“Anglophone Cameroon Literature at Crossroads: An Interview with Dr. Bate Besong”

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Anglophone Cameroon Literature is there to awaken us from our usual torpor. It testifies to the undiminished intellectual life of the homeland. Every homeland – as you’ll recall – always needs a voice in writing and print; and Anglophone literature, created, in the service of Humanity, shuns, the concerns of the fragmentary, neo-colonial elite and deals with the experiences of the marginalized in Cameroonian society; workers, the urban and rural masses.

The author of ten plays and five collection of poems, Bate Besong is, without doubt, one of the most representative and regular writers of what might be referred to as the second generation of the emergent Cameroonian literature in English. He was born in Nigeria of Cameroonian parents and did his Secondary and University education in Wole Soyinka’s country where several anthologies and literary works, as well as distinguished literary and academic bodies readily regard him as a Nigerian. He has been a Lecturer in the English Department of the University of Buea since the mid-nineties, and is well known for his uncompromising stance and incisive statements, which have earned him both friends and foes. He is a very popular figure amongst the educated Anglophone youths but cannot be tolerated by a majority of the Anglophone intelligentsia. A dreaded polemist whom some observers do not hesitate to compare to Mongo Beti, the author of Obasinjom Warrior with Poems after Detention is ultimately the emblematic figure of a Cameroonian literature in English; a literature which is in search of its imprint and which is at the same time piercing and incisive, tender and soothing, and controversial. He was interviewed by Pierre Fandio.

Pierre Fandio: I am not going to ask you the ritual question regarding the existence or non-existence of Cameroonian literature in English because it is undeniable that Cameroonians whose first language is English have produced and continue to produce literary works. However, what many scholars would like to know is how one should designate this literature: Cameroon English-speaking literature, Cameroon literature of English expression, Cameroon Anglophone writing, or what?

Bate Besong: In Cameroon, the neo-colonial power structure dates back to Foumban and you cannot understand its nature without a firm grasp of how the Plebiscite that led to the Re-Unification of the “... two, equal unifying parts”, evolved. Our present culture of “national integration” has been deliberately handed down by the Quai d’Orsay to ensure our annihilation. The Gaullists installed a puppet ruling class within the fledgling francophone and Anglophone bourgeoisie, for the continuous exploitation of Cameroon. This has left unsalutary pockmarks on

1 A French language version of this interview appeared in Africultures (n°60 - septembre 2004) under the title: « La littérature anglophone camerounaise à la croisée des chemins », entrevue avec Bate Besong.
http://www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=revue_login&no=3510&gauche=1

http://www.batebesong.com/
the threshold of our history. Exploitation and control of production is being done for the interest of these askari-elite in collusion with its overseas overseers. The struggle for national liberation has therefore become more imperative, particularly, on the cultural front. Derek Walcott wrote somewhere that “A writer dies inside when he betrays, like a paid spy, the rhythms of his people”.

ANGLOPHONE CAMEROON LITERATURE, on its part, is a creative and imaginative reflection of the above. It is a literature that involves a paradigm shift since it must convey the totality of experience; thereby giving voice to the traumatic dislocation that the post-Foumban, disequilibrium engendered.

Pierre Fandio: How would you therefore categorize the patterns and specific trends of Anglophone Cameroon Literature?

Bate Besong: Everything that the writer does is a product of his consciousness springing from the principles guiding social consciousness that produces specific interpretation of the social phenomena. In Dance of the Vampires, Shoes and Four Men in Arms, as well as in And Palm-Wine Will Flow, Bole Butake has employed the revolutionary potential of the theatrical medium to make firm political statements. But, quite often, as in Lake God and The Survivors, he retreats into individualism, formalism and mysticism when confronted by the shortcomings of the neo-colonial situation. Anne Tanyi Tang who has just announced her presence in Ewa & Other Plays, etc falls within the liberal humanist category. There is Linus Asong Tongwo, Francis Nyamnjoh, Tah Asongwed, Fru Doh, Nol Alembong...

I draw all my main characters as you had earlier pointed out in one of your papers2, from the lower classes. The way I present my hero(es) is different from say Ba’bila Mutia, Victor Epie Ngome or John Nkomnong Nkengasong for instance. I believe in collaborative effort, thus I present characters whose heroism is quite often sanctioned from within as you find for instance in Requiem for the last Kaiser and The Banquet. But, again, not in Change Waka or Once upon Great Lepers...

Pierre Fandio: Observers usually divide “Anglophone Cameroon Writers” into two generations; an earlier generation that existed before the 1980s and another that came into being after the 80s. While the first could be said to have addressed the preoccupations of the English-speaking community in an allusive manner (except Dr Bernard Fonlon’s works), the second could be regarded as the defender of the community. What, according to the writer and the scholar Bate Besong, explains these trends?

Bate Besong: The influence of Dr. Bernard Fonlon is negligible on contemporary Anglophone writing. His manifesto on creative writing as the diktat for a minority sanitized literature, is a defence of the arts for arts pedigree. Although, he is often quoted by bourgeois scholars for his loud defence of classical and neo-classical tenets, no writer of my generation has heeded to his call. This kind of writing could not usher in any structural changes needed in the society because

it often neglected the major issues of Cameroonian society, which are purely socio-economic. Mao Tse Tung pithily reminds us that: Ignorant of their own society, some people can only relate tales of Greece and other foreign lands.

The alternative literature that we write, with apologies to no one, is people-oriented literature, and this entails a dialectical approach of looking at society from the materialist angle, and unearthing the contradictions which bring about discrimination, injustice, exploitation, and marginalisation in Cameroonian society... We question those in authority. We know that under a dictatorship, a nation dies... We prefer bald statement to enfeebled imitation. We are no one’s catspaws.

Pierre Fandio: How can one explain the fact that English-speaking Cameroonians in the Diaspora participate rather timidly in the literary or intellectual life of the country whereas those resident in the country are so active?

Bate Besong: Writers who have left are those who turned their backs resolutely, to this ghettosisation... There will no longer be any attempt to anaesthetize him, to turn him comatose in the claustrophobic public service system – He no longer suffers from the admonitions of insolently patronizing party officials who are in command positions at every level of national life. Mr. Biya has just completed his 22nd year in office. As the “Natural Candidate” for the ruling CPDM party, he is offering himself for another 7 years mandate or perhaps a Life Presidency. If I had a choice in this matter, I too would leave, but where I stand I do not have any choice. The writer in Cameroon is saddled with numerous problems that include the personal, the social, the economic and the political – but the only solution is to continue writing in spite of these impediments. In the context in which I find myself, the writer who must be free has no choice really but to run great risks. Quite frankly, the Cameroonian nation has not been founded. The artist must go beyond the confines of his own immediate constituency, his own class in order to give sufficient insight into the lives of characters and into their responses to the events and problems that plague Mr. Biya’s turf.

Pierre Fandio: One has the impression that Anglophone Cameroon Literature is little known not only by the « traditional » processes of recognition (school syllabus, literary awards, etc.) but also by most critics across the Mungo. What do you think is the reason for this situation?

Bate Besong: “New Deal” politics has been a disruptive phenomenon. It excludes rather than includes social elements whose perception of reality is diametrically opposed to its worldview. The writer of my generation questions history, questions his environment, and questions people in authority. He uses his talents if I may put it crudely – to call things by their names, including the old aphorism that the emperor has no clothes. He has therefore been unpopular with the power-besotted men at the Ministry of the Education. Thus, while he has won honours and literary prizes abroad, under a wastrel and nepotistic landscape, he is condemned to the ghetto of humiliation, physical abuse, and kidnappings... His name is anathema. And, like in North Korea, he meets the President’s men, even in the air he breathes.

We need the necessary perspicacity of vision and ability to domesticate, in school curricula, for the benefit of the present and future generations, the two colonial perspectives to suit the temper and subjectivities of the envisaged Cameroonian commonwealth. Otherwise, if I may borrow...
from Jimmy Baldwin: **in the fire next time**... No one wants to be integrated into a burning house!

**Pierre Fandio:** *When one goes through many works of art in English, especially those of the second generation to which you prominently belong, one notices that Cameroon is metaphorically described as being made up of two irreconcilable entities that share almost no common values; two communities that “God put asunder”, to paraphrase Victor Epie Ngome. Isn’t this an extremist view?*

**Bate Besong:** It is often said that all arts is propaganda, but not all propaganda is arts. (pause) It is the mediocrity of the “critics” that has given rise to such a flawed perception. Victor Epie Ngome’s *What God Has Put Asunder*, for instance, is an act of cultural homeopathy. The drama could be applicable to any African society in which the fears raised in *Asunder* examine: Darfur in the Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, apartheid South Africa before Mandela etc. Now, if we examine the implications of this response, what we perceive, is, how contradictory social relations are applicable, in a re-colonised society.

Many of the critics across the Mungo – you earlier referred to – are tarnished beyond all possibility of apologetic polishing. Even the most mediocre of these “scholars”, whose command of the English language is at a very rudimentary level; indeed, a little better than the Yaoundé Mokolo market *bouam-sellam* ascribes to himself an Aristotelian demeanour when describing the aesthetics of Anglophone Cameroon writing. This brand of fragile intellects has therefore been unable as it were to glimpse beneath the surface of the artwork in order to critically examine the metaphorical currents, and artistic strands that shape the creative process.

**Pierre Fandio:** *Let’s now talk about your works and your views on Anglophone Cameroon Literature. First of all, I’d like to point out the fact that in your texts, you systematically prefer to use French acronyms (SONARA, CENER, etc.) rather than their English equivalents, even when they exist; in the same vein, while naming functions or titles in the Cameroonian administration, your prefer literal translations from French rather than the English equivalent. It is obvious, for example that you know that “chief of service” is referred to as a “service head” in English, or that the “Commissaire de Police” is indeed a « commissioner of police » etc. Nobody can believe that you do not have reasons for this!*

**Bate Besong:** The writer in our time straddles different worlds. He picks and chooses from all traditions. Besides, language commands a special attention with an inventive writer engaged for instance in exposing personalist authority, exclusivist sentiments, infrastructural mutations, and narrow-minded irredentism.

I am addressing a mixed up, eclectic and uprooted francophone and Anglophone audience; one which has been impoverished by classical colonialism.... I therefore endeavour to communicate something of lasting value... Is the present method of governance for instance not an indication of our collective failure as a nation that in spite of the enormous human and material resources at our disposal, we cannot rise above our slave mentality borne out of criminal acquiescence by those who suffer from a hangover of the proclivities of what Jean Paul Sartre refers to as the “thenon ?” The writer is looking forward to the time when the Cameroonian federation will be
back on the road of an all-inclusive reconstruction, to the extent that no dichotomy will exist between the leader and those who are now left in the lurch.

**Pierre Fandio:** A quick appraisal of the critique by Cameroon English-speaking scholars of literary works in English gives the impression that the critique is less about literary criticism and more about a “settling of scores” between two or more « camps » or factions on the basis of ideology, politics, and ethnicity (Bate Besong vs. Ako, Bate Besong vs. Talla, Mutia vs. Eyoh, Bate Besong vs. Eyoh, etc.) If this observation bears any element of truth, to what extent do these “battles” serve the interest of this literature? Why?

**Bate Besong:** The history of Anglophone writing is, in fact, the attempt to provide a fictional representation of the history of a people subjugated under Ahmadou Ahidjo’s feudalist imperialism and, now, under over two decades of the dwarf vision of the “New” Deal. Art provides the writer the arena in which to explore political ideas as refracted through human character. Literature deals with human beings and their relationships over time in space. The Anglophone writer in Cameroon dramatizes the predicaments of the Cameroonian people so that they can see the choices and choose right.

The career of the Anglophone critics you refer to have, in every material particular, played, to the hilt the roles of undertakers and home-guards to that aesthetic experience. Reactionary and stodgy in scholarly orientation, they have been incapable of making the necessary passage. They are in, but not of these times, and thus insensitive to many of the most important forces that played above their heads. These Anglophone cultural mutants find themselves caught between the interests of their people and the commands of the CPDM political party to which they have sworn allegiance to... Two contradictory ideological world views that are mutually opposed. It is a tragedy that graphically illustrates the dilemma of the Anglophone politician in the ivory tower masquerading as the cultural frontiersman, yet whose world outlook is replete with contradictions and split visions. The forty years thick political cloud Ahidjo and Monsieur Focart created is now giving way to clarity. Thank God the writer has not died of self-immolation.

**Pierre Fandio:** Don’t you think it is urgent to have an “external” view or a critical look at this to avoid the literature degenerating into new ghettos?

**Bate Besong:** Some of the most robust defence of Anglophone literature has come from the work of scholar-critics of global reknown : Chris Dunton, Bernth Lindfors, Abioseh Michael Porter, Eckhard Breitinger, Onookome Okome, M’Bare N’Gom. They have demonstrated empathy and ethical commitment, but above all critical conscience. One also feels consoled that the *Encyclopaedia of African Literature* (Routledge, 2003) edited by the erudite Professor Simon Gikandi has firmly placed that literature on the world’s stage. Clearly then, this is the illustration of the prophet not being honoured at home.

**Pierre Fandio:** What is your reaction to the view that Anglophone Cameroon Literature is essentially « bourgeois literature » insofar as its main actors seem disconnected from the masses?

**Bate Besong:** That will be an improper reading... That will be an uninformed and thus a jaundiced perception of that literature which from time to time, I have been involved in
controversy... The most exalted bourgeois scholar-writer in the anglo-saxon world has been T.S. Eliot. His compass for both the critic and the writer require serious attention: a) a keen aesthetic sensibility; b) a sense of tradition involving reason and passion in the aesthetic experience; c) a sensuous particularity in the use of language.

The Anglophone writer of my generation if we borrow a phrase from Ngugi Wa Thiong’O’s useful categorization is, “a writer in politics.” Politics, as we know, enters literature when the writer’s concern with the public welfare is dominant. It is the most obvious subject for him to demonstrate that the cultivation of humanizing values is a permanent coda of his art. The Anglophone writer, in Cameroon, is a social force and derives his credibility from the degree of attachment to his people. He changes his way of thinking and the focus of his analysis in accordance with the shifts of transformations in the people’s quality of life, their concrete needs and aspirations. We get close to a scientific analysis of that literature if we base our distinctions on features informed by ideological considerations.

Pierre Fandio: For almost a decade now, the University of Buea, which was created on the basis of an English tradition, is transforming Buea into the intellectual and cultural capital of English-speaking Cameroon. What role do you think the university should play in the process? How far does the University of Buea play this role?

Bate Besong: How power is shared and wielded through its apparatus and institutions is a major concern to all African writers... If the most important function of the Anglophone writer, in a highly lopsided North Korean-like situation like Cameroon, as we have tried to register above, is to induce people to reflect upon the condition of their lives, to raise their consciousness so that they can begin to ask why things are as they are, why things are going wrong, Alexander Solzhenityn’s declaration that “For a country to have a great writer is like having another government. That is why no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones” becomes, very instructive.

We identify the usefulness of history for giving a sense of identity to an emergent people. We are involved in creativity which prods the conscience of society which changes the relationships and perceptions of the world. Besides, Aristophanes advises that “the dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should be a teacher of morality and political adviser.”

In short, a study of art and ideology in any publication, in an African university, cannot be separated from the contexts which gave that specific literature its initial and current imperatives... Not too long ago, we saw the pedestrian logic in the wholly ad hominem guffaws, on my work and person, masquerading as post-colonial critical scholarship in Epasa Moto. Even today, the blindness of the editor of the University of Buea Pravda is reflected in ways that would have been amusing, had not the consequences been so tragic for Cameroon literature in particular, and African literature in general. Not once in the recent memory of this University has Epasa Moto carried critical, well-informed articles which underscore the historical sutures, which our writers felt needed to be addressed through the healing power of the imagination. Epasa Moto and its one-man editorial board deserve each other.

Pierre Fandio: In an increasing number of the English language literature published in recent years, the linguistic or cultural opposition (that is itself questionable) between the two
sides of the Mungo River, seems to turn into ideological or « ethnical » drama where roles are generally defined in advance: the « frogs »³ are referred to as the “bad” whereas « gentlemen » are the “good”. Can one not blame this literature for reproducing in Cameroon, the simplistic model of the Senghorian Negritude approach with… a 40 years lapse?

Bate Besong: The answers to literary problems must come from systematic research. We are writing within a society that does not even attempt to mask the mechanisms of occupation and social injustice, and where democracy has become a circus. We belong to a particular time and a particular culture that has spawned wolf-like personalities like Emah Basile and Ibrahim Mbombo Njoea. Not too long ago these scions of the CPDM regime taunted Anglophone Cameroonians people, in the official Yaoundé radio, as «les ennemies dans la maison».

We were urged to leave La République du Cameroun. We do not have the Hamas. We are Palestinians without a fedayeen, without suicide-bombers... We do not have a Dr. Abdulazeez Rantisi... As critics we must try to see the work as a totality, a gestalt, a configuration, a whole... What may be effective in one particular time and particular culture may not be so effective in another.

The theatre can be a spiritually liberating and redeeming force in our world. It can offer profound insights into man’s imaginative, psychological, and, ultimately, moral being. Formalism is not bad, but a certain kind of formalism is unwarranted. Beasts of no Nation, for instance, is a product of the prevailing social system of the time and of the economic realities that kept it in force. But so far “criticism” has largely confined itself with trying to lay down laws about what a dramatist could or could not write such as the futile and self serving propaganda by Peter Alange Abety and Edward Oben Ako in Epasa Moto⁴.

Pierre Fandio: For a great number of your colleagues (Butake, Epie, Mutia, etc.), this “incompatibility” is rather presented in a metaphorical or even allusive manner while in Bate Besong's works, it is brutal or even shocking...

Bate Besong: I agree completely with Wole Soyinka that we should use words to punch holes inside people, to make sure that we “explode something inside them which is a parallel of the sordidness which they ignore outside.” Remember that since Aristotle what is important in art is a vivid evocation of the human condition so as to enlist audience identification and participation. This is what leads to catharsis as in Marxist art that ensures that questions are raised not on individual terms alone but also on what the group can do.

A decision between good and bad art – since the aesthetic value remains paramount - is the unavoidable task of criticism. There must be recognition of the need for artistic nature in drama. Art must persuade the individual audience first. The central question of criticism is Quality! Political action may be utopia.


Pierre Fandio: Contrary to the first generation of Cameroon English-speaking writers and even some of the second generation, your works at times look like a conscious deconstruction of the English phraseology or semantics. You as well, sometimes in the same sentence, use different idioms such as the Bakossi as well as the Beti, the French language, etc. with the English which you master. If this could link up the text into the context (Cameroon of the 80s and later), isn’t this situation capable of facilitating misunderstanding or even preventing those who don’t share the same culture with the writer from fully receiving your message?

Bate Besong: The reader is wrong when he judges a work only if its message is political and “accessible”. You judge a work by asking: (a) Is the vision of man involved in Bate Besong’s The Achwiimgbe Trilogy profound? (b) Is its communication as profound as Longinus advises? Political rightness or background information is not a critical criterion. We must avoid committing the same errors that the early expatriate critics of African literature did thereby emphasizing the anthropological and sociological rather than the aesthetic basis of that literature... In paying attention to what constitute the landmarks, epochs, stages or watersheds in my society’s socio-economic and political situation over time, I have paid great attention to form, coherence, unity, organicity, the sensitive weighing of qualities etc. And, although it is through the analysis of reality that I can participate in the advancement of my country, I am primarily an artist. I do not relent in the diligent pursuit of my work as an artist.

Pierre Fandio: This leads us to a ritual or usual question: for whom does Bate Besong write?

Bate Besong: It is always a useful and instructive exercise to weigh the relative strengths and the weaknesses of the various approaches before committing oneself to an evaluation of this aesthetic experience. Literature uses language in a special manner, and as I said earlier, the functions of criticism are legion.

There is no substitute for reading and re-reading Change Waka or Just above Cameroon... The Banquet conveys a valid form of knowledge... just like in Once Upon Great Lepers... and as a communicator of truths incomunicable on other terms than those of the language of literature. Each new work of art, according to T.S. Eliot, adds to and at the same time redefines a tradition which is so much greater than the individuals who contribute to it... Certain basic qualities are therefore essential in reading Bate Besong and the job of the literary critic – as the intermediary between Bate Besong and the reader – is primarily to assess the extent to which they are present in The Achwiimgbe Trilogy, for instance.

Just this morning, I read in the newspapers the Roman Catholic cleric, the Archbishop of Douala, the Rt. Rev. Cardinal Christian Wyghan Tumi, stating that one of Biya’s ministers owns, a foreign bank account worth a little over FCFA 500 billion... How do you fictionalize that? In a society where the annual research allowance of a University Lecturer is barely 100,000 frs CFA and this trifle is being owed him in arrears... ? A frightening sum of money, you’ll admit. Since 1993, civil servants salaries have been slashed by over 75 % on the pretext that the nation is fighting a world recession. Not too long ago, at the premises of the Social Insurance, CNPS, Yaoundé, Joseph Désiré Engo, trained water pylons on retired civil service men... As a writer you are influenced by what you like... and what you do not like.
So, it is only by going to the roots of this ramshackled new-colonial superstructure on which our society is based and this entails a dialectical approach of looking at Cameroonian history – on which my works draw much of its material – from a materialist angle, and unearthing the cancer which brings about this kind of apartheid and injustice.

In examining the works of Bate Besong the aspiring critic should therefore weigh his options very carefully and not commit himself readily to any single approach no matter how attractive superficially... so if you need to see what secret propositions about drama/literature that I am trying to sell about literature, go to the critical efforts of Professor Sammy Beban Chumbow, Drs Nalova Lyonga, George Ndifontah Nyamndi, Sarah Anyang, Henry Kah Jick, Hilarious N. Ambe, Anne Tanyi Tang, Professor Simo Bobda... Alfred Matumamboh, Professor S. A. Ambanasom...

**Pierre Fandio:** The onomastics in your works seem to be incontestably a result of a lot of research, which, from the critical point of view, is rather quite interesting and exciting. In that regard, you seem to be very angry with politicians you often caricature naughtily: Akhikirkikii alias the Deity of Agidigidi, Françoise Hyppopo alias the People's CFA 1.5 Billiard Wife, Holy Prophet Atangana alias Monsignor the Marabout and Andze Abessolo alias Career Toe-Breaker and Torturer, Harl Ngongo alias Iduote Frog Mouthed Laureate; while the characters from the lower classes who seem to have your preference are generally anonymous: Blindman, Cripple, Woman, Boy, Night Soil Men, Workers, Minority Nnyanyen. This choice is far from being fortuitous.

**Bate Besong:** Immanuel Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement* argued long ago that meaning is inseparable from value in the aesthetic transaction. The ideal of a neutral scientific objectivity in literary studies in simply a chimera, a delusion… I place emphasis on the wretched of the earth as true makers of the new society. One with new visions and ideals about an acceptable, democratic, humanistic and Cameroonian-oriented mode of production and structure of social relation, through an innovative and refreshing socio-political compass. I identify myself with those progressive forces in my society who are calling for a leadership that is made up of a front-line nationalist with a steely resilience, honed in democratic zeal, and who will propel the Cameroonian people to redefine their individual as well as their national focus and aspirations.

Marx was sophisticated enough to recognise that works are as much a product of the social and economic conditions in which they were created as any other artefact of human effort... Thus, in a play like *The Banquet* where I have fictionalized the French political class: Balladur, Beregovoy, Monsieur Le Pen, Chirac, François Mitterand, Pasqua, I have tried to re-direct attention that will bring about a clean break, a total and fundamental re-ordering of priorities based on an entirely new socio-economic charter. For, only when a political and economic settlement has been secured can Cameroonian culture and literature in particular, be able to flourish.

**Pierre Fandio:** A “first level” reading of Requiem for the Last Kaiser, Beasts of no Nation, etc. could give the impression that only your French-speaking compatriots constitute this fauna of the predators who, in 40 years of independence, have transformed the life of their compatriots into permanent nightmares. What is your reaction to this?

**Bate Besong:** In our attempt to define the highest qualities of the aesthetic experience, we must always remember that its evaluation should go side by side with an interest in other areas of
historical, social, artistic, cultural, political knowledge all of which might be projected with a certain colouring. By exploring the denotative as well as the connotative dimensions of words, phrases, metaphors, cluster of images and symbols, context etc, the critic of Beasts of no Nation or Requiem for the Last Kaiser comes close to identifying the overall form of each of these plays. It is therefore always instructive to examine the language of literature through a process of close analysis.

Now to your implied question. The inverted relationship between the francophone majority and the Anglophone minority since Re-Unification has been a product of false consciousness. Francophone rhetoric functioned to secure the parochial interests of the home-guard, settler minority regime since 1972. Liberation from the francophone-anglophone dichotomy cannot be achieved by the francophone elite such as the well-meaning but often misdirected Ambroise Kom, imbibing, the stereotypes of the regime, but by exposing the ideological foundations on which the club which funds fraudulent organisations like Moïse Albert Njambe’s S.O.S Dialogue⁵, has, been built. Everybody has a stake in the Cameroonian project, and no section of the country should be allowed to hold the country to ransom. The situation will call for firmness on the part of those who will be vested with authority in a re-fashioned Cameroon. I do not therefore conceal my own conviction that it is Anglophone literature which is stating and reaffirming many of the basic truths to which the envisaged Cameroonian federation will have to return to.

Pierre Fandio: I cannot end this interview without asking you to comment on a few extracts from some of your creatures that sound either like provocations or warnings. e.g.,: “What the rich thief has put together, let no poor jaguda man put asunder » (Beasts, p.1) ; “We must break the chains that hold us in bondage.” (Requiem, 5); “The poor people of today are no longer as patient as those of old, Amougou Atangana; they will no longer sit by and watch the maracana’a vicars and their French allies prosper while their children go naked and hungry; they’ll not sit meekly and pray for those who have sold out to neo-colonial bribery” (Requiem, 13).

Bate Besong: I do not think that I should answer that question. Beasts of no Nation was directed and produced at the Amphi 700⁶ on the World Theatre Day, 23 March, 1991 by the playwright and Theatre Director, Professor Bole Butake. Elsewhere, I have written at length on why Jean-Stephane Biatcha the inflated balloon whose preposterous fiction 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; a victim of stomping tantrums, close surveillance, physical and verbal abuse. My work will be banned in classrooms, on stage and on television. That ban was only semi-officially... lifted, in March 2004! 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 and semi-sadist, Jean-Stephane Biatcha, has entered the club of Civil-Servant Billionaires! But, in Africa, a Captain Dreyfus you know never needs pardon from “extenuating circumstances!”

⁵ A local NGO
⁶ At the University of Yaoundé Campus
Pierre Fandio: If one were to refer to you as “Anglophone Mongo Beti”, what will be your reaction?

Bate Besong: Truly, one of the titans of the first generation who opposed colonialism and often stood for freedom and independence. He never compromised. He never made deals with Focart, with Raymond Marcellin, with Ahidjo or with Paul Biya, even in death!

He has achieved fame in literature pantheons because in his art you find a successful blend of passion and intelligence... A sense of rhythm. And, as I said at his funeral, at Akometam, he remains the writer’s writer. Before him, you must genuflect if your art is going to be politically correct and aesthetically satisfying. Voltaire... Montesquieu. Good bye, brave and indomitable legend!

Pierre Fandio: What could be your general appraisal of Cameroon literature?

Bate Besong: Escapism has never been a solution to any problem. Against the exterior lump of reality, what role the francophone Cameroonian writer will play in the current, artistic dispensation remains foggy. In the midst of our present political stagnation, one industry that they have continued to thrive in is that of obsequiousness, fawning and sycophancy. Ferdinand Leopold Oyono, Pabe Mongo, Ismael Pierre Bidoung Mkpatt, Mbella Sonne Dipoko, etc. They are all – to a writer – extravagantly confident in the omniscience of the current Cameroonian President. Calixthe Beyala has ceased to be an African woman by every parameter. And, for a writer like her to die blindfolded, in the prurience of the West’s fallen intellects, at the backyard of kitsch, is a frightening, traumatic clegy.

I have argued at length elsewhere that Anglophone Cameroon Literature is there to awaken us from our usual torpor. It testifies to the undiminished intellectual life of the homeland. Every homeland – as you’ll recall – always needs a voice in writing and print; and Anglophone literature, created, in the service of Humanity, shuns, the concerns of the fragmentary, neo-colonial elite and deals with the experiences of the marginalized in Cameroonian society; workers, the urban and rural masses.

Pierre Fandio: You have currently been working on one or several plays, poems or novels. What would the forthcoming works look like?

Bate Besong: Having just successfully launched The Achwiimgbe Trilogy here at the University of Buea, and later at the British Council, in Yaoundé, in the months of February and March respectively, it would be very difficult to read the future. Sometimes, you know, one does not really have a hand in these matters.

Pierre Fandio: Thank you BB!