
Romantic Primitivism and Literary Neocolonialism in Camara Laye's Novel *L'Enfant Noir*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the depiction of romantic primitivism in Camara Laye's novel *L'Enfant noir* (*The Dark Child*) and the phenomenon of literary neocolonialism behind its publication. *L'Enfant noir* is a novel published when Guinea was still under French colonization in the 1950s. It tells the story of a happy black child growing up in the middle of a beautiful Guinean countryside, that was completely untouched by the atrocities of colonialism. Upon its publication by Plon, a French publishing house, the novel received different responses from African and European readers. In Africa, it was perceived as turning a blind eye to the cruelty of colonialism. However, in Europe, it was showered with praise and it even received a prestigious literary award. To examine this phenomenon, this article analyzes the novel both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsically, it uses the theory of romantic primitivism to analyze how the novel romanticizes the lives of African indigenous people constrained by colonialism. Extrinsically, it discusses the phenomenon of literary neocolonialism behind the publication of *L'Enfant noir*. The discussion about literary neocolonialism is divided into two parts. Firstly, it addresses the historical analysis of Plon's publishing house, its relations with the French power, and the political interests underpinning the novel's publication. Secondly, it highlights the strategy the publisher uses to accentuate exoticism in the novel's peritext to market the book in Europe. The novelty of this article lies in its discovery of the elements of romantic primitivism found in the novel while it also proves that literary neocolonialism towards *L'Enfant noir* persists to this day.

Keywords: *exoticism, literary neocolonialism, Plon publisher, peritext, romantic primitivism*

INTRODUCTION

In the 1950's, when French colonialism was still firmly entrenched in Africa, a Guinean writer, Camara Laye, published a novel entitled *L'Enfant noir* (*The Dark Child*) in 1953. The novel narrates the story of a little black boy living in a beautiful, tranquil, and joyful remote African village, despite being under the French colonial rule (Steemers, 2012). *L'Enfant noir* portrays rural life in Kouroussa, northeastern Guinea, and its rich culture, from harvest feasts, its

shamans with their magical powers, its people's belief in totems and ancestral spirits, and more. In addition, to the depiction of the main character's childhood, *L'Enfant noir* also recounts his adolescence while attending an *école française*, where he becomes one of the most accomplished students. The conflict arises when he has to face the decision of whether to accept a scholarship to study in France or to stay at home to help his parents. The boy finally makes a decision on

going to Paris. The story ends when he is ready to board the flight for the first time (Laye, 2008).

L'Enfant noir is often categorized as an autobiographical novel, as it was inspired by the author's childhood in Kouroussa, his adolescence at Conakry's Georges-Poiret technical school, and his departure for France to attend the *École centrale d'ingénierie automobile* in Argenteuil. Due to the novel, the Guinean writer born on January 1, 1928 is now recognized as one of the central figures in African literature. Camara Laye is considered to have explored and introduced the traditional African environment and its contact with modernity brought by French colonialism (Naudillon, 2016; Steemers, 2012).

L'Enfant noir itself was initially published by Plon, a French publishing house. However, upon its release, the novel immediately sparked controversy. Mongo Beti, Cameroon's renowned anticolonial writer, whose stance can be compared to that of Pramodya Ananta Toer in Indonesia, criticized the novel for being too preoccupied with the description of the picturesque landscape of Guinea and turning a blind eye to the suffering, violence, and slavery endured by the Guinean people during colonialism. This sharp criticism is evident in the following quote.

Laye se plaignait dans l'anodin et le pittoresque le plus facile [...] Laye n'ait été témoin d'une seule petite exaction de l'administration coloniale.

(Beti, 1954: 420)

Laye indulges in the anodyne, and the most facile picturesque [...] Laye has not witnessed a single small exaction of the colonial administration.

Conversely, the novel received high acclaim from the Western audience. One year after its publication, it won *Le prix Charles Veillon*, a prestigious literary award from the Charles Veillon Foundation of Switzerland (Steemers, 2012). Franz Hellens, a nominated Nobel Prize in Literature from Belgium and the judge of this award, stated that the novel had good literary qualities and could convey sincerity in its text. Furthermore, he considered that this novel served as a bridge between African culture and the rest of the world, particularly France. It honored Africa, where Laye was born, and the French language, his adopted language (Hellens, 1954). In France itself, the novel also received a positive reception with more than 25,000 copies sold between 1953 and 1955

(Steemers, 2012).

The success of *L'Enfant noir* was not only determined by its sales. Today, *L'Enfant noir* is considered a classical piece of French literature and a canon of Sub-Saharan African francophone literature. Adele King, a researcher in African literature from the United States, stated that the novel has a parallel position with that of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1958). If *Things Fall Apart* represented the first excellent quality literature from anglophone Africa, *L'Enfant noir* was the first representation from francophone Africa (King, 2002).

The debate over this novel did not only occur in Mongo Beti's era or the first decade after its publication. In 2012, Vivan Steemers published a book entitled *Néocolonialisme littéraire (Literary Neocolonialism)*, in which she revealed that the canonization of *L'Enfant noir* is inseparable from France's political interests. In this book, Steemers highlighted various factors that contributed to the novel's recognition by a wider audience, its attainment of a prestigious literary award, and its continuing relevance in discussions to this day. One of the pivotal factors was the role of Plon publisher in editing the novel from the manuscript stage until its publication. According to Steemers, Plon ensured that the book's content and presentation are aligned with the preferences of the French readers and did not clash with the interests of the French colonial authorities at that time. Vivan Steemers called the entire literary production process as *néocolonialisme littéraire* or literary neocolonialism (Steemers, 2012).

This article is a qualitative research study on the themes of romantic primitivism and literary colonialism in *L'Enfant noir* presented in three chapters. The first chapter examines the primary data taken from the novel's excerpts describing the landscape, people, and culture of Guinea. To analyze these data, this article employs Ali A. Mazrui's concept of romantic primitivism to examine how the novel portrays Africa with an exotic image that resonates with Western stereotypes. This analysis aims to prove Mongo Beti's criticism regarding the romanticized portrayal of Africa while the continent was still suffering during French colonialism. After discussing the elements of romantic primitivism, the second and third chapters examine the secondary data comprising of texts related to extratextual aspects of *L'Enfant noir*, particularly regarding its publishing, editing, and marketing processes. These secondary

data are then correlated with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production and Gérard Genette's peritext theory. In the second chapter, this article applies Bourdieu's framework to indicate the role of Plon in publishing the novel and how the process relates to French power during the 1950s. Finally, the third chapter employs Gérard Genette's theory to discuss the exoticization of *L'Enfant noir's* peritext conducted by its publishers from the first to the most recent publication.

Several previous studies have contributed to this article. The first one is Vivan Steamers' *Néocolonialisme littéraire* (2012), which reveals the process of literary neocolonialism through *L'Enfant noir* and its relation to the French colonial power. This article aims to complement the book by conducting an internal analysis of the novel. By examining the romantic primitivism narrative in the novel, this article aims to strengthen Steamers' argument regarding the exoticization of the novel and its connection to postcolonial phenomenon. In addition, it also examines further into the history of Plon and discusses the novel's exoticization until its most recent publication. It aims to reveal that the phenomenon of literary neocolonialism of *L'Enfant noir* predates 1953 and persists to this day.

The second study is Arum Ambarwati's undergraduate thesis entitled *Kajian Struktural-Semiotik Novel L'Enfant noir karya Camara Laye (Structural-Semiotic Study of the Novel L'Enfant noir by Camara Laye)* (2014) which analyzes the novel's intrinsic elements such as plot, characterization, setting, and theme. This research discusses the novel's setting and social context related to the colonialism era and animist culture in Guinea (Ambarwati, 2014). However, it does not provide a critical study on the depiction of the setting and its relevance to the power structure colonial context.

Additionally, the third study is also an undergraduate thesis by Kartika Wahyu Handayani (2016) entitled *Transformasi Novel L'enfant noir karya Camara Laye ke Dalam Film L'Enfant Noir Karya Laurent Chevallier: Analisis Ekranisasi (Transformation of Camara Laye's Novel L'enfant noir into Laurent Chevallier's Film L'Enfant Noir: An Ecranization Analysis)*, which analyzes the ekranization process of the novel employing Seymour Chatman's narrative structure theory (Handayani, 2016). This study focuses on the differences in the number of kernels

and satellites, storylines, characterizations, and settings in the novel and film, but does not offer a critical review of colonialism or exoticism.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Romantic Primitivism and Idyllic Africa in *L'Enfant noir*

Romantic primitivism is a concept of believing that the mode of life of non-Western indigenous people is innocent, incorruptible, natural, and perpetually optimistic. John Panish, in *Kerouac's The Subterraneans: A Study of "Romantic Primitivism"* (1994), explains that romantic primitivism could be a racist ideology when it portrays racial minorities as noble savages but obscures the oppression they experience (Panish, 1994). Ali A. Mazrui also uses the term to describe the idea of Léopold Sédar Senghor, a writer, founder of the *négritude* movement, and the first president of Senegal, who believed that Africa had an original culture rooted in simplicity. Mazrui affirms that "romantic primitivism celebrates what is simple about Africa. It salutes the cattle herder rather than the castle-builder" (Mazrui, 1995 & 2005).

This simplicity is portrayed, for example, through the description of Africans living a life far from the hustle and bustle of modernism and enjoying the heavenly nature while singing or dancing. This is described by Senghor, for example, in his poem *Prière aux masques* which depicts Africans as "*les hommes de la danse, dont les pieds reprennent vigueur en frappant le sol dur (The men of the dance, whose feet regain strength by hitting the hard ground)*" (L. S. Senghor, 1990: 24). Mazrui's remarks about Senghor's concept align with Kahiudi C. Mabana's view as presented in his article *Léopold Sédar Senghor et la civilisation de l'universel* (Mabana, 2011). According to Mabana, Senghor held the following perspective about Africa.

L'Afrique idyllique, la beauté noire, l'harmonie de l'univers africain, les liens invisibles communs à tous les peuples qui partagent la même sensibilité noire.

(Mabana, 2011:4)

The idyllic Africa, the black beauty, the harmony of the African universe, the invisible links common to all peoples who share the same black sensibility.

L'Enfant noir is a novel that aligns with the perspective of romantic primitivism. Despite the 1930s setting, the novel fails to allude the fears of the people under occupation and the acts of inhumanity committed by the colonial government. Instead, it meticulously depicts the beauty of the natural landscape in Guinea and its indigenous people, who are peaceful, harmonious, and live collectively. This idyllic atmosphere is reflected, for example, in the narration about Tindican, the home village of the narrator's mother. The following citation illustrates the protagonist's fascination when he witnesses the beautiful nature of the village.

A mesure que nous avançons sur la route, nous délogions ici un lièvre, là un sanglier, et des oiseaux partaient dans un grand bruit d'ailes; parfois aussi que nous rencontrions une troupe de singes; et chaque fois je sentais un petit pincement au coeur, comme plus surprise que le gibier même que notre approche alertait brusquement.

(Laye, 2008: 40)

As we walked along the road, we would dislodge a hare, there a wild boar, and birds would leave with a great clatter of wings; sometimes, we would encounter a troop of monkeys as well; and each time, I would feel a little twinge of surprise, as if more surprised than the wild itself that our approach suddenly alerted.

The quote below also highlights the idyllic scenery of the village.

Jamais le ciel n'est plus clair, plus resplendissant; les oiseaux chantant, ils sont ivres; la joie est partout, partout elle explose et dans chaque coeur retentit. C'était cette saison là, la belle saison, qui me dilatait la poitrine, et le tam-tam aussi [...] Parvenus au champ qu'on moissonnerait en premier lieu, les hommes s'alignaient sur la lisière, la torse nu et la faucille prête. Mon oncle Lansana, ou tel autre paysan, car la moisson se faisait de compagnie et chacun prêtait son bras à la moisson de tous, les invitait alors à commencer le travail

(Laye, 2008: 57–58)

The sky has never been clearer nor more resplendent; the birds sing, they are drunk; joy is everywhere, everywhere it explodes, and in

every heart it resounds. It was that season, the beautiful season, that made my chest expand, and also the *tam-tam*. Arriving at the field that would be harvested first, the men would line up on the edge of the field, bare-chested and ready with their sickles. My uncle, Lansana, or some other farmer would then invite them to begin the work because harvesting was a communal effort, with each man lending his arm to harvest it all.

The novel does not only depict an idyllic nature, but it also portrays the villagers as warm and light-hearted. One example of this is their tradition of welcoming guests, where everyone eagerly contributes to feasting the visitors. This is described by the narrator when he first arrived in Tindican Village, as illustrated in the following quote.

Les femmes sortaient de leurs cases et accouraient à nous, en s'exclamant joyeusement [...] De partout elles accouraient, de partout elles venaient m'accueillir; oui comme si le chef de canton en personne eût fait son entrée dans Tindican; et ma grand-mère rayonnait de joie [...] Et quand ces excellentes femmes nous quittaient, c'était pour surveiller la caisson d'énormes platées de riz et de volaille, qu'elles n'allaient pas tarder à nous apporter pour le festin du soir.

(Laye, 2008: 43–44)

The women came out of their huts and to us, exclaiming joyfully [...] They came from everywhere, from everywhere they came to me; yes, as if the canton chief had made his entrance into Tindican; and my grandmother beamed with joy [...]. And when these excellent women left us, it was to watch over the box of enormous dishes of rice and poultry, which they would soon bring us for the evening feast.

The citation above depicts how the Tindican people welcome their guests. The main character recounts how the women welcomed him with joy and treated him like a canton chief and the evening feast that followed was filled with huge servings of rice and poultry. The concept of the African philosophy of collectivity itself is not new in African cultural discourse. Senghor, for example, emphasized this idea in his speech at Université de Montréal, September 29, 1966, declaring.

L'ontologie négro-africaine est unitaire, l'unité de l'univers se réalise, en Dieu, par la convergence des forces complémentaires issues de Dieu et ordonnées vers Dieu. C'est ce qui explique que le Nègre ait un sens si développé de la solidarité des hommes et de leur coopération; ce qui explique son sens du dialogue.

(L. Senghor, 1967: 6; Singare, 2012: 148–149)

Negro-African ontology is unitary: the unity of the universe is realized in God, by the convergence of complementary forces, from God, and directed towards God. This explains the Negro's deeply developed sense of solidarity, cooperation and their sense of dialogue.

Furthermore, the depiction of African natives as friendly, kind, and welcoming people echoes a famous adage by Seydou Badian, the Malian writer: "*L'homme est un peu comme un grand arbre: tout voyageur a droit à son ombre (Man is like a big tree: every traveller is entitled to its shade)*" (Badian, 1964:98; Kacou, 1988:61). This depiction is also evident in the description of the harvest feast in Tindican, which is described as festive, filled with singing, dancing, and the beats of the tam-tam drum as illustrated in the following quote.

Le tam-tam, qui nous avait suivi à mesure que nous pénétrions plus avant dans le champ, rythmait les voix. Nous chantions en chœur, très haut souvent, avec de grands élans, et parfois très bas, si bas qu'on nous entendait à peine; et notre fatigue s'envolait, la chaleur s'atténuait [...] Ils moissonnaient ensemble : leurs voix s'accordaient, leurs gestes s'accordaient ; ils étaient ensemble ! - unis dans un même travail, unis par un même chant.

(Laye, 2008: 62–63)

The *tam-tam*, which had followed us as we penetrated further into the field, gave rhythm to the voices. We sang in chorus, often very high, with great enthusiasm, and sometimes very low, so low that we could hardly be heard; and our tiredness vanished, the heat was reduced [...] They reaped together: their voices agreed, their gestures agreed; they were together! - united in the same work, united in the same song.

Another essential element of romantic

primitivism is the belief in the concept of *afrique mythique* (mythical Africa), signifying the idea that Africa is always connected to the spirit world. This idea is prevalent in many of Senghor's poems, frequently presenting elements from African realities such as flora (chayote, palm wine), fauna (crocodile, manatee, panther), music (tam-tam, kora), and people (black woman), and then connect these visible realities to invisible realities such as the world of ancestors, heaven, genies, and more (Malela, 2006). The concept of *afrique mythique*, for example, is portrayed in the following stanza of his poem *D'autres chants*.

Je ne sais en quel temps c'était, je confonds toujours l'enfance et l'Eden, comme je mêle la Mort et la Vie—un pont de douceur les relie.

(L. S. Senghor, 1990: 148)

I don't know what time it was, I always mix childhood and Eden
Just as I mix Death and Life—a bridge of sweetness connects them.

The mystical dimension is particularly noticeable in *L'Enfant noir*. This novel highlights African cosmogony with its spirits and ancestors, as described by Seydou Badian, "*Ils ne sont jamais parti: ils sont dans l'arbre qui frémit, ils sont dans le bois qui gémit*" (*The spirits and ancestors never left: they are in the trees that shudders, they are in the wood that groans*) (Badian, 1964:67). The presence of *afrique mythique* in the novel, for example, is reflected in the depiction of the main character's family. This family believes that the father is a descendant of the snake spirit and that there are snake genies who will always protect their lives. Consequently, killing snakes for any reason is prohibited. The mother's command in the following quote illustrates this belief.

Celui-ci, mon enfant, il ne faut pas le tuer: ce serpent n'est pas un serpent comme les autres, il ne te fera aucun mal; néanmoins ne contrarie jamais sa course [...] Ce serpent, ajouta ma mère, est le genie de ton père.

(Laye, 2008:15)

This one, my child, must not be killed: this snake is not a snake like the others, it will not harm you; nevertheless, never thwart its course [...] This snake, added my mother, is your father's genie.

The depiction of an idyllic Africa has long been debated. For Senghor, this idea departs from his belief that African philosophy differs from European philosophy. This concept is reflected in one of the lines of his most famous and controversial poem, which emphasizes that Africa is more connected to the soul, while Europe is more related to the intelligence, “*L’émotion est nègre, comme la raison est hellène (Emotion is black, as reason is Greek)*” (L. S. Senghor, 1964: 24). However, this line has been criticized by many African scholars as it appears to reinforce the Eurocentric perspective regarding the irrationality of Africans. The criticism was expressed, for example, by Boubacar Boris Diop, one of Senegal’s most prominent writers, in his polemical essay *Le Sénégal entre Cheikh Anta Diop et Senghor*. In this essay, Boris Diop considered Senghor to have exoticized his own continent and even given legitimacy to European’s *mission civilisatrice* (Diop, 2007).

As for *L’Enfant noir*, its depiction of romantic primitivism has not escaped criticism. As mentioned earlier, the novel was strongly criticized by Mongo Beti, who specifically commented on the depiction of totems, which he felt resembled the way a Western ethnologist would write an ethnology book.

Camara Laye parle abondamment de totems et de choses qu’on trouvait dans les livres d’ethnologie. Moi, je n’ai jamais entendu parler de totems dans mon ethnie ici. Dans le roman de Camara Laye, l’évocation du totem est faite de manière si artificielle que ce n’était pas credible.

(Kom & Beti, 2002:77)

Camara Laye talks a lot about totems and things that were found in ethnology books. I have never heard people talk about totems in my ethnic group here. In Camara Laye’s novel, the evocation of the totem is done in such an artificial way that it was not credible.

This argument is not mere assumption, especially considering that the novel was published in 1953 by Plon. With its economic and political networks, the publisher who was closely associated to the French colonial power, played an important role in marketing the novel, leading to a positive reception from the Western audiences. This transformed the novel into a canon in sub-Saharan African francophone literature. This phenomenon, known as literary

neocolonialism, will be explained in the next two chapters.

Literary Neocolonialism and Plon Publisher

Literary neocolonialism is a book publishing phenomenon in which literary works from colonized countries are published by publishers from colonial or former colonial countries for certain political interests. The term was introduced by Vivan Steemers to address the growing trend of African books being published by French publishers particularly since the 1950s. According to Steemers, most of the African books have been tailored to serve French political interests and conform to the preferences of the French readers (Steemers, 2012).

The theory of literary neocolonialism is influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production, which argues that publishers are integral to the power institutions which determine the value of a work (Bourdieu, 1977). As Bourdieu wrote in *La production de la croyance: contribution à une économie des biens symboliques*, the publication of a literary work is inseparable from the field of cultural production and the power relations within it. The role of the publisher is dominant in making the work accessible to the public. It determines how a work is accessed, read, accepted, and even revered by the public. In other words, it could influence the reception of a work. Bourdieu describes this process in the following quote.

On entre en littérature non comme on entre en religion, mais comme on entre dans un club select: l’éditeur est de ces parrains prestigieux (avec les préfaciers, les critiques, etc.) qui assurent les témoignages empressés de reconnaissance.

(Bourdieu, 1977:6)

One enters literature not as one enters religion, but as one enters a select club: the publisher is one of those prestigious sponsors (along with the preface writers, the critics, etc.) who assures the eager testimonies of recognition.

Bourdieu’s quote states that every literary work that reaches the public is the result of a strict screening done by publishers that act as gate keepers, much like a select club that chooses its members very selectively. They ensure that the members they foster align with their visions, interests, and ideology. This

process is analogous to the process a literary work goes through before entering the market. Much like a member of a select club, the work must also conform to the values endorsed and defined by the publisher.

Furthermore, the aforementioned quote explains that literary works extend beyond what the author has written. In addition, to the internal text, there are also external factors influenced by the publisher that have a major influence on shaping the work's value. This value formation begins when a manuscript reaches the publisher and goes through a long process of editing, cover selection, the addition of forewords, endorsements, pricing, promotional techniques, and more, which has a significant impact on the reader's reception.

As previously discussed, the historical context of Plon has profoundly influenced the publication and the reception of *L'Enfant noir*. Plon played a significant role in the realization of the novel's symbolic production enabling its entry into the market, receiving a positive reception, and becoming one of the canons in African francophone literature (Mazauric, 2014; Sorel, 2016). To understand this phenomenon, there are three fundamental contexts that should be considered. Firstly, the conditions of the African francophone literary book market in the 1950s; secondly, the historical context of Plon and its relationship with the French authorities; and thirdly, the editing process conducted by Plon, which will be elaborated in the third chapter.

In the 1950s, writers from French-colonized African countries could not publish their works in their own countries. During this period, there was a lack of book infrastructure such as publishing houses and book markets, all of which were under the control of the French colonial government (Steemers, 2012). This situation can be attributed to the predominance of oral culture in Africa during that era with few people having the ability to read and write particularly in French. In the 1950s, Golaney-Polansky stated that the politics of the French language initiated by Jules Ferry had not reached the entire African population. This was due to the fact that the propagation and indoctrination of the French language through the formal education systems was only massively implemented after the 1960s when most former French colonies chose French as their national language (Ferry, 1885; Goheneix-Polanski, 2014).

Due to these circumstances, African writers

who wanted to publish their works in that era could only rely entirely on publishers in France (Steemers, 2012). *L'Enfant noir* itself was first published in 1953. It was three years before the establishment of *Présence Africaine*, the first African publishing house in Paris dedicated to promoting African literary works. This context led to *L'Enfant noir* being published by a French publishing house and as Raphaël Thierry observed, it had to "follow French aesthetic and economic standards" (Thierry, 2020: 68-69). Therefore, the publication of *L'Enfant noir* cannot be separated from the aesthetic and interests of its publisher, Plon.

Founded by Henri Plon in 1845, Plon is one of France's most esteemed publishing houses with a long history. It has a major reputation as a publisher of French history-themed books, including memoirs of the French Revolution, the First Empire, the 1870-1871 War, the First and Second World Wars, and the Algerian War. Plon also published many biographies of major political figures and military leaders. One of its most famous publications is *Mémoires de guerre*, a trilogy of autobiographies by General Charles de Gaulle, the president who led France in the Second World War (Sorel, 2016).

Throughout its history, Plon was a publisher having close ties to the French authorities. This proximity persisted from the Bonapartist monarchy to the fifth republic (Sorel, 2016). Henri Plon, the founder and editor-in-chief from 1845 to 1872, was a staunch Bonapartist. During the leadership of the second-generation owners, Plon was led by Eugène Plon, the only son of Henri Plon, and Robert Nourrit, Henri Plon's son-in-law, the company remained ardent supporters of the third republican regime. After the death of Eugène Plon in 1985, the publishing house was succeeded by Robert Nourrit's descendants, Pierre Mainguet and Joseph Bourdel. These figures were known as *les maurissiennes*, an epithet for the adherents of Charles Maurras, a politician and writer who espoused Catholic right-wing ideology and was xenophobic and anticommunist (Khoury, 2017:54). Moreover, they had direct ties to the French and Belgian colonial regimes. During the Dreyfus affair, they even supported antisemitic politics by publishing *Psst!*, an anti-Jewish satirical newspaper. This third generation ended after the death of Joseph Bourdel on April 19, 1945. The fourth generation was led by Maurice Bordel, the son of Joseph Bourdel. It was

during this fourth generation that *L'Enfant noir* was published (Sorel, 2016).

The publication of *L'Enfant noir* was intrinsically connected to the ideology of the fourth-generation members. From 1945 to 1962, Plon was led by several key figures, such as Maurice Bourdel, Charles Orengo, Guy Depré, and Robert Poulet. As with the previous generations, they maintained close ties with the French authorities. Maurice Bourdel had a particularly strong connection with the French military. In 1950, he received *l'Ordre national de la légion d'honneur*, an honor for civilians considered to have contributed eminent service to the nation. Charles Orengo, the literary director and the most important figure behind Plon's success in the 1950s, had direct contact with the Interior Minister, François Mitterand. Guy Depré and Robert Poulet were both editors with conservative political views and were advocates of Western moral superiority over the colonized people. During their tenure, Plon published *La Table Ronde*, a newspaper that opposed the *sartrienne* engaged movement, and published many articles written by conservative right-wingers and anti-communists (Steemers, 2012). These two figureheads played the most important roles in the publication of *L'Enfant noir*.

Robert Poulet was one of the first people to read the novel's manuscript. Poulet was a perfect representation of the *zeitgeist* of French society in the 1950s, who believed that colonialism had positive impacts on its colonies. During his tenure, he was responsible for selecting literary works from overseas colonies that could prove that the colonial regime had successfully transformed some "primitives" into talented writers (King, 2002; Steemers, 2012). Throughout the 1950s, he selected and edited novels with exotic themes depicting the serene and idyllic life in the colonies. The publication of *L'Enfant noir* is closely aligned with the publication of novels with similar themes, such as *La coline oubliée* by Mammeri (1952) and *Nam et Sylvie* by Phạm (1957). According to Adele King, the publication of these novels served several purposes. Firstly, it catered to the preferences of French readers in the 1950s, who wanted to experience the exoticism of faraway lands but did not want to become involved in serious political topics, particularly those related to colonialism.

Furthermore, the publication of *L'Enfant noir* was sponsored by the French Ministry of the Sea. This sponsorship indicates that the novel did not contradict

the interests of the French authorities at the time. Guy Dupré, another editor at Plon, confirmed this by emphasizing that *L'Enfant noir* shares the French spirit of *le culturalisme humanitariste* (humanitarian culturalism) and *le culturalisme apolitique* (apolitical culturalism) (Steemers, 2012).

Exoticism in the Peritext of *L'Enfant Noir*

Plon's role goes beyond ensuring that the novel fulfills the French public's desire for African exoticism. Furthermore, Plon also played a role in fashioning exoticism in the elements outside the text, or what Gérard Genette calls the peritext. Before delving into this topic, this chapter will first explain two concepts: exoticism and peritext.

According to *Larousse*, exoticism is the characteristic that evokes the customs, the inhabitants, or the landscapes of faraway countries (Larousse, 2022). The word has its roots in the Greek word, "exōtikos" which means "stranger" or "something strange." The concept of exoticism began to develop when European colonization reached its peak in the 19th century. According to Jean-Marc Moura, "The origin of exoticism is of all reading: the desire of an elsewhere more beautiful, more shimmering, and more astonishing than the real. Exotic writing is the unveiling of a world that is comical, bizarre, baroque or picturesque, at a constant distance from the dreary everyday life" (Moura, 1992). Based on those definitions, exoticism represents a set of characteristics that describe people outside of Europe as defined from a European perspective. These characteristics often rely on clichéd stereotypes that emphasize the differences between European and non-European civilizations. Europeans are seen as rational, modern, sophisticated, and orderly, while non-Europeans are seen as wild, magical, innocent, and mysterious. This distinction aims to position Europe as a civilized world, while the rest as *un monde sauvage* (a wild world), so that Europe can finally occupy the highest hierarchy of civilization.

Meanwhile, peritext is a term introduced by Gérard Genette that refers to elements outside the principal text of a literary work that serves to complement the work to become a book. Genette in *Seuils* wrote, "*le texte se présente rarement à l'état nu* (the text rarely appears in its naked state)" (Genette, 1987:7). He explained that a text does not only consist of what is written by the author but also

all elements outside the text such as title, sub-title, preface, afterword, endorsement, dedication sentence, note, front cover, back cover, etc. These elements are generally not only determined by the author but also by the publishers. The fashioning of peritext can be crucial since it can affect the reader's reception and also its sales.

In *Néocolonialisme littéraire*, Steemers discussed that the high sales and the canonization of *L'Enfant noir* could not be separated from Plon's role in fashioning its peritext as exotic as possible. As a note, the novel has achieved best-seller status since its first publication. In the first two years of publication, it was sold more than 25,000 copies. This number was remarkable for the market at the time, let alone for a book written by an African. In comparison, Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre christ de bomba* (1955), published by Laffont Publishers, only sold less than 3000 copies over 15 years, from 1955 to 1970. According to Steemers, this high sales were the result of Plon's role in designing and determining the novel's peritext, specifically the title, author's pen name, back cover, and front cover (Steeemers 2012).

The manuscript of the novel was originally titled *L'Enfant de Guinée* (Guinean Child). However, the proposed name was rejected by Robert Poulet, who then changed the title to *L'Enfant noir*. Miller says this change was intended to make the title more relatable for the French readers, who did not know that Guinea is an existing country—even today, the name remains unfamiliar to some French people. In contrast, the attribute of skin color was clearly more relevant, even more interesting, and engaging for French society. By emphasizing black identity, the exoticism of Africa could be clearly and powerfully conveyed from the title alone. As Miller stated, "*l'universalisme racial était plus attirant que le particularisme national* (racial universalism was more attractive than national particularism)" (Miller, 1990; Steemers, 2012).

Besides the title, Poulet also changed the author's pen name. It is important to note that the author's real name is Abdoulaye Camara. There are at least two important remarks about this transformation. First, there was a reversal of the author's surname and first name. In Guinean culture, Camara is a surname not a first name. From a commercial point of view, this reversal might have been intended to make it easier for Western readers to remember the author's name. However, according to Miller, this reversal implies the

ignorance of African cultural identity (Miller, 1990; Steemers, 2012). Secondly, the word "Abdoul" in the surname "Abdoulaye" was omitted as it was important to maintain the image of romantic primitivism in the novel. In addition, it is to prevent the novel from being associated with other images, especially considering the name "Abdoul" which is an Arabic name.

The exoticism was also evident on the novel's back cover. Since its first publication, Plon has embedded Camara Laye's biography, which contains his name, birthplace, and educational background as a graduate of *école français*. The inclusion of these elements was basically meant to accentuate the author's otherness as an African. The accentuation of exoticism on the back cover was then most evident in its second edition. In the edition published in 1955, Plon placed a photo of the writer next to his biography. This was very unusual, considering that the back covers at that time almost never contained an author's photo (Steeemers, 2012).

Meanwhile, the peritext that contained the most intense exoticism was the front cover of the novel. The cover is one of the most essential elements outside the text that determines the identity of a book. Most people are willing to buy a book before knowing the story based on their opinion of the book cover. A book cover is often considered a representation of the content of a book, even if this is not always true. In short, the front cover could greatly affect the reader's interest. For this reason, it could also significantly influence book sales (Genette, 1987).

Francophone African literature itself has had a long specific issue with front covers. As Alain Mabanckou wrote in *Huit leçons sur l'Afrique* (2020), the front covers of African novels often represent stereotypical images of Africa by portraying Africa as "*un voyage lointain* (a distant journey)" that promises "*une balade exotique dans un univers palpitant où le mystère, l'aventure, la magie, et la sorcellerie* (an exotic ballad in a thrilling universe with mystery, adventure, magic, and witchcraft)" (Mabanckou, 2020: 113-114). The covers, for example, often feature images of mysterious jungles, African tambours, witches, and black people, which are not always related to the story. According to Mabanckou, this reproduction of exotic image derives from "*l'inconscient colonial* (the colonial unconscious)" which sought to portray Africa "as African as possible" according to Western notions (Mabanckou, 2020). Binyavanga Wainaina, a

Kenyan writer, shared a similar opinion by satirizing Western publishers. He used certain titles or symbols on the front cover to reinforce their stereotypes of Africa. These additions include the words “Massai,” “Zulu,” “Zambezi,” “Congo,” “Nile,” “grandeur,” “tambour,” “ciel” (sky), “ombre (shadow)”, “soleil (sun)” etc. (Wainaina, 2013; Mabanckou, 2020). This kind of representation was also strongly condemned by the young Ivorian writer Gauz, who in one of his interviews satirized how Africa is always portrayed as a heavenly place full of sunshine. As Gauz said, “le soleil c’est un grand malheur [...] ce qui plaisait à mon grand père, c’était la pluie, les promesses de fertilité des terres (the sun is a real misfortune [...] what my grandfather liked was rain, the promise of fertile land)” (L’Obs, 2018).



Figure 1. “L’enfant Noir” by Camara Laye

In the case of *L’Enfant noir*, the exoticism on the front cover has been a long-standing phenomenon. However, it did not necessarily occur in its first edition. In the first edition, the novel’s front cover was still very simple. The front cover was dominated by a black color with a combination of orange and red. It only contained the title, the author’s name, and the publisher’s name. It did not include any illustrations or photos of the author. This was understandable, considering that in the 1950s, books with illustrated covers were rare. At that time, French readers only relied on the back cover to get an overview of a book (Steemers, 2012). As discussed earlier, Plon had maximized the back cover of *L’Enfant noir* in its first

and second editions to accentuate African exoticism as the novel’s main selling point.

A significant change occurred 13 years after its first edition. Since the publication of the 1966 edition, the front cover has always included an illustration of a black boy, as shown in the pictures below.



Figure 2. The editions of *L’enfant Noir* by Camara Laye

The images above are some examples of the novel’s front cover which can be found at <https://www.worldcat.org>. These images show that the illustration of a black boy has become increasingly obvious over time. In the 1966 and 1970 editions, the cover only showed the silhouette of a black boy. Then, from the 1975 edition to the latest 21st-century edition, the covers explicitly feature a painting or photograph of a black boy. However, a closer look shows that the front covers have randomly and inconsistently placed black boys as illustrations. The black boys have shaved heads in the 1976 and 2008 pocket editions, but in the 1976 Plon and 1994 Pocket Jeunesse editions, the boys have very short curly hair. In addition, each boy also has different physical traits and are of different ages. This shows that the publishers arbitrarily chose a picture of any boy as long as he is black. At this point, African exoticism was again strongly exploited on the covers of *L’Enfant noir*. Remarkably, these front cover evolutions also coincided with the increase in the novel’s sales. To illustrate this, between 1970 and 1973, the novel sold 111,392 copies. It was certainly

a formidable figure for the period (Steemers, 2012).

The most important aspect to emphasize in this evolution is that exoticism has always been crucial in the promotion of *L'Enfant noir*. It could even be said that publishers have always been consistent in intensifying the elements of exoticism in the novel's peritext as a complement to the *romantic primitivism* narrative that already lies within the story. This consistency indicates that the desire for exoticism did not only exist in the 1950s or 1960s when colonialism and racism were still strongly entrenched in the world. Long after that, even more than half a century later, exoticism is still an important part of the sales of African francophone novels, especially *L'Enfant noir*. Indeed, the portrayal of romantic primitivism in the story is not sufficient, the exterior presentation should also exhibit exoticism.

CONCLUSION

Based on an intrinsic analysis of the novel, this article identifies the perspective of romantic primitivism in the way the novel romanticizes Guinea's nature, people, and culture neglecting to portray the destructive effects of French colonialism. In the novel, nature is portrayed as pristine, African as peaceful and joyous people, living in the heart of solid culture of solidarity. This idyllic depiction of Guinean social life is also intertwined with narratives of *afrique mythique*, where the indigenous are portrayed as still having a close relationship with the ancestral world and belief in totems, which symbolize invisible beings as an integral part of the material reality in Guinea.

This romantic primitivism perspective then led the novel to experience literary neocolonialism. In this context, literary neocolonialism refers to the novel's publishing process since its first edition until its most recent publication in 2008. In its first edition, Plon played a role in ensuring that the novel did not embody a political stance contrary to the interests of the French colonial government. In addition, the novel's publication was driven by Plon's background with its proximity to French power since the Bonaparte era, and also the right-wing political positions of its owners and editors.

This article also highlights that literary neocolonialism is evident in the process of designing the novel's peritext to suit the preferences of French readers who imagine Africa as a distant land full of

exoticism. As Vivan Steemers mentioned, the depiction of exotic Africa and the emphasis on its otherness had been accentuated by Plon in the novel's title, author's name, back cover, and front cover. However, the novelty of this article is that it reveals how exoticism in the novel's peritext is not only accentuated in its initial publication—or the 1950s period—but it also continues to its latest publication in the 21st century. This is particularly evident in *L'Enfant noir's* book covers which always feature an image or illustration of black children to attract French readers to buy the novel. In conclusion, exoticism remains an integral part of the marketing process of *L'Enfant noir*, which to this day still conforms to Western preferences and their stereotypical perspectives of Africa and Africans.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that this article is completely free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, editorial, and publication processes.

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