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The Metaphor of Assimilation in Rabéarivelo's Poetry

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Abstract: In his article "The Metaphor of Assimilation in Rabéarivelo's Poetry" Yasser Khamees Ragab Aman discusses the impact of the metaphor and the policy of assimilation in the poetry of Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo, who swings between a desired image of a superior France based on a mythically archetypal symbol of a patron and a reality which, as a matter of course, distorts the image of a good-natured colonizer. Aman traces the influence of French Symbolists such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Laforgue on Rabéarivelo's poems and discusses to what extent these influences help make an *assimilé* of the poet. In Aman's interpretation Rabéarivelo identifies with the French symbolists since his work shows many of their characteristics and shows how the poet tries to adapt this model to transfer his own heritage through French. In his personal life, the poet's conflict between a desire for assimilation and desperate attempts at self-expression culminates in his suicide. In Aman's view, Rabéarivelo is smothered by the metaphor of the benevolent patron which he believes in.

Yasser KHAMEES RAGAB AMAN

The Metaphor of Assimilation in Rabéarivelo's Poetry

In my study I investigate the impact of the metaphor of assimilation — the French *patron* — in Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo's texts. I argue that the poet swings between a desired image of a superior France based on a mythically archetypal symbol of the *patron*, a godfather, fostered by the colonizer himself, and a reality which distorts the image of the good-natured colonizer. I focus on the influence of French symbolists such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Laforgue on Rabéarivelo's poems and show to what extent these influences help make an *assimilé* of the poet. Rabéarivelo draws heavily on French literary figures in an attempt of assimilation which is primarily meant to introduce his culture and literary heritage in French. Torn between a desire for assimilation in the realm of literature and the reality of not being able to travel to France, Rabéarivelo took his own life. His literary fame — launching a literary journal, writing two plays, a book of criticism, and two historical texts — culminated in his acceptance into the Académie Malgache modeled after the Académie Française. He played the role of cultural mediator by translating literary works from Malagasy to French and vice versa. However, he was criticized as being one of the "authors [who] chose instead to evacuate their real authorial presence by appropriating the postures of translator, mere mediators between a supposed indigenous-language original and a European-language version" (Adejunmobi 72).

Rabéarivelo's generation suffered from the effects of French assimilation, a most patronizing aspect of colonization but that also found its expression in affective mythology. The policies of assimilation aim at making the *assimilé* forget his blackness and idolize the colonizer. Rabéarivelo was such an *assimilé* and he modeled his poetry on French symbolism but at the same time throughout his career and especially in his prose work, he did not show any approving remark of being labeled as black. In his novel *L'Interférence* (first published in 1988 but written in 1928) there are "several references not only to the physical but also to the social and moral 'blackness' of the slaves who are incapable of any noble sentiment except when they act in devotion to their masters" (Serrano 44) but his work shows no connection to the movement and he was seen as an "unapologetic royalist whose entire political faith reposed in the wisdom of the ancestors and in a system of inherited ascendency, which was entirely antithetical to the ideology of Negritude" (Serrano 45). However, his posthumous fame made him one of the most prominent African writers. Written in the 1920s, it took about sixty years for his two novels, *L'Interférence* (The Interference*)* and *L'Aube rouge* (The Red Dawn), to be published and read: "These two novels, which were well written, were not published at that time. Publishers, who were necessarily under colonial power, refused such daring subjects, even if the texts of Rabéarivelo were not in the least anti-colonialists? Or because they did not understand the writing of Rabéarivelo which seems clumsy because it deviates from the norms of standard French?" (my translation) ("Ces deux romans, bien qu'achevés, ne sont pas publiés à l' époque: refus des éditeurs, nècessairement soumis au pouvoir colonial, devant de sujets audacieux, même si les textes de Rabéarivelo ne sont nullement des brûlots anti-colonialistes? Ou bien incomprehension de l'ècriture de Rabéarivelo , qui semble maladroit parce qu'elle s'écarte des normes du français standard?" [Jarrety 649]).

Contrary to scholars of post-colonialistm who hold that the colonized is forced to write in the language of the colonizer, Rabéarivelo was seen by some — for example by Richard Serrano — as someone who, instead, "writes himself into the literary tradition of the center and then writes himself out of it" (49). Thus, Serrano sees Rabéarivelo as a representative of the true Malagasy scene, rather than the colonized writing back to the center. Despite what Serrano holds in this respect, by translating from the French and expressing Malagasy thoughts in French, Rabéarivelo helped cultural transmission survive (Jarrety 460). Like Baudelaire, Rabéarivelo was too much of an aesthetician to take up rebellion and be labeled as a militant poet. He lived in a self-imposed exile, in a mythical world of his own creation, over which visions of suffering and death, and exploitative colonizing civilization, hover. In his poems, the employment of literary thematics and adherence to symbolist texts show in many ways his understanding of Malagasy sentiments, especially so in matters of rhythm and form (on this, see, e.g., Moura). Thus we find in Rabéarivelo's work the metaphor of the colonizer — the French *patron* — reflecting the work of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Laforgue, and Mallarmé.

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Further, the metaphor of voyage, so controlling and so effective in his life, reflects his desperate attempts at assimilation:

> It should not surprise us that Rabéarivelo relies heavily on other poets when he evokes voyage, since he never went on one. Indeed, his inability to voyage made reliance on French poetry imperative; over the seventy years preceding the composition of *Chants pour Abéone* the French poetic tradition often concerns itself with the abortive, refused, feared or longed-for voyage, but seldom the voyage made. Rabéarivelo was familiar with Baudelaire's "Invitation au voyage," Rimbaud's "Bateau ivre" and, most of all, Mallarmé's "Brise marine," but he also knew how the poetics of voyage developed by these three worked itself out in the verse of lesser-known writers who followed them. As a result, the voyage never made in the *Chants pour Abéone* seems the logical culmination of a French tradition that shipwrecks on the shoals of Madagascar. (Serrano 52-53).

Rabéarivelo *Chant pour Abéone* (written in 1926 and published in 1936), can be seen as the most accomplished French model of symbolism. One of the recurring motifs is one of journey, be it spiritual as it surely was, away from his land. In fact, the poet retreats in an impenetrable shell allowing his soul to be immersed in such a reverie of the never made voyage and thus he suffers from alienation and exile, to get out of which he perhaps followed the French model of drug addiction. Also, the concept of the *poète maudit* was influential on Rabéarivelo's poetry since nearly all the poets he admired tackled the concept in a way or another. Mallarmé and Rimbaud were seen by Verlaine as damned poets whose genius was a malediction and *Chants pour Abéone* is haunted by the image of the damned poet who wishes to leave for another place away from his present predicament. Rabéarivelo opens *Chants pour Abéone* with a number of citations which illustrate his indebtedness to French texts and contextualizes the influence of symbolism on his work: "Anywhere out of the world. E.A. Poe (Far! Far! Here the mud is made of our tears)." ("Loin! Loin! Ici la boue est faite de nos pleurs! Baudelaire"); "Flee! To flee there! I feel that the birds are drunk. With being between the unknown foam and the heavens!") (Fuir! Là-bas fuir! Je sens que des oiseaux sont ivres. D'être parmi l'écume inconnue. Mallarmé" ("Vessels, we would have loved you in futility)." ("Vaisseaux, nous vous aurons aimés en pure perte. J. de La Ville de Mirmont)." (The wind fills you in vain, sailors of no voyage). Le vent vous gonfle en vain, voiliers de nul voyage. Marcel Ormoy" [qtd. in Serrano 53-55]). The first line of Poe actually appeared in his essay "The Poetic Principle," written in 1850, where Poe quoted "The Bridge of Sighs," a poem by Thomas Hood (1798-1845). However, the same line is a title of one of Baudelaire's poems, which shows the influence of Poe on Baudelaire and the latter's on Rabéarivelo. The second line is from Baudelaire's "Moesta et errabunda," a poem in his volume *Les Fleurs du mal*. Time and again the same desired voyage away from this defiled world is expressed vividly through pictorial images of an azure world, as clear as paradise. The third citation is from Mallarmé's "Brise marine" where the poet expresses his tedium of his current situation and wishes to set sail, to be free from the burdens he is suffering in body and soul. The fourth one, which is the first line from a poem by J. de La Ville de Miromont, through an apostrophe, expresses the speaker's wish to set sail on board of the ship he addresses. The last one illustrates the same point with regard to the long-desired voyage. With these quotations Rabéarivelo predetermines his poems and tries to appropriate the spirit of the voyage to the Malagasy setting: "Having constructed a narrative of sorts out of these citations, Rabéarivelo turns to his own poems about voyage. He works through the diction of voyage he has learned from these poets and then proposes other sorts of voyage, through life and after death. Abéone was the Roman goddess of departure, but Rabéarivelo insists on specifically Hova context for these poems. As a result, he must transform voyage from its specially marine context, since the ocean is far from Antananarivo" (Serrano 56).

The first section of *Chants pour Abéone* opens with an intertextual reference to Mallarmé's "J'ai lu tous les livres" where Rabéarivelo expresses his boredom of books and life of the flesh and, next, the influence of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" and "L'Invitation au voyage" is apparent; however, Rabéarivelo adapts it to his desperate mood. In his poem, Baudelaire analyses the nature of the voyagers, their wishes and fears, and the uneasiness they suffer as they toil to find rest in every adventure they go through and every place they visit. The desire for taking this adventure, the illumination he feels, is derived from the "sun," "sea," and "cities." To the contrary of this, Rabéarivelo's text shows the crippling inability to make such a voyage: "in vain the eternal call/ of voyage will embrace me: / will I

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resist the distress/ suffered long ago by Ovid / before the desert sea?" ("en vain l'appel éternal du voyage m'étreindra: / résiterai-je au chagrin / que souffrit jadis Ovide / devant la mer désertique?" [qtd. in Serrano 56-57]). Instead of Baudelaire's optimistic image where glory is symbolized in natural aspects, Rabéarivelo creates a pessimistic image, one of spiritual, as well as physical imprisonment suggested by the simile of Ovid who was to be kept in his exile. Rabéarivelo's reference to Ovid who was denied departure from the Greek port of Tomi in the Black Sea creates a double image of a politically, as well as the poetically exiled and depressed self.

"L'Invitation au voyage" differs in potentialities and initiation from Rabéarivelo's *Chants au Abéone*. The former calls for going into an adventure free from all cares depending on one's own potentialities while the prelude of Rabéarivelo's poem is encumbered by an image of a tradition-fettered man. Baudelaire's invitation to his family and his people stands in contrast to the implied invitation made by Rabéarivelo's to stay. Through correspondence and association of symbols, Baudelaire creates a scene of paradise, an ideal country where they can be rapturous and enjoy love. The association between the "suns," the "skies," and the "eyes" symbolizes the interaction between humanity and nature: both act as a lens, a mirror to each other. Rabéarivelo is tied unwillingly to his land and hindered by the colonial power so that he cannot make the longed-for voyage: "Stronger than the lianas enlacing the old tombs, / the Virgilian graces / of the land of my race / of the land of my dead / as much as of my loves, / will come to the edge of the sea, / will come to make themselves again loved, / and, in my forgetful soul, / will lay out a burning malaise!" ("Plus fortes que les liane / aux vieux tombeaux enlacées, / les graces virgiliennes / de la terre de ma race, / de la terre de mes morts / ainsi que mes amours, / viendront au bord de la mer, / viendront se refaire aimer, / et, dans mon âme oublieuse, / mettront quell ardent malaise!" [qtd. in Serrano 56-57). It is his "forgetful soul" which precludes him from feeling the charms of his native land, he feels imprisoned by and chained to the memories of the "lianas," "tombs," "the land of his race," and "the land of his dead" and love affairs." Voyage as a symbol to the afterlife where death is seen as savior shows itself in the concluding lines of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" and this is again reflected in Rabéarivelo's postlude of *Chant Pour Abéone*. The same symbols used to crystallize an image of glory are used to draw one of bleak setting and it is the key symbol which creates an association between the sky and the sea on the one hand, and the anchor on the other. Therefore, the call for lifting the anchor comes in correspondence to the broken heart which suffers this bleakness. Anxiety for making this voyage away from this world makes the speaker indifferent; it does not matter whether he sets sail to hell or heaven. What really matters is to make a change if even he leaves for the unknown.

As suggested previously with regard to the symbolist context of Rabéarivelo's work, his poems "Quel rat invisible?" and "La Peau de la vache noire" are modeled on the symbolist school of poetry. They suggest the meaning, rather than state it; therefore symbols are basic to crystallize different kinds of meanings. Sometimes the same symbol is used to serve different, and mostly antithetical, purposes. Darkness/blackness refers to the destructive forces of the colonizers and greedy politicians as suggested in "Quel rat invisible?" The image is of a demonic underworld from which evil forces — symbolized in the ironic portrayal of an "invisible rat" — creep furtively into the peaceful world of innocent and helpless black people. The aural image suggested by the verb "gnaws" in the poem highlights ferocious atrocities done by the colonizer. Whiteness suggested in "the milky cake of the moon" enhances the sense of innocence and refers to an antithetical relation between "milky" and "night" which underlines a fundamental difference between the colonized and the colonizer. The poem proceeds to stress complete defeat of the colonized by the colonizer — something which is made sure of through a visual image which echoes the bloody action: "Tomorrow morning, / when it has gone, / there will be bleeding marks of teeth" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 159) ("Demain matin, / Quand il se sera enfui, / Il y aura là des traces de dents sanglantes" [Rabéarivelo, *Poèmes* 57]). The visual image of blood and the aural one of the resounding act of gnawing suggested in "teeth," associated with the "invisible rat," relate the symbolic structure to the deep meaning it reflects; namely, the exploitation of helpless and absentminded people.

The poem provides another set of images which justifies the title being "Quel rat invisible?" The first image is of mesmerized people who fall under a spell so much so they are unable to realize what is going on: "Tomorrow morning / those who have drunk all night / and those who have abandoned their cards, / blinking at the moon / will stammer out: / Whose is that sixpence / that rolls over the

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green table?' / 'Ah!' one of them will say, / 'our friend has lost everything / and killed himself!'" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 159) ("Demain matin, / Ceux qui se seront enivrés toute la nuit / Et ceux qui sortiront du jeu, / En regardant la lune, / Balbutieront ainsi: À qui est cette pièce de quat'sous / Qui roule sur la table verte ? / 'Ah' ! ajoutera l'un d'eux, / L'ami avait tout perdu / Et s'est tué !" [*Poèmes* 57]). The act of drinking is going on indifferently and meanwhile, the "invisible rat" is gnawing at "the milky cake of the moon." Such synchronization endorses complete hypnotization of the African people who are deceived by the myth of a benevolent patron that supposedly aims at nothing but enlightening and civilizing people everywhere. "Quel rat invisible?" echoes Laforgue's Pierrotesque tone along with his irony which — as Pound praised him in his essay "Irony, Laforgue and Some Satire" — is a sign of modernization of poetic style. Rabéarivelo's irony shows both in the belittlement of evil forces into just an "invisible rat" and in the depiction of the colonized people as drunk, indifferent, and aimless. Verbs such as "snigger," "stagger," and "fall" shows the influence of Laforgue's text and the interlocutors in Rabéarivelo's poem are the equivalent symbol to Laforgue's Pierrot. For Laforgue, "Pierrot assumed first place, combining irony and the metaphysics of earlier poetry. He and the moon carry on a dialogue … Through the sensibility of these lunar inhabitants, called Pierrots, Laforgue was describing his own sensibility. Like them, he wanted to become legendary before the beginning of the false ages … the psychological characteristics of his Pierrots [are] nervousness, anxiety, an ephemeral existence" (Fowlie 88). However, Rabéarivelo's interlocutors are portrayed as indifferent and absent minded and this may be owing to his wish not to be labeled under the racial term "black" or he could have aimed at enticing his contemporaries to take action. For Rabéarivelo colonized people have something in common with the traditional French pantomime figure. Like Laforgue's Pierrot, they are drug-bound, a spell under which they escape from the burden of their world; and Rabéarivelo repeates Laforgue's wish to live as a legendary figure over the moon, a wish he never fulfilled since the invisible rat had already ate it away.

In "La Peau de la vache noire" ("The Hide of the Black Cow") Rabéarivelo suggests a synecdoche to African people who suffer from colonization and color-based discrimination. The opening image is one of spiritual, as well as physical death, highlighted by the act of stretching the hide, which suggests mistreatment and physical harm: "The hide of the black cow is stretched, / stretched but not set to dry, / stretched in the sevenfold shadow. / But who has killed the black cow, / dead without having lowed, dead without having roared, / dead without having once been chased / over that prairie flowered with stars?" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 160) ("La peau de la vache noire est tendue, / Tendue sans être mise à sécher, / Tendue dans l'ombre septuple. / Mais qui a abattu la vache noire, / Morte sans avoir mugi, morte sans avoir beuglé, / Morte sans avoir été poursuivie / Sur cette prairie fleurie d'étoiles?" [*Poèmes* 58]). Here, the poet questions the killing of the cow whose hide is "stretched" unnaturally since it is "not set to dry." The unnatural act of killing is underlined by the utter absence of any sound which should have been made by the cow, referred to in the aural image by words such as "lowed," "roared," and "chased." The massacre is done slowly but surely. Time and again, the image of the colonizer as an "invisible rat" comes to the fore. The anaphora in "stretched" and "dead" is effective for portraying the bloody massacre, while the one suggested by "without having" ensures complete succumbing to colonial power. And he then introduces the antithetical idea of hope as seen in the image of giving birth to a young calf: "She who calves in the far half of the sky. / Stretched is the hide / on the sounding-box of the wind / that is sculptured by the spirits of sleep. / And the drum is ready / when the new-born calf, / her horns crowned with spear grass / leaps / and grazes the grass of the hills" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 160) ("La voici qui gît dans la moitié du ciel. / Tendue est la peau / Sur la boîte de résonance du vent / Que sculptent les esprits du sommeil. / Et le tambour est prêt / Lorsque se couronnent de glaïeuls / Les cornes du veau deliver / Qui bondit / Et broute les herbes des collines" [*Poèmes* 58]). The process of the mother cow's labor is portrayed in an aural/visual image suggested by "blowing wind," "the drum," and finally by the appearance of the new-born's "horns." These sound producing instruments herald the newcomer despite the bad milieu in which it will live. The act of crowning "with spear grass" stresses a sense of freedom in nature, and grazing "the grass of the hills" refers to hope for a better future.

In his poem "Cactus" Rabéarivelo shows the impact of Rimbaud's "Vowels" and in his poem Rabéarivelo associates the human hand, the symbol of force, with the shape of the cactus. However

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the image is of a disfigured hand with no fingers: "That Multitude of molded hands / Holding our flowers to the azure sky / That multitude of fingerless hands / Unshaken by the wind" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 162) ("Cette multitude de mains fondues / qui tendent encore des fleurs à l'azur, / cette multitude de mains sans doigts / que le vent n'arrive pas à agiter" [*Poèmes* 24]). The correspondence is between the symbol, the dismembered hand, the object, the cactus, and what is evoked through their association. Hands-shaped cacti, which are directed to the sky holding flowers, symbolize hope while being fingerless evokes the un-sustainability of this short-lived hope. Rabéarivelo's "azure sky" recalls Rimbaud's poem where "lilies" are set towards the "dark azure" and Rabéarivelo adjusts Rimbaud's pastoral setting to fit his own, which is one of a desert with no meadows or ponds where swans flock. Instead, Rabéarivelo expresses his thoughts and feelings using nature-nurture cycles in a particular way fit for Malagasy life: "They say that a hidden source / Wells from their untainted palms / They say that this inner source / Refreshes thousands of cattle / And numberless tribes, wandering tribes / In the frontiers of the South" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 162) ("on dit qu'une source cachée / sourd dans leurs paumes intactes / on dit que cette source intérieure / désaltère des milliers de bœufs / et de nombreuses tribus, des tribus errantes, / aux confins du Sud" [*Poèmes* 24]). Obviously, Rimbaud's dripping snouts are modified into "a hidden source" which "wells from their untainted palms" and so are dark-haired buffaloes into cattle. The tribal life, characteristic of the desert, adds to the shepherding image which is put in juxtaposition to Rimbaud's pastoral one.

Influenced by the metaphor of the French model and perhaps unsatisfied with the tribal-shepherding image, Rabéarivelo tries unsuccessfully to create an incongruently idyllic scene by bringing home Rimbaud's setting: "Here, / when the flanks of the City were made as green / moonbeams glancing through the forests, / when they still left bare the hills of Iarive / crouching like bulls thrusting, / it was upon rocks too steep even for goats / that they hid, to protect their sources, / these lepers sprouting flowers" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 162) ("Ici, / quand les flancs de la Cité en étaient encore aussi verts / que les clairs de lune bondissant dans les forêts, / quand elles éventaient encore les collines d'Iarive / accroupies comme des taureaux repus, / c'était sur des rochers escarpés et défendus même / des chèvres / que s'isolaient, pour garder leurs sources, / ces lépreuses parées de fleurs" [*Poèmes* 24]). The lines evoke two contradictory images: one of the supposed idyllic happiness, suggested by the green flanks, the moonbeams, the forests and the other is of romantic solitude where the lepers, to protect their flowers, retreat into a seemingly impenetrable shell. However, the simile of bull-like movement, which is meant to imitate Rimbaud's flora and fauna, does not suit the nature of flowers.

Rabéarivelo's "Cactus" echoes many features of Rimbaud's "Le Bateau ivre" ("The Drunken Boat"); and the symbols of "dawn," "azure," and "child" are modeled after Rimbaud's poem. However, Rabéarivelo adjusted the marine setting to be one of an oasis in a desert to suit the Malagasy landscape. The concluding lines of "Cactus" find an echo in Rimbaud's penultimate stanza of "Le Bateau ivre" where the child, a symbol of future change, represents the vision of both poets. In Rimbaud's poem, the child, sad as he is, tries to take action while Rabéarivelo makes a missionary of the child who should go on teaching people to care for long-wished dreams till they come true: "I know a child, a prince in God's kingdom / Who would continue the tale: / 'Fate took pity on the lepers / And told them to plant their flowers/ And guard their springs afar from man's cruelty'" (*Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* 163) ("Je sais un enfant, / prince encore au royaume de Dieu, / qui voudrait ajouter: / Et le Sort, ayant eu pitié de ces lépreuses, / leur a dit de planter des fleurs / et de garder des sources / loin des hommes cruels'" [*Poèmes* 25]). Rabéarivelo's child is fate-bound since he will just narrate the tale without any intervention. Although influenced by the concept of the "damned poet," Rimbaud shows some hope that the undivided will of the individual might one day effect change.

In conclusion, the French colonizers tried to apply their policy of assimilation to exploit the Malagasy commercially and in times of war but the colonized received nothing in return beyond the promise of French citizenship, itself meant to further tighten the grip of the colonizer. However, some of the colonized, among them Rabéarivelo, fervently sought assimilation and his work modeled on French symbolism underscores this desire for assimilation. As I demonstrate in my article, Rabéarivelo's adoption and use of French symbolism suggests a different paradigm than the currently

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held view of the colonized writing back to the empire; instead, it shows the vicissitudes of assimilation: "If Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo's death was a tragedy, it was a tragedy caused not by cruelty of the colonial system, but by reading too much (or the wrong kind of) French poetry without the ironic distance precluded by the great physical distance between Paris and Antananarivo" (Serrano 46). Thus, in a way, French colonization succeeded in making him an *assimilé* while at the same time he was refused such assimilation in his lifetime, a double marginalization against his own intentions.

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