There is an almost constant presence of religion in African fiction in French, partly because religion is central to the human experience, and in this respect French-speaking Africa is no different from anywhere else in the world, but also because Africa has not escaped the colonising thrust of religions and has been affected for centuries by the conflict between its traditional religions and those that have invaded it from the outside. The nature of the presence of Islam and that of Christianity in the fiction of French-speaking Africa is however different, largely because the former has been absorbed into the African way of life in a way that the latter has not for the modern period which is the setting of most contemporary novels. Thus, Hamidou Kane's classic novel *L'aventure ambiguë* deals with the conflict between an indigenous African Islam described with sympathetic insight and an invading European culture seen from the outside, while the novels of Ousmane Sembène incorporate Islam as part of the social background and criticise it as religion not as Islam.

A number of novels from French-speaking Africa of the post-war pre-independence period evoke the impact of Christianity on African culture, depicting the encounter most frequently through the role of the Christian missionary who is represented as a collaborator of the European colonial administration. The novels of Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono published in the fifties and sixties are celebrated examples of this approach. In them, the missionary is mercilessly satirized for his ignorant attempts to destroy African culture as the enemy of a successful implantation of Christian morality. The purpose is essentially polemic so the characters of the missionary protagonists are presented for the most part in very simplistic terms, quite unlike the subtle portrayal of the Muslim hero of Kane's novel; the inner conflicts of the mission
superior in Beti’s *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* are more nuanced than is usually the case in these novels, a factor which makes the novel stand out from the rest as being untypical in this respect. Almost without exception, the missionaries of these novels are Roman Catholic, reflecting the predominant presence of Roman Catholicism in French colonial Africa and providing the writer with a ready source of dramatic conflict as a result of what was seen as the Catholic Church’s uncompromising approach to the conversion of the peoples of Africa.

The Christian priest, rather than the layman, is almost inevitably the protagonist in these novels of the colonial period because, as the word ‘missionary’ implies, Christianity is seen as still being in the process of establishing itself on the continent. While there has been a striking decline in the number of novels dealing with Christian missionary endeavour in French-speaking Africa since the advent of independence, it is still the priest rather than the layman who is the central protagonist in the few novels dealing with the subject that have been published. There is however a subtle shift from the missionary theme to the role of the priest as a member of the community, and this is done by means of another fundamental shift of emphasis—the novelist is no longer concerned with the white missionary but with the black priest, and whereas there was previously little interest in the priest’s inner conflicts about his role since the main aim was to comment on colonialism, it is the black priest’s torment about his personal identity which now preoccupies the novelist. Two novels particularly stand out: Williams Sassine’s *Wirriyamu* and V. Y. Mudimbe’s *Entre les eaux*.

Sassine’s novel is a highly fictionalised account of what happened in Wiriyamu in colonial Mozambique in 1972 and bears little relationship to actual events. The central character, too, is a poet. The priest in the novel is one of a set of secondary characters whose reactions to events form a significant part of the novel’s themes. Terrified for his own life, he does nothing to help the villagers as they are massacred and their homes destroyed by the colonial troops, but hides instead inside his house until his sense of guilt overcomes his inertia and he goes out to die in a final inferno of defiance which he lights himself. He dies in despair, conscious of having been betrayed by the white culture to which he had given his allegiance as a Christian priest and rejected by his own people to whom he gave nothing when they most needed him.