

“Shit and Stench as Dramatic Strategy: Bate Besong’s *Beasts of no Nation*.”

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Born in Calabar, Nigeria of Cameroonian parents, Bate Besong’s writing career began at the tender age of 24, when Chinua Achebe launched his first book of verse, *Polyphemus Detainee and Other Skulls*. (Scholars Press) in 1980. The same year, Africa’s first Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka introduced the young writer into the Union of Writers of African Peoples (U.W.A.P.). Besong has continued to receive literary acclaim including a 1991 Cameroon Post Group of Newspapers Man of the Year Award, a 1992 ANA (Association of Nigerian Authors) Prize in drama for *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, a 1992 Patron Publishing House Award for Literary Excellence, and a 2002 Manyu Solidarity Fund (MSF) Award for Literature and Culture. He took a PhD in English and Literary Studies at University of Calabar, Nigeria in 1996, and has, since then been teaching Theatre History, Playwriting and Critical Theory at University of Buea, Cameroon.

The theatre of Bate Besong seeks to dramatise the psychosocial, economic and political disequilibrium that has been imposed on his post-independent society, and the attempts of the traumatised masses and victims of that reality, to redress their dislocation and overcome the forces and causes at the root of their alienation. In the process of conveying such totality of experience, he delves into the realities in his changing universe, unearthing the contradictions and posting possible forms of alternative

functionality. However, it is by approaching Besong's theatre from a materialist, dialectical and inter-subjective interpretative perspective that one can accurately grasp the totality of his meanings.

Beasts of no Nation, (a docu-drama), is arguably the most controversial and compellingly provocative in the repertory of Besong's dramatic writings.¹ In this play, he recasts the reality of Anglophone Cameroon's marginalisation in the Cameroon Republic as 'second class citizens'², and their leaders as insatiable locusts devouring tones of green, yet producing nothing but buckets of shit. Since shit is the main product in the play's setting, and its stench looms freely everywhere in the theatre space, shit and stench become the central organising metaphor in the play. One critic has described Bate Besong as a 'shitologist of a playwright who is steadfast and blunt'³, while another comments that Bate Besong is so violently angry with the wrongs and injustices done to the Anglophone community in the Cameroonian society in particular that 'he vomits nothing but filth and shit.... He is our shitologist par excellence.'⁴ Bate Besong himself describes his endeavour and strategy through one of the characters in *Beasts of no Nation*, Narrator, as 'an experiment in the bucket toilet, a scholarship in excrementology and shitology' (p. 123).

In depicting the conflicting relationships and social and economic imbalances in his fictive setting, Ednuoay, (which becomes Yaounde, Cameroon's political capital if read/spelled from left to right), the dramatist, now like the Ghanaian writer, Armah, in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, invests in scatological and unsettling images: decay, excrement and filth. The images of the shit bucket and faecal equipment (toilet brooms and brushes) that dominate this theatre, and the ever-present mental sound and

rhythm, as the buckets of excrement are loaded and offloaded by the ubiquitous Night-soil carriers, who symmetrically squat and foul the air, capture the picture of a society enmeshed in the rot and darkness of an old and dilapidated latrine.

The Yaounde University Theatre premiered *Beasts of no Nation* at the Amphitheatre 700 of University of Yaounde in March 1991. The production was directed by dramaturg, Bole Butake. The stage set-up was a toilet with three wooden toilet pots and dirty brownish buckets. Stage notes/directions, dramatic action and dialogue will make clear that the stench from the toilet looms powerfully and permanently in the theatre hall. When the play, for example begins, stage directions first accentuate the central metaphor of the toilet and stench that will dominate the theatre:

Narrator, priest-like stands like a statue by a lavatory. The stench from the lavatory stands in the theatre like pangs of S.A.P. One of the Night-soil men sits on an empty bucket. He is asleep besides his night-soil equipment. Narrator climbs on one of the lavatories... (p. 85)

The dramatic dialogue and action appear in fragmented forms, and the only consistent idea we glean from the action and dialogue is the Night-soil men's demand for freedom. 'Give us freedom, give us freedom,' (p. 87) they cry. But as Narrator ironically remarks, the only freedom the Night-soil men have is the free stench and smell from the lavatory: 'You might think you have no freedom. But you have. You have fresh air (*smugly*). And fresh air is freedom' (p. 102) he said.

In other segments of the play, the playwright continues to invest in, and explore the toilet metaphor as a means of commenting on, or representing political offices in abhorrent terms. In 'Beasts of no Nation,' the second movement of the play, as the Night-soil men, Cripple and Blind man ridicule state functionaries as ruthless embezzlers and

looters of public wealth, in the play-within-the play scenes, they always indicate their exasperation at them by turning their backs to the audience, raising their behinds and farthing. It is in the last fragment of the play, 'Aadingingin and the Night-soil men' that the dramatist's investment in filth and shit is raised to an unbelievable nauseating proportion, as the characters lampoon the philistine, priggish arrogance and aberrations of their leaders. Stage direction in this last section is so detailed and mental in its utilisation of toilet diction and images:

Action takes place by the lavatory. Sound of defecating terrors before twilight hour. Lights should shift to lavatory: Brooms thick with excrement. Pails of human waste, brownish, yellowish, greyish or black matter intestinal products of an inebriated society waiting to be carted away. Odour of human faeces hangs thick in the air despite the rigorous application of several tins of carbonic acid (p. 126).

The dramatic dialogues too are replete with toilet diction and excremental images. Narrator, for example, says that he has put his shoulder on the wheel of shitology, and could thus 'argue endlessly about fine points of excrementology' (p. 130). To the Night-soil men, 'carrying night-soil without identity cards is tyranny' (p. 132). Curiously, it is with 'buckets full of excrement' (p. 141) that the Night-soil men storm Aadingingin's office in their lone and feeble act of revolt.

Artistically, the shit metaphor that the dramatist uses to punctuate all the facets of his drama resonates with lots of signification. It is first of all a metaphor of decay and a questioning statement about why it is allowed to be so in the first place. Secondly, it is a statement about a nation held hostage by beastlike leaders who, because of their inexhaustible greed, reduce every other thing in the society to filth and shit. The imagery

is so compellingly repellent as we follow the squatting and grunting Narrator's graphic description on one of the toilets:

I am the alumnae, a genius in the academic cosmos of shitology (*squats as if answering call of nature*). This is the prolegomena of the brimstone, the Nitric acid, the effluvium, the gangrene, the syphilitic concoction, and the mycobacterium leprae of modern trade dealers (p. 123).

Such an absolutely grotesque and repellent device of artistic representation, not only shocks the audience, but also (and this seems to be the dramatist's intention), pricks and appeals to the collective conscience to begin to want to arrest such a state of depravity and callousness.

It was in fact, this shocking new way of communicating the human condition that so shocked some high-level government officials present in the hall when the play was performed, that they fled the Amphi Theatre 700 in protest and terror. The next day, one of them, Jean Stephan Biatcha, wrote a lengthy confidential report to hierarchy, articulating the truthfulness of the play's central concerns. I quote at length some sections of that report:

It is a clear political pamphlet directed at the regime in power that is held responsible for the economic crisis through corruption, favouritism and capital flight to foreign banks. The author holds the thesis that Francophones in power are responsible for the economic crisis because they are producers of waste matter, embezzlers of public funds... The author equally affirms, and this is the central thesis (philosophy) of the play that Anglophones of Cameroon are marginalized and confined to undignified roles like that of "carriers of excrement"... At the end of the performance, the playwright took to the stage to publicly declare that the future of Cameroon is uncertain and that chaos can set in at any time. This experience, which I must admit, is shocking and disappointing enough will help me to be more vigilant and diligent

with regards to all other cultural manifestations that will take place on the University campus.⁵

Biatcha's confidential report had immediate effects. Theatre activities in the city of Yaounde, but particularly at the University campus were grounded. Before any performance, the theatre troupe had to procure a permit, better known in French as 'l'autorisation de spectacle' from the immediate competent administrative authority: Vice Chancellor, Sous Préfet (Divisional Officer) or Préfet (Senior Divisional Officer). The real problem however, was that the process of getting the 'l'autorisation de spectacle' was deliberately bureaucratic, entailing the submission of a series of dossiers: copy of play script, summary of the play, number of actors, purpose of the performance, director of the production, CV of the director, previous activities of the troupe, people in the production and duration of the performance. Submitting the completed application file for the 'l'autorisation' did not necessarily mean the permit was to be granted. The intention of the administrators/politicians on this matter was to maintain absolute censorship, or at least, discourage the performance — and this especially, if the performance had anything to do with democracy/politics. While it is true that some directors simply ignored the issue of getting the 'l'autorisation', and went ahead with their performance schedules, ready for the consequences, it is also true that insistence on the acquisition of the 'l'autorisation'⁶ was a disguised form of banning performances altogether in the city or at the University campus. For thirteen years, this ban stood on, and was only recently (on March 11th, 2004) renounced by the strongly reformist new Vice Chancellor of University of Yaounde I, Sammy B. Chumbow.

After the March 1991 performance of *Beasts of no Nation* and Biatcha's confidential report, playwright, Bate Besong was kidnapped by Cameroon's Secret

Service men at the premises of the State Television House (CRTV) in April 1991 on charges of inciting chaos and rebellion, and taken to an unknown destination. Recently, Bate Besong recalled how the Biatcha report victimised him:

Jean Stephan Biatcha's preposterous fiction on my play led to my being kidnapped by CENER, the Cameroonian Gestapo at the CRTV Mballa II premises in April 1991. For over a decade, I would suffer financial ruin and humiliating demotions in the Kafkaesque Cameroonian Public Service System... My work will be banned in classrooms, on stage and on television.⁷

But while the theatre and Besong suffered, Biatcha, author of the report simply walked his way into the hearts and good books of the Yaounde authorities. In 1994, he would be appointed at the President's Civil Cabinet and placed directly in charge of the First Lady's (Chantal Biya) Protocol Service. Then, in 2002 he would be appointed CEO of the First Lady's powerful international NGO, 'SYNERGIES AFRICAINE' for the fight against HIV-AIDS and Suffering; a position he keeps as I write. Again, Bate Besong's disgust is unhidden:

Today, as I watch the complete transformation of this semi-illiterate and mole-like character on state television, shaking hands with First Ladies from all corners of the globe, there is no doubt in my mind that as Director of First Lady Chantal Biya's Foundation, this harlequin, Jean Stephan Biatcha has entered the club of Civil Servant Billionaires! But in Africa, a Captain Dreyfus, you know, never needs pardons from extenuating circumstances.⁸

The central dramatic action and artistic engagement in *Beasts of no Nation* deal with the Night-soil men's dire struggle to get their professional identification papers, which the authorities (represented by Dealsham Aadingingin) do not want to give. But this action is not unified or coherently laid out, so that a sense of direction of the action is gotten only from the impressions garnered from the disjointed tableaux into which the

play dissolves: 'Parabasis,' 'Beasts of no Nation' and 'Aadingingin and the Night-soil men.'

The setting and nature of character drawing in the play are deliberately built to emphasise the polarised nature of Ednuoay society. On the one hand, we have the Night-soil men, Cripple and Blind man, described by the playwright as 'the doomed carriers of mountains of fetid waste of the Ednuoayan city council' (p. 82). They represent the deracinated, doomed and downtrodden of the society. Although Narrator is a maverick, he clearly also belongs to the group of oppressed characters in the play. The fragmented and warped nature of the character drawing of this oppressed group reinforces the theme of slavery and dispossession contained in the central metaphor of shit and stench. It is thus overcoming dispossession that propels action for the oppressed in this play. On the other hand, there is Comrade Dealsham Aadingingin, whose very position as Supreme Maximum Mayor of Ednuoay Municipal Council, 'the one who is capable of playing the city's anthem backwards' (p. 82) places him on the pedestal of those with connection and power. The sly Gaston Otshama, who is himself an ex-Night-soil man, but now newly promoted to role of 'Middle man under category nought,' would normally be classified in the group of the oppressed; but his cynicism and political ambitions catapult him to the rungs of the oppressors.

In this play we experience the stateless and physical material depersonalisation of the oppressed characters pitted against the deliberate insensitivity of their leaders. Narrator describes Ednuoay society as engulfed in a 'valley of darkness' and laments that it has depreciated to the level where 'the blind lead the blind' thus offering no hope for the future. Ednuoay is, indeed, undergoing agonising traumas and difficulties from the

heavy pangs of the imperialist imposed Structural Adjustment Plan (S.A.P.). And S.A.P. continues to suck and drain the strengths and resources of the already depleted Ednuoay society, rendering it the more fractured and vulnerable. But by emphasising the necessity (through thematic and formal investments) to overcome such flaws, *Beasts of no nation* becomes a literary and political weapon the dramatist uses to explain his world: how it is, and how it could be.

Unfortunately the play ends with Aadingingin's defeat of the Night-soil men's attempt at overcoming their dispossession and victimisation. The final insolent exultation of the former, 'My Word is Double Law. I AM THE LAW!' (p. 143) that draws the curtains, constrains and dooms the Night-soil men once more to their 'valley of darkness.' But again, such an oppressive declaration may instead suggest a call for a much more dedicated and organised social force, a call which is however, not denotatively demonstrable in the dramatic integrity of *Beasts of no Nation*. We recall that as far back as 1964, Roland Barthes in *Elements of Semiology* had hinted at the possibilities of theatre functioning as a cybernetic machine that can send several and simultaneous messages to audiences. This possibility for an infinite façade of meanings and the inelastic expressiveness in artistic language is the title and contents of Antonin Artraud's research in *The Theatre and its Double*.⁹

The incidents dramatised in the universe of *Beasts of no Nation* is a failed revolutionary attempt at stripping the ruling clique of its disgusting extremes, and restoring meaning to the social, economic and political conditions of the alienated masses. This defeat of the liberation endeavour is the warning signal of doom and darkness emphasised in the central organising metaphor of shit and stench. This warning

signal is that class exploiters, those with excessive power and connections, such as Aadingingin, would always usurp the final decisions about any persons or group of persons' future, if the struggle of the masses is not collectively organised and coordinated.

The signals in *Beasts of no Nation* are however, only implicitly deduced since the overall architectonics in the play require a certain extent of cognitive excellence and intellectualism that will allow for the decoding of the overall symbols as part of actual reality. In fact, the form in the play has a much profound intellectual and cognitive appeal, and this seems to be a deliberate strategy of the playwright: to write a work that is intellectually demanding, challenging and profound. For Besong partly believes, as does Osofisan too, that the educated and intellectual class could, more than any other class, assist in salvaging society. This is indeed part of what defines the nature of Osofisan's aesthetics, as he himself tells us:

One vital prerequisite for the task of salvaging our society is a committed educated class. As I see it, of all the various communities...it is the educated community, armed with a proper ideological consciousness that can successfully undertake the building of a dynamic modern economy towards which we yearn to stir our country.¹⁰

Difficult though the form and diction of *Beasts of no Nation* could be, there is no doubt that the playwright successfully recreates in language and imagery the sensibilities and fractured postcolonial outlook of the society he sets out to represent. In fact, the symbolism of night-soil men, carriers of shit, shit buckets, stench and rot documents the realities of a postcolonial Cameroonian society and emphasises the long history of political, social and economic domination of the Anglophones, whom Besong indicates

have been the greatest losers and victims in the formation and evolution of the Cameroonian nation at decolonisation. But the metaphor is also a call for the suffering masses and their greedy leaders, to improve on their human conditions and uplift their society from the darkness and rot that have held it hostage.

Notes

¹ *Beasts of no Nation* was first published in Limbe by Nooremac in 1990, and then reprinted in the playwright's new collection: *Three Plays: The achwiimbe trilogy* (Yaounde: CLE, 2003, 80-143). All references in this essay are from the reprinted edition. His other dramatic works are: *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* (Limbe: Nooremac, 1986); *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* (Calabar: Centaur, 1991); *The Banquet* (Makurdi: Ehi, 1994) and *Change Waka & His Man Sawa Boy* (Yaounde: CLE, 2001).

² It is now a public issue that Anglophone Cameroon, which voted overwhelmingly to achieve independence by uniting with Francophone Cameroun (following a United Nations organised Plebiscite in 1961), to form what is today the Cameroon Republic, has been, in spite of her bounteous resources and wealth, the victim and major loser in the union. There are, for example, not more than eight Anglophone ministers in a cabinet of fifty-three, and only twelve Préfets (Divisional Officers) out of a total of two hundred and sixty-eight. Appointments at state corporations and at other lower levels of administration and government also indicate a disappointing extent of alienation. Literatures that document and condemn the central administration's marginalisation of both the people and their region abound. See particularly, Albert W. Mukong, (ed.) *The Case for the Southern Cameroons* (Washington D.C.: CAMFECO, 1990); Bate Besong, 'Literature in the Season of the Diaspora: Notes to the Anglophone Cameroonian Writer', in *Anglophone Cameroon Writing (BASS 30, WEKA No.1)* Nalova Lyonga, Eckhard Breiting, Bole Butake, (eds.) (Bayreuth: BASS, 1993. 15-18); All Anglophone Conference I, *The Buea Declaration* (Limbe: Nooremac, 1993); All Anglophone Conference II, *The Bamenda Proclamation* (Limbe: Nooremac, 1994); Sam, E. Elad et al., 'Against the Annexation of The Southern Cameroons by La République du Cameroun' *The London Communique* (London: Southern Cameroons National Council, 1995, 1-14); Eckhard Breiting, 'Anglofou or Anglophone: Language, Letter and Alternative Discourse in Bilingual Cameroon' in *Macht der Identitaet. Identitaet der Macht*. Heidi Willer, Till Forster and Claudia Ortner-Buchberger, (eds.). Münster: Lit, 1995, 471-480); Piet Konings and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, 'The Anglophone Problem in Cameroon' in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 35.2 (1997): 207-229; and Frederick E. Alobwede, 'La Proclamation de la Restauration de la Souveraineté et L'indépendance du Southern Cameroons et son Regain' (Yaounde: *Messenger* Aug. 02 2001).

³ See Hansel N. Eyoh, 'Historicity and New Anglophone Cameroon Drama' *Anglophone Cameroon Writing (BASS 30, WEKA No.1)*. Nalova Lyonga, Eckhard Breiting and Bole Butake, (eds.) (Bayreuth: BASS, 1993, 101-108).

⁴ See Bole Butake, 'Writer as Visionary' in *Epasa Moto: Critical Perspectives on Cameroon Writing* 1.3 (1996): 19-27.

⁵The original confidential report written by Jean Stephan Biatcha was leaked out to the press and published in a local French Language weekly newspaper, *Challenge Hebdo* No. 0045, Oct. 23-Nov. 6, 1991 with the title, 'A la Haute Attention de Monsieur le Chancelier d'Université de Yaoundé.' The translation into English is by Shadrack A. Ambanasom in 'Pedagogy of the Deprived. A Study of the Plays of Victor Epie Ngome, Bole Butake and Bate Besong' in *Epasa Moto: Critical Perspectives on Cameroon Writing* 1.3 (1996): 218-227.

⁶ Godfrey B. Tangwa has offered an extensive critique on the issue of procuring the 'l'autorisation' for performances and other activities in Cameroon. See, for example, 'Anglophone Theatre in a Francophone City: The Flame Players and Other Troupes in Yaoundé' in *New Theatre in Francophone and Anglophone Africa*. Anne Fuchs, (ed.) (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999, 155-168).

⁷ Interview given to Pierre Fandio, April 2004.

⁸ Interview given to Pierre Fandio, April 2004.

⁹ Antonin Artraud, *The Theatre and its Double* Trans. Mary Caroline Richards. (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

¹⁰ See Tejumola Olaniyan, 'Femi Osofisan: The Form of Uncommon Sense' in *Research in African Literatures* 30.4 (1999): 74-91.