

Majors and Minors in Europe's African Enterprise: Oyono's *Une vie de boy* in Danish and Swedish Translations

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THE PUBLICATION OF FERDINAND OYONO'S ANTICOLONIAL NOVEL *UNE VIE DE BOY* (1956) IN THREE SCANDINAVIAN-LANGUAGE TRANSLATIONS—Danish, Swedish, and Nynorsk Norwegian¹—in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a surge of pan-Nordic interest in African culture and liberation movements. This outward turn was part of a major shift in the construction of national and regional identities in the Nordic region—particularly in Denmark and Sweden.² Once minor European kingdoms with modest colonial holdings on several continents (including Africa), these considerably downsized modern nation-states were forced to reposition themselves on the world stage starting in the twentieth century. Africa's anticolonial movements presented an opportunity for the Nordic region to embrace a new global role: that of nations of conscience whose leadership on human rights issues granted them influence and authority far beyond the size of their military, population, gross domestic product, or cultural and linguistic presence in the world. While the importance of this leadership among Western nations—particularly in fighting apartheid—can hardly be disputed, it has, paradoxically, also made it possible for Scandinavians to distance themselves from their own colonial involvement in Africa and to focus instead on the more extensive, visible, and enduring colonial histories of other European nations, mainly France and England.

This short essay provides some context for understanding how this paradox came to be, then considers how this distancing mechanism operates on a cultural level in the Scandinavian translations of Oyono's novel and in modern literature in general. Ample French and English loanwords, as well as untranslated words that are given Scandinavian grammatical endings, populate the translated texts. The presence of these world languages in the Scandinavian texts implicates France and England not only as major imperial powers in modern Africa but also as major hegemonic cultures in modern Scandinavia. The incursion of these languages underscores Scandinavia's own historically marginalized position—linguistically, culturally,

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and politically—on the European continent, particularly vis-à-vis France and England. Thus, these translations of an African literary classic, which show Scandinavians the brutal realities of European colonialism from an African point of view, ironically also reaffirm the Nordic countries' self-image as "do-gooder" nations whose moral authority rests on their lack of comparable colonial histories.

Understanding the context of these translations necessitates a critical summary of the Nordic region's role in supporting modern African liberation and development along with its modest, yet significant, role in European colonial enterprise in Africa from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. In the mid-seventeenth century Denmark and Sweden, then the only imperial Nordic kingdoms,³ established forts on Africa's west coast and participated in the Atlantic slave trade. From the start their participation depended on alliances forged with militarily superior kingdoms, most notably England and France. (At that time Denmark and Sweden competed for regional dominance.) From 1650 Sweden established treaties with England and France concerning the trafficking of slaves from forts on the Swedish Gold Coast (present-day southeastern Ghana); then in 1663 Denmark followed Sweden to Africa and seized the Swedish forts. From 1674 to 1750 the settlements were governed by the Danish West India-Guinea Company; in 1750 they became a Danish crown colony. In 1850 Denmark sold its African forts to the United Kingdom. Denmark and Sweden also operated island colonies in the Caribbean where slaves were auctioned, traded, and used as domestics and field labor for sugar cane and rum. Denmark ruled the Danish West Indies from 1638 to 1917, when it sold them to the United States for \$25 million (they are now the US Virgin Islands). Sweden received Saint Barthélemy from France in 1784 in a trade for shipping rights in the port of Gothenburg, on Sweden's western coast, and returned the island

to France in 1878. The colonies, once a source of considerable profits, became a drain on the metropole economies with the ending of slavery. Starting in the nineteenth century, as these small Nordic kingdoms became modern democracies, they turned their energies away from empire and toward nation building, laying the groundwork for their model welfare states. In most history books, including those used in schools, Scandinavia's colonial adventures in Africa are now a footnote (see Brøndsted; Dookhan; Harrison; Kent).

Indeed, by the time the Danish baroness Karen Blixen published her international literary classic *Den afrikanske farm* (1937; *Out of Africa*)—Scandinavia's most celebrated novel set in Africa—Scandinavian involvement in Africa's colonization had been all but forgotten. There had been no official Scandinavian colonial activity for nearly a century, although Africa continued to attract individual Scandinavians, such as Blixen, on the hunt for adventure or profit.⁴ Blixen's novel, a memoir of the seventeen years she spent running a coffee plantation in Kenya, in British East Africa, makes no reference to the Nordic former colonies on Africa's other coast. It does, however, cast Blixen herself as an exceptional, enlightened Scandinavian who cared deeply for the Masai people who worked for her, in contrast to the vulgar and exploitative British colonists. Yet her novel depicts the Masai as childlike and entirely dependent on her. The Kenyan writer and activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has called the novel "one of the most dangerous books ever written about Africa" and claims that Blixen represents "the greatest racist myth at the heart of Western bourgeois civilization" (133, 135). Blixen's novel, a beloved classic that was made into an Oscar-winning film starring Meryl Streep in 1985, has helped perpetuate a myth of Nordic exceptionalism, as well as a perception among many Scandinavians that Africans depend on "good" Europeans. The notion of inherently good Danishness is buttressed by

Denmark's popular historians (e.g., Lauring); if they mention its role in the colonization of Africa at all, they tend to depict Denmark as moral and self-sacrificing because it was "the first country in the world to forbid slave trading," in 1792, even though the action hurt Denmark financially (Stecher-Hansen 81).

Blixen's novel was hardly Scandinavia's only source of knowledge about modern Africa, however. For example, the writer and critic Artur Lundkvist, "Swedish literature's greatest internationalist," who translated much non-European literature into Swedish,⁵ belonged to the first generation of Swedish modernists to travel to Africa (Granqvist 5). He published his impressions in two travelogues, *Negerkust* (1933–34; "Negro Coast") and *Negerland* (1951; "Land of Negroes"). In a 1952 foreword to his reissued first travelogue, set in Cape Town, Lundkvist writes, "One was predisposed to imagine that Africa would be primarily of psychological interest. But in reality it was first and foremost social problems that awaited [visitors]. This led to disappointment, a painful attitude adjustment, and a healthy wake-up call" (5). Among Africa's strongest advocates in Norway at the time was the missionary Halfdan Endresen who from 1932 to 1964 was based in Cameroon, the setting for Oyono's novel. Endresen wrote many books, including *Slavekår i dagens Afrika* ("Slave Conditions in Today's Africa"), published by the Missionary Society Press in Stavanger, Norway, in 1954. As Marianne Gullestad has argued, the cumulative activities of the missionaries helped construct Norway's image as "the . . . goodness regime" (35). The missionaries' ideas and practices were easily adopted by Norwegian secular organizations starting in the 1960s, when Nordic public opinion agreed that more must be done to assist Africa.⁶

In this context, it is unsurprising that the first Scandinavian translation of Oyono's novel, in 1960, was in Nynorsk, a language spoken by barely a million people. One of

Norway's two official languages, Nynorsk ("new Norwegian") is spoken by a minority of the population concentrated on the southwestern coast, a region with the most church and missionary activity in the country.⁷ When the world learned of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa the same year, the Nordic governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden were the first in the West to aid refugees (Reddy 7). In 1960, too, Norway's Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Albert John Lutuli, president of the African National Congress. The South African government would not allow him to travel to Oslo until a year later, when he was awarded the prize at the same ceremony that honored the 1961 peace prize recipient, the late Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, who had served as United Nations secretary-general until he died in a plane crash en route to peace negotiations in the Congo. In 1965, when the Danish translation of Oyono's novel was published, the Nordic governments supported proposed United Nations economic sanctions against South Africa (Reddy 11). In 1977, the year that the Swedish translation appeared, the Nordic governments were represented at the highest levels at the World Conference for Action against Apartheid in Lagos, Nigeria. The Nordic governments were also the first to make direct grants to African liberation movements coordinated by the Organization of African Unity, and by the early 1980s the Nordic countries collectively were providing most of the Western assistance to humanitarian nongovernmental organizations and to African liberation movements (Reddy 7). Flush with idealism and wealth, Scandinavians focused on tackling the problems of *u-länder* and *u-lande* (Swedish and Danish shorthand for *utvecklingsländer* and *utviklingslande*, or "developing nations").

By the 1960s this focus on Africa created a demand for translations of modern African literature into Scandinavian languages. Scandinavians were highly literate, curious

about the world, and hungry for international titles. Most contemporary African literature was being written in European languages, and publishing subsidies from the Nordic governments facilitated such translations. In 1961, when the Swedish writer Per Wästberg, who today is president of the Nobel Literature Committee and arguably African literature's most fervent Scandinavian advocate, wrote his dissertation on African literature, his adviser at Uppsala University remarked, "I have never heard of any of these people, you could have made them up" (Chatfield).⁸ The same year, Wästberg published translated excerpts from the work of fifty-seven contemporary African writers in an anthology titled *Afrika berättar* ("Africa Narrates"). One of the excerpts is from another Oyono novel, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956; *The Old Man and the Medal*); two are by Wole Soyinka, who in 1986 became the first sub-Saharan African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. A Danish version of the anthology, *Afrika fortæller*, was published a year later. In 1967 Wästberg began inviting African writers to Sweden for the African-Scandinavian Writers' Conferences sponsored by the state-supported Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala.⁹ In addition to systematically collecting materials on Africa published in the Nordic languages, the NAI also publishes bibliographies of Scandinavian books on Africa. One such bibliography lists 829 titles, principally nonfiction, published from 1969 to 1974, a considerable number for an area housing only twenty million speakers (Wallenius).

Today the NAI's holdings of African creative literature total more than 3,200 titles. Most of them are in English, French, and Portuguese; about 300 are in Swedish translation (Nordic Africa Inst.). Why translate African literature into the "minor" Scandinavian languages when it is widely available in "major" European languages that all educated Scandinavians can read? The role of Nordic state and cultural institutions in subsidizing the

translation and publication of international titles deemed important for an educated citizenry is one factor. Then there is the affective argument that fictional narratives are more compelling when imparted through a reader's native tongue. A cursory search of the Danish and Swedish royal library catalogs reveals that hundreds of African literary titles are widely available to the public in their original English, French, and Portuguese. However, the number of translations into Danish and Swedish is large. Between 1956, when *Une vie de boy* first appeared in French, and 1977, when its third Scandinavian translation appeared, at least sixty-five full-length African literary titles were published in Danish and Swedish. In addition to Oyono, authors translated during this period include Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Amos Tutuola, of Nigeria; Peter Abrahams, André Brink, Nadine Gordimer, and Ezekiel Mphahlele, of South Africa; Léopold Senghor, of Senegal; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, of Kenya; Okot p'Bitek, of Uganda; Castro Soromenho and José Luan-dino Vieira, of Angola; and Camara Laye, of Guinea (see Ruuth-Bäcker; Nordic Africa Inst.). Oyono's novel, then, was hardly an anomaly in this literary landscape.

The Scandinavian translations of *Une vie de boy* are as polished and colloquial as one would expect in a literary market with ample qualified translators. The most striking difference among the translations is their titles. In Nynorsk *Une vie de boy* becomes *Boyen Toundi* ("The Boy Toundi"), effectively naming the "boy" who is anonymous and representative in the original French title. The Danish title is *En boy's liv*, conforming to Scandinavian word order but further creolizing the original title by rendering the genitive form with an apostrophe—an English grammatical idiom. Scandinavian languages simply add an *s* to make a word possessive, as in the Swedish title *En boys liv*. None of the texts translate the odd word *boy*, for an equivalent colonialist term does not exist; even in earlier

Danish and Swedish colonial contexts outside the Nordic region, English, French, and Dutch Creole were the lingua francas. The Danish translator, Hanne Dissing, also pairs an apostrophe with standard Danish noun endings when declining *boy* throughout the text (e.g., *boy'ene* in the plural), underscoring the word's foreignness. The Swedish and Nynorsk translators, Britte-Marie Bergström and Ottar Odland, simply append the Swedish and Norwegian noun endings to the word. This is a sensible choice because Scandinavians often accept foreign words into their everyday speech. But it also indicates the ease with which the Scandinavian languages have, over the years, absorbed colonialist language and ideas even while marking these words as distinctly “un-Scandinavian.”

The pattern continues with the remaining English terms—*jeep*, *pick-up*, *pullover*, *veranda*—that appear in the French original; they are reproduced untranslated, with Scandinavian noun endings (e.g., *jeep'en*). Rendering a translated text at once readable and foreign casts the Scandinavian reader, by now well schooled in Nordic exceptionalism, as a morally enlightened witness to, rather than a fellow perpetrator of, European colonization in Africa. While the Scandinavian translators, unlike the English translator John Reed, conscientiously translate the text's racially loaded terms, Scandinavian readers are unlikely to internalize Oyono's critique, even when he employs *européens* to describe the colonists as a bloc. However, the Danish and Swedish translators do not replicate Oyono's capitalization of racial terms, such as *Blanc* versus *nègre*, to underscore unequal power relations, since this contrasts too strongly with Scandinavian norms. They render the ubiquitous French *les Blancs* (“the whites”) and *les noirs* (“the blacks”) by using lowercase with standard Scandinavian noun endings (e.g., *de vita* and *de hvide* for “the whites,” *de svart*a and *de sorte* for “the blacks”); *indigènes*, or “natives,” is treated the same way (e.g., *in-*

födning and *indfödning*, *infödd* and *indfödd*). In the Scandinavian languages, the names of nationalities, languages, ethnicities, religions, and other markers of identity are not capitalized—not even for emphasis in literary texts. The irony of marking loaded, colonialist words as foreign while facilitating their circulation in the text is that Scandinavians then imagine Africa as always mediated by imperial French and English.¹⁰ The role of the Scandinavian reader of Oyono's text is similar to that of Oyono's framing narrator, the tourist in Spanish Guinea who finds a dying man's journals written in another language and is moved to read them.

Finally, an important feature of the translations—particularly the Swedish version—is the number and type of French loanwords. Until the late nineteenth century, French was the language spoken by Scandinavia's aristocracy,¹¹ and many of the region's great artists and writers lived or trained in France or premiered their work in Paris. In the Scandinavian translations of Oyono's text, many of the French loanwords represent powerful social positions or European salon culture. Examples of social positions are *kommendant* (Swedish) and *kommandant* (Danish) for the colonial leader; *kommisarie* and *kommisære* for the police chief; *residenset* and *Residensen* for the governor's home; and *monitörerna* and *monitorer* (42; 39) for the teaching assistants at the school. French loanwords referring to salon culture in the Swedish translation include *gourmandis* (18); the Danish uses *grådighed*, or “greediness,” to describe someone who loves food (18); a type of reclining chair is *schäslong* and *chaiselong* (136; 121).

The Scandinavian languages also formed *neger* from the French *nègre*. *Negerboll*, the colloquial term for a popular Swedish pastry, was the source of an official 2003 complaint to the Swedish ombudsman for civil rights. In 2006 the Swedish Academy supplemented the word's entry on its official list with the advice “använd hellre *chokladboll*” (“chocolate ball is

preferred").¹² *Neger* remains a topic of public debate, for many Scandinavians think that the word is neutral in a Nordic context, even if it is racially loaded elsewhere. In the translated Oyono texts, *neger* is declined using Scandinavian noun endings and is sometimes fused with another Scandinavian word to form a compound—for instance, *negebarnen* and *negebørnene* ("the Negro children"), for *les petits nègres* (51).

This latter term underscores the most powerful cultural translation at work in a Scandinavian context: the novel's genre as a bildungsroman. Children's and youth literature is highly valued in Scandinavia. Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales and Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking stories (in which Pippi's sea captain father sails to Africa and becomes a *negerkung* ["Negro king"]) are but two examples of beloved literary classics. The Nordic region's welfare states also have codified the individual rights of children. Thus, the Swedish cover of Oyono's novel evokes an entire Scandinavian welfare discourse of society's responsibility to protect children's rights; it features a young African boy, barefoot and wearing loose cotton shorts, standing so that the top of his head touches the word *boys* of the title. Oyono never provides Toundi's age, and while Toundi is certainly a boy at the outset of his first journal, in the course of the narrative he matures to the point that Madame asks him why he doesn't start his own family. Here, midway through the narrative, we realize that Toundi's self-awareness has matured, for he responds that he could never provide his children what the white families can theirs, an assertion that elicits Madame's astonishment at his "delusions of grandeur" ("storhetsvansinne" and "storhedsvanvid" [75; 67]). (This is, tellingly, the scene excerpted in a 1971 Danish anthology, *Litteratur fra Afrika* [Hegerlund, Johansen, and Johansen].) Yet the Swedish publisher's decision to market *En boys liv* as a boy's tale brings two Scandinavian discourses

together: the imperative to care for children and the Nordic region's moral calling to save Africa. It is the same myth of Nordic exceptionalism that pervades Blixen, only this is in a translated African work, where it gains undeniable authority. Given that Oyono's novel appears on the NAI's list of recommended books on Africa for young people, one hopes that the critical questions raised in this essay might, in the anticolonial spirit of Oyono's original, be presented to new generations of Scandinavians confronted with *Une vie de boy* in translation.

NOTES

I wish to thank the American Scandinavian Foundation for financial support as well as my Africanist colleagues David Chioni Moore, Reiland Rabaka, and Nandini Dhar for their input and Ellen Rees for assistance in locating the Nynorsk text. Unattributed translations in this essay are mine.

1. Because of space constraints, this article focuses on the Danish and Swedish translations and offers minimal information about the Nynorsk Norwegian translation. My colleague Monika Žagar, a Norwegianist, intends to conduct a more thorough analysis of that translation in the future.

2. While the terms *Scandinavian* and *Nordic* are often used interchangeably, *Scandinavia* has, since the nineteenth century, referred to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. *Nordic* includes Finland and Iceland as well (although the NAI reports cited in this article do not include Iceland).

3. Norway was part of Denmark from 1536 to 1814, then in a union with Sweden until 1905, when it declared its independence; Finland was part of Sweden from 1157 until 1809, when it was ceded to czarist Russia, and it became independent in 1917; and Iceland was part of Denmark from 1380 to 1944. Icelanders, Finns, and Norwegians thus participated in colonialism in Africa, but they did so under the Danish and Swedish flags (Brøndsted; Harrison; Kent).

4. Blixen lived in Kenya from 1914 to 1931; her former house is now a museum.

5. Among Lundkvist's translations is a collection of the Senegalese writer Léopold Senghor's poetry, translated from French to Swedish.

6. Special thanks to Monika Žagar for contributing this context.

7. Bokmål ("written, literary language") is the cosmopolitan language spoken in Oslo and in most of Norway. It is closer to Danish than Nynorsk is, although Nynorsk and Bokmål are mutually comprehensible. Nynorsk, based on

southwestern Norwegian spoken dialects, is an attempt to distance Norwegian from Danish, the hegemonic language.

8. Wästberg also founded Sweden's chapter of Amnesty International in 1963; edited Sweden's largest daily newspaper, *Dagens nyheter*, from 1976 to 1982; and served as chairman of International PEN from 1979 to 1986. He has visited Africa many times and published more than fifty books, many of them on Africa.

9. The NAI's mission is to "put knowledge of African issues within reach for scholars, policy makers, politicians, media, students and the general public" (Nordic Africa Inst.; Wästberg, "Writer").

10. For an excellent analysis of how this dynamic functions in Danish and Norwegian literature and culture, see Oxfeldt.

11. Sweden's current royal family, the house of Bernadotte, is descended from one of Napoleon's generals.

12. "Svenska Akademiens ordlista." The comparable entry in *Den danske ordbog* ("The Danish Dictionary"), for *negerbolle*, offers no such advice but instead Danish synonyms: *flødebolle* ("cream ball"), which is a marshmallow topping that Danes often add to ice cream cones, and *negerkys* ("Negro kiss"), which is a *flødebolle* covered in chocolate.

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