

DRAMA AND THE REVOLUTIONARY VISION: BATE BESONG'S *BEASTS OF NO NATION* AND BOLE BUTAKE'S *LAKE GOD*

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ABSTRACT

Using the Marxist, Sociological and Formalistic approaches to literary criticism, this paper aims at underscoring the centrality of *Beasts of No Nation* and *Lake God* in the evolution of Bate Besong and Bole Butake as dramatists of revolt. The playwrights do not only realistically and critically capture post-colonial Cameroon in its political, social and spiritual essence but, actually lay the basis of a future of hopes and possibilities through the actions of the oppressed in these plays. The revolutionary overture in these works lays the foundation of a developing revolutionary offensive that matures significantly in subsequent plays.

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This paper examines the centrality of *Beasts of No Nations* and *Lake God* in the evolution of the revolutionary vision of Bate Besong and Bole Butake respectively. It seeks to show that before the publication of these plays, both writers had more or less been concerned with simply delineating an essentially dystopian society in their first published plays. With the evolution of post-independent Cameroon however, both playwrights go beyond a mere presentation of society to a questioning of it. There are even indications that something can be done about its inherent contradictions. This is the basis of a revolutionary vision that is substantially developed in their subsequent plays.

The revolutionary vision demands firstly, an analysis of society, laying bare the objects of the writers' satire. Wole Soyinka corroborates this when he says that

Part of the essential purpose of an African writer is to write with a very definite vision by exposing the future in a clear and truthful exposition of the present (Goddard, 18)

Here, we gather that the clear and unequivocal presentation of social reality is the basis for a future of hopes and possibilities. At another level, there is the implication that something can be done and ought to be done about the state of affairs in the community. In this framework therefore, both playwrights adopt the posture of spokesmen for their country speaking about it to their people and the rest of the world. They also move the people to action to right the wrongs in the society. The way in which Bate Besong and Bole Butake conceive of their role here as writers is consistent with a universal tradition that places great emphasis on the social responsibility of the artist. It is a tradition that considers writers as philosophers who are critics of the status -quo. Philosophing according to Maurice Merleau.-Ponty in *Eloge de la Philosophie* means that there are things to see and to say. The writer as a wise man sees a! nd says things about the society that may not agree with the latter's conventional wisdom and dominant interests. However, in his uncompromising quest for truth, he makes a critical appraisal of all received ideas, values and conventions and equally suggests the way forward, especially in a context where there is a disjunction between what is and what should be. Emmanuel Obiechina underlines this when he says that the writer in Africa is

A man who probes the body and tissue of the contemporary scene, discovers the dead or the dying cells, locates the diseased organs and prepares the ground for the surgical operation to restore the body to health and new life (8)

This is what Bate Besong and Bole Butake do in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Lake God* respectively. In these plays, they lay bare the incoherence of the contemporary scene in Cameroon. They discover the disease in what Jean-Francois Bayart has called in another context, "La politique du ventre". This is the metaphor that aptly captures the politics of self-aggrandizement practised by the post-independent Cameroon elite who gravitate towards the state and use it to achieve personal economic and social power at the expense of the masses. The diseased organs for both playwrights are not the state structures but rather the fact that the state is in the hands of the wrong people; an oligarchy which sees the state whether at the level of a city like Ednouay or the Fondom of Ewawa, as a conglomeration of agencies and offices to be captured and manipulated for individual benefits. The ground for the surgical operatio! n is prepared by the playwrights' open criticism of this parasitic class thereby, awakening the oppressed to their plight and then portraying them as capable actors in forging a new constellation.

Beasts of No Nation and *Lake God* published in the early Biya period draw from history- the

re-unification of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon and the 1986 Lake Nyos tragic gas disaster- to make statements about contemporary society. In the plays, different facets of contemporary Cameroon come under the critical lens of the playwrights. In a rich dramatic style, the lacunae of the socio-political system is laid bare, negative attitudes criticized and the dramatists' anger in the face of social anomalies and aberrations come through to the audience.

In *Beasts of No Nation*, Besong is critical of the government in Ednouay, the fictional setting of the play. The leaders are described as a "crop of ignoramuses, a brainless and sensuous class, who someday will take the Ednouay nation hostage as a result of their inexhaustible greed" (p.41). All that has gone wrong and continues to go wrong in the city has its basis in "a mongrelized breed, beasts of no nation" who by their actions have turned the city into a huge lavatory. The tensions here are captured through symbolic characterization with the haves represented by Aadingingin and the have-nots represented by the Night Soil Men, Cripple and BlindMan. The contrast between these two classes suggests that a class society is bound to breed tensions and inevitably invite the critical lens of the committed dramatist. Bate Besong uses modernist techniques of theatre to register his disgust with such an evil system.

In Narrator's first speech in the play, the socio-political situation in the city is laid bare

Aadingingin is the flag! He will raise up a golden serpent for the safety of Ednouay.. You have come to him with your oceans of flattery ...He is not very bright, is Aadingingin, but if the Swiss *maharajahs* knew how many farthings he left behind, they'll fall about laughing ... Because you have not been clubbed and eaten by the crisis and you have never been ignored in a subterranean cell for two nights.... (1-2)

Here, we discover the insensitivity, ineptitude, corrupt, dictatorial and treacherous nature of post-independent leadership in Ednouay. This is a city in which one man is the law. He has done nothing for anybody but has instead used the city to enrich himself at the detriment of the poor now caught in the throes of a structural adjustment program that has "clubbed" and "eaten" them, trapping them as it were in destitution and misery.

The mention of S.A.P, immediately show us that the play is built on the consideration of Ednouay as a 'weak' or 'failed' state, that is, a state which has disintegrated to the point where restoration of effective central institutions is problematic at best. This has been the city's unenviable situation for some time now as we learn from Narrator. The play lays the blame at the door of

flawed state craft, initiated and propagated by a ruler ship that has killed it by its greed and philistinism. In effect, all in positions of power in Ednouay are involved in bribery and corruption; the gendarmes, bank managers, business men and politicians who now invite international financial institutions to come to its aid. Narrators says to this effect “But of Ednouay’s new soiled upper crust...I myself have, seen the very corrupt in power flourishing like coded bank accounts” (6)

Bate Besong is up against these “Thieves of Ednouay... the worst publicans that every burdened the earth” because by their actions, Ednouay has become nothing but “night soil pollution” (10). These leaders have squandered the country’s wealth on themselves and their lusts to the extent that a change in political leadership has ironically landed the country in an economic crisis felt only by the down trodden “Agbada go/ crisis come / but c.f.a. go de flow”.

Parody, song and imagery become the weapons through which Bate Besong underscores his disgust with such a leadership. In the play, the down trodden parody the new-colonialist tendencies of this oligarchy who collude with foreigners to siphon the wealth of the country. Their sexual lust is also emphasized. It is a government whose insensitivity is seen in its inability to fight the “crisis with home made products”

BLIND MAN:

Through Zurich
Buy philtres and stimulants
From the sex shop
Never... (*a meaningful gesture
which Cripple as rich pilferer/ plunderer
nods understanding*)

FIRST:

Chei Oga! Government say make you fight the crisis with home-made products you dey take make yeye,

The Song of the Prodigal from which we quote a portion is an eloquent statement on post-colonial politics of corruption, patronage, misrule and inordinate avidity.

Goat di chop
For place weh
Dey be tie him

If I die
I go come back
If I quench
I go come back
So my dear frog-
Brother wack
And burn
This damnbrubah Ednuoay
Dear frog-brother
Wack and burn
This damnbrubah Ednuoay
.....

SOLO:

How many million
Promises can
Fill a basket?
How many million
Promises can ever
Fill a basket?

ALL:

When you eat money
The way locusts
Eat tons of greens,
When frogs eat money
The way locusts
Eat tones of green (13).

Proverbs and rhetoric are employed in the song to ridicule a keptocracy preoccupied with acquiring personal wealth for often ludicrous ends. The government is also shown as one of “modern slave dealers” whose destructive capacity is underscored through images of filth, destruction and

corrosion. It is further shown to be monstrous with monstrous features captured in the symbolic Aadingingin

*Comrade Aadingingin is a lumbering
gargoyle of mayor with a brooding
brutishness. He is fat, extremely fat
The sort of bloated fatness associated
with a very juicy toad. (p.48)*

This disgusting animalistic physique continuously bespeaks a rapacious, parasitic nature and a penchant for graft. It is a monstrous regime thriving on torture, using brute force and corrupt practices to constrain the people into apathy and silence. Aadingingin's shooting of Otshama, a close political ally, is a suggestion of the leadership's paranoia at any form of opposition or collusion with opposition to his rule. That is why when the Night soil men react, Aadingingin bribes Otshama so he can ensure that they are effectively constrained into silence.

This brief overview delineates the new ruling class controlling the city and economy as avid. Because of its avidity, it has engendered excessive corruption and misrule which has deepened economic and social disparities between them and the masses. It is a situation abetted by sophistry, often at very sophisticated levels, 'Well promise them a millionaire's life after death. Tell them they'll become billionaires after they die'.

The multifaceted role of the writer as prophet, philosopher and patriot is underscored through Narrator who essentially uses biblical imagery and a declamatory style to x-ray the malaise of Ednouay and pronounce judgment on a leadership which has contributed to the moral and physical decay of the country. "Every corrupt nation, eventually, meets its Dien Bien Phu". Like the revolutionary that he is, Bate Besong draws inspiration from the moral and political history of other nations to underscore the need for a new dispensation. He castigates the Night soil men for being blind to their state and the need for change. The eventual revolt of these characters against the status-quo is an indication that the intellectual's role as conscientizer is bearing fruit.

Bate Besong is also concerned with how history affects the Anglophone Cameroonian in his special position as an underprivileged minority in post independent Cameroon. As Bole Butake points out,

...With the accession of Paul Biya to power and more especially after the April 1983 (sic)

coup attempt, tribalism was instituted as a way of government and so the Anglophones came to constitute the most marginalized tribe in Cameroon. (155)

In effect in the play, the Anglophone Cameroonian's (symbolized by the Night soil men) identity is not even recognized. The people live destitute lives, carting away night soil and their predicament is aptly captured in the bare nature of the stage and in images of putrefaction. Through Narrator, these destitute characters are awakened to the reality of their situation and actively and insistently demand the right to be recognized. They actually storm Aadinging'in's office in protest, an indication they have been sufficiently awakened to the point of action. Shadrach A. Ambanasom is therefore right when he observes that unlike in *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie*, Bate Besong's first published play, where the oppressed are merely presented as "troglodytes wallowing in misery", in *Beasts of No Nation*, they "are given a voice" (122). We contend ! that this act alone lays the foundation of a revolutionary offensive which has gone beyond a mere reflection of the incoherence of the present to an overt action of the downtrodden who now register their disillusionment with a regime which fails to recognize its humanity.

In *Lake God*, Bole Butake presents a society caught essentially in the throes of a conflict between two ways of life; traditional and modern. At another level, we realize the playwright's pre-occupation with the contending forces at work in contemporary Cameroon where vested interests collide with the collective will of a people.

On the one hand is Fon Joseph, ruler of Ewawa, a hybrid personality who manifests dictatorial powers in a hitherto communal setting. He has banned 'Kwifon', the secret cult responsible for maintaining order, peace and justice in the land and now exploits and oppresses his people in collusion with external forces represented by Father Leo and Dewa, the Fulani cattle grazier. Peter Abety is right when he sees the Fon as representing post-colonial African leaders "who allow themselves to be directed by white men in foreign capitals. These leaders do not hearken to the aspirations of their people in the same way as the Fon ignores the women and the 'Kwifon' " (260).

The women's challenge to the Fon's neo-colonialist tendencies and intransigent behaviour is eloquent. Dewa must be sent away but because the Fon owns cattle, he will not do so. This sparks off a series of actions that culminate in the men folk forcing the Fon in spite of himself to lead them in the sacrifice to the lake God. George Nyamndi has aptly underscored the symbolism of cattle in the context of *Lake God* when he notes that

In this play, cattle are worked into the central artistic symbol through which subject matter is explored, meaning is conveyed... They are at once the symbol of wealth of regenerative force, of cultural imperialism and of ultimate destruction (229).

Here, we are in the post-colonial context where those in positions of political power like the Fon, use this to enrich themselves at the expense of their people. The Fon's dependence on Father Leo almost borders on buffoonery. At every juncture, the Fon lets it be known that he and Ewawa would not have been where they are without the white man. Writing about Father Leo, Abety again observes that he is

An embodiment of all Western, powers bent on having a full grip on independent African countries... in this way they reduced African leaders to mere puppets whose strings are pulled from foreign capitals (260).

This is the post-independent leadership that Butake presents and challenges through the women in *Lake God*.

The world of the down trodden, represented by the men and women of Ewawa is one of suffering, poverty and a break down of the relationship between the gods and the people, the authority and the people. The yearly sacrifices have not been made to the lake God because the Fon has banned 'kwifon' and the Lake 'rumbles' in anger at the apparent neglect of the people.

The Fon too is deaf to his people because he is a Christian. This leads in variably to a break down in dialogue between these two poles of power. The situation is further aggravated by a series of unpopular measures and actions the Fon has taken-banning 'Kwifon' and 'Fibuen', selling the land to cattle owners and refusing to handle problems between farmers and graziers. Further more, the men who are supposed to act to insure the proper functioning of society instead "burn their lives away in drink, idle talk and carnal speculation" (Nyamndi, 231). The women are exasperated with this state of affairs and swing in action. First they tight up Dewa, a cattle rearer, and bring him to the palace for punishment. They question some of the Fon's actions and propose what they think should be done.

Yensi:

The Church of Christ does not forbid
the selling of the land to Nomads?

all that we demand is for Dewa and his kind to leave this land. We have borne the suffering long enough. (25)

Through the dialogues of the characters, Butake lays bare the socio political rot that is characteristic of post-independent Africa, where those in position of authority oppress people by insensitivity to their plight. The women then act decisively to forestall the decimation of society by a minority represented by their Fon, whose rule has become synonymous with arbitrary tyranny .But when the women fail to prevail upon the Fon , they employ strange weapons to move their men to action-refusal to satisfy their physical hunger and “hunger of the loins” (39). Their revolt bears fruit as the men respond by doing the right thing, forcing the Fon to accompany them to the sacrifice to the lake god even though they are overtaken by events.

As we observed before, this view of women draws primarily from post-Ahidjo Cameroon where women begin to take leadership roles in deciding the fate of the land. Nalova Lyonga underscores this when she observes that:

Cameroonians have recently witnessed
Such transposition with the Ta’Kembeng
during the state of Emergency in
Bamenda... Cameroon playwrights
have dramatized women’s role in
resolving crisis (175)

Giving women such an active role in the resolution of the crisis becomes Butake’s way of laying the foundation of a palpable revolutionary posture against an evil system. The women’s questioning and challenge of Fon Joseph’s hegemony and his neo-colonial potentates is the playwright’s criticism of the post-colonial social order in Cameroon. The women are not against the Fon but against the way in which he rules the land. They try to bring him to order and when this fails, they constrain their husbands to do so. Indeed, men like Fisiy become conscious of the real cause of trouble in the land, a consciousness which is a pre-requisite for action.

Fisiy: The Fon is the one who is breaking
The laws and destroying the land in

the name of his new religion
brought by Father Leo (43)

Bole Butake in this play employs dramatic techniques like “passion and poetry, sound and sense, suspense and spectacle, tension and tone, creative lighting and imaginative décor” (Ambanasom 74) to give us not only a critique of contemporary society but also to show how the committed writer can help his people break off the shackles of tyranny and injustice by effective action against greedy and unconscionable leadership. We agree with Ambanasom that this play has significant contemporary political relevance within the Cameroonian context even from the fact that the women are imbued with a vision that moves them to take steps to address their plight. This is a far cry from *The Rape of Michelle*, Butake’s first published play, where he is pre occupied with understanding the ideology behind justice in contemporary society rather than with characterization. We find the women in this early play, unable to influence in any significant way the decisions that affect their lives. Rather, they are used as instruments to x-ray the question of governance in contemporary society. *Lake God* therefore stands out as foundational in Butake’s vision because it is here that he creates characters who begin to take effective steps to restore society to sanity.

CONCLUSION

In *Beasts of No Nation* and *Lake God*, we have seen not only a delineation of contemporary Cameroon in its historico-social dimension but also a questioning of the values that sustain it. The social system in both plays is one in which the common man is trapped by political and economic pressures. The playwrights criticize those in positions of authority for their high handedness in dealing with affairs. They use significant dramatic techniques of character, dialogue and parody among others to awaken the oppressed to the reality of their situation. Through Narrator and the women in *Beasts of No Nation* and *Lake God* respectively, the oppressed are mobilized to action. The dramatists demonstrate that the oppression suffered by the masses because of false ideas and ideologies can be eliminated if the people are willing to take the necessary steps to do so. Drama from this study can be seen as a powerful weapon in moving people to dismantle oligarchies in contemporary Africa, for in theatre, Besong and Butake have shown us how this can be done.

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