
**Drama and Politics: A Study of Bate
Besong's *Beasts of No Nation***

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I

Drama is one genre in Literature whose functionality in society cannot be under estimated. It is an active and practical genre because; there is harmony and a practical relationship between the audience and the dramatis personae. It thus imitates its society at best. From this, it is difficult to separate drama from politics; politics being a science that deals with the state and the condition of the human society.

Bate Besong is one of the most renown Cameroonian playwright of English expression, besides Bole Butake, Victor Epie Ngome and John Nkemngong, who is of the younger generation of Cameroonian playwrights in English. Even then, **Bate Besong**'s plays have not gained impetus in the eyes of critics. But examining the content and form of *Beasts of no Nations*, a play he published in 1990, one can rightly conclude that **Bate Besong** is an experimentalist playwright and a reformer. That is, one who uses art with the hope of changing the state of affairs in his ailing Cameroonian society. It is in this light that he becomes a political writer.

I defend the hypothesis here that drama and politics are inseparable.

Drama does not only mirror society but plays the role of a conscientizing, since man is only a political being and not a political genius. My goal in this paper will be to assess the relationship that exists between drama and politics and its results in society.

The sociological approach would be used to analyse the relationship between drama and politics in Batae **Besong**'s play. This approach is based on the assumption that literary works are reflections of society. Critics of the approach hold that the understanding of the actual society is very important in the understanding of the textual society. In this case a literary work becomes the product of the community. I find this approach relevant in that I

relationship.

This paper has been structured into two broad phases: the first phase looks at drama as a genre, politics as a discipline and their relationship. The next phase looks at how **Bate Besong** uses the art of drama to handle some burning issues in Post-independent Cameroon

Aristotle defines drama as “action”. Action results from the interaction between the *dramatis personae*. Through action, the audience understands the conflicts and follows closely how it is resolved. Dramatic action makes the fictitious story in the play *present*. This is because dramatic action is the attempt to make fiction real. Seeing the importance of the *present* in dramatic action, Peter Szondi postulates that:

Dramatic action always occurs in the present. This does not imply staticness: it simply indicates the particular type of passage of time in drama. The present passes and is transformed into the past, but as such ceases to be the present – The present passes affecting a change, and from it antitheses, there arises a new and different present. The passage of time in the drama is an absolute succession of ‘the present’.
(Qtd. Elam 118)

The evolution of events and the new awareness that unravels in the minds of the *dramatis personae* and the audience makes dramatic action real and present. In this sense, language and stage direction are very necessary. The language reveals speech patterns that are contemporary, in the first place to the *dramatis personae*. This speech, at times might be difficult to be decoded by the audience but often, the language is familiar. For stage direction, it basically provides a vivid picture of the scenario.

Dramatic reality has two dimensions; the first is that drama is fiction

made real through performance. This is what makes drama allegorical for by it, abstract notions like love, wealth and poverty are made concrete. Here, stage directions become very important to the creation of reality in drama. Secondly, drama is an imitation of people. These people are real. It is a projection of real life, not for the sake of it but with the lofty goal to help transform people for the better. This is the purpose of **Bate Besong**'s *Beasts of no Nations*.

Drama has a structural characteristic in that it is divided into Acts and scenes. However, in today's drama, writers have various ways of dividing the sections of their story. *Beasts of no Nation* for instance, is divided into three main subtitles. Let me posit unequivocally that drama is rightly literature and most often, I shall relate to it as simply Literature.

Politics on the other hand, at the literally level means representing the whole set up of society. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O in *Writers in politics* explains that:

Literature cannot escape from class power structures that shape our every day life. Here a writer has no choice... his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economy, political... struggle in a society. What he or she cannot do is to remain neutral. Every writer is a writer in politics. The only question is whose politics? (xvi)

Politics in this sense is not stream lined to the existence and militancy in political parties. It does not mean the right wing or left wing 'governments'. It is a human activity that engulfs all of man. But since man is not homogeneous there are bound to be many politics. Thus Ngugi's question of "whose politics" is very pertinent and needs to be answered. In this case, it is obvious that the writer should write the politics of the masses, the wretched of the earth. The writer should be the eye and the voice of this blind and dumb masses and it is in this case that the writer becomes a committed

writer. In the words of Chinua Achebe, one learns that;

It is impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment some kind of protest... in fact, I should say our writers, whether they are aware or not are committed (Innes and Linfors 1978: 40)

Ngugi, and Achebe both argue that a writer cannot escape from being political. Their assumptions lead to the obvious conclusion that every literary piece that handles public issues geared towards the welfare of the masses is political.

Having looked at drama as a genre in Literature and politics, what then is the relationship that exists between Literature (drama) and politics? The evident relationship that both notions have is that they deal with man and his environment. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O again confirms this in *Writers and politics* when he says, "Literature (drama) and politics are about living men, women and children breathing, eating and crying... Men in history of which, they are products and makers" (72). Chinweizu et al in *Towards the Decolonisation of African Literature* equally state that

Literature (drama) and politics influence each other and writers are deluded who, draw from absurd pretensions of art for art's sake put on this airs of an artistic elect who must keep their works unsullied by the political concerns of their fellow citizens. (251)

This relationship has been so strong and so relevant that most writers refer to themselves as writers with a political orientation. Bonnie K. Stevens and Larry L. Stewarts confirm this when they say that: "it is important to remember, however, that poets and novelist themselves have often insisted that Literature is in fact very much bound up with politics and society." (68).

With this, writers have even declared their intentions of writing, which is geared towards political reforms. A case in point is the English writer George Orwell in “ why I write.” He declares his purpose of writing as a

Desire to push the world in a certain directions; to alter other people’s ideas of a kind of society that they should strive after... no book is genuinely free from political bias. The attitude that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude. (Stevens and Stewarts 68).

The argument raised will lead me to the view that writers and Africans especially do not give room for art for art’s sake and those who try to separate Literature (drama) from politics are bound to fail greatly. As a result of this relationship that Literature (drama) has with politics, most politicians have become poets, novelist, or playwrights. Agostinho Neto of Angola was a poet and president; Léopold Sedar Senghor was also poet and president of Senegal. In Cameroon, Mbella Sone Dipoko, poet and novelist as well as Ferdinand Oyono all militate in the ruling party and have political posts. Also was the case of Mongo Beti, Cameroonian best-known novelist who, because of manipulation from the regime in place was rejected from the parliamentary List under Cameroon’s main opposition party. Having looked at the relationship that exist between drama and politics, it is clear that **Bate Besong** is truly a playwright in politics, that is, one who handles societal issues not as an Iconoclast but for the betterment of the whole society. This shall be my next preoccupation in this paper.

II

Bate Besong’s *Beasts of no Nation* is very much considered a play in politics because the play handles contemporary Cameroonian social and political issues.

The Anglophone problem is an issue that has been in Cameroon since 1972. Cameroon became a protectorate under Britain and France after the 1914 – 1918 war. France and Britain surrendered to these territories and they gained independence in 1960 and 1961 respectively and proceeded to Fouban to seek for a federation, which went on well until 1972 when Ahidjo decided to destroy the federal system in favour of a unitary system. This situation was to give birth to what is today known as the Anglophone problem in Cameroon. In 1982, Paul Biya came to power and in 1983, he decided to annex the Anglophone by naming the country *La Republique*, the name Francophone Cameroon had before 1960. With this, the Anglophone sees himself most exploited, most marginalized and even treated as strangers. With very high qualifications, they are given low paid jobs. In the text, one of the Nightsoil men who formed part of the Anglophone community cries out,

O me die man, innocent Anglo

Monkey work, gorilla chop?

(*O I am a died man, innocent Anglophone the monkey works the gorilla eats*) (Besong 19).

This Anglophone lamentation is a clear case of the fact that the Anglophone is not happy with the way he is treated. Bate Besong even blames the Anglophones for cowardice, which is at the basis of their marginalisation position.

Cripple: Your Excellency, the Mayor we might goad them into writing their petitions.

Blindman: My dear fellow, I wish that they themselves do not wish. Anglos will always write petitions. It is their make-up (Besong 24)

This statement by Blindman shows that the Anglophone is living the way he has opted to live. **Bate Besong** further attacks the Anglophones for not even being bold to make their petitions. Instead they ask a Francophone to plead on their behalves.

Otshama: They are peaceful and penitent your eminence

Aadingingin:...

Otshama: They are truly sorry your eminence. (**Besong** 25)

Otshama is a Francophone who leads the Nightsoil-men. These Nightsoil-men are Anglophones and they send Otshama to go and intercede for them. The Anglophone marginalisation is vividly described in *Beasts of no Nations*. They have no identity in Ednuoay and this is because the people of Ednuoay do not believe they are integrated citizens. Even then, in *Beasts of no Nation* segregation and marginalisation is seen in the fact that, the Anglophone is not even regarded as a citizen, but as a slave and traitor.

Don't waste my time

Anglos are traitors and slaves

We saved them from the claws

Of the Igbos... (**Besong** 17-18)

Not only are the Anglophone marginalized, they are also exploited by the Francophone. The first Nightsoil-man comments

First:

Sah na salary for category

Nought anglo-Nightsoil-men

For five billion centuries...

(Sir this is the salary of a category nought Anglophone Nightsoil-men for five billion centuries) (**Besong** 23)

Marginalisation and segregation are clear elements in the minds of this people. While the Francophone see themselves as superiors, the Anglophones suffer as inferior persons. The result of this relationship is the mounting resentment of one for the other. The end is civil disorder, which in the play leads to the death of Otshama, who plays the role of a go-between as he flirts with both *Anglos* and the *Frog* leadership.

Having looked at the Anglophone problem, **Bate Besong** also handles the problem of corruption. Corruption is a canker worm that has eaten deep into the core and fabric of post-Independence Cameroon. In the eyes of **Bate Besong**, all Cameroonians are victims of corruption and no one is free. First he sees the vice as being a daily practice among the leaders and directors.

Narrator: If I find in Ednouay
Two righteous Directors
Then I will spare
All the places for
Their sake. (**Besong** 8)

Just like Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible, there is no righteous Director in Ednouay. Every body is interested in the swindling of state funds to private pockets and it is now a norm in that society to “Eat and drink, for tomorrow you shall die” (**Besong** 5). The gendarmes, who are the keepers of the law, are not free from corruption:

First: To hell with gendarme
Mfam break den herd
Blind man: Gendarme be all the same
Taken bribes is all
They know
(*First: To hell with gendarmes mfam (a Bayang god) break their heads.*)

Blind man: Gendarmes are all the same; taking bribes is all they know.
(**Besong** 7)

Not only the gendarmes are involved in bribery and corruption, the intellectuals and University dons are not left out:

First: Which kind gendarme?

They go form line

In front prof him door

Every evening to get

Their daily kola

(What kind of gendarme? They form lines at the professor's door every evening to collect their daily bribe) (**Besong** 21)

What is worth noticing here is that bribery and corruption is a daily affair. The Nightsoil-men also prove that if given the opportunity, they too can be very corrupt.

Nepotism and tribalism are off shoots of corruption that have destroyed meritocracy in post-Independent Cameroon.

Narrator: (as rich plunder to sweet sixteen) I think you understand?

Just tell me in what currency you want, my dear- you see,

my brother-in- law is with BEAC, and my younger sister is

the P.S of Alhaji Magida Ewondo- Ndingi. Director of

contracts at the ministry of Secrets Contracts and Honey in

Gidigis. (**Besong** 19).

According to **Bate Besong**, if corruption has been a serious problem, it is because no one cares about the welfare of the nation. Here the nation is not what Renan describes, as a soul of a people who agree to live together and having the same goals.

This means that a nation is like a concept that looks like a religion. It is when people adhere to this religion of nationhood that patriotism and devotion to the nation is at its best. However, *Beasts of no Nation* is a manifestation of true beasts, who by chance or ill fate occupy a geographical space. Their prime goal is to eat and drink for they shall die tomorrow (**Besong** 5). This creed of theirs has ruined the nation because no one cares about its well being.

Narrator:

Now, comrade and honorable, saintly, martyred venerable militant, I want each of you especially the drop out priest amongst you: I want each of you to donate twenty percent of your hoard money to revamp our leprous economy.

Cripple: (*as rich militant, indignantly*) for what?

Blindman: I beg no come die for my head. Na crisis I go chop
(*please, let me alone, I eat crisis*)

Cripple: I love Ednuoay but does Ednuoay love me? (**Besong** 27-29)

Ernest Renan's lecture came up in a conference on the 11th march 1882 under the title «Ou'est-ce qu'une nation?» (what is a nation?) Curiously this lack of patriotism starts from the ruling class and it spread to the masses and the nation is without focus. This is typical of the post-Independent Cameroonian society. In all of these, **Bate Besong**'s cry is that there should be a change of attitude else the nation will not survive. He describes corruption in society in these words "Corruption is the Industry of Ednouay" (**Besong** 45) and as a prophet of doom he says if nothing is done, the nation is doomed "...Every corrupt nation eventually, meets its Dien Bien Phu" (**Besong** 43). **Bate Besong**'s call was not heeded to and it started producing its results; twice in human history, Cameroon was ranked the most corrupt of corrupt nations on earth. Despite this **Bate Besong** in his work is

still a warrior against corruption.

Another issue that **Bate Besong** handles in *Beasts of no Nation* is dictatorship. Cameroonians politicians clamoured for, and promised the masses self-government during the struggle for independence. Once it became theirs, they became tyrants and were against any attempt to give the people their basic freedom. *Beasts of no Nation* can also be seen as a play where the oppressed are looking for their freedom. So is the case when the oppressed Nightsoil-men who run to Narrator:

All: We want freedom:

Set us free (**Besong** 3)

The playwright uses historical figures that stood for freedom and the liberation of oppressed people such as Um Nyobe, Cameroonian's nationalist leader in the struggle for Independence and Churchill who advocated Western democracy during the 1939 –1945 war. These names are used to stir up the people to fight for their liberations: “Hero- worship is strongest where there is least regard for freedom.” (**Besong** 45) says Blind man. With this, some citizens have opted to rebel and to reject the tyranny of the leadership. Narrator is one of these persons. He speaks and stands for the truth and therefore is a constant threat to the regime.

Narrator: A violent man with a just cause. If you like, a rebel
for a just cause. Sound in mind and limb. But of
Ednouay's newly upper crust. I am for peace but
when I speak they are for war... (**Besong** 6).

Narrator's position is **Bate Besong**'s position. His call to the oppressed people is that they should stop their fear and resist the leadership of their country for it is only through this that they will gain freedom.

To those who are capable of speaking out, the regime has designed a

means to shut up their mouths. This is seen by the use of torture as expressed by the dramatis personae:

All: Like Aadingingin

Extractor of Confessions (**Besong** 11)

in a land that is plagued by poverty and misery, the government spend much money to buy torture instruments . Cripple says “But before then you’ll be tied to a tree and attacked with machetes and harpoons bought...” and the voice of Narrator adds:

Don’t forget the torture tinkers, tear gas, water hoses,
Equipment for constant beatings, water immersions
Russian roulettes (**Besong** 30-31).

We are also given an insight as to how citizens are treated in these goals.

Major Aadingingin says:

You’ll be put in a torture chamber. The machine will go in full swing. They will chain your hands and feet and drag you on the floor until you faint. Bottles will be broken on your head (**Besong** 10).

Bate Besong presents of dictatorship in such a way as to push the people to arise and say no to their leaders who have put them in such difficult situations.

If thematically, *Beasts of No Nation* is a play in politics, it is thanks to the playwright’s creative ability. His artistry is a moving one with the goal of conscientising the oppressed masses of Post-independent Cameroon. This can be seen in his choice of language. He uses English, French, pidgin and some national languages spoken in Cameroon. Through these languages, **Bate Besong** vividly exposes and satirises the class structure of Cameroon. For instance, English and French are spoken by the leaders and intellectuals

who use these languages to show their superiority over the others.

Aadingin the Mayor says:

Don't waste my time
Anglos are traitors and slaves
We saved them from the claw
Of the Igbos (**Besong** 17-18)

At the same time, pidgin is the language widely spoken in Cameroon by the less privileged and the uneducated. In the play the Nightsoil-men mostly speak in pidgin.

First: Which kind gendarme?
They go form line
In front Prof. Him door
Every evening to get
Their daily kola.

(What kind of gendarme? They form lines every evening in front of prof's door to collect their bribes). (**Besong** 21).

Also, there is the use of *Camfranglais*, which is a combination of French, English, pidgin and some national languages. This language is modern and is used by youths or any one who thinks he is living his life such is the case with Aadingin who says

Look here, mon amie, Otshama Lazare
Stop this idle nonsense. (**Besong** 24)

and still another from a low class business man:

I grab for nyun... I grab for tounf for sit
Heur et demic with huit miiyong [...] I take
Camion I pay sigty dollar fap tallah.

*(I come from nyun ... I left my home at six thirty
With eight million [...] I took a truck and paid sixty dollars five cents)*
(Besong 43).

These languages show the multilingual nature of Cameroon. *Beast of no Nation* touches all aspects of Cameroon in the area of language.

In conclusion, I have proven drama and politics are inseparable notions. It has been illustrated that a writer can be an active politician because of his works. Also I have proven that Bate Besong's play *Beasts of no Nation* is a play in politics since it handles issues of post independence Cameroon as corruption and the Anglophone problem. It is therefore my desire that the issue raised will be relevant in the building of a new and better Cameroon for posterity.

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