

**THE BERNARD FONLON REVOLUTION:
IF GOLD SHOULD RUST, WHAT WILL IRON DO?**

**Paper Read During The Commemoration Of The 19th Anniversary Of The
Passing Away Of Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon.**

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BY
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WILLIAM FULBRIGHT has argued that literary agitation, like practical political instigation, which edges on dissent or rebellion is “an act of faith”. Accordingly, and, as I have already shown elsewhere, although Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon (a man who was so exceptionally handsome), was, an intellectual pillar of fire; a Prometheus among his peers; indeed, something of a twentieth century Aristotle, the Greek philosopher and classical biologist, his neo-classical treatise on literary composition have, neither, received accolades nor endorsement from me.

Professor Fonlon, however, using, his towering, super-human intellect, fulfilled, the noble revolutionary role of critical-activity in the identification and exposition of truth for the good of Cameroonian humanity. He agreed with the “Talented Tenth” garden variety scholar – I refer to the American philosopher, Dr. W.E.B du Bois- and the French existentialist thinker, Jean Paul Sartre – that the primary task of the intellectual as an agitator and instigator was the rehumanization of a dehumanized polity capable of undercutting the material foundations of social injustice thereby facilitating the realization of socialist democracy.

Chinua Achebe, in agreement with Paulo Freire, believes, that to speak or write a true word is to transform the world.

In his numerous writings on such varied subjects as economics, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, education, theology, political sciences etc Professor Fonlon delineated, the landmarks, epochs, stages and watersheds in Cameroon’s, socio-economic and political evolution over time.

As an oxymoron, then, in unmasking the *yeye* Minister – Professors of our time, Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon, Dip. Ed (Oxford), M.A. Ph.D (NUI) remained, to the very end, a critical visionary of the imperatives of Cameroon Re-Unification politics and a sublime purveyor of the desiderata of the Cameroonian condition.

This is the angle, then, that this contribution will take.

THE GESTAPO REGIME OF AHMADOU AHIDJO

Commentators and analysts such as J.F. Bayart, Richard Joseph, Ndiva Kofele-Kale, Reginald Herbold Green etc have built their reputation in the attempt to prise open for public viewing the phenomenon that was His Excellency Ahmadou Ahidjo, “Father of the Nation”, Prophet of Pan Africanism, Defender of African Dignity, Pioneer of Negritude etc. etc.

In *Main Basse Sur le Cameroun* (1972), Mongo Beti posits that, under Ahidjo, especially during the intensification of French military operations; Cameroonian progressive forces were pitilessly hounded, villages razed and the population bombed with napalm. Further information is buttressed by eye witness accounts such as that provided by an old man, a Monsieur Charles Van de Lanoitte, who had resided 43 years in Africa, particularly in Douala, where as a journalist, he served as a correspondent for Reuters:

I loved Cameroon a great deal, and made it my adopted country, but I was revolted by the innumerable abuses of the veritable Gestapo regime, which was rapidly installed after independence.... I left Cameroon at the age of 65...the villa of my daughter and son-in-law was situated 150 metres from the sinister torture camp of Manengouba. I know that nameless horrors took place there. Some nights, one heard of the howls of the wretches; during the day, the lorries came up the road filled with men in chains. Around three in the morning, it was the creaking and grating noise of the military lorry going to the cemetery where a team of prisoners buried the dead, naked and bloodied – unfortunates who had been tortured to death, and sometimes still breathing...I couldn't eat, or work or sleep.. There have been massacres, summary executions, even hostages executed ... It is estimated that 3.000 to 4.000 is the number of persons who have been deported ... to Mokolo and another concentration camp in North Cameroon (without trial) often, on the basis of an anonymous denunciation, the local "Gestapo" (policemen of the SEDOC) came at three in the morning to seize someone brutally in the midst of his dazed family who were then ordered to keep quiet (Beti **Main Basse** in Richard Joseph (ed) **Gaullist Africa: Cameroon under Ahmadu Ahidjo, 1978:96.**

For some of you who are familiar with my work, you will recall that I, too, have attempted, in literary fiction, in such works as *Once Upon Great Lepers* and *The Banquet* (See *The Achwiimgbe Trilogy* CLE: 2003) to fathom the enigmatic personality of the sphinx-like and remote phenomenon, El Hadj Ahmadou Ahidjo.

In spite of all the progress that Western philosophy has made, it is still rooted in the works of Plato and Aristotle. Let me therefore reiterate the point that the political philosophy of Professor Bernard Fonlon derived its theoretical trajectory in the classical

and neo-classical tradition. He drew heavily from the Greek philosopher Plato (427 – 437 BC) who was so named because he came not only from a rich and powerful family but also because he had broad shoulders. (His real name was Aristocles). Plato, it would also be re-called, like Fonlon, in the twentieth century, had, in 390 BC, served, in the court of the tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse who would later hand him over to a Spartan envoy as a slave. That in a moment.

FLATTERY WAS NOT IN HIS CHARACTER

I have always wondered from where Cameroonians got the conjecture of being “the Switzerland of Africa”, a land with a descent political tradition not the incubus named National Elections Observatory, NEO; the state as the neutral umpire in the contest of environmental resources; not a neo-colonial, Kafkaesque, historical torpor in which the “leader” can engage in all sorts of unbelievable mischief against perceived opponents; the nation as the haven for the patriot as immortalized in the national anthem inspired by the then Dr. Bernard Nsokika Fonlon; not a leadership that misdirects state resources into shabby ends or to other such mass enfoolment as the rheumy compass of a truncated nationhood, to wit, with its cauterizing and animalizing calendar.

Whether in his **Open letter to the Bishops of Buea and Bamenda**, or in **A Case for Early Biligualism** but more germane in our context, in **Shall We Make or Mar**, Professor Fonlon, considered, as anathema, a regime of tax-gatherers and exploitation; he abhorred a government of accumulation of private fortunes and the concomitant extortion of surplus value for the benefit of a few.

The Nigerian materialist scholar, Chief Arthur Aguncha Nwankwo, must have had Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon in mind when, in **Before I Die: Obasanjo – Arthur Nwankwo Correspondence on the One Party – Party State (1989)** he posits:

The relevance of a particular writer...depends on the extent of which he successfully explains the past history of society, the extent to which he identifies society’s propulsive force in its movement from the landmark of development to another, and the extent to which he understands and predict’s society’s immediate circumstances with the view to changing them (1989:177).

For all the subjects upon which researchers of the classical epoch exercised moral judgment, none seems to have been so universally and so exhaustively studied as hypocrisy, or political guile. It must be evident, then, that the number of proverbs,

epigrams, aphorisms, wisecracks etc in regard to the theme of appearance and reality; flatterer or friend, imbedded, in literature and philosophy of the classical century is astonishing, but it reflects an absorbing interest in this passion.

For instance, Plutarch, the Greek biographer (about 40-50 after 120) was a man of broad education and pronounced moral values, whose chief aim as a critic was to counteract the corruption of his time by moral and historical examples. His influence in Europe reached its peak during the Re-naissance. Literary scholars such as I.A. Langnas and J.S. List in **Major Writers of the World** (1963) have proven that Plutarch's influence lasted long enough to affect Goethe and Beethoven and even today "*though dimmed, it is by no means extinct*" (378). In the **Parallel Lives** of great Greeks and Romans of which "*twenty three*" "*double lives*" are preserved, Plutarch opines that Self-Love, subjects a man to flattery, for he likes to have his good opinion of himself sustained. Accordingly, it is therefore difficult to tell the flatterer from the friend, but the basis of judgment is to be found in the fact that the flatterer or political hypocrite applies himself to the passions of the person concern, while the friend or patriot makes his appeal not to passion but to the person's reason:

The flatterer is inconstant, the friend constant; the flatterer always says and does what will give pleasure, the friend does not hesitate to give pain, to offer rebuke or correction, when it is necessary, the flatterer is always ready to speak, the friend is often silent; the flatterer is over-ready and excessive in his promises, the friend is temperate and just and reasonable; the flatterer bustles about but is not ready with genuine service, the friend will dissuade from unjust action but will serve even at great cost to himself (Quoted in Lily B. Campbell's *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*, Methuen, 1970: 184).

Distinguished audience, I do not have to remind you, that the excessive and passionate speeches of our Vice-Chancellors-for-Life and zoologist-assassins and Minister – Professors in the form of motion-of-support, for instance, are in all essentials the logorrhea of Wonganga flatterers. It is such seedy forces as these who have formed the triangular alliance between ethnicity and repellent individualism, the obduracy and lack of patriotism and the determination of centrifugal, right wing forces to sniff the Professor Bernard Fonlon revolution not only in our university campuses, but more destructively, in the wider civil and political culture.

That the folly of this political class has led to a course that is both evil and foolish is at once evident in the motion of support syndrome, which is a hangover of the Ahmadou Ahidjo monolithism.

If it is pertinent to remind ourselves that Mr. Paul Biya, the present Cameroonian Head of State had served as a junior editor at ABBIA, which was the inspiration of the venerated Professor, how then do we explain the Fonlonian ideology, which repeatedly highlights the salient features of Athenian democracy? More succinctly: what would Professor Bernard Fonlon had done had he been confronted with the present national tragedy?

THE IMMORTALITY OF BERNARD NSOKIKA FONLON.

Although EL Hadj President Ahmadou Ahidjo was obstreperous as he is cast in the popular image, he was a pragmatist politician. In the epic confrontations between the emperor and his classical humanist philosopher, the latter resisted the instigation of hyenas within his inner circle braying for a tit-for-tat strategy; he refused to fall prey to emotional reactions of the political caciques.

William Fulbright, you will recall, endorsed criticism of government as “an act of faith”, which though it may destroy a consensus of policy, but it also averred that it (criticism) often created the balm in its consensus of values.

Ahmadou Ahidjo tolerated and subtly encouraged the Minister-professor on the Fulbright road since he endorsed the argument that criticism may embarrass him (Ahidjo) in the short-run, in the long run it would strengthen his hand in the **glasnot** of the politics of Re-Unification.

Accordingly, the first President of the Cameroonian experiment demonstrated the capacity to look beyond his nose and selfish interest. Even when Professor Fonlon retired from politics and returned to his much cherished ivory tower to establish the first and only Dept of Negro African Literature on the African continent at the University of Yaounde, Ngoa Ekele, Ahidjo, never collaborated with some foreign embassies in the capital to frustrate his fellowship nominations or blackmail him into silence as has been the characteristic prurience from the stunted psychology of disgraced Vice-Chancellors-for-life and their midget-mentors.

EPILOGUE: IF GOLD SHOULD RUST

Professor Fonlon's immortality can be partially evaluated from his commitment to steer the Cameroonian tyrant away from the murderous, Dionysian path he had trodden in collusion with Monsieur Foccart in the decimation of the nationalist tendencies represented, by such eponymous heroes as Mpodol Ruben Um Nyobe, Dr. Roland Felix Moumie, Ernest Ouandie, Albert Womah Mukong, Anthony Ngunjoh etc; to the pedestal of the philosopher statesman which, Plato, had, in **The Republic** and **Laws**, advocated as the lore for the Guardians of his ideal Commonwealth.

I suspect that El Hadj President Ahmadou Ahidjo believed that Professor Bernard Fonlon was, in his critical-activity, demonstrating patriotism of the purest water. He believed that the philosopher never wavered an inch in his loyalty to the new federal republic. I recall that 23 years ago when I first met this paragon of the liberal humanist imagination, I was a young poet, in my late twenties, with a brand new M.A degree of the University of Ibadan, teaching literature to excited, high school students at the Cameroon Protestant College, CPC, Bali. Professor Fonlon had read my poems published by his friend Professor Chinua Achebe in **Okike: A Journal of New Writing from Africa**. He was also familiar with the poems that I had earlier published in the London based **West Africa** journal whose poetry editor, Ben Okri, would, before our own very eyes, pick up Britain's most flattering literary award, the Booker Prize in Literature. As I saw Professor Bernard Fonlon off to the Bali airstrip- wearing his usual Mao Dze Dong outfit- he requested that I dedicate my next collection of poems to his memory. This was the first part of his trip to Canada where he had just been appointed Emeritus Professor.

I have never been able to honour the request of this essentially sublime character in the Caius Longinus sense.

I am presently working on my autobiography. Perhaps, it will lead to the sowing of that faith, at the Bali airstrip, 23 years ago.

SUGGESTED READING

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