theories and methodologies

When Oyono's "Boy" Speaks Dutch: Two Readings in One Language

JEROEN DEWULF

JEROEN DEWULF, Queen Beatrix Professor in Dutch Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author recently of a monograph on Dutch resistance literature (*Spirit of Resistance: Dutch Clandestine Literature during the Nazi Occupation* [Camden, 2010]). He is working on Flemish literature about the Congo and on Dutch-African relations in a transatlantic context.

DE HUISJONGEN, THE DUTCH TRANSLATION OF FERDINAND OYONO'S *UNE VIE DE BOY*, WAS PUBLISHED IN 1980 BY KOSMOS AND RELEASED IN two cities: Amsterdam, where the publisher had its headquarters, and Antwerp, the site of its Belgian branch. For Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgian) readers, the Catholic and French colonial environment described in the novel represented a world that in many ways felt familiar. In the once deeply Catholic Flanders, where French used to be the language spoken by the elite and where the memories of the former colony Belgian Congo are still vivid, people could easily identify with Oyono's main character, Toundi.

In the Netherlands, however, the memories of the nation's colonial history are characterized by a predominantly Protestant worldview that primarily evokes images from Southeast Asia. There, in the former Dutch East Indies, it was not the masculine "boy" but the feminine *babu* who took care of the household. This explains the decision by the then twenty-seven-year-old Dutch translator of Oyono's novel, today's best-selling author Herman Koch, not to use *boy* in the title but to opt for *huisjongen* (lit., "house youth"). The idea of having a "boy" as housekeeper clearly sounded strange to this Dutch translator.

In view of the different associations the novel must have evoked among Dutch and Flemish readers, this article presents two separate analyses of the same translation. One reflects a Dutch perspective on *De huisjongen* and interprets Toundi, a child diarist doomed to die at the hands of oppressors, as an African Anne Frank. The other reads the novel from a Flemish perspective and interprets Toundi as an African variant of Manneken Pis, the roguish street boy from Brussels who derides the authorities.

The Dutch Perspective: Toundi as an African Anne Frank

A remarkable feature of *De huisjongen* is the drawing on the novel's cover. It was made by Thé Tjong-Khing,[1] one of the Netherlands' best-known book illustrators. It depicts a scene from the final part

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of the novel, when the commandant steps on the hand of Toundi, who was just cleaning his boots (141). Thé's drawing evokes movement, whereby the commandant seems to be cut from a different world and pasted into Africa.[2] The whiteness of the commandant's skin is accentuated by his white clothing and boots and contrasted by the dark green of the nearby tropical forest. His dominance over the houseboy is reflected in his size, more than double Toundi's, and is emphasized by the heavy boots that crush the young, barefoot African's hand. The mesmerized look in his strangely yellow eyes gives the commandant an almost extraterrestrial air; he tramples Toundi without even taking notice of him. Unlike the commandant's blurred eyes, Toundi's are wide open and sharply focused on his crushed hand. In depicting the commandant's blinkered march, Thé captured the essence of Oyono's colonial drama. It shows how the tactless European, mesmerized by his pseudo-civilizing mission, tramples the African and reduces everything in his path to chaos.

Born in a wealthy Chinese family on the island of Java, Indonesia, in 1923, Thé has a personal connection with Europe's colonial history (Akveld and Terhell 11–13). As the preferred trading partners of the Dutch colonizers, Java's Chinese community enjoyed a privileged position in the East Indies, and many of its members, including Thé's parents, adopted the Dutch way of life. After Indonesia's independence in 1945, anti-Chinese riots erupted and drove many Indonesian Chinese to the Netherlands (Fernando and Bulbeck). Among them was Thé, who migrated in 1956. Similar to most European repatriates born in the former colonies, Thé had grown up assuming that it was normal to have servants but now had moved to a society where households with servants were generally perceived as morally decadent and a symbol of colonial abuse.

While the *tukan kebon* ("gardener") and *kokki* ("cook") in the East Indies were traditionally male, the household was the task of the female *babu*. White male bachelors in the Indies would sometimes live in concubinage with their housekeeper, who was then referred to as *njai*. Ever since the seventeenth century, Dutch settlements in Southeast Asia operated thus with moral values completely different from those of the homeland. While concubinage was seen as sinful and despicable in the Netherlands, it was considered normal in the colonies (Gouda), hence the reputation of the Indies as a cesspool of impurity and vice (Stoler). However, this reputation sparked curiosity among the Dutch, which explains the focus in Dutch literature from and about the Indies on topics such as eroticism, adultery, and prostitution (Paasman 73–74).

One of the classics of this literature, Louis Couperus's novel *The Hidden Force* (1900), parallels *De huisjongen*. It describes how the arrival of the Dutch administrator's wife, Leonie, destabilizes colonial order. Couperus used Leonie's luxurious behavior as a metaphor of European decadence in the tropics, symbolizing the downfall of Europe's civilizing mission. Couperus's depiction has a real basis. As Ann Laura Stoler has shown, the increase of European women in the Indies after 1800 strongly affected race relations and profoundly changed the colonizer-colonized relationship (55–60). Oyono's focusing on white female sexual promiscuity in the tropics as a way to expose the hypocrisy of the European colonial ethos was thus familiar to Dutch readers.

Sexual perversity also plays an important role in Oyono's negative portrayal of Father Vandermayer, whose name indicates a Dutch origin. This should not come as a surprise. During the period referred to in Dutch Catholic history as "het grote missie-uur" ("the great era of mission"), roughly 1914–40, the Catholic minority in the Netherlands was extremely active in missionary activities; during that period, one in every nine Catholic missionaries around the globe was Dutch.[3] Since

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1912 Dutch missionary workers had been operating in Cameroon. Although they belonged to the French Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit, their attempts to strengthen the influence of the Vatican in Africa regularly clashed with France's ambitions. A famous case is that of Father Valkering, whose late-1940s attacks on what he considered immoral, anti-Christian French culture led to his expulsion from Cameroon by the colonial administration (Ngongo 38–39). Although these tensions are not explicitly mentioned in Oyono's novel, Vandermayer's outsider's position as a moral crusader corresponds in many ways to that of Valkering.

This Dutch Catholic eagerness to excel in missionary work stood in sharp contrast to the traditional reluctance of the (Calvinist) Dutch Reformed Church to spread Christianity in the colonies. Dutch Calvinism was more elitist. Affiliation with the Dutch Reformed Church and the use of the Dutch language largely remained the privileges of the colonial elite (Gouda). This elitism of the Reformed Church corresponded to the deep conviction in the seventeenth-century Netherlands that the (Protestant) Dutch were a chosen people (Schama), who with God's assistance had been able to defeat the mighty Spanish (Catholic) adversary and were destined to end Iberian supremacy around the world (Schmidt). The development of a Dutch (Protestant) national identity was intimately related to the country's colonial expansion, which was seen as the fulfillment of a divine calling. Hence, the definitive loss of Indonesia in 1949 forced the Netherlands to reinvent its national identity (Dewulf, "Many Meanings").

The Netherlands rapidly adapted itself to a new national identity in the 1960s. From a colonial empire with a deeply religious and predominantly provincial mentality, it transformed itself in less than a decade into a small nation with a predominantly secular and international mentality. In the context of this transformation, the Netherlands was far more radical than any other Western nation in applying the progressive philosophy of the 1960s to political practice. Whether the issue was same-sex marriage, abortion, the legalization of soft drugs, or euthanasia, Dutch legislators were front-runners convinced that, sooner or later, the sun of Dutch progressiveness would shed its light on even the darkest corners of the world. The generation of the 1960s reinterpreted the traditional Calvinist conviction of being a chosen people from a secular, progressive perspective. The result was the Dutch ambition to be a "country of guidance" to the rest of the world (Kennedy).

This reinvention was triggered not only by the loss of Indonesia but also by the debate on the Holocaust. In the light of the fact that about three-quarters of the Jewish population in the Netherlands had been transported to Nazi death camps, the largest percentage in western Europe (Barnouw 61), the Dutch accommodation to the Nazi occupation was fiercely debated in the 1960s (Dewulf, *Spirit* 209–12). In the late 1970s, unconditional support for the transformation of the Netherlands into a multicultural society was seen by many—consciously or unconsciously—as a way to atone for shameful errors of the past: the country's history of oppressive governance in the former colonies, its involvement in the slave trade, its military interventions in Indonesia in 1947 and 1949, and, most notable, its mixture of passivity and complicity regarding the persecution of the Jews in the Second World War (Sniderman and Hagendoorn 15).

This connection among the Second World War, Dutch colonial history, and subsequent Dutch multiculturalism was notorious in the policy of the Anne Frank Foundation. While its initial task had been to save the site of the famous diarist's secret annex and to transform it into a museum that represented the ideals of Anne Frank, the foundation gradually shifted its interests to the struggle against any form of discrimination. This naturally implied solidarity with immigrants, many of

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whom had come from former Dutch colonies. The foundation also invited Mies Bouhuys to write the children's book *Anne Frank is niet van gisteren* (1982; "Anne Frank Is Not from Yesterday"), which explicitly connected Anne Frank and Third World immigrant children.

The Dutch translation of Oyono's novel was part of this general effort to promote a different conception of history for the younger generation. *De huisjongen* was in fact presented to Dutch readers as a book for teenagers; the glossary at the end of the novel even included terms such as *circumcision* and *gonorrhea* (Oyono 171–72). Since it was published at the same time as Bouhuys's popular book on Anne Frank, the legacy of the Second World War undoubtedly influenced the way Toundi's story was read in the Netherlands. The horrific scenes of torture in its final chapters reinforced this connection. While listening to Toundi's cries in Africa, Dutch readers almost inevitably heard echoes of the Nazi concentration camps in the background. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the "boy" Toundi Ondoua who is trampled on the cover's drawing is literally a boy, a teenager of roughly the same age as Anne Frank, the Dutch icon of the horrors of the Holocaust.

The Flemish Perspective: Toundi as an African Manneken Pis

In the eyes of its Flemish readers, the same Dutch translation of Oyono's novel might have been an entirely different book. A large percentage of the Flemish population had a personal connection to the former Belgian Congo through an acquaintance or relative. Thus, compared with Dutch readers, Flemish readers tended to have a stronger familiarity with the Franco-Cameroonian world described in *Une vie de boy*. Had the novel's translator been Flemish and not Dutch, it is doubtful that *boy* would have been removed from the title. As it was commonly used in the Congo, *boy* is still a familiar term in Flemish society today. Because of strong memories of the Congo, many Flemish people were also familiar with the originally Portuguese term *chicotte* ("whip"), which was commonly used in the Congo. In the Netherlands, however, the word remained unknown and was in fact mistranslated by Koch, who thought that it was a stick (Oyono 15).

Until the mid–twentieth century, Flemings were on average poorer than their French-speaking compatriots, which explains why most Belgians working in the Congo came from Flanders. The Congo was a segregated society; the only Africans many Flemish colonists really got to know were their "boys" (Verlinden 63–64). There was a clear hierarchy among the "boys": addressing, for instance, a *boy lavadaire* ("laundryman") as *boy parcelle* ("gardener") constituted a great offense. For Flemish readers, Toundi's apparently leading role in the household might have been surprising because in the Congo the *boy maison* ("housekeeper") worked under the *boy cuisinier* or *pischi* ("cook"), who always stood at the top of the housekeeping hierarchy (Raymaekers 116–17). As these terms indicate, French was the lingua franca in the Belgian Congo, so the Flemish communicated with their "boys" in a language that was foreign to them and communicated among themselves in Dutch, a language the Congolese could not understand.[4] Dutch, therefore, acquired a bad reputation among the Congolese, who perceived it as a language used to keep secrets (Foutry and Neckers 39). Most of the Flemings living in the Congo were of humble origin and had no experience with servants. Their sudden increase in social status on arrival presented a challenge that could cause conflicts and tensions (Lagae 4–6). While colonial women often felt disoriented in an environment where all traditionally female tasks were performed by "boys," men had difficulty accepting the fact that their wives spent most of the day surrounded by male servants. Although a strong emotional connection could

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sometimes develop between Flemish colonizers and certain "boys," the relationship—seen all over *De huisjongen*—was generally characterized by recurrent misunderstandings, miscommunications, and mistrust.

The colonials' rise in status also damaged their reputation in the homeland (Raymaekers 109). Their constant references to the "boys" on visits home from Africa only increased the jealousy of family members in Flanders (Eynikel 127). When colonials complained about the *boy lavadaire* who deliberately burned holes in his master's pants and shirts, knowing that damaged clothes were given to the "boys," people at home generally felt more sympathy for the "sly" servant than for the victim (Eynikel 136–37). Toundi, likely perceived primarily as a victim in the Netherlands, must have looked like a hero to many readers in Flanders, recalling not Anne Frank but the *pícaro*, or trickster, a cunning underdog who resists corrupt masters. Whereas Dutch readers were drawn to the book's final scene, which conjured up associations with concentration camps for them, Flemish readers identified with Toundi's spitting in the glass of water his arrogant master forces him to bring (Oyono 143). This behavior parallels the defiance of Flanders's famous hero Manneken Pis, a roguish Brussels street boy who, in statue form, unashamedly urinates before the wealthy and powerful in the center of Belgium's capital.

The interpretation of Toundi as a hero corresponds to a Flemish tradition of sympathy with the underdog who resists a mighty French-speaking adversary. In fact, Flemish identity grew out of a shared feeling of discrimination in a nation controlled by the French-speaking upper class (Dewulf, "Flemish Movement"). Not surprisingly, then, colonial Flemish women who had servants were often derided at home as *madammen* (Eynikel 127). This Flemish corruption of the French *mesdames* insinuated that these women had abandoned Flemish moral virtues and instead adopted dubious habits of the hated bourgeois *mesdames de Bruxelles*. To a Flemish readership, Toundi's discovery of used condoms under Madame's bed might have been connected to these prejudices about the moral decadence of European women in the colonies (Oyono 118–19).

This self-identification as an oppressed people also explains the remarkable decision by Flemish nationalists to draw parallels to the Congolese, as in the 1885 pamphlet *De Vlamingen aan de Negers van den Congo* ("The Flemish to the Negroes in the Congo"), which argued that the French-speaking bourgeoisie exploited the Congolese in Africa as they did the Flemish at home (Ginderachter, Gobyn, and Vanhaecke 27). When Congolese visitors to the World Expo in Brussels in 1958 were asked to sing a song in their local language for King Baudouin, the journalist Louis De Lentdecker reacted in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* with a column in which he lamented that he and other Flemish visitors to the expo were not African because if they were perhaps they would also have been allowed to address the Belgian king in their own language instead of having to use French (Raymaekers 132). By portraying themselves as the blacks of Belgium, Flemish nationalists disassociated themselves from Belgium's patriotic colonial rhetoric. The anticolonial mood in Flanders, present long before the Congo became independent, accounts for the cold reception of colonial repatriates and the general feeling in Flemish society that when repatriates lost everything they had built up in the colony, they got what they deserved (Verlinden 210).

Paradoxically, this anticolonial mood was accompanied by a strong admiration for the many Flemish missionary workers in the Congo. Eighty-four percent of the Catholic missionaries operating in the Congo were Flemish. Catholic missionary work there was, in fact, a Flemish bastion (Foutry and Neckers 133). Although Dutch was never used among

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the Flemish for missionary activities, their anti-French sentiment was reflected in their eagerness to convince the Congolese to take pride in their native language, an effort that stimulated group identification in the colony on the basis of African language groups (Reybrouck 127–28). While Flemish society, deeply Catholic, felt that the French-speaking bourgeoisie exploited the colony, hardly anyone doubted the noble intentions of the Flemish missionaries there. Unaware of the entanglement between the Catholic Church and the colonial administration, people in Flanders collected massive amounts of aluminum foil and put coins in money boxes in the shape of an African boy to support the building of Catholic schools, hospitals, and orphanages (Foutry and Neckers 133). This naive belief in the integrity of Flemish missionary work did not necessarily wane after Congo's independence in 1960. Despite the steady secularization of Flemish society since the 1960s, many persist in viewing Flemish involvement in Belgian colonialism as charity only (Ceuppens 36–39). Whereas the Dutch today tend to perceive their colonial history as sinful and shameful, the Flemish widely believe that the Congolese ultimately benefited from their presence and that most faults of colonial rule resulted from Belgium's French-speaking bourgeoisie and royal family. One can thus assume that Flemish readers easily sympathized with Toundi, who opposes the arrogant French commandant and his decadent wife.

Because of the specificities of the colonial and social histories of Belgium and the Netherlands, the same Dutch translation inevitably evoked different associations among Flemish and Dutch readers. While it is likely that Dutch readers found a confirmation of their worldview in the scenes of torture in the novel's final chapters, many Flemish readers might have focused on Toundi's cunning resistance against an enemy they shared with him. These complex and entangled scenes reflect the unexpected trajectories that world literary studies take when we examine a text that has been translated from its own tradition into another.

Notes

1. This is a Chinese name: Thé is the artist's family name, Tjong is his generation name, and Khing is his given name (Akveld and Terhell 11).

2. In their biographical study of the artist, Akveld and Terhell highlighted Thé's background in film and the importance of movement in his drawings, comparing them to film stills (13). In an e-mail message to the author, Thé confirmed the importance of movement in his cover drawing for *De huisjongen*.

3. This prominent role of Dutch Catholics can be traced back to the decision by French and German missionary congregations to move their headquarters to the (neutral) Netherlands in the context of the First World War. Attempts by these congregations to recruit Dutch candidates for missionary work were strongly supported by the Dutch Cardinal Willem van Rossum, who between 1918 and 1932 served as head of the Propaganda Fide, the Vatican department of missionary activities (Goddijn, Jacobs, and Van Tillo 95–96).

4. The English term *boy* was used in the Belgian colony because the administration had been in the hands of British colonialists appointed by Henry M. Stanley before King Leopold's organization of the Congo Free State took off. Once the administration was taken over by Belgians, French replaced English in the colony, but certain terms, such as *steamer*, *boy*, and *pool*, continued to be used (Reybrouck 77).

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