

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***The Old Man and the Medal / Le Vieux nègre et la Médaille* (1956)**

Ferdinand Oyono (1929-2010)

Sources:(Paris: Editions Juliard, 1956) / (trans. John Reed, Waveland Press, Inc., 1967)

OVERVIEW

Author Ferdinand Léopold Oyono, born on 14 September 1929 in Ngoulemakong in southern Cameroon and deceased on 10 June 2010 in Yaoundé, occupies a singular place in African intellectual history. His trajectory moves from the classrooms of the Lycée Général Leclerc in Yaoundé to the lecture halls of the Sorbonne, and later to the *École nationale d'administration* in Paris, where he trained for diplomatic service. This path produced a figure who combined literary insight with political pragmatism. Oyono's later career as diplomat and minister, including his tenure as Cameroon's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Culture, reveals a man who chose to inhabit the very institutions he once dissected in fiction. His life suggests a tension between critique and participation, between the imaginative freedom of the novelist and the constraints of statecraft. This duality is part of what makes him an unusual and compelling figure in the landscape of postcolonial Africa.

Book *The Old Man and the Medal*, published in 1956, is a novel that stages disillusionment with remarkable clarity. Rather than constructing a heroic narrative of resistance, Oyono focuses on the quiet unraveling of a man who has believed too deeply in the promises of colonial benevolence. Méka's journey is not framed as a political awakening in the conventional sense. It is instead a slow erosion of trust, a collapse of meaning that exposes the fragility of the symbolic gestures through which colonial authority sought to legitimize itself. The novel's power lies in its ability to show how humiliation operates not only through violence but through ceremony, through the distribution of honors that mask exclusion. In Cameroon, readers recognized the novel as a mirror held up to the colonial present, a text that captured the emotional cost of loyalty to a system that refused reciprocity. Abroad, critics praised its irony, its restraint, and its capacity to reveal the psychological architecture of domination. The book circulated widely in discussions of African anticolonial literature, not because it offered slogans, but because it illuminated the intimate spaces where colonialism shaped identity and expectation.

Background The novel emerges in a decade marked by agitation, uncertainty, and the first cracks in the edifice of French colonial rule. In the mid-1950s, Cameroon was experiencing political turbulence, including the rise of nationalist movements and growing dissatisfaction with missionary influence. Oyono writes at a moment when colonial authority still appeared solid, yet its moral foundations were increasingly questioned. The world of the novel reflects this transitional atmosphere. The ceremonies, the speeches, the paternal gestures of the colonial administration all appear intact, yet they ring hollow. The book provoked discussions about the nature of colonial friendship, the manipulation of African elites, and the emotional violence embedded in everyday interactions between colonizer and colonized. Its publication contributed to a broader conversation about the need for new forms of political consciousness, not only in Cameroon but across French Africa. Oyono's narrative does not simply describe a historical moment. It captures the texture of a society on the verge of transformation, where faith in colonial promises is giving way to a more sober understanding of power.

MAIN CHARACTERS

MÉKA An African who is receiving a medal for his service and devotion to the Catholic church and the colonial administration

KELARA MÉKA'S wife, who is convinced that God is on the side of the whites

FATHER VANDERMAYER A Catholic priest who does not practice what he preaches

GULLET A violent white police commissioner

SYNOPSIS

Méka is an aging villager who has spent his entire life trusting the Church and the colonial administration, convinced that loyalty to these institutions will bring dignity and recognition. His faith is so complete that he gives his ancestral land to the Catholic mission and sends his two sons to fight for France during the Second World War, believing that such sacrifices will elevate his family in the eyes of the whites. When the administration announces that he will receive a medal for his devotion, Méka interprets this gesture as proof that he has finally crossed the invisible boundary separating Africans from Europeans. The news fills him with pride, and the entire village celebrates, imagining that the honor bestowed on Méka will reflect on them all.

As preparations for the ceremony unfold, Méka becomes increasingly absorbed in the symbolic weight of the medal. He rehearses how he will greet the white chief, obsesses over his clothing, and imagines a new social status that will erase the humiliations of the past. But the day of the ceremony reveals the hollowness of these expectations. Méka stands alone under the blazing sun, isolated in a chalk circle, watched by whites who whisper and point and by black villagers who wait behind him. When the white chief finally arrives, he warmly embraces Mr. Pipiniakis, the Greek merchant, but offers Méka only a disdainful handshake and a lesser medal than the one given to Pipiniakis.

The humiliation deepens after the ceremony. Drunk and disoriented, Méka attempts to give substance to the chief's words of friendship by inviting him to share a goat at his home. The chief politely refuses, and the whites withdraw to celebrate among themselves. Later, Méka is forgotten in the African Community Center, trapped during a violent storm. He loses his medal in the chaos and is beaten by black policemen and the white commissioner, who assume that Méka is a prowler. Dragged through the floodwaters and thrown into a cell, Méka confronts the brutal reality of the system he once revered. When the Commissioner finally recognizes him, Méka is given a belated apology, in the form of a cigarette forced through his lips. Méka returns to his village shattered, rejecting the Church, rejecting the administration, and acknowledging that he has grown old believing in promises that were never meant for him. His disillusionment is complete, marking the collapse of a lifetime of faith.

PLOT NARRATIVE

A restless night: Méka has spent a sleepless night, waiting anxiously for the first rays of sunlight so he can head to the white quarter and answer the summons of the white Commandant. He could not understand how his wife, Kelara, managed to sleep in such circumstances. He wakes her with scolding, steps out to relieve himself in the bush behind their hut, eats the breakfast she has prepared, puts on his finest clothes and his helmet, and set off, still uneasy.

Gathering strength at Mammy Titi's: At the edge of the white quarter, Méka stops at Mammy Titi's place to gather a bit of courage in a bowl of arki, that illicit alcohol banned by the colonial administration and condemned as a sin by the Church. Shame pricks him as he drinks, he who has given his lands to the Church and is held up by its leaders as an example, even though his fellow villagers call him a fool for surrendering, without a fight, the ancestral land; an act that now leaves him living in a dilapidated hut in the black quarter.

A medal for Méka's service and loyalty: After a few bowls of Mammy Titi's fortifying brew, Méka resumes his walk toward the Commandant's residence, singing and dancing along the way, while in Doum, Kelara and the entire village pray for him, though Kelara herself is convinced that "God [is] ... on the other side ... with these whites" (14). Finally, a car driven by a white man, roars into the village. Méka steps out proudly and announces to everyone that the Commandant has summoned him to inform him that, in recognition of his service and devotion, he will receive a medal from the chief of the whites on July 14, during the commemoration of French Independence Day. The whole village erupts in celebration at the news.

A messenger at Engamba's: Engamba, Meka's brother-in-law, has just finished a meal of grilled viper when a messenger arrives in his village, breathless and visibly excited. His sudden appearance, half running and half stumbling, immediately stirs the entire village. People follow him all the way to Engamba's hut, eager to hear what news could have sent him rushing like this. He announces that the town of Doum is in great excitement and is preparing for an important event. The chief of all the whites is coming personally from Paris to pin a medal on Méka's chest in recognition of his loyal service to the Church and to France.

Engamba feels Méka's glory: The villagers feel proud of Méka, whose reputation has crossed borders and reached the ears of the white chief himself, who now wishes to seal his friendship with him. Engamba, Kelara's brother, feels Méka's glory as his own. Engamba declares that anyone connected to Méka through family ties or friendship will also be able to claim the privileges granted to him. The villagers promise to contribute to the celebration that will surely take place. Some pledge a hen, others cassava, others palm wine. Engamba and his wife Amelia then set off for Doum. She carries a basket of provisions, and he pulls along his old goat.

The city prepares for the ceremony: The messenger did not exaggerate. Doum is truly in a state of excitement. Engamba cannot remember a time since the Second World War when so many soldiers filled the streets. Commander Fouconi personally oversees every detail of the preparations for the fourteenth of July. He makes sure that the champagne, wine, sparkling wine and whisky have all arrived. A heavy drinker himself, he instructs his cook to set aside a private crate of whisky for him in the kitchen, and he also ensures that his black mistress is safely hidden in the back room, out of sight of the white guests who will soon be visiting.

A "zazou jacket" for Méka: Méka goes to have his ceremonial jacket sewn by Ela, the neighborhood tailor, who promises to make him a "zazou jacket", something finer than what the Europeans wear, that, according to Ela, leaves their backsides exposed. As Méka watches the tailor at work on the Zazou jacket, he feels a vague unease, a suspicion that he will not like the final result. When evening falls, Ela sends Méka away with a needle, thread and buttons, telling him to have Kelara attach them, since his own wife is ill and, in his view, sewing on buttons is women's work.

Engamba and Amalia set off to Doum: Engamba and his wife Amalia travel on foot through the forest toward the town of Doum. Amalia walks with quick, steady steps despite the heavy basket strapped to her back, held in place by a band across her forehead and two straps around her shoulders. Engamba, struggling with his capricious goat, lags behind and complains about his rheumatism, asking Amalia to shorten her stride.

How Amalia chose Engamba: As she walks, Amalia remembers how her mother used to lament that she would never find a husband, so frail and so lazy was she. Then one day, Amalia rose to the challenge and carried the largest basket in the village. From that moment, every suitor rushed to her mother's door. She chose Engamba because he already had many wives, and she thought the household tasks would not be too overwhelming.

A stop at Binama's: Engamba and Amalia make a brief stop in a neighboring village to visit their friends Binama and his wife Agatha, where they are offered food, drink, and the latest news. Before they resume their journey, Binama insists that Engamba remind Méka to remind his friend, the chief of the whites, that the road promised through the villages is still waiting to be built. Engamba promises to deliver the message.

Kelara's resourcefulness: Engamba, his wife Amalia, and many visitors from neighboring villages who have invited themselves to the medal ceremony arrive at Méka's home. Méka wonders how he will feed everyone and where they will all sleep. Fortunately, Kelara's resourcefulness saves the day. Recycled leftovers fill every stomach, and banana leaves spread across the floor, from the hut to the veranda, provide bedding for the guests.

Méka will not wear his "zazou jacket": After the evening meal, Kelara insists that Méka try on his new jacket. She finds it ridiculous and refuses to sew on the buttons, promising to speak to the incompetent tailor. She tells Méka that he will wear his old khaki jacket with new leather shoes she bought him for the ceremony rather than the ugly thing the tailor made.

How should I greet my new friend? Méka struggles to fall asleep. He lies awake imagining what the medal to be pinned to his chest might look like and wondering how he should greet the chief of the white men, who is now considered his friend. Should he throw himself into his arms? Should he bring him a gift? He thinks of Engamba's present, the goat, Engamba being the only one among all the visitors who thought to bring him something. As for that goat, he promises himself he will not share it with all the visitors. Only he, Kelara, Engamba, and Amalia will eat it.

Méka is uncomfortable: On July 14, the day of the ceremony, Méka stands bare-headed under the blazing sun, at the center of a circle drawn in chalk. Sweat streams down his face, and his new shoes burn his feet. A stiffness creep into his neck, and his heart pound so violently he fears it might give out. The chief of all the whites is late, and Méka, with the noisy crowd of black villagers behind him and the whites whispering under a tent in front of him, pointing at him, feels painfully out of place, *"between two worlds ... he was not with his own people and he was not with the others. He wondered what he was doing out there ... between two worlds that [God] had made utterly different from each other"* (85, 89). Should he flee? Should he abandon this whole medal business and return to Kelara, who is waiting somewhere in the crowd? He tells himself that his ancestors are watching from wherever they are, and that he must remain stoic, like a properly circumcised man. He will wait, as long as necessary.

A hug for Pipiniakis and a chilly handshake for Méka: At last, the great white chief arrives. After endless greetings and ceremonial flourishes, he approaches the chalk circle. At that moment, Mr. Pipiniakis, the Greek merchant, is brought forward, and Méka realizes that he too will be decorated. Mr. Pipiniakis receives a medal and warm accolades from the white chief. Méka receives a different medal and nothing more than a distant, chilly handshake.

Kelara is overwhelmed by grief: During the soldiers' parade, Méka watches the rifles glistening in the sun and thinks that his father was very foolish to believe he could resist the invasion of the whites. As Kelara's eyes fill with joy, someone in the crowd shouts that Méka deserves more than a mere medal for giving his two sons to France. Kelara's joy collapses into an indescribable pain, and she feels a surge of contempt toward her grinning husband standing there in the heat.

Kelara is disappointed in Méka: Kelara returns to the village in tears. She curses the fate that has given her such a foolish husband, a man who has sold their sons for a simple medal. "Is any wife or mother more wretched than I am? I thought I had married a man, a real man. My children, my poor children, sold like the Lord who was betrayed by Judas. The man who lay with me so that I should bear you did not get a good price for the drops of his seed" (100). While Amalia tries to console her, Engamba, who had been unable to attend the ceremony because of the pain in his legs, scolds his sister for wanting to spoil such an august day.

Méka is drunk: Méka is drunk on champagne, red wine and whisky. He imagines his wife driving a car filled with shoes pierced with tiny holes to let his painful little toes breathe. He imagines himself inviting the Commissioner to share the goat Engamba has given him and to plunge his hand into the same dishes as everyone else, while the priest, transformed in his mind into a begging black dog, waits at the door for a few scraps.

Méka dares the chief of the whites to share his goat: Méka steps out of his dreams and tries to turn them into reality. After the long speech in which the chief of the whites declares himself their friend and brother, Méka walks up to the platform and asks him to give substance to those words of friendship, so often repeated and never fulfilled, by coming to his home to share his goat. The chief of the whites thanks him and says he is sorry that he cannot accept the invitation because he lacks the time. The whites withdraw to the European Club, which belongs to Mr. Pipiniakis, who organizes a celebration for them.

The villagers congratulate Méka for his boldness: The black villagers congratulate Méka for his courage in speaking the truth. Once the whites have left, the villagers take turns at the podium to reaffirm Méka's words and denounce the duplicity of the whites. A detachment of soldiers arrives and forces the villagers to evacuate the Community Center. Méka, who has fallen asleep and is snoring heavily, is forgotten in the confusion and left locked inside the building.

Méka loses his medal in a storm: Méka is awakened by a violent storm. The tin roof of the African Community Center has collapsed on top of him. He staggers in the dark and manages to find his way out into the flooded street. He pats himself. The medal is no longer on his chest. It must have fallen, or someone must have stolen it. He prefers the second possibility, because the first would mean he has lost it forever in the storm and the rising water.

Méka is beaten by the police: A patrol of black policemen comes upon Méka and asks for his papers. Méka has none. They accuse him of being a prowler taking advantage of the dark to loot the white quarter. Méka tries to tell them that he is a friend of the Governor, the one who gave him a medal. The policemen beat him, spit on him and drag him through the water. Méka wonders how he has ended up like this, he, the son of a dignified Méka. He is thrown into a cell at the police station.

The Commissioner recognizes Méka: The next morning, he is brought before the white Commissioner, who strikes him repeatedly until, through his interpreter, he realizes who Méka is. Embarrassed, the Commissioner tries to make amends by offering him a cigarette. Méka refuses. The Commissioner plants it between his lips anyway, lights it and extends his hand. Méka refuses to shake it, claiming that his own hand is covered in mud and that he does not want to soil the Commissioner's.

Méka sets out for the village: Méka sets out for the village. On the way, every small event takes on meaning. He stubs his toe on a root, and a passerby tells him that this means a good meal is waiting for him at home. A panther-rat runs along the trail, and Méka tells it that he knows where it is going so that the animal will not lose its way. He stops to urinate on a type of grass known for restoring virility to any man who wets it with his urine. A bird drops its waste on him, and Méka takes it as a sign of good luck.

"The whites ... just the whites": Memories of his youth return to Méka, memories of a time of freedom and carelessness, a time before the arrival of the Church, and they give him a strange pleasure. To everyone he meets on the road and who asks what has happened, Méka simply answers, "The whites, just the whites." Méka finally reaches the village without ever crossing paths with Engamba, who has been sent out to look for him. His hut fills quickly with friends who come to console him.

Méka loses faith in the Church: some villagers thank the Lord for bringing Méka back alive: Méka forbids anyone from speaking of the Lord in his house and throws out the catechist who insists on saying a prayer. The women lose themselves in lamentations and tears. The villagers conclude that nothing about what has happened to Méka is surprising, that ever since the whites arrived, nothing truly belongs to them anymore. For them, this is because whites are a different kind of being, a different species. "*The chimpanzee is no brother to the gorilla*" (153). Essomba performs the dance of the chameleon and pours palm wine to soothe the humiliation and restore Méka's dignity.

Engamba's act of temerity: Engamba, who has gone out looking for Méka, reaches the Commandant's residence and even steps onto the veranda. He suddenly realizes that he has acted recklessly and that such an intrusion could cost him many years in prison. He retraces his steps and finds the men of the village gathered around a demijohn of palm wine in Méka's hut.

Méka acknowledges that he has grown old: Engamba grows angry and accuses them of taking advantage of Méka's moment of weakness to eat and drink at his expense instead of offering him support. Some of the men take his remarks badly, and the tension almost turns into open quarrel. Seeing the situation escalate, Engamba pretends he was only joking. The mood softens, the wine is shared, and the conversations return to the duplicity and cruelty of the whites. Engamba asks Méka what he will tell the people of his village when they ask him for news of the ceremony. Exhausted, Méka answers that he may tell them whatever he wishes. As for him, he is nothing more than an old man now.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

MÉKA (*naive, proud, disillusioned*):

Méka is an African old man. He begins as a naive man who trusts the Church and the colonial administration. He gives his ancestral land to the missionaries and sends his two sons to fight and die for France, convinced that loyalty will bring honor. When he learns that he will receive a medal for his loyalty, his proud nature awakens. He imagines that this reward lifts him to the social level of the whites and that he now belongs to their world. On the day of the medal ceremony, he discovers that nothing has changed. The racial divide remains firm, and the medal is only a gesture meant to keep him obedient. His attempt to return home through the white quarter after a storm completes his fall. He loses the medal, is mistreated by the colonial police, and realizes that the institutions he trusted never saw him as an equal. His disillusionment becomes absolute. He turns away from the Church and from all whites.

Naïve Méka's naivety is the foundation of his tragedy. He is an old man shaped by a lifetime of trust in institutions that never saw him as an equal. His decision to give his ancestral land to the missionaries reveals his profound belief in the Church's good will. He sends his two sons to fight and die for France with the conviction that loyalty will be rewarded, that sacrifice will elevate his family in the eyes of the colonial administration. This trust blinds him to the racism that governs every interaction between whites and blacks in Doum.

Proud Pride awakens in Méka the moment he learns he will receive a medal from "the chief of all the whites." The news transforms him. He imagines that this symbolic gesture lifts him to the social level of Europeans, granting him a place in their world. His walk through the village becomes a performance of dignity: singing, dancing, announcing the Commandant's summons. He obsesses over his appearance, commissioning a "zazou jacket," polishing his shoes, rehearsing how he will greet his new "friend." Pride also shapes his expectations of reciprocity. He believes the medal will erase racial boundaries, that the white chief will embrace him warmly, perhaps even visit his home to share Engamba's goat.

Disillusioned Disillusionment arrives brutally for Méka, shattering Méka's worldview. The medal ceremony exposes the hollowness of colonial friendship: Mr. Pipiniakis receives warm accolades, while Méka receives a cold handshake and a lesser medal. The storm that follows completes his fall. Losing the medal feels like losing the very meaning of his sacrifices. The police beating strips him of dignity, showing that loyalty offers no protection. Even the Commissioner's delayed recognition, delivered through violence and a forced cigarette, confirms the hypocrisy of the system he once trusted.

KELARA (*perceptive, strong, outspoken*):

Kelara is Méka's wife. She is a perceptive woman who understands the world around her. She feels pride in the prospect of her husband receiving a medal, but she sees the limits of colonial promises long before Méka does and never believes that the medal will change their place in society. Her strength carries the household, especially after the loss of her sons, and she relies on practical intelligence rather than illusions. When Méka comes home with a jacket built by a deceptive tailor, she tells him that the jacket is ugly, and that he will not be wearing it to the ceremony. When a young man exclaims that Méka deserves more than a medal, she sees through the colonial deception and refuses to celebrate the medal, and refuses to pretend that the colonial administration values their family. After Méka's humiliating return and the loss of the medal, Kelara's lucidity becomes central. She does not gloat or scold him. She simply confirms what she always

knew. She accepts that the institutions around them will never honor their sacrifices and becomes the moral anchor of the household, grounded in truth rather than hope.

Perceptive Kelara's understands the world around her with a lucidity Méka lacks, and she sees the limits of colonial promises long before the medal ceremony exposes them. While she initially feels pride at the prospect of her husband being honored, she never believes that such a gesture will alter their social position or erase the racial hierarchy that structures their lives. As she puts it, God is always on the side of the whites. Her reaction to the tailor's "zazou jacket" shows this perceptiveness, as she immediately recognizes the deception and refuses to let Méka wear something that would expose him to ridicule. When a young man exclaims that Méka deserves more than a medal, Kelara sees through the colonial manipulation embedded in such praise.

Strong Kelara's strength carries the household through loss, humiliation, and uncertainty. She manages the influx of visitors before the ceremony, organizes food and sleeping arrangements, and maintains order in a moment when Méka is overwhelmed by excitement and anxiety. She protects her husband from appearing foolish, even when he cannot see the danger himself, by refusing to sew the buttons on his ugly jacket. After the ceremony, when Méka returns humiliated and drunk, Kelara does not collapse. She absorbs the shock, processes the pain, and continues to guide the household. Her strength is the everyday resilience of a woman who has learned to navigate a world where promises rarely match reality.

Outspoken Kelara speaks plainly, without fear of offending, because she refuses to participate in illusions. When Méka brings home the tailor's jacket, she tells him directly that it is ugly and that he will not wear it to the ceremony. During the ceremony, when someone shouts that Méka deserves more than a medal, Kelara's reaction is immediate and visceral. She sees the statement as a cruel reminder of the sons she has lost, and her grief erupts into a powerful denunciation of the colonial system that has taken so much from her family.

FATHER VANDERMAYER (*hypocritical, paternalistic, short tempered*)

Father Vandermayer, the catholic priest, presents himself as a man of faith who teaches tolerance and charity. His public sermons emphasize patience, forgiveness and brotherhood. In private, he behaves in ways that contradict his own teachings. His hypocritical nature appears in the way he scolds, belittles and sometimes strikes the African parishioners he claims to guide. His paternalistic attitude reinforces this contradiction. He views the villagers as children who must be controlled and shaped. He identifies more with the colonial administration than with the people he serves. He praises the whites, imitates their mannerisms, and treats their authority as sacred. During the medal ceremony, when Méka approaches him with a simple question, Vandermayer reacts with irritation and dismisses him. Méka sees in that moment that the priest he trusted has no respect for him. Vandermayer's rebuff becomes the final blow that destroys Méka's faith in the Church and in the colonial order. The priest remains convinced of his own righteousness, yet his actions reveal a leader who has lost the moral authority he claims to embody.

Hypocritical Father Vandermayer embodies the deep hypocrisy that structures the colonial Church. Publicly, he presents himself as a man of faith who preaches tolerance, charity, patience and brotherhood. His sermons construct an image of moral authority and spiritual guidance. Yet in private, his behavior contradicts every principle he claims to uphold. He scolds, belittles and sometimes strikes the African parishioners he is supposed to shepherd. His hypocrisy is rooted in a worldview that sees Africans as inferior and unworthy of genuine compassion. Vandermayer's hypocrisy becomes the final blow that destroys Méka's faith in the Church.

Paternalistic Vandermayer views the villagers as children who must be controlled, corrected and shaped according to the values of the colonial administration. His authority is grounded in hierarchy. He imitates the mannerisms of the whites, praises their superiority, and treats their authority as sacred. Vandermayer's alignment with the colonial administration is so complete that he no longer sees the villagers as individuals with grief, dignity or history

Short-tempered Vandermayer's short temper exposes the weakness of his moral authority. Beneath the polished sermons and paternal gestures lies a man who reacts with irritation, impatience and violence whenever his authority is questioned. His temper surfaces in private interactions, where he scolds and strikes parishioners who fail to meet his expectations. Vandermayer's temper is a symptom of a system that grants him unchecked authority and encourages emotional domination.

GULLET-THE POLICE COMMISSIONER (*authoritative, detached, punitive*)

The Commissioner enters the story as an authoritative figure whose presence defines colonial power. He carries himself with confidence and expects immediate obedience from everyone around him. His authority is not earned through respect. It is imposed through uniform, rank and the fear he inspires. His detached nature reinforces this authority. He does not see the African population as individuals with histories or grief. He sees them as subjects who must be managed. His punitive instinct becomes clear during the storm. When Méka is dragged before him after losing the medal, the Commissioner reacts with irritation rather than concern. He strikes Méka and dismisses him without hesitation. His violence is casual, administrative. It reveals how deeply he identifies with the colonial system and how little he cares for the people under it. He remains the same authoritative, detached and punitive figure from beginning to end. Yet his actions have consequences. His treatment of Méka becomes the final blow that destroys the old man's faith in the colonial administration.

Authoritative Gullet is the embodiment of colonial authority, a figure whose presence alone defines the hierarchy of Doum. His authority is not earned through respect. It is imposed through uniform, rank and the fear he inspires. He carries himself with confidence, expecting immediate obedience from everyone around him, and the villagers understand instinctively that his word is law. Gullet's interactions with the Africans are marked by command rather than dialogue, and his presence signals that the colonial system operates through intimidation rather than partnership.

Detached Gullet is a detached man. He does not see villagers as individuals with histories, grief or dignity; he sees them as subjects to be managed. This emotional distance reinforces his authority, allowing him to administer decisions without empathy or hesitation. His detachment is visible even in moments that should call for compassion. He is the quintessential colonial officer, trained to prioritize order over humanity and procedure over justice.

Punitive Gullet's punitive instinct emerges with brutality during Méka's humiliation. His violence is casual, administrative, and delivered without hesitation. When Méka appears before him, soaked, injured and terrified, Gullet does not pause to assess the situation. He strikes him immediately, reinforcing the idea that punishment is the default response to African presence in the white quarter. His blows precede recognition, revealing how deeply he identifies with a system that equates authority with physical domination. Even after realizing who Méka is, Gullet does not apologize in any meaningful way; instead, he forces a cigarette between Méka's lips, a gesture that pretends to restore dignity while reaffirming control.

THEMES

Racism Racism emerges as a structure that governs movement, emotion, expectation and the very meaning of belonging. The narrative unfolds in a world where the white quarter and the black quarter are arranged as unequal territories, and this spatial division becomes a constant reminder of who holds authority and who must approach that authority with fear. Méka's anticipation of the Commandant's summons shows how deeply racial hierarchy has shaped his imagination. He prepares himself with care, drinks arki at Mammy Titi's to gather courage, and walks toward the white quarter with a mixture of pride and anxiety. His desire for recognition reveals how colonial power teaches the colonized to seek approval from those who deny them dignity. The medal ceremony exposes the precarity of this hope. Méka stands under the sun, isolated in a chalk circle, watched by whites who whisper and point and by black villagers who wait behind him. His discomfort reveals the emotional violence of a system that places him between

two groups that both see him as an object: "He was not with his own people, and he was not with the others" (85). The white chief's disdain towards Méka and the warm celebration offered to Mr. Pipiniakis show how racial hierarchy determines the value of loyalty and sacrifice. Kelara's grief after the ceremony expresses the human cost of this hierarchy. She sees her husband's pride as a betrayal, because the medal symbolizes a transaction in which their sons' lives have been exchanged for a gesture that carries no real meaning.

Racism also appears through institutional violence. When the storm destroys the African Community Center and Méka loses his medal, the black policemen who find him do not see a man in distress but a potential criminal whose presence near the white quarter must be punished. Their beating, spitting and dragging of his body through the floodwaters expose how colonial policing transforms black subjects into suspects by default. The Commissioner's reaction the next morning reinforces this dynamic. His blows precede recognition, and his apology takes the form of a cigarette forced between Méka's lips, a gesture that pretends to restore dignity while reaffirming domination.

Racism also shapes the villagers' understanding of their own condition. They conclude that nothing truly belongs to them anymore because the arrival of the whites has altered the structure of ownership and authority. Their comparison of whites to a different species expresses the depth of alienation produced by colonial rule. Even acts of consolation, such as Essomba's dance of the chameleon and the sharing of palm wine, are attempts to repair a dignity repeatedly fractured by racial hierarchy. Through these scenes, the narrative portrays racism as a pervasive system that organizes identity, shapes relationships and determines how individuals interpret their own suffering. It is a force that leaves Méka suspended between hope and humiliation, between the desire for recognition and the reality of exclusion.

Memory and superstition Memory and superstition function throughout the narrative as forms of refuge that allow characters to endure moments of intense stress, humiliation and uncertainty. Méka's journey home after the storm shows how deeply these practices shape his ability to interpret the world and protect himself from despair. As he walks through the forest, every small occurrence becomes a sign that reassures him and restores a sense of order. When he stubs his toe on a root, the passerby's interpretation that a good meal awaits him at home transforms pain into promise. When the panther-rat crosses his path, Méka speaks to it as if it were a companion whose direction he understands, a gesture that gives him a sense of mastery at a moment when he feels stripped of dignity. His decision to urinate on the virility grass shows how superstition offers a way to reclaim strength after the violence he has endured. Even the bird that soils him becomes a source of comfort, because he interprets the incident as a sign of good luck. These moments reveal how superstition creates a protective narrative that shields him from the chaos of the storm, the brutality of the policemen and the humiliation of losing his medal. Memory also plays a central role in this process. As Méka walks, he recalls his youth, a time of freedom and carelessness before the arrival of the Church. These memories give him pleasure because they reconnect him to a self that existed outside the reach of colonial authority. They allow him to imagine a continuity between past and present, even though the present has been marked by violence and betrayal.

The villagers also rely on memory and superstition to make sense of Méka's suffering. Their lamentations, their belief that the whites have altered the very structure of ownership and belonging, and their comparison of whites to a different species express a collective memory of dispossession that helps them interpret the present. Essomba's dance of the chameleon and the sharing of palm wine are rituals that draw on cultural memory to restore dignity and soothe humiliation. These gestures do not erase the violence Méka has endured, but they create a communal space where suffering can be transformed into solidarity. Superstition and memory therefore operate as emotional technologies that help characters navigate a world shaped by colonial power. They provide explanations when rational ones are unavailable, and they offer comfort when social structures fail to protect them. Through these scenes, the narrative shows how individuals and communities rely on inherited beliefs and remembered experiences to rebuild meaning after trauma: "All these superstitions had sprung up again in his mind like a great tide sweeping away the years of Christian teaching and practice" (142). Memory becomes a link to a time when life felt coherent, and superstition becomes a way to interpret events in a manner that preserves hope. Together, they form a refuge that allows Méka and his community to endure the instability and humiliation imposed by the colonial world.

Gender: Womanhood The novel presents womanhood as a space shaped by expectation, sacrifice and emotional labor, where women carry the burdens that men either ignore or fail to understand. Kelara embodies this tension from the opening pages. While Méka spends a sleepless night worrying about the Commandant's summons, Kelara sleeps soundly, a detail that reveals her long habituation to uncertainty and her ability to endure stress without outward panic. Her role requires steadiness, and she performs it without complaint. She prepares Méka's breakfast, helps him dress, and later manages the overwhelming influx of visitors who descend on their hut before the medal ceremony. Her resourcefulness saves the day, as she transforms leftovers into meals and banana leaves into bedding. These acts show how womanhood is defined by competence and resilience. Yet Kelara's strength does not protect her from the emotional cost of her husband's choices. When she is reminded that Méka has given their sons to France for a mere medal, her grief erupts with a force that exposes the depth of her suffering. She curses her fate, questions her marriage and expresses a sense of betrayal that comes from watching her husband celebrate a medal that symbolizes the loss of their children. Her lament uncovers how womanhood is tied to motherhood, and how the colonial system exploits this connection by turning maternal sacrifice into political currency.

Amalia offers another perspective on womanhood. Her memories of being considered frail and lazy, and her transformation into a woman capable of carrying the largest basket in the village, show how expectations of female strength are shaped by community judgment. Her marriage to Engamba, whom she chose because she believed the household tasks would be manageable, reveals how women must negotiate their roles within domestic structures that often undervalue their labor. The narrative also shows how women are expected to provide emotional support even when they themselves are suffering. Amalia consoles Kelara, and the women of the village gather to lament Méka's humiliation, turning collective grief into a ritual of solidarity. Their tears express a shared understanding of how colonial power disrupts family life and places disproportionate emotional weight on women. Even in moments of crisis, such as Méka's return after the storm, women are expected to respond with care, prayer and lamentation, while men debate politics and honor. Thus, the narrative portrays womanhood as a role defined by endurance, emotional intelligence and the capacity to hold together a community fractured by colonial violence. It is a role that demands strength without recognition, sacrifice without reward and lucidity in moments when men falter. The novel shows how women sustain the moral and emotional fabric of the village even as they bear the heaviest consequences of the colonial world.

Appearance: Duplicity and dissimulation Duplicity and dissimulation permeate the narrative, shaping interactions between individuals and revealing how people perform acts that conceal their true intentions. The colonial authorities embody this dynamic from the outset. The Commandant summons Méka with the language of honor and recognition, yet the ceremony he prepares is designed to reinforce hierarchy rather than friendship. The white chief's disdainful handshake and the warm celebration reserved for Mr. Pipiniakis expose the gap between the rhetoric of gratitude and the reality of racial exclusion. The whites speak of brotherhood and loyalty, but their actions reveal a desire to maintain distance and superiority. Even the Commissioner's apology after beating Méka is a performance of benevolence that masks the violence of his earlier behavior. His gesture of forcefully placing a cigarette between Méka's lips and extending his hand is meant to appear conciliatory, yet it reinforces domination by forcing Méka into a position of submission.

The black policemen also engage in dissimulation. They accuse Méka of prowling and looting, although their violence is driven less by suspicion than by the desire to assert authority in a system that rewards displays of loyalty to the colonial order. Their actions reveal a tension between their role as enforcers and their own precarious position within the racial hierarchy. The villagers, too, navigate duplicity in their interactions. They celebrate Méka's medal as a collective triumph, yet many of them privately view his devotion to the Church and the colonial administration as foolish: "You're the one who gave your land to the Good Lord? ... What a stupid sod" (6). The villagers' praise masks resentment and confusion, especially when they gather in his hut after his humiliation. Engamba's anger at the men drinking Méka's palm wine exposes how quickly solidarity can give way to opportunism. His sudden shift from indignation to joking shows how dissimulation becomes necessary to maintain harmony within the community.

Kelara's behavior also reflects this dissimulation. She supports Méka publicly, preparing his clothes and welcoming guests, yet her private grief reveals a profound sense of betrayal. Her tears after the ceremony express the emotional cost of a marriage in which she must perform loyalty while suffering silently. Even Méka engages in acts of self-deception. He interprets the medal as a sign of friendship and

imagines sharing his goat with the Commissioner, although his experiences repeatedly show that the whites do not view him as an equal. His drunken fantasies reveal a desire to believe in a world that contradicts the evidence before him. The villagers' comparison of whites to a different species expresses their recognition of this duplicity, as they understand that the gestures of friendship offered by the colonial administration conceal deeper structures of domination. Through these scenes, the narrative portrays duplicity as a pervasive force that shapes relationships, decisions and emotional life. It reveals how individuals perform roles that mask fear, resentment or ambition, and how colonial power encourages dissimulation as a strategy for survival.

Family: *Familial and racial solidarity* Familial and racial solidarity operate throughout the narrative as forces that shape how communities respond to stress, humiliation and uncertainty. whites perform their own form of racial solidarity to preserve hierarchy and protect privilege. Within the black community, solidarity emerges as an instinctive response to danger. When Méka receives the Commandant's summons, Kelara prepares him, the villagers pray for him, and Engamba feels Méka's honor as his own, insisting that any privilege granted to Méka extends to all who are connected to him. This sense of shared identity transforms personal recognition into collective pride. As the medal ceremony approaches, entire villages mobilize, promising hens, cassava and palm wine, turning the event into a communal celebration.

Their pledged contributions express solidarity through shared labor and shared hope. After the ceremony, when Kelara returns in tears, Amalia consoles her, and the women gather to lament, transforming individual grief into a collective ritual that reinforces bonds among mothers, sisters and neighbors. Racial solidarity among the black villagers also emerges through their interpretation of Méka's humiliation. They conclude that nothing truly belongs to them anymore because the arrival of the whites has altered the structure of ownership and authority. Their comparison of whites to a different species expresses a collective recognition of racial difference imposed by colonial rule. This shared understanding strengthens communal ties, as the villagers see Méka's suffering as part of a broader pattern that affects all of them. When Méka returns after the storm, his hut fills quickly with friends who come to console him, demonstrating how racial solidarity transforms individual trauma into communal responsibility.

Even moments of tension, such as Engamba's anger at the men drinking Méka's palm wine, reveal how solidarity must be negotiated and reaffirmed. His shift from indignation to joking shows how maintaining unity requires emotional flexibility and a willingness to preserve harmony. Yet the narrative also exposes how whites perform their own racial solidarity, one that reinforces exclusion rather than comfort. The white chief arrives surrounded by soldiers, administrators and guests who move as a unified group, whispering under the tent and observing Méka from a distance. Their celebration at the European Club after the ceremony, organized by Mr. Pipiniakis, shows a closed circle of racial belonging that excludes the very man they have just honored. Even the Commissioner's behavior shows how whites protect one another. His initial violence toward Méka is followed by a forced gesture of reconciliation once he realizes Méka's identity, a performance meant to preserve the appearance of fairness within the white community. Through these scenes, the narrative portrays solidarity as a double structure. For black villagers, it is a source of resilience, emotional shelter and communal strength. For whites, it is a mechanism of protection that maintains hierarchy and reinforces the boundaries of racial power.

Religion: *The religion-colonial power collusion* The narrative reveals a world in which religion and colonial administration operate as intertwined systems of authority, each reinforcing the other and shaping how individuals understand duty, loyalty and humiliation. Méka's devotion to the Church illustrates how religious institutions help secure obedience to colonial power. He has given his lands to the Church, a gesture that leaves him living in a dilapidated hut in the black quarter, yet he continues to see himself as a model of piety celebrated by religious leaders. This devotion is framed as virtue, but it functions as a mechanism through which colonial authority gains control over his life. Kelara's belief that God stands with the whites shows how deeply spiritual hierarchy has merged with political hierarchy, creating a moral universe in which divine favor appears aligned with colonial rule. The medal ceremony exposes this collusion. The event is presented as a recognition of Méka's service to France and the Church, yet the ritual serves to display colonial power rather than honor him. The white chief's distant greeting and the warm accolades given to Mr. Pipiniakis reveal how religious symbolism is used to mask racial hierarchy. Father Vandermyer's behavior during the ceremony further illustrates this alliance. When Méka approaches him

to ask where he should go next, the priest reacts with hostility, refusing even the smallest gesture of guidance. His reaction shows how religious figures participate in maintaining colonial distance, reinforcing the idea that black subjects must remain silent and compliant even during rituals supposedly meant to celebrate them.

The Church's influence appears again when villagers thank the Lord for bringing Méka back alive, a gesture that Méka rejects by forbidding any mention of the Lord in his house. His refusal reveals a growing awareness that religious language has been used to justify his suffering and sanctify the authority of those who humiliate him. The catechist's insistence on praying in Méka's hut demonstrates how religious figures act as extensions of colonial control, enforcing spiritual obedience even when the community is grieving. Kelara's lament, comparing the loss of her sons to the betrayal of Christ, shows how colonial administration uses religious narratives to transform political violence into moral duty. Through these scenes, the narrative portrays religion and colonial administration as mutually reinforcing systems. Religion provides the moral vocabulary that justifies obedience, while colonial administration provides the political structure that enforces it. Together, they shape how characters interpret loyalty, suffering and identity. The collusion between these institutions transforms spiritual devotion into a tool of governance, turning faith into a mechanism that stabilizes colonial rule and obscures the violence at its core. The text reveals how this alliance creates a world in which individuals are encouraged to interpret exploitation as virtue and humiliation as divine will, leaving them suspended between reverence and resentment.

Colonialism: *dispossession* Colonialism in this narrative operates as a system that produces both physical and psychological dispossession, stripping characters of land, autonomy, dignity and even the ability to interpret their own experiences without fear. Méka's life illustrates how physical dispossession becomes the foundation for deeper forms of emotional and mental displacement. He has given his ancestral lands to the Church, a decision encouraged by colonial and religious authority, and this act leaves him living in a dilapidated hut in the black quarter. The loss of land is not presented as a simple economic setback. It becomes a symbolic rupture that disconnects him from the heritage that once grounded his identity. The medal ceremony intensifies this dispossession. Méka stands in a chalk circle under the blazing sun, separated from both whites and blacks, and the physical discomfort he endures mirrors the psychological isolation imposed by colonial hierarchy. His new shoes burn his feet, his neck stiffens, and his heart pounds with fear. These bodily sensations reveal how colonial rituals transform the body into a site of suffering, forcing him to perform gratitude while enduring humiliation.

The white governor's distant aloofness and the warm praises granted to Mr. Pipiniakis expose how colonial authority dispossesses Méka of recognition even in the moment meant to honor him. Kelara's grief after the ceremony expresses the emotional cost of this system. She sees her husband's pride as a betrayal, because the medal symbolizes a transaction in which their sons' lives have been exchanged for a gesture that carries no real meaning. Her lament reveals how colonialism dispossesses families of their children, turning maternal sacrifice into political currency. The storm that destroys the Community Center deepens this theme. When Méka awakens under the collapsed tin roof, soaked and disoriented, he discovers that his medal is gone. The physical loss of the medal symbolizes the collapse of the illusion that colonial recognition can protect him. His encounter with the black policemen shows how colonialism dispossesses individuals of safety and belonging. They beat him, spit on him and drag him through the floodwaters, treating him as a criminal because he lacks papers. Their violence reveals how colonial policing transforms black subjects into suspects by default, dispossessing them of the right to move freely. The Commissioner's blows the next morning reinforce this dynamic. His apology, delivered through a forced cigarette, pretends to restore dignity while reaffirming domination. Psychological dispossession also appears in Méka's memories. As he walks home, he recalls a time before the arrival of the Church, a time of freedom and carelessness. These memories give him pleasure because they reconnect him to a self that colonialism has eroded. The villagers' conclusion that nothing belongs to them anymore expresses a collective recognition that colonial authority has reshaped ownership, identity and emotional life. Through these scenes, the narrative portrays colonialism as a force that dispossesses individuals physically and psychologically, leaving them suspended between longing for the past and struggling to endure the present.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. How does the narrative portray the psychological impact of colonial authority on individuals and communities?**

Students can examine moments when characters internalize colonial hierarchy, such as Méka's anticipation of the medal ceremony or Kelara's belief that God sides with the whites. They can discuss how fear, shame or desire for recognition shape characters' behavior. Students can explore how humiliation becomes a shared experience that affects the entire village.

- 2. In what ways does the text depict racial solidarity among both black villagers and the white colonial elite?**

Students can identify scenes where black villagers unite around Méka, offering food, lodging or emotional support. Students can analyze how communal lamentation functions as a form of racial solidarity. Students can contrast this with the whites' solidarity: their whispering under the tent, their retreat to the European Club, their unified response to Méka. Students can discuss how solidarity reinforces power for one group and resilience for the other.

- 3. How does the narrative illustrate the collusion between religion and colonial administration?**

Students can examine Méka's relationship with the Church and how religious authority shapes his decisions. They can analyze Kelara's belief that divine favor aligns with colonial power. Students can discuss Father Vandermayer's hostility at the ceremony and what it reveals about religious hierarchy.

- 4. What forms of physical and psychological dispossession appear in the text, and how do characters respond to them?**

Students can identify moments of physical dispossession, such as Méka losing his land or his medal. They can examine psychological dispossession: loss of dignity, loss of identity, loss of belonging. Students can discuss how characters use memory, superstition or communal rituals to cope with dispossession. Students can explore how colonial policing contributes to the erosion of personal safety and autonomy.