

A Dramaturgy of the Oppressed Workers

By Professor Ada Ugah [Sunday Chronicle January 6, 1991]

The art of writing is essentially a revolt against the existing status quo. Imbued with visionary fervour, the literary artist seeks to negate the existential stasis in which he finds himself by temporalizing his dreams and aspirations.

Thus the writer's private fears and frustrations assume a societal dimension by act of identification by the readers of such author's work. This act of identification is even more immediate in a dramatic rendition. It is this feeling of total and engaging identification that readers and viewers of Bate Besong's latest play are immersed with when confronted with the dramatic portrayal of unitary Cameroon's national question.

Bate Besong is one of the most versatile and prolific poets and playwrights in Anglophone Cameroon.

A contemporary at the University of Calabar as a pioneer English honours degree graduate in 1980, when as a final year under-graduate he published with *Scholar's Press* his first book of poems titled *Polyphemus Detainee and Other Skulls*.

He later went to the Nigerian Premier University of Ibadan where he bagged a Master of Arts degree in Literature. Thereafter poems and poem-sequences have appeared in journals, magazines and on radio in Nigeria, Britain and Cameroons: *Opon Ifa, Afa, West Africa, Kuka, New Horizons etc.*

He has performed with the American poetess, Ms. Dorothy Hansen, on Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) Channel 9; held research and teaching positions in Eastern and Northern Nigeria, has been lecturer in poetry analysis in Bali, Editor of E.L.T.S, a journal of Anglophone Cameroon's North-West Teachers of Language and Literature Society. He is currently teaching, writing and acting in Buea, Cameroon.

To most of Besong's admirers in Nigeria, the news of his continuous literary productivity is very rewarding in view of his phenomenal artistic contributions while studying and working in Nigeria. However, while Bate Besong is known here as a poet, it is as a dramatist that our versatile creator is being celebrated in his native Cameroon. In 1986, Bate Besong published his second major poetry collection titled *The Grain of Bobe Ngom Jua* with a Cameroon – based publisher Drapoe Publications.

The same year, his major dramatic work titled *The Most cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* was performed at the Cameroon Cultural Centre, Bamenda, by the Mutual Drapoets

In 1989, the play *Beasts of No Nation* slightly retouched was first produced under the titled Aadingingin and the Nightsoil-Men at Cameroon College of Arts and Science, Kumba by the New Dawn Repertory. It was directed by the playwright himself and assisted by Kikefemo Mbulai. Choreography was by Fale Wache. And in January 1990, it was performed under the current title of *Beasts of No Nation* by the New Dawn Repertory for Cameroon Radio and Television, Yaounde.

The book, *Beast of No Nation* which recall one of the titles of Afro – beat King Fela Anikulapo – Kuti's records, contains three playlets namely *Parabasis*, *Beast of no Nation and Nightsail-Men*.

However, these three playlets can be seen as three acts of the same play as both the characters and theme remain the same. Alternatively c they can be seen as three versions of the same story namely a dramaturgy of the oppressed workers in Cameroon and any so-called developing country for that matter currently under-going the economic throes of the World Bank imposed Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP)

The story line is simple just like the characters. The characters of Bate Besong's tragic play include (1) Some nightsoil-men (2) A blindman (3) A cripple (4) Comrade Dealsham Aadingingin – Supreme Maximum Mayor of Ednousy Municipal Council (a fictional city) who is capable of playing the City's anthem backwards, (5)

A narrator (6) A boy and (7) Chef Gaston Lazare “patron” Otshama, an ex-nightsoil carrier now in the pay of the mayor of Ednouay.

The Play opens with both the blind – man, the cripple and some masked nightsoil-men in solidarity song. This song is a satiric rendition of a leadership blind-fold and the commoners’ alienation from the land’s commonwealth.

The cripple puts it more succinctly:

Monkey will do
The dorny work
Gorilla go di wack
(...)
A stumbling block
Always looks innocent.

(pp. 8,9,10)

When the care free city Mayor Aadingingin intones majestically:

The truth will be kept
Away from you
Our lies with be told
Boldly and persistently
For you can be made
To believe anything

(p.16)

But this elitists HAUTEUR is short-lived as the Nightsoil-men, tired of being dregs of society threw down their masks and requested for official recognition from the municipal authorities. Thus they intone a revolutionary song of liberation:

Give us our profession
Identity cards, Sir
Give us professional
Identity cards, sah
Your thirty million budget

Sah, na salary for category
Nought anglo-night-soil-men
For five billion
Centuries
So give us professional
Identity cards, sah (...)
(p.23)

The simple act of granting recognition is denied the nightsoil-men because as the authorities explained officially, there is no “money to print identification papers. We have tightened the economic belt to the last centimeter.”(p.45)

The expected revolt followed and in the MELEE that erupted, the mayor accidentally shoots his protégé chief Gaston Lazare Otshama. He cynically justifies his action.

“You bastards! Bastards, I say!
What is it you want from me, eh?
Others have eaten and do not lose
A second’s sleep? Some have
Eaten and the sky to them is the
Limit. I’ll break all the Nightsoil
Buckets over your skulls (...)
My word is double law
I AM THE LAW!”
(p.52)

Bate Besong’s play is a metaphor of contemporary Africa where the oppressed workers are not accorded a pride of place. In an anti-heroic Brechian traditional, the playwright has authored a novel vision of Cameroonian reality where a section of the country treats others like nightsoil-men and when they demand ordinary human recognition, they are treated as pariahs. This play is Anglophone Cameroon’s most pungent indictment of francophone oligarchic rule in that part of the Central Africa. It is hoped that authorities that be in that country will listen to the visionary playwright.

In this play, Besong's language is very accessible unlike what we are used to in his poetry. It is to be expected, as Bate Besong wants to be the unpaid spokesperson for the less privileged in Africa. And that is a genuine mission of all humanists the world over. Let us listen to him.

*** Professor Ada Ugah is the General Secretary of Association of Nigerian Authors (South) and former Commissioner of Information, Plateau State, Nigeria**

COMMENTS PUBLISHED IN *SUNDAY CHRONICLE ARTS* (Sunday, January 6, 1991)