has been tarnished by his service in the dictatorial Biya government. During his tenure as ambassador to France copies of Mongo Beti's *Main basse sur le Cameroun: Autopsie d'une décolonisation* (1972, *The Plundering of Cameroon: Autopsy of a Decolonization*), a novel critical of Biya's regime and of France's support of it, were seized by the French authorities; Mongo Beti was threatened with deportation to Cameroon, where he would have been subject to harsh treatment. Oyono did nothing to help his fellow writer; his allegiance to the regime he served took precedence over his concern for literary freedom. Nevertheless, Oyono, along with Mongo Beti and Ousmane, brought the Francophone African novel to a higher level of narrative skill and thematic value, and his works remain milestones in Africa's rediscovery of its dignity and personality.

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