

WHO'S AFRAID OF ANGLOPHONE THEATRE?

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An unpublished 1979 doctoral dissertation submitted to the School of English, University of Leeds, England by Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh reports the Francophone Cameroonian playwright Guillaume Oyono-Mbia as having said that although Cameroon enjoys the position in Africa, being by far the country with the largest number of known dramatists – in the French speaking section alone – “The Anglophone region of Cameroon has been less fortunate” for neither the existence of the Editions CLE in Yaounde...nor..the training programme organized by the French and the American cultural centres in Yaounde and Douala nor the theatre Ecole in Yaounde, have affected play-wrighting from this region” (vi-vii)

Nalova Lyonga and Bole Butake in a review in *ABBIA* wonder whether it is because of the dramatic and structural complexity of a play, which repel the amateur. They argue that while Sankie Maimo is a gifted poet, he does not seem to have successfully grappled with the dramatic mode. While commending the content of his play *The Mask* (1980), as “political, it touches on issues about scheming, espionage and unfounded recrimination; he shows these as haunting facts which constrain members of society to wear masks.’ (1978:158), they conclude that he has still got to master form.

This first important critique, which attempts to explain the paucity of dramatic writing and literature of Anglophone Cameroon ends with what sounds like a triptych: “Hardly has any well-known shown interest in them” (159)

The observation of Lyonga and Butake is generally true of Maimo’s drama. The disingenuous anti-hero of *The Mask*, Sammy Baye, fails to give expression to larger social life. He expresses his absurd view of experience. Maimo’s play is a dramatic recreation of an individual rather than group response to political repression. He expresses the haunting facts of Cameroon politics in terms of the symbol of the mask. It will take the plays of Victor Epie Ngome and Bole Butake to give Anglophone Cameroon serious drama that pays attention to the larger version of society rather than individual.

Asheri Kilo’s 1992 doctoral thesis “Anglophone Cameroon Drama 1969 – 1991”, also submitted to the School of English, University of Leeds, attempts a distinction between the popular and the literary (elitist) nature of that drama and theatre. She tries to situate it as the legitimate demands of the individual and the aspiration of the community and shows how individualism is blocked under an oppressive regime whose negative aspects are nurtured and warped by ogreish structures of state.

Kilo’s dissertation makes attempts to show why the “elitist dramatist” resorts to literature as a political weapon and how he attempts to uphold the ideal of a better society than the one that exists in contemporary Cameroon. But the distinction she makes

between “elitist” and “popular” tradition is often blurred and confusing. Her thesis is subjective rather than analytical.

Eyoh’s *The Inheritance* and Maimo’s *The Mask*, can be said to be successful because they show a convincing picture of man’s dilemma and confrontation with history. Each of these playwrights has successfully absorbed social conditions into his work in the attempt at recreating a credible world showing Cameroon’s political struggle. The vision of man is shown in a coherent dramatic organization.

Eyoh displays artistic resourcefulness in creating metaphor but these metaphors celebrate stagnation rather than viable human striving as in Ngome’s *What God Has Put Asunder*. It is the familiarity with the African idiom and people that explains the peculiar nature of African drama. In such a wholly mythologised imagination as Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1982) the ambiance of incantations renders spiritual language transliterated into English. Eyoh does not achieve this transposing of Bafaw tradition thought patterns into suitable English.

Contemporary Anglophone drama rejects a social order of idealized bourgeois deception as in Eyoh’s play by opting for a medium that deals and addresses the reprobate conditions of pure blood royalty and manifestations. On the other hand, in *The Mask*, Baye’s dilemma to choose between the truth and success in a repressive system is vividly evoked. However, unlike Butake who succeeds in affirming human worth and dignity in *And Palm – Wine will Flow*, Maimo allows his audience to go with a sense of despair.

Weka in Ngome’s *What God Has Put Asunder*, for instance, captures the dilemma of the double colonization of the Anglophone Cameroonian. The heroine exists as a credible character stifled by an opponent who is a metaphorical husband. The metaphor of marriage helps encode what is realistically portrayed as a human agony in an oppressive social system. At the end of *What God Has Put Asunder*, there is a sense of regeneration for all humanity even if Ngome’s well-made play does not often rise to the sublime.

Generally, however, one can say that these plays are “popular” works of arts because individually they attempt to express the universal through the concrete and the particular. As a momentous response to realities of Cameroon society, each of these plays registers most intensely, and with consistent sensitivity the incidents of Cameroon history and society.

Over the years the arts page of the sole government newspaper, *Cameroon Tribune*, carried review articles on Cameroon writing, both French and English. Articles,

which appeared in that strictly censored medium, were published with little regard for rhetorical coherence. Essays were merely anecdotal narratives, sheer opinion or merely journalistic surveys, which were highly subjective. Thus “criticism” that was published in that medium were largely impressionistic essays which failed to provide a rigorous application of general standards and objective criteria to analyze classify and attempt to evaluate works of drama as literature. A 1990 review of Butake’s *And Palm Wine Will Flow* states:

The Yaounde public last Tuesday joined the Minister of Agriculture John Niba Ngu, the Chancellor of the University of Yaounde, Joel Moulen and other top ranking personalities to discover Bole Butake’s And Palm – Wine Will Flow in the Amphitheatre of the University of Yaounde...first; the public was discovering the play for the first time, second, the actors did it in public for the first time, finally the message was pregnant with meaning... The play either tells the story of what happened, what is happening or what is likely to happen in our society
(Nyuylime, 90:13)

The above cannot be considered as the analysis of a critic in the Biodun Jeyifoean sense of the word, on the value and quality of a piece of dramatic literature that is expected to open up unknown areas of emotional experience or as a mirror of the Cameroonian society which Butake attempts to create with its poetic, multifaceted images and ambivalence to meaning. It would thus have been expected that Butake’s play would be examined as new theatrical experience which shows striking innovations on subject matter, in style and as a frontal attack on established government

Rather, what we find is a deductive judgment based upon the hypothesis that: art documents life. It is thus criticism that fails as an intellectual formulation about the relationships existing among the incidents of drama as a means of expression and communication. And, like the *alazon* (i.e the pedantic scholar in Greek comedy) that “critic” revels in artificiality in his seamless survey of Butake’s repertory:

The message of And Palm-Wine Will Flow, was very well told by eleven well selected actors capable of expressing themselves in English without difficulty... The tragic end of the play brings in a new era where more energy is devoted to rightful thinking...

But Butake keeps his audience in suspense. He fails or refuses to say how successful the democratic role becomes (13).

Unlike the above critic who attributed the success of Butake's play to the evidence of "... the thunderous applause, hooting and laughter from the audience." Godfrey Tangwa's review of Butake's *Lake God* (1986) can be considered as the first, thorough, assessment of that playwright's theatre. Although Tangwa complimented the play for being an autonomous whole, by subjecting it to rigorous and logical system of analysis of its several parts and their organization, he however flawed it as "a drama of false consciousness" (71) and thereby accused Butake of attempting to profit from the human tragedy that befell the people of Lake Nyos, North West Anglophone Province of Cameroon in August, 1986.

Criticism of Anglophone drama in Cameroon and its literature only began to bloom recently. In 1993 the Goethe Institute, German Embassy, Yaounde Research grant, in collaboration with Anglophone Cameroon Writers Guild and also in association with the University of Bayreuth, Federal Republic of Germany, managed to come up with a publication that carried over twenty articles that treat a wide variety of issues related to styles, techniques, creative language, and even ideology of Anglophone literature in Cameroon. Some of the articles are largely journalistic essays, which deal with how the individual could achieve a viable, moral way of living in the on-going democratic process in Cameroon.

The poet and critic, Nol Alembong, identifies Butake's drama as an expression of a community's discussion with itself by situating his plays in a social context as part of human culture. He then deals with Butake's employment of some –important forms and techniques or narratives such as folkore, formal speeches, digressions and proverbs and illustrates how these are mediated in *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* rather than merely imitating those elements. In trying to show how Butake has broadened his characters by symbolism and mythification, attempts are made to situate Kibaranko and Kwengong as reminiscent of characters in Soyinka's theatre. The duality of Butake's Shey Ngong therefore matches Soyinka's Ogun. This remarkable essay which is a vigorous step in the direction of a comprehensive study dealing with the social and aesthetic perception in Butake's drama sees that dramatist 's vision as being largely a cosmological world – view as Noni oral tradition becomes the raw data from which Butake's *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* is anchored. (135 – 141).

Lyonga on her part considers Butake's exploitation of the central metaphor of palm – wine in the same play as generating endemic darkness and muddle headedness and, thus "Butake often stays one step ahead of reality as one would expect from a committed dramatist concerned with regeneration of society." (159-160) The T.V. critic Kwasen Gwangwa'a captures the prevailing mood of Butake's latest and most abrasive drama "Shoes And Four Men in Arms" as "an arrow of liberation for the oppressed, enslaved, marginalized and exploited people" (9-10).

Dr. Shadrach Ateke Ambanasom's 1994 study, *Education of the Deprived: A Study of Five Anglophone Cameroon Plays*, is the first full-length work on this new drama by a Cameroonian literary critic in its attempt to situate the analytical premise from which the new Anglophone dramatist in Cameroon studies his society. It harps on the point that literature, being a part and parcel of the social and political life of the people, it is only in the last decade (1980-1994), that, that kind of drama has become properly established in Anglophone Cameroon.

Ambanasom shows why the interest in Ngome's *What Has Put Asunder* (1992) lies on the dramatist working on such issues of life, which he transforms through the intercession of his abundant imagination into dramatic experience. In pointing out the interpenetration of cultural and urban phenomena and consciousness in new Anglophone drama in Cameroon, he illustrates that Butake's *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* is essentially a mimetic and objective representation of outer reality. He then proffers reasons to show why that drama is in many ways representative of how recent Anglophone dramatic practice in Cameroon is an accurate notation of empirical phenomena.

Ambanasom's research has much to commend it. For one thing although Ambanasom does not rise to the analytic, sublime rigour of a Femi Osofisan, or of a sociological critic of the mark of Ime S. Ikiddeh, his research explains to the audience of this drama the socio-political background against which the three Anglophone playwrights in Cameroon (Ngome, Butake, Bate Besong) produced their plays and shows that socio-historical background as an integral part in the exploration of public themes. At the aesthetic level Dr. Ambanasom also illustrates how that drama has been changing in a subtle but fundamental way in order to attune itself to its socio-historical configurations. He thus concludes his research by showing how that drama acts as an artform for analyzing and commenting on contemporary society, rather than the individual.

Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh's review of the new trend in Anglophone drama in Cameroon demonstrates the fact that these are works, which usually underscore some

obvious ethical, moral and socio-political issues, and thus it is largely a theatre which is a momentous response to the realities of Cameroon society. On Ngome's *What God has Put Asunder* he identifies the socio-historical relevance of that play and commends the form as being most suited for expressing the relationship between politics and history.

Eyoh correctly identifies the satiric bent in Ngome's title as an inversion of the biblical adage of what God has put together in the playwright's dramatization of the incompatibility between the Francophone and Anglophone union through the marriage metaphor. In spite of its sometimes subjective method, the commendable aspect of Eyoh's essay is in the historical approach that he brings into his critique of that new drama. (101-108).

With the wave of democracy that preceded multi-party politics in Cameroon, Anglophone dramatists found themselves face to face with a theatre audience of thousands seeking answers to political questions. The experimental form of theatre thus moved away from the European stage conventions towards the creation of total (mixed genre) theatre. Thus, critics of that drama in tracing its ideological contours would note the themes of individual conscience, communal consciousness and national being as remaining paramount.

However, the reaction of some academics in the Department of English of the University of Yaounde I to Eyoh's third play *The Inheritance* (1992) shows a very disturbing development in recent Anglophone Cameroon literary discourse. Adolf Lima, for instance says, "if this play cannot move you, your feet won't either." Another critic, John Lambo, a Professor of Literature of the same department says "Eyoh's *The Inheritance* indeed makes very exciting reading (italics) if only for the freshness and new life it brings to bear on age-old cultural, political and generational conflicts". He, of course rates it as "high tragedy". Ekema Agbaw who until recently taught Literary Criticism in that Faculty is at pains to point out the relevance of the play's title to the tragedy. In a roundabout manner he conjures up images of the strategy's use of "suspense and manipulations", then he concludes lamely on the traits that characterize "the homecoming of Chief Epie-Ngous, an ex-Ambassador who inherits not only the village throne but all the complications connected with his inheritance". It is as if aesthetic and thematic standards are being deliberately lowered so that a member of the club would be immortalized on the pantheon of the avatars. (Blurb (T1).

Eyoh treats the conflict in *The Inheritance* by resorting to the already set mode of bourgeois drama. He focuses on the individual rather than on the group. He therefore fails to dramatize his illusion of reality in a way that would ensure audience participation

with his protagonist. The predicament that befalls Chief Epie-Ngous- witness the contrived deus- ex-machina_ although it adumbrates the realization (anagnorisis) that his very existence, is a result of a grand deception and fails to elicit the cathartic response of “pity” and “fear”. Cathartic response is however generated by the dilemma and tragedy of the chief’s elder brother, the illiterate Makia-Wokwo, on whose truncated psyche sex looms so large; that is, when he is not spouting Donne or Shakespeare!

Those who knew these facts but still wrote about Eyoh’s *The Inheritance* in the bankrupt theories of descriptive criticism could thus be accused of insincerity of even deliberate mystification. Yet, the most characteristic phenomenon of “solidarity criticism” is it’s tendency to gloss over critical questions in a non-dialectical decipherment of the literary phenomena. It is therefore, in its chronic lack of disinterestedness, neither diagnostic nor descriptive.

In Eyoh’s play the group experience fails to emerge. Ordinary people are not represented. No evidence can be adduced in this play of the response of the larger community. The collective dilemma would have given it the mark of an authentic sense of realism. The royal line of the Epie-Ngous and by implication the divine rights of that royalty is represented in *The Inheritance* as “given”.

Eyoh’s portrait of Wundupie community in the throes of change is therefore paradoxically static and this is seen most glaringly in the manner in which he conceives of the portrait of his highly disadvantaged antagonist, Makia Wokwo. The response to this communal need is evoked in terms of an aristocratic myth, not a communal myth.

Whatever position a myth takes it must express the community’s deepest, shared values or repressed feelings. It cannot and must not exist outside language and narration. Ambassador Epie-Ngous and his highly educated wife have only apparently succeeded in controlling the small circle of opportunists at court such as Nkumba with the gadgets of Western technology and material well-being.

A valid criticism that could be made against Eyoh’s drama is that the community is not adequately represented. The characters he presents, the attitudes, their ideals are too elitist. They stand above the very Wundupie community that they are supposed to serve. Even if attempts are being made to initiate the Ambassador’s children into the tradition these remain merely at the level of gestures.

The Inheritance’s representation of individual predicament sometimes rises to the level of heroic confrontation with destiny. However this height soon dissipated on a central protagonist who cannot maintain this grandeur and is referred to as a “brat” by his illegitimate half-brother Language veers from the profound to inept colloquialisms.

Sanga Tete's agony reaches sublime seriousness. So does the Chief's fears and doubts. But these are explorations of individual agony not as representative of the group dilemma. Language usage does not reinforce the seriousness of this tragic exploration of the question of national inheritance. The mode of expression is ambiguously Western, traditional, and colloquial, a mixed register that confuses the serious inquiry of inheritance.

All opposing socio-political and economic interests and conflicting world pictures fail to be addressed and reconciled in Eyoh's play. There is a crippling inability to mediate the nature of class conflicts and contradictions in *The Inheritance*. This is made clear by the playwright's inability to mediate between the big and small issues of his "tragedy" and in that way bringing about the highest form of expression in a theatre that is supposed to be an oblique chronicle of the mores and history of Southern Cameroon, Wundupie society.

Literature, we recall, is a dialectic that is continually going on in the collective memory. Eyoh never rises above his class and thus neither displays sufficient dramatic resourcefulness nor subtlety which could enable him subvert the bourgeois ideology of his privileged, capitalist parasitic class.

Vibrant Anglophone drama in Cameroon in its hybrid nature experiments with form both in architectonics and language, and thus attempts to speak in the name of the people thereby condemning hypocrisy, cruelty and injustice. Only from that perspective can we perceive what gives it its electrifying appeal. In spite of its classical western orientation, current Anglophone African dramatic practice blurs this fact by its insistence on the use of folk, mythic and historical materials. A foreign critic coming to that dramatic practice which by its very eclectic nature has enriched this genre and in exceptional cases by a certain amplitude of idea and vision, is not expected to evaluate it solely on the canons of classical, European drama. Questions that would come in for analysis would be how the Euro-American or metropolitan exposure of these dramatists has informed the form and shape of that living experience. Central to all these would of course be the success or failure of these dramatists in their exploration of the individual visions of life or of their various African experiences.

The first full-length study on one of the precursors of Anglophone drama and theatre in Cameroon is by the Canadian critic, Professor Stephen H. Arnold. In his widely publicized essay "The Career and Aesthetics of Victor Elame Musinga: Anglophone Cameroon's Most Popular Playwright", whose work is "the aesthetics of an African... unspoilt by school and thus falling between "Ekwensi and Onitsha Market

Literature on stage.” (24-50) Then, in the vein of Ayi Kwei Armah’s Charles R. Larson’s brand of anthropological criticism, Arnold dons the mask of a Dr. Albert Schweitzer: “The African is indeed my brother, but my junior brother!”. Consider the colonialist (1988:66) gush of larsony.

The Anglophones do not study much drama or literature in school, whereas Francophone in Cameroon receive a much more traditional European education (42).

But the curriculum of the practicing Anglophone dramatist in Cameroon was similar to that of his colonial Anglophone neighbour, Nigeria!

Bjornson’s monumental research with the intimidating title *The African Quest for Freedom And Identity: Cameroon Writing and the National Experience* came out in 1991. Although the over 500 pages book references cover up to 1988, less than 20 pages dwell on the entire body of Anglophone Cameroon drama and literature.

Bjornson’s monumental research however enables the reader to know a literature that has emerged decade by decade as a communal discourse revolving around two crucial issues: “The desire for freedom from various forms of oppression, and the need to forge a viable sense of individual and collective identity” (Dunton: 10-16).

In such a huge tome scant reference is made to new Anglophone drama in Cameroon. Rather, the critic indulges on his perennial Francophone Cameroon turf: René Philombe, Francois Sengat-Kuo, Louis Marie Pouka, Daniel Ewandé, Jean-Marc Ela, Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, etc. as usual, come in for critical deification.

The merits of Professor Richard Bjornson’s monumental research are obvious in documentation. Its critical excellence would seem to have been diminished by a certain lacunae arising from the non-familiarity or deliberate asphyxiation of works of those new dramatists who in a fleeting moment he refers to as “embattled” West Cameroonians.

Anglophone Cameroonians today are like doomed protagonists; those “ marked men” in Greek tragedy called upon to endure the result of actions committed long before-partly by the mutual treachery of Southern Cameroon politicians themselves such as Nformi Nyam and Nformi Eleme in Butake’s *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* (1990). Recent dramatic writings have therefore often served as a mode of social inquiry and that is why Anglophone dramatists in Cameroon have always striven in their works especially Ngome, Maimo, but more profoundly Butake to be both artists and social historians.

Their work is an attempt to dramatize that actuality, to reproduce on stage the happenings of French internal colonialism on Cameroonian society.

The Anglophone dramatist in Cameroon is writing from a background of a cynical internal colonialism of what Emmanuel Fru Doh refers to as “horizontal colonialism”. Ngome’s *What God Has Put Asunder* for instance is a reenactment of political happenings in present day Cameroon as well as a dramatic representation of a past era. It is a dramatic metaphor of that apotheosis. It provides a perspective of a literature that is responsive to its political and historical;’ environment which is thus topical, involved, vivid and close to the grain of modern Anglophone Cameroon.

The significance of any research on the subject should derive from the fact that Anglophone drama be evaluated against its historical surroundings and the fact of the dramatists’ life and times. Such a study should investigate how the dramatist uses artistic devices to reaffirm the grandeur of the human heart. Supposedly new artistic synthesis should be examined to see how far it portrays elements of capitulation, a false universalized de-socialized inhumanity, or how it attempts the recreation of the human encounter with life and politics.

By attempting for its apprehension of that drama and theatre not only as entertainment for its cathartic impulses but its validity as art in the context of the history, the sociology and psychology of Cameroon society, such research on Anglophone Cameroon drama should be an intensive investigation of artistic integrity of these plays and as significant human statement, fill the existing loophole in the critical evaluation of Cameroon drama. Such a study should seek to be a systematic investigation of their artistic form as part of historical and social vision.

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