Introduction to the novels of Camara Laye

Najaria Hurst Gray

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS OF CAMARA LAYE

By

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A.B., Oberlin College, 1967

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to study the modern Neo-African novel in French as exemplified in the works of the Guinean writer Camara Laye. Since this is an area of literature which is still relatively unfamiliar to the American student, a brief history and background of the genre and of the négritude movement into which it falls are also included as is some biographical material concerning Mr. Laye.¹

Although the Neo-African novel in French is a part of French literature, it has also certain unique aspects which must be related to Africa and the African heritage just as the literature of the French writers from North Africa reflects preoccupations which are distinctly Mediterranean. To the extent that it is possible in a work of this length, I hope to separate purely African elements from the more universal ones and evaluate the place of each type in the whole body of works considered.

Naturally in a work of this type the limitations are rather stringent ones. Only the novels of Camara Laye will be used in this paper. It is hoped that as a writer of

¹See Appendix 1, p. 64.
recognized excellence Mr. Laye will represent many modern African novelists—both in scope and in potential value as a source of study to the serious student of French literature.
CHAPTER I

ORIGINS OF THE NEGRITUDE MOVEMENT

The concept of négritude is such a basic one in French African literature that it is necessary to begin any study of French African works with a cursory look at the négritude movement as a whole. The foundations of an African literature which had pride in blackness as a basis were laid not in Africa but in the Caribbean. The predecessor of négritude was negrismo, a movement which began in Puerto Rico during the late 1920's, and which was spearheaded by such poets as the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos. An example of this early negrismo poetry is the famous "Danza Negra" of Palés Matos which appeared in 1927.¹

Calabó y bambú.
Bambú y calabó.
El Gran Cocoroco dice: tu-cu-tú.
La Gran Cocoroca dice: to-co-tó.
Es el sol de hierro que arde en Tombuctú.
Es la danza negra de Fernando Póo.
El cerdo en el fango gruñe: pru-pru-prú.
El sapo en la charca sueña: cro-cro-cró.
Calabó y bambú.
Bambú y calabó.

It is interesting to note that this earliest of negrismo poetry was produced by a white man who used the African elements purely for stylistic purposes.

In 1934 the Cuban Nicolás Guillén published his "Balada de los dos Abuelos" which reflects a basic preoccupation of the Caribbean negrismo writer—that of his mixed blood.

Sombras que sólo yo veo,
me escoltan mis dos abuelos.

Lanza con punta de hueso,
tambor de cuero y madera
mi abuelo negro.

Gorguera en el cuello ancho,
gris armadura guerrera:
mi abuelo blanco.

Yo los junto.
¡Federico!
¡Facundo! Los dos se abrazan.
Los dos suspiran; Los dos
las fuertes cabezas alzan;
los dos del mismo tamaño.
bajo las estrellas altas;
los dos del mismo tamaño,
ansia negra y ansia blanca;
los dos del mismo tamaño,
gritan, sueñan, lloran, cantan.
Sueñan, lloran, cantan.
Lloran, cantan.
¡Cantan!

This particular problem is not a factor in most African

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négritude literature since racial mixing is less common there.

The basic message of these early black writers was that the blacks should reevaluate their heritage and celebrate rather than hide its African aspects. The primary motivational force of this movement was a reassertion of cultural identity. Nostalgia for a lost past combines with anger at oppression and colonialization. The négritude poet seeks to return symbolically to the source of his identity and to capture thereby a lost reality.

French West African literature really started with the meeting of three young blacks in Paris during the 1930's. It was then that Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and Léopold Senghor met and nurtured the idea of a new literature, one which would make all blacks proud of their blackness, hence the name négritude.

Léon Damas, a French Guinean, first published in 1937. In his angry poems he attacks the oppressors and their institutions:

```plaintext
vous les verrez
vraiment tout se permettre
ne plus se contenter de rire avec l'index inquiet
de voir passer un nègre
mais
froidement matraquer
mais
froidement descendre
mais
froidement étendre
mais froidement
matraquer```
descendre
étendre
et
couper leur sexe aux nègres
pour en faire des bougies pour leurs églises.³

Damas is relentless in his bitterness and venomous in
his hatred for the degradation his people undergo; he
paints a picture of oppression as black as that of the
Nazis toward the Jews. The use of the verb verrez in the
future tense shows that he does not see a bright future for
black peoples but rather one such as that he describes.

Less violent but still vehement is the poetry of Aimé
Césaire of Martinique. He published his long poem Cahier
d'un retour au pays natal on the eve of World War II. In
this surrealistic work which went largely unnoticed until
after the war, Césaire pleads for his country to embrace
him after his long years of exile:

... je dirais à ce pays dont le limon entre
dans la composition de ma chair: "J'ai
longtemps erré et je reviens vers la hideur
désertée de vos plaies."
Je viendrais à ce pays mien et je lui dirais,
"Embrassez-moi sans crainte ...",
country may no longer trust him. This same fear appears in one of Laye's novels: *Dramousse*.

The third and most moderate of this trio, Léopold Sédar Senghor did not publish his first volume of poetry until 1945—*Chants d'Ombre*. He published other volumes in 1946 and 1947. In 1948 Senghor published the *Nouvelle Anthologie de la Poésie Nègre et Malgache* with a long introduction by Jean-Paul Sartre. This was undoubtedly the most influential work of the movement, and it firmly established the cult of *négritude* in all of French Africa as well as in the Caribbean.

Only seven years later, in 1953, Camara Laye's first novel, *L'Enfant noir* was published. As the man often characterized as "... der bedeutendste Romancier der 'Négritude'"\(^5\) Laye embodies many of the problems so actively debated in the modern African novel. Louis Sainville in his article "Le Roman et ses responsabilités" attempts to define the purpose of the black novelist, "La mission du romancier, comme celle du poète ou du philosophe, est donc surtout d'aider à la prise de conscience totale de ses frères de couleur ... l'homme noir a besoin de retrouver sa fierté et la conscience de sa valeur."\(^6\)


His primary concern is still clearly that of the négritude message: the black man's pride in his blackness. Nonetheless certain black novelists and critics have gone beyond that point as can be seen from the opening statements to the conference on black literature of 1957 by Jacques S. Alexis:

A propos du roman, peut-être le débat que nous ouvrons aurait-il intérêt à surtout mettre en lumière trois principaux thèmes: l'authenticité du message africain (je veux dire populaire) délivré par l'artiste—l'accent revendicatif qui n'est absent du coeur d'aucun colonisé (ou ancien colonisé)—et enfin le public auquel est ou doit être destinée l'œuvre.  

By writing in French the African novelist opens himself to some special criticism; this applies to Camara Laye as well as to other Neo-African novelists. For example, the critic Edouard Glissand states that, "l'écriture en langue française impose des cadres qui ne sont pas forcément naturels au romancier," and he feels that, "l'exercice de la langue française semble paralyser les romanciers plus que les poètes." Albert Gérard feels that the language Laye uses has altered his audience, causing distortion; and believes that "... it is possible that writing for a foreign audience may have led to some distortion of the


image of Africa and its people by many of Africa's novelists. In some of the novels of . . . Guinea's Camara Laye, for example, there is a tendency to present a romanticized and sentimentalized image of negro life and experience as a whole."

Indeed Camara Laye is never in any of his works as strong a critic of the treatment of the blacks by the whites as is Léon Damas, but neither does he idealize Africa and its people any more than does Léopold Senghor. He can be compared in this respect to Césaire; both stand somewhere between these two extremes.

The problems mentioned by Gérard and Glissand will be dealt with later in this paper; however, it is hoped that a general idea has been given of the kinds of questions that are a part of all study of the Neo-African novel, and that this will help in placing the work of Camara Laye within the genre.

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"J’étais enfant et je jouais près de la case de mon père."¹ This is how L'Enfant noir begins. Laye describes his life with a sense of immediacy that shows a degree of artistic skill unmatched in other African novelists.² He reveals the new attitude towards tradition in French West Africa. Jahnheinz Jahn captures this when he says of him that "he did not consider his African childhood as something remote, primitive, something to be ashamed of."³ In this respect Laye reflects the new affirmations of the négritude movement. He treats Africa with a tremendous affection. He does not mock his outgrown superstitions. In the first chapter he describes an incident with a snake in which he holds a straw for the snake to swallow, gradually allowing the snake's teeth to approach his hand. When he is rebuked for this game, he learns to kill all snakes except one special one—the snake which was the génie of his father.

Je considérais le petit serpent avec ébahissement. Il poursuivait sa route vers l'atelier; il avançait gracieusement très sûr de lui, eût-on dit, et comme conscient de son immunité; son corps éclatant et noir étincelait dans la lumière crue. Quand il fut parvenu à l'atelier, j'avisai pour la première fois qu'il y avait là, ménagé au ras du sol, un trou dans la paroi. Le serpent disparut par ce trou.

--Tu vois: le serpent va faire visite à ton père, dit encore ma mère.

While he is learning to respect the traditions of his race, a premonition enters young Camara that all his life will not follow in the ways of his people. When he questions his father one night about the snake, his father says that the boy should spend more time with him; his father foresees their eventual separation.

--J'ai peur, j'ai bien peur, petit, que tu ne me fréquentes jamais assez. Tu vas à l'école et, un jour, tu quitteras cette école pour une plus grande. Tu me quitteras, petit ...

The child Camara, when he sees his father communicating with his tutelary genie, begins to have doubts that he will follow in his father's steps.

Cette caresse et le frémissement qui y répondait—mais je devrais dire; cette caresse qui appelait et le frémissement qui y répondait—mejetaient chaque fois dans une inexprimable confusion: je

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4Laye, L'Enfant noir, p. 16.
5Ibid., p. 23.
pensais à je ne sais quelle mystérieuse conversation; la main interrogeait, le frémissement répondait ...

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

Oui, c'était comme une conversation.
Est-ce que moi aussi, un jour, je converserais de cette sorte? Mais non: je continuais d'aller à l'école! Pourtant j'aurais voulu, j'aurais tant voulu poser à mon tour ma main sur le serpent, comprendre, écouter à mon tour ce frémissement, mais j'ignorais comment le serpent eût accueilli ma main et je ne pensais pas qu'il eût maintenant rien à me confier, je craignais bien qu'il n'eût rien à me confier jamais ...

And so moving back and forth between moods of change, and of the child's fear of inadequacy, Laye introduces the theme of separation. Camara Laye builds images which he allows to age in the reader's mind just as they did in that of the boy. Out of each fresh incident he forms a mood, an anticipation of that to come. Of this process he is a master. He allows the reader to become subjective about these images and thus involves him in the growth processes of the boy.

In Chapter II Laye presents the forging of the gold in his father's workshop. This was an exciting event in the life of young Camara, and one which surpassed all others in mystery. The pure act of creation captured the whole imagination and attention of those present.

Sur un signe de mon père, les apprentis mettaient en mouvement les deux soufflets

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6Ibid., pp. 25-26.
en peau de mouton, posés à même le sol de part et d'autre de la forge et reliés à celle-ci par des conduits de terre. ... Pour l'heure, l'un et l'autre pesaient avec force sur les branloires, et la flamme de la forge se dressait, devenait une chose vivante, un génie vif et impitoyable.

... personne ne disait mot, personne ne devait dire mot, le griot même cessait d'élever la voix; le silence n'était interrompu que par le halètement des soufflets et le léger sifflement de l'or. Mais si mon père ne prononçait pas de paroles, je sais bien qu'intérieurement il en formait ...

Quelles paroles mon père pouvait-il bien former? Je ne sais pas; rien ne m'a été communiqué de ces paroles. Mais qu'eussent-elles été, sinon des incantations? N'était-ce pas les génies du feu et de l'or, du feu et du vent, du vent soufflé par les tuyères, du feu né du vent, de l'or marié avec le feu, qu'il invoquait alors; n'était-ce pas leurs aide et leur amitié et leurs épousailles qu'il appelait?

When the gold is fused and taken from the fire, the griot begins his ecstatic songs in praise of creation. "Lui aussi s'enivrait du bonheur de créer, il clamait sa joie, il pinçait sa harpe en homme inspiré; il s'échauffait comme s'il eût été l'artisan même, mon père même, comme si le bijou fût né de ses propres mains."

So it is very early that Camara is convinced that "il n'y a point de travail qui dépasse celui de l'or." Being

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7Ibid., pp. 31-33.
8Ibid., p. 39.
9Ibid., p. 33.
witnesses to the process, we too become convinced. "Senghor, the famous poet and philosopher from Senegal, in one of his essays comments on the scene: Laye's father is forging a golden jewel. The prayer or rather the poem, which he recites, the song of praise which the Griot sings as he works the gold, the dance of the smith at the end of the operation, it is all that—poem, song, dance— which, more than the gestures of the craftsman, accomplish the work, and make it a work of art."

Similarly, Laye is able to infuse this creative process with a life of its own, a mystical magical life which he communicates to us.

In Chapters III and IV Camara leaves Kouroussa to visit his maternal uncles and grandmother at Tindican. As he walks along the road from Kouroussa another image is built—that of moving out and away from home into another world. There nature is a new element, the boy is a bit frightened but easily reassured by his uncle who throws stones to make the animals scamper off the road and tells stories about the events at the farm. The animals are well known to Camara who calls each cow by its own name and he soon fits into life at his uncles' concession.

His uncles are special to Camara. The eldest, Lansana, is a quiet man, a farmer. He is, according to

10Jahn, pp. 35-36.
Camara, timid. Working all day in the fields, he participates in "ce mutisme des choses, des raisons profondes des choses."\(^\text{11}\) But his eyes are witness to his thoughts, for "il suffit que ces choses aient été évoquées et leur impénétrabilité reconnue; il en demeure un reflet dans les yeux: le regard de mon oncle était singulièrement perçant."\(^\text{12}\)

Another of his maternal uncles, Bo, is but a wispy memory, for Camara has seen him only once. He remembers him as an exuberant man who told stories by the hour—tales of adventures in strange places, and then who left in search of more. He never reappears in the course of the novel. The youngest of these three uncles is the young man who comes each year to walk with Camara; he is still a boy, too young to be married, but enough older than Camara to be a picture of all things to come, for he is engaged and does his own part of the work on the farm.

Camara was always at Tindican at harvest time. The tam-tam gave the signal; the harvesters with their scythes marched joyously off to the fields to work, rhythmically, skillfully, scythes swinging, wheat falling. With a rhythm akin to that of the harvesters, Laye evokes the feeling of unity that they shared at this festival time:

\begin{quote}
Ils chantaient, nos hommes, ils moissonnaient; ils chantaient en choeur,
\end{quote}

\(^{11}\text{Laye, }\text{L'Enfant noir, p. 59.}\)
\(^{12}\text{Ibid., p. 60.}\)
He never mentions discord, dissatisfaction, unhappiness in these early episodes of his life. These are the relived joys of a child--of a black child in a world that was benign.

The later chapters serve to strengthen this essential impression. The child returns home to the case of his mother where he lives with his younger brothers and sisters. He lives very close to his mother whom he describes with much affection. She was a powerful woman whose totem was that of the crocodile. She was able to draw water from the river at flood season when all the other villagers had to use the springs, for the crocodiles would not harm her. In Laye's novel his mother becomes more than a mother--she is courage, dignity, resignation. She always walks very tall and straight. It is to her that he dedicates his book from Paris:

_Femme noire, femme africaine, o toi ma mère je pense à toi ..._ 14

His mother has become a symbol of Africa. She was the one who nursed him, who opened his eyes to the wonders of the

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13 Ibid., p. 72.
14 Ibid., p. i.
world. She is now his strength from afar. A mother, a country—it is no doubt both have benefited from this softening, this idealization produced by separation.

Returning to reweave a thread which had appeared earlier, Laye begins the middle portion of his book with a description of his school life. School is his lot, for he is a good student; it is this excellence in his studies that will take him out of his concession as his father had predicted long ago, but that is yet to come.

Now Camara is approaching adolescence. He must enter into the association of the non-initiated—the uncircumcised. One evening the drums begin to call forth the dreaded lion spirit—Konden Diara. Camara must spend the night in the wilds with the other uninitiated; they must brave the lion king. They must encounter and overcome raw fear. Together around a bonfire under a huge tree, the naked boys hear the roaring of the lions. They must stay there and dominate their fear; none must cry out. It is thus that primitive man must have overcome fear—huddled around a fire while wild beasts roared in the darkness. This is an episode out of man's primordial night. Listen as Camara Laye relives it.

Il y avait Konden Diara, la présence latente de Konden Diara, mais il y avait aussi une présence apaisante au sein de la nuit; un grand feu! Et j'ai repris coeur; ... Il y avait à présent ce havre, cette sorte de havre dans la nuit: un grand feu et, dans notre dos, l'énorme tronc du fromager. Oh! c'était un havre
Having overcome fear in this lesson of self-mastery, the next step is more menacing—the rite of circumcision. This is an occasion of public celebration and joy. The boys dance all day for a week in preparation of it, and the town participates. However, as the author noted, the secret side of the rite was a threatening one.

"Entre le rite public et le rite secret il y a une antimonie complète."16 There is no way to efface completely this anticipation of anguish, yet no boy tries to escape it. Camara says he would not have dreamed of it: "Je voulais naître, renaître! Je savais parfaitement que je souffrirais, mais je voulais être un homme, et il ne semblait pas que rien fût trop pénible pour accéder au rang d'homme."17

But the physical suffering which he undergoes is minimal when compared with the real outcome of this ceremony—the separation of the child from its mother. The boys do not see their mothers for three weeks. Only the adult males are allowed to visit them in their confine. The Malinké society has established strict rules for the

15Ibid., pp. 125-126.
16Ibid., p. 143.
17Ibid., p. 145.
circumcized. They ease the transition from boyhood to manhood by formalizing it. After three weeks Camara is visited by his mother, but she cannot touch him nor her, the physical and psychological border of the confine must not be crossed.

—Mère! ai-je crié. Mère!
... Quand j'avais quitté ma mère, j'étais toujours un enfant. A présent ... Mais étais-je vraiment un homme, à présent? Étais-je déjà un homme? ... J'étais un homme! Oui, j'étais un homme! A présent, il y avait cette distance entre ma mère et moi: l'homme! C'était une distance infiniment plus grande que les quelques mètres qui nous séparaient.

... Elle était devant moi! En deux enjambées j'aurais pu la rejoindre; je l'eusse assurément rejointe, s'il n'y avait eu cette défense absurde de franchir le seuil de l'enceinte.18

Here we see how the Malinké society understands and eases the process. Laye's use of the subjunctive here (eusse rejointe) shows a child fighting back against his new status, but he knows that he cannot fight the rules. He is a man now.

The separation theme which begins at the end of this section continues to develop in the physical sense; for Camara is taken ever further away from Kouroussa—first to Conakry, then to Paris, but it is here that the essential break is made, the rest is merely the inevitable.

The last section of the book is a series of departures and arrivals with brief intervals spent with his family.

18Ibid., p. 172.
The tone of acceptance of this constant wandering is a Moslem one. Camara as well as his father, is a fatalist, accepting that which he understands through his religion to be inevitable. His mother is less fortunate. She resists, struggles, and in the end must give in. At Conakry Camara stays with his paternal uncle Mamadou, a man who has wholly accepted Islam. His self-discipline is an example to Camara of the purposefulness required to achieve any goal, for he too had left Kouroussa to go to school at Conakry and had become a successful businessman.

Il était musulman, et je pourrais dire: comme nous le sommes tous; mais il l'était de fait beaucoup plus que nous ne le sommes généralement: son observation du Coran était sans défaillance ... Jamais je n'ai vu mon oncle en colère, jamais je ne l'ai vu entrer en discussion avec ses femmes; je l'ai toujours vu calme, maître de lui et infiniment patient. Patience is important to Camara for he loses his first year through a long sickness.

The second year at Conakry he meets Marie and falls in love. They are both students, and their love is the inspiration for some of the most lyric passages in the book. They often sit together overlooking the sea.

La mer est très belle, très chatoyante quand on la regarde de la corniche: elle est glauque sur les bords, mariant le bleu du ciel au vert lustre des cocotiers et des palmiers de la cote, et frangée d'écume.

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19Ibid., p. 201.
frangée déjà d'irisations; au delà elle est comme entièrement nacrée. Les îlots à cocotiers qu'on aperçoit au loin dans une lumière légèrement voilée, vaporeuse, ont une tonalité si douce, si délicate, qu'on en a l'âme comme transportée.  

However such interludes cannot last. Camara passes his exams. He is to go to Paris, but first he must return to Kouroussa for permission from his parents. From his father who was a religious man, Camara receives understanding.

—Vois-tu, reprit-il, c'est une chose à laquelle j'ai souvent pensé. J'y ai pensé dans le calme de la nuit et dans le bruit de l'enclume. Je savais bien qu'un jour tu nous quitterais: le jour où tu as pour la première fois mis pied à l'école, je le savais ... et petit à petit, je me suis résigné.  

However, with his mother, his strong-willed African mother, it is not so simple. She does not want to admit that her son must grow up and leave her, even though she knows it.

Mais à présent elle savait que je partirais et qu'elle ne pourrait pas empêcher mon départ que rien ne pourrait l'empêcher ... mon destin était que je parte! Et elle dirigea sa colère--mais déjà ce n'était plus que des lambeaux de colère--contre ceux qui, dans son esprit, m'enlevaient à elle une fois de plus.  

Camara leaves to be a student, and years later in Paris he writes this all down, with melancholy, with

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20 Ibid., p. 221.
21 Ibid., pp. 246-247.
22 Ibid., pp. 252-253.
nostalgia, and with great understanding. *L'Enfant noir* is a masterpiece of French African expression.
Camara Laye's second novel Le Regard du roi is completely unlike L'Enfant noir. It is symbolic throughout, and this characteristic gives the work a certain multivalence, a trait which Senghor considers typical of African art.

Le Regard du roi opens with Clarence, the protagonist, working his way through an endless crowd of Africans awaiting the arrival of the king. He is the only white in the crowd and his progress is very slow, for the throng is tightly packed and every foot must be gained by forcing someone else to yield. In addition, Clarence is oppressed by the odor of the Africans which he describes as "une odeur de laine et d'huile, une odeur de troupeau, qui plongeait l'être dans une espèce de sommeil."¹ Clarence falls asleep several times as he works his way through the crowd. Upon arriving at the first row, Clarence finds that there is really nothing to be seen except red dust, but it

is there that he meets a beggar. The beggar, who is never named, offers to place Clarence's request before the king, for Clarence has come to seek a position. He has gambled away all his money in his white hotel and must now live among the blacks because he is abandoned by his fellow whites. Clarence sees himself purely as a white; he feels no kinship with the blacks in the square. In fact he is enraged when the beggar scoffs at the idea that he would speak to the king himself:

---Je suis venu pour parler au roi, dit-il.
---Vous voulez parler au roi? dit le noir en toisant Clarence pour la seconde fois.
---Je ne suis venu que pour cela.
---Inouï! dit le noir. C'est proprement inouï. Croyez-vous donc que le roi reçoive n'importe qui, jeune homme?
---Je ne suis pas n'importe qui, dit Clarence. Je suis un blanc!

The idea apparently had not occurred to Clarence that being a white man would not be the magic key to honor or acceptance in this land of blacks. He is a very long way from understanding black society. If one considers this lack of awareness on Clarence's part, one of the possible interpretations of the work becomes evident: that of a white man's gradual development of comprehension of the

---Ibid., p. 12.

---The reader should note that in Moslem cultures the beggar is a role often filled by holy men and seers. A beggar is not a despised man within this context, but an ideal guide.
black soul. Edgar Hättich elaborates this theory:

Allmählich nur wächst in dem weißen
Mann die Einsicht, daß die ihm dumpf und
treibhaft erscheinende schwarze Welt, in
die er geraten war, eine echte Erfüllung
des Menschseins bedeutet, die in der Gestalt
des Königs ihre symbolische Mitte besitzt.
Das Königturn wird in Camara Laye's Roman
nicht als Institution gepriesen oder erneuert,
sondern als bildhaftes Medium benutzt, um
das begreiflich zu machen, für das es
keinen Begriff gibt: die schwarze Seele. 4

This interpretation seems to be a particularly valid one
as will be shown later in this chapter.

Clarence does not see the king, and the beggar is not
able to secure a position for him since he is unfit for any
African work. Clarence again reveals his lack of under-
standing for black modes of action in asking for a job.
He says he will accept any job whatsoever, a declaration
which causes the beggar to doubt that he is qualified for
any one position. Clarence then suggests, "Un simple
emploi de timbalier, par exemple ... " 5 He is attempting
to be modest, but the reply is:

---Ce n'est pas là un simple emploi, dit
le mendiant; les timbaliers sont de caste
noble et, chez eux, l'emploi est héréditaire;
certes, vous auriez battu du tambour, seulement
ce n'est pas ce qui compte: vos battements

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4Edgar Hättich, "Asthetische und nihilistische
Tendenzen bei neoafrikanischen autoren franzôsischer

Such is the kind of faux pas which characterizes Clarence during the initial sections of the book. He cannot distinguish one black from another; he does not know when he has said the wrong thing; in short, he is disoriented and culturally ignorant. However, it must be pointed out that Clarence is not bigoted or even prejudiced. From the first encounter he feels that he could love the king:

Oui, il semblait qu'on pût aimer
d'amour ce frêle adolescent, on le pouvait
en dépit de la nuit de son teint. ...
Qu'est-ce que le teint a de commun avec
l'amour?  

The whole work would take on a different complexion were Clarence a bigot; he is good willed but ignorant and completely helpless in a totally alien culture.

When he finds there is no hope of a job, Clarence accepts the beggar's offer of hospitality and agrees to be his guest on a trip to the South. This is a symbolic acceptance by Clarence of his need to be guided, re-oriented, even taught a new way of life. He thinks back on his arrival in Africa:

Il pensait à la barre qui défendait
ces terres rouges et qu'il avait si péniblement franchie. Il avait cru d'abord ne pouvoir jamais la franchir; le flot vingt

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6Ibid., p. 37.
7Ibid., p. 22.
fois avait porté la barque vers le rivage
et vingt fois l'avait rejetée vers la haute mer ... 8

By crossing the reef Clarence broke away from his spiritual stagnation, made a move toward rejuvenation. 9 This move allows him now to begin the process of indoctrination into a new view of the world. The beggar is to be his guide.

Clarence and the beggar are joined on this adventure by two young boys, Nagoa and Naoga, two scamps who aspire to be dancers for the king one day. The boys represent the African view of life as a whole. They will serve as examples to Clarence of how the African faces life with confidence and enthusiasm. The boys are not really two separate individuals but rather two copies of the same attitudes—a fact which is revealed by the similarities of their names. Before the foursome can leave Adramé, however, another episode intervenes in which Clarence is arrested and accused of having stolen his jacket from the African landlord to whom he had given it in lieu of payment for his room. Clarence is innocent of this crime, but innocence is irrelevant in the Kafkaesque trial which follows. In order to pay for the stolen jacket Clarence would have had to part with his shirt and possibly his trousers. The court costs could have easily absorbed the remainder of

8Ibid., p. 27.
his clothes. The beggar who is present at the trial advises him:

"Filez! Filez sans attendre! ... On se retrouvera à la porte de la ville."\(^\text{10}\)

Clarence flees and finds himself in a labyrinthian series of passageways, rooms, and doors. He fears that he is crossing the same rooms and halls over and over, and he is, for eventually he returns to the same room from which he had fled, empty now except for the judge who is sleeping. Clarence turns and walks straight out of the building by going down the hall and ignoring all the doors. He arrives at the street again. During Clarence's flight through the seemingly endless passageways and rooms, Laye presents his protagonist in the position of a novitiate in a labyrinth. Clarence is a neophyte in search of a new reality whose path is not clear to him. But he still believes in his guide, the beggar; he will search for the city gates.

When he arrives outside he asks his way of a dancer:

"Pouvez-vous m'indiquer la porte de la ville? demanda-t-il à une danseuse ..."
"La porte de la ville? dit cette femme. Qu'allez-vous inventer là? La ville n'a pas de porte."\(^\text{11}\)

This sort of development is not unusual in the unraveling of this complicated story in which even the protagonist is

\(^{10}\)Laye, Le Regard du roi, p. 72.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 76.
often not certain if he is awake or asleep. All communication between him and the black community is reduced to misunderstanding, at best. It is uncertain whether Clarence believes the dancer's response or not. The beggar has told him they would meet at the gates of the city. His European background would cause him to expect that there should be a city gate. He humors the dancer and asks the way to the country. But she leads him to her house where she takes him into a room in which the two boys, the beggar, and the judge are all drinking. When the beggar reproaches him for not being at the city gate Clarence says, "La ville n'a pas de porte."

The response is curious:

Tout le cercle s'esclaffa, la danseuse comprise.
—Non, mais voyez-vous l'excuse qu'il a trouvée?¹²

The fact that Clarence answered in this manner reveals his unwillingness to admit that he could not find the city gate. He is still too proud to place himself completely in the hands of the beggar, but the beggar easily sees through this emotional crutch as do the rest of those in the group who laugh at Clarence. They realize that he is both proud and ashamed and laugh at the absurdity of the combination in the helpless white man.

¹²Ibid., p. 80.
This chapter ends with the judge leading Clarence, the beggar and the two boys to a tiny door along the same corridor through which Clarence has now passed at least twice, a door which opens onto the countryside, which also clearly points to the fact that Clarence is unable to guide himself in the new culture that is Africa; he can only progress when he is led by someone from within that culture. He is learning to admit his helplessness. By now Clarence is well into what Jahnheinz and Ramsaran describe as a "gradual initiation into African thinking and feeling," but he is as yet unable to decipher what he encounters.

The trip south is an endless trial for Clarence, for he must place himself totally in the hands of a man in whose mercy he has no reason to have faith and of whom he is constantly mistrustful—the beggar. Clarence does not understand the beggar; he would like to solve the mystery of his behavior but he cannot. He is constantly drugged by the odor of the jungle:

... une odeur qui mérite d'être décrite, non seulement pour le fait que Clarence était spécialement attentif aux odeurs, et très curieusement affecté par elles, mais encore, mais surtout, parce que cette odeur était

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13 This tiny elusive door is symbolic of the difficulty Clarence is having entering African culture.

hautement représentatif des caractères du Sud.

L'odeur mêlait intimement aux parfums des fleurs les exhalaisons du terreau. C'était là assurément une odeur bizarre et même suspecte, pas désagréable ou pas nécessairement désagréable mais bizarre, mais suspecte; un peu comme l'odeur opaque d'une serre chaude et de fleurs décomposées; une odeur douceâtre, entêtante et inquiétante mais plus enveloppante que rebutante, étrangement frôleuse, oui, et--on s'effraie de l'avouer--attirante, insidieusement attirante; une odeur en vérité où le corps et l'esprit, mais l'esprit surtout, insensiblement se dissolvaient. On l'eût très exactement qualifiée d'émolliente.

This extended description is perhaps the best clue to an understanding of the South for Clarence. He attempts to resist the effect the odor has upon him, but he is enveloped by it. The word émolliente is apt for it brings to mind the sticky, slippery, elusive quality which characterizes both the odor and the new way of thought to which Clarence is trying to adjust. The odor also has strange sexual and sensual overtones, as does the African world in which Clarence is being immersed. He was attracted to the dancer, struck by her bare breasts. He often gives himself over to coconut wine, he is beset by myriad new ideas and an attractive new morality. Eventually the South will envelope Clarence and mould him and prepare him to fit into the African world, to be accepted by the king. But

15 Laye, Le Regard du roi, pp. 85-86.
at this point Clarence is still bothered by the beggar. He fears that the beggar is leading them in circles. He wants to see the wall of thorns which they are constantly avoiding, to verify his conviction that they are indeed not heading southward. But just as he is about to catch his elusive vision, he falls asleep and as Ramsaran puts it,

Clarence is never nearer to a solution than at the moment before he falls asleep. Then there is a moment, only a second perhaps, or perhaps infinitely less, in which it seems everything is going to be made clear at last. But then slumber intervenes and Clarence falls asleep before he has time to grasp . . . (What? Who knows?)

Clarence believes that the wall of thorns will reveal answers to his questions about the beggar. He believes that there is a wall of thorns just as he believed there was a gate to the city at Adramé, but when he mentions the wall one of the boys scoffs at the idea:

... je voulais voir le mur.
—Le mur? Il n'y a pas de mur ici. 17

This scene is very reminiscent of the dancer's response that there was no gate to the city. Both these experiences reveal Clarence's inability to cope with African modes of thought. He could not escape from Adramé because he was


still thinking in European terms of escape through justice and revindication. He cannot go directly to the South because a wall of his own ignorance bars the way. Before he can enter into a new spiritual level—symbolized by the South he must exert an effort to understand what he is doing—to see the wall. As soon as he makes this effort his journey ends; the day he decides to resist the odor and see the wall is the last day of the journey. He arrives at the South because he is now ready to arrive. Clarence never finds the evasive response to his questions, and eventually they arrive at the South—at Aziana.

It is at Aziana that Clarence begins to be Africanized. Already in his experiences in Adramé he has experienced a sort of colonialism in reverse. He was mistreated and could get no justice because he was white. He has learned what racism means to the oppressed race. During his wanderings with the beggar and the two boys he was the pupil in a sort of instructor-disciple relationship with the beggar and learned to give up his pride in whiteness when he was told such things as, "Un homme blanc ne peut pas tout voir, car ce pays n'est pas un pays de blancs." 18 Clarence has given up his confidence in the superiority of whites; he has realized that in Africa blacks are superior in some areas. Now he is ready to be stripped of all white

18 Ibid., p. 87
European values and to learn to feel and act like an African.

At Aziana the beggar trades him to the Naba, the local ruler, for a donkey and a woman. Clarence is unaware of this and he allows the beggar to convince him to stay in Aziana to await the king. The beggar tells Clarence he will be given room and board for performing "minor services" for the Naba. He does not specify what these services are to be. Clarence does not realize that he has been traded to the Naba as a stud for the Naba's harem since the Naba wants to have more interesting offspring. He is willing to stay and work and await the king earning his way by performing services for the Naba. This is a compromise for him since it was a position from the king that he originally sought in Aziana. Now he is able to serve the Naba which is a step up in his development. He can wait for the king and while he waits he will be learning to fit into life at Aziana.

Life is pleasant for Clarence. He is given a permanent mistress and a hut of his own. He adapts well to the daily routine even working out new shower-like bathing arrangements with Akissi, his mistress. His only irritations are that his friend Samba Baloum, the eunuch, insists on calling him by names like "cock," or "stallion" and that his mistress repeatedly brings jungle flowers into their bedroom at night. Clarence has never overcome
his particular susceptibility to the influence of odors. He cannot resist the heady sensuality of these particular flowers and succumbs to their trance-like spell. When he is thus drugged each night Samba Baloum introduces one of the Naba's harem into his bedroom and Clarence, while performing perfectly as a stud-at-hire, never realizes what is happening.

He does, however, have his moments of suspicion; one morning he says to Akissi as she returns from the well bearing water:

"Il y a des moments où je ne te comprends pas, dit-il. Pas plus que je ne comprends ta façon de modifier, chaque jour, ta démarche. Tout à l'heure encore, je te regardais aller à la fontaine, et je ne te reconnaissais pas. Je me demande parfois si tu es toujours la même femme."

"Est-ce qu'une femme est jamais la même?" dit-elle.

"La fois prochaine, ne dépose plus de fleurs dans la case, dit Clarence."^{19}

Clarence adopts the customs and habits of the villagers. It occurs to him one day how changed he is: "Si quelqu'un qui l'avait connu alors l'eût vu sous la galerie, fumant et buvant, accroupi à la manière des noirs, vêtu d'un boubou comme les noirs, il ne l'eût pas reconnu."^{20} Now he must learn to accept the whole African

^{19}Ibid., p. 136.
^{20}Ibid., p. 144.
truth; he must give up his European morality; he must live as one indivisible unit. One day as he is drinking with Baloum, the latter repeats his now familiar refrain, "Tu es un fameux coq," and Clarence responds with his also habitual response, "Un poulet, un coq ... dit Clarance. Je t'ai déjà dit que je n'aimais pas ces comparaisons." But by this time Clarence continues to consider the nickname, he suspects what he is being used as; he dreads the night. He dreams that he is in the harem of the Naba and he sees the little mulatto babies in the women's arms. He knows they are his, and, as if from a nightmare, he awakens. There is another woman in his case. Shame over­comes him. Now he knows that he is only a stallion for the Naba; a male used to give the Naba distinctive children. This is the ultimate insult to him as a member of the white race.

The ultimate repudiation of his traditional value system is directly forthcoming. Samba Baloum blames the maître des cérémonies for causing Clarence to realize how he was being used. The maître des cérémonies is to be punished for this offense to the Naba. He is to be beaten with the whole village as an audience.

Clarence objects as the beatings begin; he cannot allow such a thing to go on because of him. "Savages,"

\[21\] Ibid., p. 144.
he mutters to himself and insists that the proceedings be stopped. As a reward for his mercy and compassion he is thoroughly disliked both by the villagers who feel deprived of a good show and by the maître des cérémonies himself, for as one of the villagers explains,

Le maître des cérémonies, par votre faute, n'aura pas de repos. Si la chose avait été conduite jusqu'au bout, il se reposerait pour le quart d'heure; tandis qu'à présent il faudra qu'il se traîne comme s'il n'avait reçu aucun coup. Or, il en a reçu, même s'il n'a pas reçu son dû; ...

... Personne finalement ne sera content, ni le maître des cérémonies, ni les gens.²²

Now Clarence is totally stripped of his pride, his morality, his ethics. None of his previous values fit his new culture, and he realizes this. He must now make the interior adjustment process which corresponds to the exterior one he has already made. He has learned to dress and act like an African, now he must learn to think and feel like one.

The rebuilding process begins. Before Clarence can appear before the king he must now learn to value life and creation the way the African values them. He must leave off separating the sensual from the aesthetic and considering the one vice, the other, virtue. The two boys Nagoa and Noaga are a clear example of this combination. They steal and lie but they are also carefree and kind,

²² Ibid., pp. 191-192.
and in their fashion, good. They do not doubt the outcome of their long-awaited audience before the king for they already are the essence of Africa—they live life as a whole and accept it all as it is. They do not doubt that the king will accept them. Clarence must learn to have this confidence, this appreciation of himself as a part of all life.

One of his best teachers is Diallo, the blacksmith who forges axe after axe in a continuing effort to create a thing of perfection. He tries to explain this to Clarence:

... Mais qu'est-ce qu'une hache? J'en ai forgé des milliers, et celle-ci assurément sera la plus belle; toutes les autres ne m'auront servi que d'expériences pour finalement réussir celle-ci; si bien que cette hache sera la somme de tout ce que j'ai appris, sera comme ma vie et l'effort de ma vie même. Mais que voulez-vous que le roi en fasse? ... Il l'acceptera, j'espère du moins qu'il l'acceptera, et peut-être même daignera-t-il l'admirer; mais il ne l'acceptera et ne l'admirera que pour me faire plaisir. En fait, quel plaisir y prendrait-il? Il aura toujours des haches infiniment plus belles et plus meurtrières que toutes celles que je pourrais forger ... Pourtant je la forge ... Peut-être ne puis-je faire autre chose, peut-être suis-je comme un arbre qui ne peut porter qu'une espèce de fruit. ... et ... parce que je suis comme cet arbre et je manque de moyens, le roi malgré tout considérera-t-il ma bonne volonté. Mais la hache en soi? ...

Clarence is now ready to accept this view of life. His

\[^{23}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 189.}\]
only reservations are sexual ones, he still feels guilt because of his sensual attractions to the African women. The episode with the fish-women rids him of this.

Clarence is at the river, he is thinking about the day the king will come wondering if the king will accept him. His guilty fears loom up before him. After all, what has he been? He is unworthy of the king. Suddenly he sees a fish-woman in the river; she has the head and tail of a fish but the torso of a woman:

La forme, à présent, progressait en ondulant parmi les herbes et paraissait brouter. Chaque fois qu'elle se renversait, ses seins se découvraient, opulents et blanchâtres ... Il ne put toutefois détourner le regard; il se sentait à la fois repoussé et attiré, plus violemment attiré, plus violemment rebuté qu'il ne l'avais jamais été par l'odeur de la forêt.  

Clarence tries to avoid this creature but she continues to approach him. Soon she is followed by others like herself. They are not fully mermaids or sirens. They have the heads of fish, not women; it is merely by their protruding, white breasts that they resemble women. Clarence sees them as his sexual attraction to the African women. He has been obsessed by them even when he could not tell their faces apart. They have caused him to yield to his desires but he feels guilt because he still understands sexual

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24The river is a life symbol; objects coming out of the river represent subconscious desires and fears.

25Ibid., pp. 196-197.
desires through European moral codes. He feels debased and sinful. He needs to escape; he tries to avoid the fish-women, but he cannot.

Il recommença de lutter contre la boue et contre le courant; mais les femmes-poissons, cette fois, acceptèrent très mal ces nouveaux efforts; leurs appels se firent plus impérieux et même irrités; elles tendirent le buste avec moins de retenue encore. Clarence vit le moment où il n'allait pas seulement les frôler, mais les heurter; heurter en plein leurs seins blanchâtres, les heurter de la tête et les heurter des mains, les heurter avec tout le corps, et sentir sur ses mains, et sur son front et sur ses joues, cette gluante mollesse et cette envahissante tiédeur. Il poussa un grand cri, il fit un supreme effort, il dégagea si rudement ses pieds de la boue et du courant qu'il ressentit un choc, un choc bizarre, comme si, dans sa chute, il eût heurté le fond même du fleuve, le lit caillouteux même du fleuve ... 26

And with this great effort he suddenly finds himself being shaken by Baloum and the two boys. He has been dreaming, but this dream is enough for him. Now he is willing to accept his life, even as a stud.

The author describes his state of mind.

Il avait été tout heureux de regagner le village, tout heureux de s'asseoir dans sa case devant un bol de vin chaud. ... Il avait cédé devant tout. Les femmes qui venaient à la nuit ne se dissimulaient même plus ... Et ainsi tout était plus franc, semblait-il. Mais c'était la franchise de l'abjection, seulement; c'était pur cynisme. 27

26 Ibid., pp. 200-201.
And with this cynicism, this abjection, Clarence finally yields himself to the sea of African culture and it envelopes him. His European morality in which he had been encased is broken; it falls away from him, leaving him naked but whole. He waits still to see the king; he wants to know when he will come, and so, in his new African-ness he does the logical thing—he goes to the village seer—the snake woman Dioki. She tells him that the king will arrive soon and, indeed, is already en route to Aziana. Clarence must hurry to ready himself, but suddenly, after all the months and years of waiting, he falters. He is afraid the king will not want to receive him; he hesitates to go before him. The king is in the town square; the axe has been given, the boys are accepted into his retinue, all his business in Aziana is finished and still he waits. Clarence is naked and alone in his hut. He fears Africa will reject him. His good will may not be enough. And then the king looks at Clarence. His look seems to call; Clarence cannot refuse him.

—Hélas! Seigneur, je n'ai que mon bon vouloir, murmura Clarence, mon très faible bon vouloir! Mais vous ne pouvez pas l'accepter. C'est un bon vouloir qui me condamne plus qu'il ne me disculpe.

Pourant le roi ne détournaît pas le regard. Et son regard ...

28 Ibid., pp. 252-53.
Clarence goes to the king, and, kneeling, kisses his beating heart, and the king wraps him up in his cloak to be with him forever.

This is the oft disputed end of Le Regard du roi; its potential for various interpretations is great. If one were to continue in the interpretation of Jahnheinz Jahn it is an affirmation by Laye that even whites can be accepted in Africa if they show a willingness to learn instead of insisting on teaching.²⁹ In such an interpretation Laye would be asserting, in the direct négritude stream of thought, that black ways are best for Africans and that whites have no right to change or attack these ways but should adapt to them to fit African life. However, although it is the best, this is only one possible explanation. Another equally defensible one is that the whole of Le Regard du roi is religious allegory and that Clarence is a pilgrim figure who spends his time searching for the way to God and truth. The king then becomes God, a redemption symbol, bearer of everlasting life.

Another possible interpretation is that the king symbolizes death—and that in embracing him Clarence makes the final submission.

No doubt there are other interpretations which could

be defended, but it suffices here to say that the potential for varied interpretations is one of the greater merits of *Le Regard du roi*. Both J. Jahn and J. Ramsaran have classified *Le Regard du roi* as "the peak of Neo-African literature in French prose."  

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30 Jahnheinz and Ramsaran, p. 10.
Camara Laye's third novel Dramouss, which he prefers to call a récit, is neither purely lyric autobiographical material like that of L'Enfant noir, nor is it allegorical like Le Regard du roi, yet it has aspects of both and can be seen as a combination of their two styles. However, the purpose of the récit must be examined carefully, for he tells us in the preface that the work does have a special one.

Libérer cette extraordinaire puissance de sympathie qui est au plus profond de chacun de nous, savoir dominer nos passions pour qu'elle émerge en nous, la rendre plus active et plus présente encore, lui donner tout son champ pour que notre appel, l'appel d'une Afrique authentique, consciente et résolument engagée dans la voie de sa sagesse tutélaire et de sa raison parvienne, à tous, pour que l'incommunicable soit communiqué et l'ineffable entendu, tel est le dessein de l'auteur.1

Dramouss then is not a purely literary effort but is also political in intention, and Laye makes his audience quite clear in dedicating the work "aux jeunes

It is with these two factors in mind that any study should be carried out, for the work is a sort of encyclopedia of experiences lived and lessons learned while abroad as a student, and at the same time a defense of the past and revelation of the future of Guinea. In addition there are sections undeniably directed at the European world; these are observations of what Europe fails to see in Africa. But it is best here to let the work speak for itself. Listen to Fatoman's description of African art:

"... Je suivais attentivement le travail. Que pouvait bien chercher mon père en creusant et en taillant le bois? ... La réalité, sans doute! ... Il cherchait à être vrai, aussi vrai qu'il est possible de l'être ... Je voyais bien que son souci, son seul souci de la vérité, de la réalité, dans l'accomplissement de son ouvrage, n'était tempéré que par la recherche de la beauté idéale et, en conséquence, par l'établissement d'un type de beauté universel."^3

Later in the narrative Laye lets his father speak for himself to reveal his conception of what his art is:

"--Nos aînés ... ne copiaient pas la réalité; ils la transposaient. Parfois même, ils la transposaient à tel point qu'il se glissait quelque chose d'abstrait dans la figure qu'ils en donnaient. Mais c'est une abstraction non systématique, et une abstraction qui apparaît plutôt comme un moyen d'expression tendu à la limite, incertain de sa limite."^4

^2Ibid., p. 7.
^3Ibid., p. 164.
^4Ibid., p. 167.
These passages are at once effective within the narrative—for conversations about art between Fatoman and his artisan father are easily believable—and at the same time instructive to the European world that criticizes African expression. Camara Laye is also speaking here to young Africans, reminding them of what is best in their heritage for they have strayed from appreciation of their own artistic heritage in an indiscriminate embrace of all things European. Indeed Fatoman is a perfect figure to reveal to the young African where he errs, just as Laye himself is this figure.

In Dramouss Fatoman returns from Paris where he has been studying and working, to find his country much changed in the few years of his absence. Louis Allen in an article in New Blackfriars discusses this change:

His country is about to fall into the grip of a revolutionary tyranny which promises to be little better than that of colonialism, save that it is exercised by Africans themselves. And the quality of life has deteriorated. 5

In an article in Présence Africaine Mr. Laye defines precisely the enigma such a young African experiences:

L'étudiant Africain qui regagne son pays natal, après avoir passé cinq ou six ans en Europe—le temps d'achever ses études—a d'abord quelque peine à se figurer que ce pays natal est bien le sien ...

It is this tension between two radically different worlds that is the major theme of Dramouss. Even structurally, from beginning to end, the dichotomy is maintained.

Fatoman arrives at Conakry from Paris. Throughout the trip he anticipates this arrival:

... C'est que toutes ces années qui m'avaient tenu au loin étaient à proprement parler des années d'exil, car la terre natale ... sera toujours plus qu'une simple terre: C'est toute la terre: C'est la famille et ce sont les amis, c'est un horizon familier et des façons de vivre que le coeur sans doute emporte avec soi ... 7

Upon arriving at Conakry, Fatoman is immediately drawn into conversation by a traveller who wants him to echo his own anti-colonialist sentiments. The latter says:

... D'ailleurs, les colons n'ont jamais voulu qu'il y ait quelque chose de présentable. Ils ont pensé et ne pensent qu'à garnir leur portefeuille, pour passer d'agréables congés en Europe. C'est à ça qu'ils pensent, les colons et non au bonheur du Nègre.

--Je ne suis pas d'accord avec vous, fis-je.

--Comment? Comment, vous êtes du côté des colons, à présent?

--Je ne suis du côté de personne. Je m'en tiens à la vérité. D'autre part j'estime


7 Laye, Dramouss, pp. 8-9.
que le moment n'est pas encore venu de condamner ou de blâmer, les colons. Ce moment viendra quand nous aurons su prouver, dans l'abnégation, par notre travail, par des réalisations concrètes, que nous sommes supérieurs aux colons.  

This dialogue is extremely crucial to the récit for it flatly states in the opening pages of the work the attitude which is Fatoman's and at the same time that of the author. Allen points out the problems this has caused Mr. Laye: "Camara Laye was very strongly criticized in the magazine Présence Africaine . . . for seeming to indulge the colonial power (France in this case) and its vision of an essentially child-like people who would continue to need the tutelage of the coloniser for a long time to come."  

This criticism, however, is repudiated by Laye himself in his work, for he clearly sees Africa and African life as preferable to that of Europe. What he decries is the lack of willingness of the two peoples to see each other simply as they are, to accept each other without fear. In a flashback scene of his first night in Paris six years previous, he points out these unbased fears in an amusing anecdote. Fatoman was lost and unsure of himself in the subway. A laborer from Les Halles named Stanislas comes along and voluntarily helps him, carrying the heavier of his two bags and leading the way. The boy

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9Allen, p. 490.
is uneasy and fears the man because he has been warned to be suspicious of "solitary men who roam the cities."
Finally he confesses his fear to his companion thinking to apologize for this internal distrust. Stanislas replies:

---Oui, je comprends! Pour les colons, vous autres, vous êtes des nègres cannibales. Du moins, c'est ce qu'ils racontent ici. Pour ces mêmes hommes, nous Français, nous sommes des brigands, hein? C'est ce qu'ils racontent chez vous, n'est-ce pas?  

This is how Fatoman begins in Paris—as naked and decultured as was Clarence in the esplanade at Adramé. Both have to adjust to new ways of life, but Fatoman is aware during this process; with him it is a conscious thing possessing none of the somnolent dream-like qualities of Clarence's conversion.

And so six years pass and Fatoman learns to understand the Europeans and to accept theirs as a valid way of life even if he does not choose to adopt it himself. This is the same realization as that of Clarence in Le Regard du roi except that Clarence has less freedom of choice. He does accept African life, but he has little other choice. Returning to Kouroussa to find his own village beset by political turmoil and all his friends in militant nationalist activities, it is not surprising that Fatoman has many doubts and questions about the future of Guinea. He goes to his father with these questions.

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10Laye, Dramouss, p. 69.
But his father refuses to answer him directly; instead he gives him a magic ampule to place beneath his pillow and tells him to ask God to reveal the future to him. The Dramouss chapter follows, from which the novel received its name.

This passage is a dream sequence in which Fatoman sees the future of his country allegorically depicted. This dream is later explained in the course of the novel when Fatoman returns to Guinea after having spent some years in Europe. In it are predicted the problems of Guinea, and the solutions to these problems. In the dream Fatoman passes a place where a giant is guarding the entry to a house which is surrounded by a wall so high it merges into the sky. The giant grabs him and throws him feet first up into the sky where he floats momentarily like a cloud. From the sky he sees into the walled-in area; it is full of shaking and miserable prisoners being whipped by huge guards like the giant at the entrance. When he falls back to earth the giant grabs him and tells him he

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11Laye, Dramouss, p. 195.
is a prisoner. It is easy to see this walled-in area as Guinea and by extension as Africa. Cowered inside the walls are the Africans who are being terrorized by the giants who can be interpreted both as the colonial powers and as the politically militant parties in power within Africa. Fatoman sees this all from above for he has been outside the wall--to France.

In this prison there are three classes of prisoners: those who are condemned for life to forced labor, those who are to receive twenty years imprisonment, and those who are only to spend five years. Fatoman, however, is condemned to death.

---Et toi, disait-il en me montrant aux autres, tu es condamné à mort.

---Comment? Comment? m'écriais-je ...

---Ce n'est pas moi qui te condamne, disait-il.

---Mais qui? Qui donc pourrait le faire? ...

---C'est toi-même. Ce n'est personne. C'est toi-même qui te condamnes à mort. ... 

---Tu est comme le linké, hurlait-il. Exactement comme cet arbre géant, qui, au lieu de porter son ombre à son pied, la porte bizarrement à des lieues à la ronde, abandonnant ainsi ses racines au soleil, bien que celles-ci aient besoin d'humidité pour que l'arbre survive. ¹²

Fatoman is condemned to death because he altruistically gives of himself to his fellows. Imprisoned, he

¹²Ibid., p. 201.
still cannot give up being interested in his brothers. He says they could all escape if they would band together and throw off the giants. They are many. Their keepers are few, but each is concerned for himself. None will risk his own life; consequently, they all continue suffering at the hands of unjust and cruel guards. Fatoman, at the moment when he is to be shot by the firing squad, miraculously turns into a bird and flies away. But his giant keeper turns into a hawk and chases him, and he surely would be caught but a flying black serpent appears in the sky and saves him.

 Accroche-toi à moi bien vite. Je suis venu te sauver, cria-t-il. Je l'aggrippais à la nuque et, d'un seul coup, son corps décrivait un quart de cercle, pour échapper à l'étreinte des terribles murailles.

 Comme une fusée, le serpent s'élevait vers le ciel, si rapidement que l'air me repoussait, me collait au serpent-fusée, si bien qu'il ne me serait plus possible de me dégager de ses écailles tant qu'il n'aurait pas terminé son extraordinaire ascension.\textsuperscript{13}

The serpent is a familiar symbol in Laye's writing.\textsuperscript{14}

Here this snake saves Fatoman as "un hommage à ton esprit de droiture et de solidarité envers ton prochain."\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 218.

\textsuperscript{14}It will be remembered that the black snake in L'Enfant noir was the creative génie of Laye's father. p. 9.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 219.
Clearly the message is one of the need of the Africans to unite and work together against the forces that oppress them. Flight is not the answer to the problems that Guinea faces, a fact clearly shown by the hawk's appearance when Fatoman was fleeing as a bird. The answer lies in returning to African ways and beliefs. The black snake symbolizes African selfhood which alone has the power to save Guinea. Africans are to be saved only by returning to their own essence, not by imitating the Europeans. They must overcome themselves. Laye regrets the internal political strife in Guinea; he sees this political militancy as destructive and as a major barrier between his country and a happier future for Guineans.

Dramouss is the dream génie; she represents mystic forces, visionary powers; she is the one who reveals the future and strips the problems of the present down to their naked essence. She appears as "... une femme belle, extraordinairement, dont les cheveux couvriraient les épaules, le dos et descendaient jusqu'aux chevilles." She is sometimes a normal size, sometimes a giant but always incomparably beautiful. It is she who comes to aid him when his dream world floods, and he is on a tree branch with water rising ever higher. She stands beside him and looks up to the heavens. Her eyes become like locomotive

\[16\] Ibid., p. 220.
beams and they reveal a vision at their extreme limit:

... une multitude humaine, qui formait deux longues files sur une immense esplanade.
... La première file, celle de gauche, en boubous flambants, boubous en feu, criait désespérément; la seconde, celle de droite, vêtue de boubous bleu-ceil, chantait, joyeusement. A un point intermédiaire entre ces deux files, un immense tableau noir portait l'inscription suivante: SUR LA TERRE L'HOMME NE FAIT RIEN POUR PERSONNE, NI RIEN CONTRE PERSONNE; IL FAIT TOUT POUR LUI-MEME ET TOUT CONTRE LUI-MEME.

The polarity of the red and blue boubous serves to dramatize the opposition of these two parallel lines of men—those in red doomed to eternal fires and agony while those in blue will rejoice forever in their solidarity.

The enigmatic inscription is related to the black serpent's advice that men must take a stand for each other, but it also seems to dramatize the two alternatives and their ends.

The water has reached Fatoman's hips when slowly, serenely, the moon descends from the heavens attached by a long filament to the sun and comes, boat-shaped, to the branch. Fatoman climbs on board. Dramouss is with him and the black lion, symbol of the country, and an eternal symbol of strength, is also a passenger.

Fatoman looks back to see the whole world engulfed by the flood of water. Dramouss says simply that everything

\[17\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 227}.\]
is "englouti par la révolution."\textsuperscript{18} As they sail higher and higher into the sky, Fatoman recognizes in the moon the various sections of Guinea, and the people who are Guinea.

... Je contemplais ma Guinée, guidée avec sagesse par le Lion Noir, l'héroïque et sage Lion Noir.

Et je découvrais qu'il n'était pas seul; je constatais que le peuple et ses frères l'accompagnaient dans son ascension merveilleuse vers le soleil; et vers le progrès; tous embarqués sur un même esquif, passagers solidaires, promis au même port ... \textsuperscript{19}

Thus the dream ends on a note of optimism. Laye is an optimist but also a realist for he realizes that much of what lies in store for his native land is terror, death, and resultant self-destruction.

Shortly after his dream Fatoman and his bride, Mimie, leave Guinea for Paris. When they return, several years later the dream-revealed future is a reality. The prison where brute force was king is Guinea. The slaughtering giants are the political militants; the victims are many of Fatoman's friends, accused—unjustly we assume—of plotting against the government. Now he needs his optimism, for the serpent has not yet come to save Guinea from herself. It will be some time before the coming of the black lion, as Fatoman's father admits:

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 228.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 231.
— ... Quand viendra le Lion Noir, je ne serai plus là.
— Le Lion Noir? fis-je.
— Oui, l'héroïque et sage Lion Noir, que tu connais tout autant que moi. La légalité reviendra aussi. Et alors vous serez reconnéciés avec vous-mêmes et avec les autres. Même avec ce pays dont vous parlez la langue. Je le dis: si telle est la volonté d'Allah, bénis soit son nom!
— Aminâ! Aminâ! répondis-je.20

With these words Dramouss ends, and it is significant that this last vision is that of Fatoman's father rather than his own,21 for it is an old man's dream and not a dream which young men will easily realize, or will easily believe.

The author himself, writing for Présence Africaine is less optimistic:

Tout ce que nous pouvons nous dire ... c'est que l'histoire est faite d'oscillations qui, une fois, font pencher le monde vers le bien une autre fois, vers le mal. Il suffira peut-être de traverser la violence présente pour assister à un rebondissement que nous connaîtrons ou que nous ne connaîtrons. Si la consolation est mince, elle n'est pas illusoire.

Que serons-nous alors? ... Je l'ignore. J'aimerais croire que nous sortirons indemnes de l'aventure. Je ne puis le croire.22

Hopefully, Dramouss' vision of the future can be communicated, and, if it can, then Camara Laye's success will extend far beyond the literary acclaim which he has

20Ibid., p. 246.
21Allen, p. 491.
already won, into the realm of men who succeed in altering history.
CHAPTER V

CAMARA LAYE: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

In examining the critical material concerning the works of Camara Laye it is necessary once more to return to the opening assertion of this thesis—that Laye must be seen as a part of the négritude movement, and that as a member of an emerging literature he is still judged by criteria slightly different from that used in judging a writer working outside this framework.

As is readily evident from the three preceding chapters, Laye's writing has so far undergone three distinct phases of development: the first, as expressed by L'Enfant noir falls within the poetic framework of returning to the source of his identity in an attempt to capture a lost reality. Indeed, this novel is highly poetic in mood, and Laye was criticized for it and accused of sentimentalizing. Replying to this criticism, Joseph Drachler in the introduction to his book African Heritage writes, "Is the aura of poetry we find here to be identified with sentimental nostalgia? Or isn't it more likely to flow from the durable conviction that some essence of African selfhood is at stake in the poetry of the older
ways?"¹ This explanation of Drachler is strengthened, moreover, when we find almost the exact words used by Eduard Glissant who, in an article in Présence Africaine describes Camara Laye:

Il se caractérise par ce que j'ai appelé la recherche des qualifications essentielles: le souci de créer un style plutôt que de dénoncer un état des choses.²

Nonetheless, Albert Gérard does not agree; he feels that L'Enfant noir is not a true revelation of African selfhood but rather a distorted vision drawn up for a European reading public.³

This attitude brings us back to another problem which applies directly to Camara Laye—that of his intended audience.

It is a serious problem, especially in countries such as Guinea in which the generation of writers who are writing now were educated in the French schools and in the French language. That portion of the populace of Guinea which is literate, speaks and reads French. To accuse Africans writing in French of writing to a European public is to ignore this fact. French is one of the state languages of

Guinea just as it is of Québec. It is true that Malinké is increasingly used as a language in writing within Guinea, a fact which may change the modes of expression of Guinean novelists. However, it can never speak to all of West Africa, as can French.

Jacques Alexis in "Où va le roman?" does not feel the need to criticize writers of the Francophone novel, for as he puts it,

Le roman est un genre qui ne peut vivre et se développer véritablement dans un pays que dans la mesure où l'instruction publique y est assez répandue et continue à s'y répandre. ... Dans les pays où l'instruction publique est l'apanage d'une très faible minorité, les romanciers sont des exceptions, des hirondelles qui annoncent le printemps, rien de plus.  

Eduard Glissant insists that Africans must free themselves from all vestiges of colonialism—even in literature. He writes:

La réalité nègre est encore tributaire de la colonisation, ce n'est pas une réalité libre d'elle-même; le roman est enjoint d'abandonner une quête aléatoire des richesses pour dénoncer ce manque de liberté. Dès lors, il devient un cri, un acte d'accusation, une tentative, pour perpétuer les richesses du présent. ... 

... Le juste recours aux langues africaines permettra de précipiter l'évolution du roman noir vers une forme propre.  

This idea of a "forme propre" is echoed to a certain

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5 Glissant, p. 18.
extent by Alexis when he avows that "l'art doit être national dans la forme," but the meaning of "national form" remains obscure. To a certain extent it seems to be synonymous with national spirit. This concept as applied to the black novelist is clearly explained by Louis Sainville in *Présence Africaine*.

Elle [la tâche] est, à côté de celle des hommes d'action et des philosophes, d'écrire pour le peuple, des livres qui lui disent quelle a été son histoire passée, quels sont les liens qui maintenant l'attachent à d'autres peuples frères, quelles sont ses relations avec l'humanité. Elle est de décrire ses souffrances et de lui faire connaître quels sont les héros qui se sont dévoués pour elle; elle est de chanter son travail, ses efforts et ses vertus; elle est de lui indiquer quelles sont les voies qui peuvent conduire vers un avenir lumineux.

It is a task which is essentially that of the African novel. Purely as an African phenomenon, Camara Laye accomplishes the task to the extent that he does reveal the past and proposes means and ideals for the future. He combines the real and the imaginary and exhibits what Jacques Alexis calls "notre goût des belles histoires, notre incorrigible propension au conte et à la légende." He is an authentic manifestation of the Malinké world view as defined by K. A. Busia: "When we think of a

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6Alexis, p. 89.


8Alexis, p. 81.
people's world view we consider their concept of the supernatural, of nature, of man, and society, and of the way in which these concepts form a system that gives meaning to men's lives and actions. Each of these concepts appears somewhere in the works of Laye who presents them as an inseparable whole. The supernatural is as much a part of the life of Camara the child in *L'Enfant noir* as it is of his later counterpart, Fatoman in *Dramouss*. Nature is the inspiration for such diverse sections of Laye's work as the harvesting scene in *L'Enfant noir* and the jungle descriptions in *Le Regard du roi*. The African man and his society are intricately set forth in *Le Regard du roi* in the lessons for Clarence, as in *L'Enfant noir*. Moreover, Fatoman's Dramouss dream is a powerful revelation of how the system works and how it must change in order to achieve a better future for Guinea.

It is undoubtedly because of all these reasons—because he is African, and because he is a true reflection of the African soul, and also because he has been exposed to French literary traditions—that Camara Laye is able to produce such successful literature. It is no wonder that this combination of ingredients and influences has caused Jacques Alexis to write confidently:

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C'est notre conviction que par un réalisme combattant, un réalisme lié à notre sol, à la création populaire chez nous, comme à tout l'acquis progressiste de l'univers, nous sommes en mesure de produire, dans le roman comme dans plusieurs autres disciplines, quelque chose de vraiment neuf.

The West African novelist writing in French has produced a fascinating new addition to French literature, certainly equal to that of the North African in interest, and, potentially, in scope. He opens new horizons to students of French literature and poses questions yet unanswered. Camara Laye's production to date is exemplary of this addition. It is hoped that much more is yet to come from this brilliant young writer.

10 Alexis, p. 85.
APPENDIX I

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY OF CAMARA LAYE

Camara Laye was born in 1924 at Kouroussa, Guinea into a caste of copper-and-goldsmiths, one of the ancient craft aristocracies of West Africa. He was part of a very old civilization only recently dominated by France and still relatively self-sufficient. Gerald Moore characterizes Laye's background as a "life which was not essentially changed from that of the Moslem negro empire of Manso Musa which had ruled these riverine cities six hundred years earlier."¹

Laye was educated first in the Moslem and then the French school at Kouroussa and later continued his education in Paris. He now works as a civil servant in Guinea.² He has published three novels in French: L'Enfant noir, 1953, Le Regard du roi, 1956, and Dramouss, 1966. He has also published several short stories and articles in Présence Africaine.

Since all of his novels are presently out of print


and can consequently be difficult to obtain, the following appendix includes brief summaries of each of his novels which may aid the reader.
L'Enfant noir is an autobiographical novel beginning when Camara Laye was about five or six years old. It recounts the daily life and games of the young Laye in his native town of Kouroussa. He includes many of the high points of his early life in his mother's care, such as the chasing of snakes, fights in the school yard, yearly trips to visit his maternal uncles and a grandmother in the neighboring village of Tindican.

The gradual growth of Laye is reflected by his increasing concern for his future and interest in his father's activities as well as those of the older boys he knows.

An entire chapter is devoted to the secret rites of Kondén Diara—the king of the lions who must be braved by all the young boys before they can be taken into the group to be circumcised. Another chapter deals with the ceremonial circumcision and entry into manhood of all the young males. Camara's departure for Conakry and school follows and extends for three years. During this period he lives with a paternal uncle and learns a great deal. He
also has an innocent love affair with Marie, a beautiful student in a neighboring girls' school.

The book ends with his departure from Kouroussa and Conakry to Paris where he is to continue his studies at a French university.

*Le Regard du roi* is an allegorical novel. Its protagonist is a white man named Clarence who has just arrived in Africa and lost all his money gambling. As a result, he has been thrown out of his hotel and his belongings have been taken by the proprietor. He has gone to stay in an African inn. Clarence then goes out to find the African king in order to enter his service.

The king arrives, but Clarence can only get a glimpse of him. He meets a beggar in the crowd and a pair of boys Nagoa and Noaga who join them. The beggar then enquires of the king to see if there is a position Clarence can fill, but there is none so the beggar advises Clarence to accompany him and the two boys to the South where they are all going.

Clarence is arrested and brought before a mysterious judge for stealing back his jacket—a crime of which he is innocent—but the beggar advises him to flee. He escapes through a maze of passages and the southward journey begins. During the trip south, Clarence is plagued by a narcotic odor in the jungle. He loses all sense of direction and thinks the beggar is leading him in circles,
but all four eventually reach the South where Clarence, unbeknownst to himself is traded by the beggar to the local ruler, the naba.

The naba wants to use Clarence as a stud for his wives in order to have unusual offspring and he instructs the head eunuch, Baloum, to plant a different wife in Clarence's room each night. Clarence believes that he is only sleeping with his regular mistress but is plagued by a guilty sensuality and an obsession with his night dreams. Eventually he realizes to his shame how he has been used and that he has several mixed coloured children.

The king then arrives but Clarence is too ashamed to appear before him. Thus degraded, he cannot approach the king. However the king himself urges him to come and ask his favor. Clarence yields to the wishes of the king and is embraced by the young African ruler.

Dramouss is a novel about a young African who returns to his native town of Kouroussa after six years of study and work in Paris. He stops at Conakry on the way back and spends several days within the family of his uncle, and he meets there his childhood sweetheart, Mimie and is married to her. He then continues to Kouroussa by train and goes with his wife to his family home where he finds his parents in a situation much altered from that in which he had left them.

The first night at home he spends sleeplessly
reliving all his years of struggle and poverty in Paris, recalling his whole stay from his arrival, alone and frightened, to his departure from his Parisian friends to return home.

The time with his parents is spent in much talk with family and friends about the new Guinea he has found. In the company of two of his old friends he attends a political meeting in which the revolutionary party in power is inciting the youth to burn down the homes of the opposition, in order to clear the way for progress of the party and to oppose the colonialist sympathisers. His friends eagerly question him about his political position, but he has little to say for he has learned that few issues are as simple as they seem.

The next day he asks his father about some of the changes he has found and the future of his country. His father, once a goldsmith, but now a woodcarver since there is no longer any demand for handwrought gold, declines to answer any of his questions but instead gives him a magical ampule which will allow him to see into the future in a dream.

A symbolical dream sequence follows in which the future of the country is revealed to Fatoman by Dramouss, a dream genie.

The departure of Fatoman and Mimie for Paris, where he is to take up a position as a technician, follows. The
book ends with their return to Kouroussa several years later with their children to find the future revealed in the dream taking place.
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PART I: ORIGINAL WORKS


PART II: WORKS CITED


