

The Anglophone-Francophone Marriage and Anglophone Dramatic Compositions in the Cameroon Republic

By Hilarious N. Ambe, Ph.D.

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Let me begin with the following anecdote, which throws some perspective on some of the issues discussed in this paper.

Quite recently, I was at a conference in Leipzig, and during one of the coffee breaks, I found myself in a conversation with a group of other participants. When I introduced myself as a Cameroonian, two of the persons in our little group exclaimed, almost at the same time: "*Ha! Roger Milla! Football!*" I simply nodded with a grin, somehow proud that almost a decade after Cameroon's ace football striker—Roger Milla's wonderful performance at the World Cup Football Finals in Italia 90, my country was still being remembered and praised. A third person in our little group asked me: "*If you're a Cameroonian, how comes you are this articulate in English?*" I hoped inwardly that I were, and then told her I come from the English-speaking parts of Cameroon. She said she had always known Cameroon to be a French-speaking country. I told her we were a bilingual country. At the reception dinner that the conference convenors offered the next day, I again introduced myself as a Cameroonian to a new group with whom I was sharing the same table. "*Ho! Transparency International! Your country is number one in the world!*" one of them said to me. I do not know if the others on our table

understood what he meant, but I knew he was referring to a Berlin based anti-corruption NGO (TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL) report whose 1999 classification of most corrupt nations in the world gave Cameroon the premier position, followed by Nigeria, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Honduras, Uzbekistan, Tanzania, Kenya, Paraguay and Yugoslavia in that descending order—a position the Cameroon government has since, been vigorously attempting to revert.

These are some of the terms in which some people, even very many people in the world know Cameroon. With regard to my anecdotal third speaker's remarks above (that she had always known Cameroon as a French-speaking country), I think there are even many more today who still think in same terms as she does. In fact, since independence in Cameroon, there has been a deliberate and systematic ploy (some may disagree) by successive neocolonial governments and their exploitative partnerships to completely eclipse the Anglophone reality in Cameroon, and have the country as a

French-speaking state, though the country's constitution boldly engraves her bicultural and bilingual status. What we find in the Anglophone-Francophone marriage in the Cameroon republic, and the ensuing dramatic compositions that attempt to define that reality as I argue, is a systematic machinery set in place to assimilate and integrate the English-speaking minority populace of the country into a so called *société évoluée* or *black French Africans* (my italics). Unfortunately, some literary circles outside Cameroon, (of course, with very few exceptions¹), seem to, deliberately or inadvertently

¹ These exceptional cases of Western scholars draw attention to the uniqueness of a body of literature known as Anglophone Cameroon literature, and a people in the Cameroon republic called Anglophone Cameroonians. See especially Breitinger (1993, 1994, 1995, 1999), Arnold (1981, 1982), Bjornson (1991), and Kreiger (1996).

exacerbate such eclipsing by classifying and treating all of Cameroon literature under the broad rubric of French African Literature²

The Cameroon republic today (known in French as La République du Cameroun), is made up of two formerly federated states, Southern Cameroons and East Cameroun, that united into a United Republic of Cameroon following a United Nation's organized plebiscite in February 1961. The former Southern Cameroons State which was formerly a UN's Trust territory under Britain speaks English, while the majority former East Cameroun, which was a former UN's Trust territory under France speaks French. But even before these two regions became Trust territories under the UN, they were a German Protectorate called Kamerun, which the Germans lost to the Allied Forces following their defeat in the First World War. Since 1961, but particularly, after the window-dressing Referendum of 1972 which former president Ahmadou Ahidjo organized and won by 99.99% to validate (the imposition of) the Unitary State, a high-handed autocracy with the counsel and support of imperialist alliances, have continued an organized raping of the communality and all its democratic institutions.

I recall that before 1966 and the stage-managed 1972 Referendum for a Unitary State, the two Cameroons were existing as federated states, with two educational systems, two administrative and legal systems—the one using the French Napoleonic Codes, and the other the British Common Law System. In 1982, former president Ahmadou Ahidjo, for reasons, which to this day, are still hypothetical, resigned his office as president of the United Republic of Cameroon, and handed over power to Mr. Paul Biya. In July 1984, president Biya, through a presidential decree, unilaterally reverted the name of the country from the United Republic of Cameroon to la République du Cameroun—the name under which former East Cameroun gained its independence from France, and

² This is the kind of classification which Banham et. al. (1976, 1994) for example, give to Cameroon theater. Cameroon's Godfrey Tangwa has dismissed Banham et. al. (1994), writing that: "as a reference book on theater in Cameroon, the book is worse than useless." (1999).

membership of the United Nations. By doing this, "la Republique du Cameroun has wrongly presumed to be the de facto successor state to the Federal Republic of Cameroon which was constituted by the union of the Southern Cameroons and la République du Cameroun." (Foncha et. al 3)

And, to this day, the vast majority of the Cameroonian populace, in spite of their bounteous resources, find themselves caught up under the banner of National Unity and Integration, totally alienated from the production process in their country. While, for example, it is true that the vast wealth of the country (Timber and Petroleum) comes from the English-speaking parts, it is paradoxically also true that the roads and infrastructure of this area suffer an almost complete neglect. To use the graphic description of Bate Besong, the people from this area have been:

subjected to perpetual mental and psychological servitude, they are the storybook victims of a cultural holocaust...an embattled people caught in the terrifying coils of a world beyond their comprehension...the product of an age of profound discontent...profoundly afflicted by cataclysmic changes and traumas... hollow men without speech, fighting against titanic odds. ("Season of Diaspora ..."16)

We recall that, of all imperialist forces in contemporary Cameroon, it is the French that had, and still is clearly visible on the socio-economic and political landscape; and supports directly the various dictatorships. Rotcod Gobata writes that "Cameroon is overwhelmingly composed of little Frenchmen, pupils of French mentors who believe that without the French they are finished" (66). At the beginning of the democratic struggle in Cameroon in the early 1990s, French politicians and the so called "Strategists for African Affairs" declared that it was improbable and impossible that France supports an English-speaking Cameroonian as president, if that came to pass. Today, it is an open bitter political reality in Cameroon that English-speaking Cameroonians do not get appointed to head strategic ministries (such as Finance, Education, Interior, Defense,

Justice) and/or corporations in charge of Petroleum, Energy and Water. Instead, they are appointed, in most cases, only as assistants to their French-speaking "compatriots" who make and take all decisions. Emmanuel F. Doh has condensed all these recollections in the following apt description:

It is by now fairly obvious that although the Francophones and Anglophones of this nation live side by side, with far-fetched national policies of integration, the plight of the Anglophone Cameroonian is peculiar to his group. Today, the fate of the Anglophone Cameroonian is hardly different from that of Africans when the so called Colonial masters were openly in control. Because of his minority status, the Anglophone is a second class citizen who is watched, always suspected. He is one on whom strange policies and superficial gibberish which preach the "national good", but are indeed meant to alienate him from his heritage, are imposed. Anglophone Cameroonians, earlier colonized by the white man, is once again a victim of "colonization" but, this time, his colonizer is his former partner with whom he served, and were together tormented and exploited by the colonialist. The Anglophone sees himself today in a social, political and cultural marriage in which the couple is incompatible, for the idea of marriage as a give and take does not apply to this "home" ...once beautifully structured Anglophone social system, political and cultural bastion is today in ruins (77-78).

But I must quickly point out that the problem in Cameroon, especially as it concerns the Anglophone Cameroonian, is not with his "brother" the Francophone, per se. The problem is with the demonstrable bold-faced intolerance of its leaders, the absence of political morality, and the institutionalization of political lunacy and eating. Plus: the unbearable ubiquitous interference of the French in the politics and economy of the country. All these have combined to be drifting the union to a near complete state of anemia; a universe devoid of love and spirituality. It is within such a background of unparalleled diversity, marginality, deprivations and betrayals of faith, that contemporary

Anglophone Cameroon Literature, but especially drama and theater is launched, with the hopes of propelling the victimized into makers and shapers of their collective destiny.

Dramatic compositions in Anglophone Cameroon then, is a reactive response to such a cultural holocaust, a response to the diabolic maneuvers of "home annexationists" and their neocolonial bosses. As an independent body of artistic and creative reconstruction whose *métier* is to condemn and change the leprous human conditions under which the citizens are subjected, the drama transmutes human evil and greed into an imaginative art form that is at once revolutionary, people-oriented and imbued with lots of positive projections. The drama becomes an opprobrium on the one hand, and a hope on the other.

In this connection, the plays I have chosen to comment on here draw their energies from a vision of the marginality, and attempt to dismantle and defer notions of hegemonies whose repressive strategies abound. The overriding intention in the drama being not just to record atrocities, but to recreate a truthful and harmonious experience of humanity's confrontation with history, and transform that history from its shrunk state to a more humanizing actuality. The Anglophone dramatists I have chosen for a brief commentary here are Babila Mutia, Epie Ngome, Bate Besong and Bole Butake.

Babila Mutia's *Before This Time, Yesterday* is a recreation of the "before", "yesterday" and "today" of the Cameroon republic. The play takes us back to the annihilations and betrayals of whole villages by agents of the blue, red and white flag during the time of the battle for independence, and then comments on that evolution. The experiences then, and the state of affairs in the play's present are responsible for the psychological and political imbalances that beset the actions and motives of its characters. Nothing has changed, Mutia tells us through one of his character, Abassa:

What was a flag and national anthem when our people had no political and economic freedom?...The kind of independence the colonialists gave us

was one without the right to control our destiny....Nothing has changed Sango. Look around the country, has anything changed? It is still the same men, the same partnerships collaborating with the imperialists...But this time the exploitation has become more vicious. Yesterday and today, it's still the same faces....Ours is a lost generation." (33-36)

Epie Ngome's play, *What God Has Put Asunder* is an artistic articulation and peep into the truncated historical contours that make the union of former West Cameroon and la République du Cameroun. The play chronicles and incorporates the political and economic maneuvers, the betrayals, deceits and exploitation of the players in the union as an attempt to explain that past, which continues to affect the marriage today. In the play's heroine, Weka (symbolically representing West kamerun), her husband, Garba, whom she marries reluctantly (symbolically representing East Cameroun), Louis, her husband's mentor and chief consultant on all issues (representing France), her guardian at the Orphanage, Rev. Gordon (symbolically representing Britain during the Trusteeship), and the officiating priest at the wedding, Rev. UNOR (symbolically representing the United Nations at the Plebiscite), we read a well composed political/historical allegory of the evolution and formation of today's Cameroon republic. This is a play about the growth of Weka in a malicious and predatory environment, with the forces of darkness everywhere.

At the surface level, *What God Has Put Asunder* may just be about marital incompatibility. But read closely, the play reveals and attacks the forces and issues that compound the essence and growth of the union. Bate Besong has remarked that by creating the metaphor of unequal marriage in his play, Ngome attacks the domineering Francophone influence over the minority Anglophone population of Cameroon, and lampoons the notion of national unity and the national mission (Historicity 49).

Bate Besong's rendering of the state of the union in his own theater is couched in more direct, frontal and disgusting images of sprawling men in a state of total decay. His setting is now—the new republic. Although the overriding picture of the human condition

in the new dispensation that Besong paints is shattering, there is some hope that the situation may never remain the same throughout. The Night Soil Men, Blindman and Cripple in *Beasts of No Nation*, very much like the depersonalized creatures in Soyinka's *Madmen and Specialists* and the minions/sub humans in Beckett's *Endgame*, are a representation of the marginal, despised and exploited in the beastly Ednuoay universe, reduced to despicable terms by the dramatist's grim and fecal images. The major problem of the Night Soil Men in *Beasts of No Nation* is that they want professional identification papers which their leaders do not want to issue; yet these leaders grow fat out of the toil of the Night Soil Men, and horde Ednuoayan money into coded accounts overseas. Here is one of the songs the Night Soil Men sing to explain the situation in the not too fictional society of the play called Ednuoay:

Solo: I fit bury one thousand million for my ceiling

I fit bury même ten thousand million for my ceiling

All: Because Ednuoay city don spoil-oh

Because Ednuoay city don spoil-oh...³

(*Beasts of No Nation* 15)

Judging from this song and others in the play, one observes that the culture of eating, stealing and embezzling are institutionalized in the fictional Ednuoay setting—a setting which becomes the capital city—Yaounde, if we spell the word EDNUOAY from right to left.

In *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* and in *The Banquet*, the world that Besong represents is one made up of demented and bloody leaders with an iron grip on the citizenry. While the drama powerfully captures the political tragedy of Cameroon, it also dramatizes the afflictions and mockery of the country's flag independence in the hands of neocolonial French imperialism. The neocolonial forces are at work everywhere in the

³ I can hide one thousand million at the roof of my house. I can even hide ten thousand millions at the roof of my house. Because there is no accountability in the city of Ednuoay.

play. What the dramatist does, however, is that, he subverts the forces of attrition, and foregrounds a reconstruction from the homestead of the oppressed. As revolutionary dramatist bent on exposing the truths about the ogres preying on others, the dramatist evolves a form that accentuates truths from the perspective of the hostage majority, and then re-appropriates a discourse which is people-oriented.

Bole Butake's recent play, *Dance of the Vampires* cuts across most of the central issues that his dramaturgy impales: graft, venality, myopia, drunkenness, avarice and nonchalance. Psaul Roi, His Most Royal Majestic Majesty in this play, becomes really drunk with power and rules only by edicts and ordinances. We hear him, for instance, announce: "The best part of my job as a monarch is signing and sealing Instruments and Proclamations. It is the only moment in my life when I have a feeling of fulfillment. It is like having an orgasm" (158). Nformi, the Army General, who will eventually step in with a military option to arrest the excesses of Psaul Roi laments the manner in which the country is run: "Here" he says, "we think only His Most Royal Majesty because we are frightened of his Royal Edicts, Instruments and Proclamations" (166). Although the emissary of the kingdom of Albinia, Albino complains that he has never seen "such degeneracy, such baseness, such bestiality and nonchalance all combined in one man, the monarch" (166), unfolding events in the play soon reveal him as another exploiter. Butake's diatribe in the play is caustic and terse, becoming an overt assault on the assailant.

We find in this play, as we find in his other plays: *Lake God*, *The Survivors*, *And Palm wine Will Flow* and *Shoes and Four Men in Arms*⁴ a pitting of liberation aesthetics against hegemonic dictatorship. In Butake's theater, we find a storybook of a community undergoing rapid socio-economic, political and historical transformation. In this vein, we

⁴ These plays are all found in a recent edition of his mainstream theater titled *Lake God and Other Plays* (1999). All references to Butake's theater in this paper are from this collection of plays.

are reminded of the Latin-American writer—Eduardo Galeano, who, writing about the militarization of power in Argentina, said:

If we recognize a certain continuity between the stage of domination and the stage of liberation in any socio-historical process, then why deny the importance of literature in its possible revolutionary functions of exploring, rebelling, and disseminating our true identity or its thousand possible projections?" (15)

From this brief discussion, Anglophone Cameroon drama comes across as another voice in the battle for political and economic reforms/liberties...another voice that demands a radical transformation of society. The works of the dramatists which I have briefly examined here do not only proffer a mirror-like reflection of the playwrights' society, the works move into the mirror and offer a deeper ferment in the ideological struggle and in the battle for communal and individual self-actualization and redefinition..

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