

PLAYWRIGHTS WREST VICTORY FROM CHADS OF ANOMIE:  
**Diminution of Babila Mutia's Humanist Vision**

BY BATE BESONG

**Prolegomenon**

*I sit on a man's back choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by any means possible except getting off his back. Leo Tolstoy*

*Augusto Boal*, the famous Brazilian theatre umpire had so presciently noted long ago (1979) that in the dialectical theatre of the German Marxist playwright, Bertolt Brecht, we are witnessing the death knell to the illusionistic or naturalist tradition. By unquestionably preaching the changeability of archaic institutions, Brecht's commitment, which embraces both a political, social or economic vision of man, demystifies capitalist myths by attacking the perpetual peazantisation of the masses or lower classes. In turning official historiography and mythopoesy on their heads, the playwright's artistic vision "clarifies concepts, reveals truths, exposes contradictions, and proposes transformations" (106).

Ba'bila Mutia's *Before This Time Yesterday* (1993) is predicated on Jacques Focart inspired genocide that characterised Gaullist-France's colonial policy in Cameroon (Richard Joseph, 1978, Victor Julius Ngoh, 1987). The playwright explores the savagery employed by the Ahmadou Ahidjo puppet-government in Yaounde, in the "Pacification" of the UPC, Cameroon's first mass populist revolutionary alternative political party whose messiah – martyr, Reuben Um Nyobe, was assassinated by a French Expeditionary Patrol, on September 18, 1958, near his birth place, Boumnyebel (see for example Mongo Beti's fictive accounts: *Remember Ruben* (1980), *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*, (1974).

### **Pathological Dream**

Economic development remains an elusive goal since the state revolves around resource extraction, social control, order maintenance and wealth accumulation by a sybarite and parasitic elite (Ake, 1983). The stories of greed, terror and mayhem in the recent past have as a common denominator the absence of democracy and lack of respect of human rights. (See Francis B. Nyamnjoh, 1999, 101-118). The ideals of participation and democracy have been subordinated to the security imperatives of those who control the state as well as the economic and strategic interests of the colonial overlord, France. The protagonist (Sango Eboa's) haunting, pathological dream in the play therefore becomes the Freudian epicentre in which Minister of State Tonton Onana is demonised. Mutia in the attempt to play back the historical tap of Cameroon's ambushed history uses the stream-of-consciousness technique to re-focus on state terrorism, hypocrisy, betrayals as well as the overwhelming themes of imperialism and neo-colonialism. According to Joseph (1978) Monsieur Foccart's warped vision that characterised France's imperial policy involved detention without trial, genocide, house arrest, torture, extra-judicial executions, brutal repression of strikes and demonstrations, and other heinous as well as unimaginable atrocities. It was a world that was once more plunging itself into barbarism. Cameroonians were denied access to the resources of their own land, stripped of their full citizenship and inalienable rights and deprived of their historical and cultural heritage. This annexation, and thus privatisation of state symbols, together with the resulting failure to fulfil the people's aspirations for freedom and economic empowerment, led to the effective erosion of its legitimacy and a reduced capacity for governance.

### **Undialectical Projection**

The clock symbol therefore in *Before This Time, Yesterday* operates both as a force and as a reminder of the truism that the iniquities committed during and after the UPC Holocaust should be righted. However, a major impediment to the playwright's vision and artistry is the undialectical projection of history; a failure to demythologise the various myths that cover up the Uncle Claude Abassa's emasculation which-in a way-is a diminution of the artistic paradigm to subdue or tame reality.

By failing to create hope in the characters in such a way that they become confident of making changes, Mutia is content with merely documenting and testifying to the archipelago of anomie of socio-political abysses and cleavages such as economic haemorrhage, terror, and repression within a totalitarian, augean stables.

### **Political Emancipation**

What the UPC liberation struggle meant for ordinary Cameroonians was democratic governance that offered the best chances for people to participate in their own political emancipation and economic development (Fanon 1963). The state, which Mutia however projects in *Before This Time, Yesterday* operates mostly as the property of the Commandant Sikambas and their entourage, rather than as an impartial system of institutions serving the general interest. Modern Cameroon Literature continues to be intensely political and seems destined to remain so for some time; (see Mongo Beti's *Les deux mères de Guillaume Ismael Dzewatama: future camionneur* (1982), for instance.

Bertolt Brecht (1984) proffers an insight into the dramatist's compass in the following manner "Henceforth the theatre presents the world so that the spectator will take possession of it" (1986). Rather than chart the course of revolutionary struggle in a new theatre that reflected the concerns of the people in the midst of massive social and economic upheavals, following in the tradition of bourgeois intellectualism, *Before This Time, Yesterday* adumbrates an escapist vision of man trapped in tragic reality. The vision of the Cameroonian human condition, which the play offers, is one of capitalist terrors and primal drives. The invocative images, views or concepts, to the very end, are those of a static world imposed on the audience by Uncle Jean Claude Abassa in the cathartic experience. The one-party behemoth installed and maintained by Ahidjo as well as repeated doses of French pacification of a people in revolt hold sway. Abassa's fear, for one who had opted for silence after his release from prison is clearly exemplified at the end of the play, after the Minister had shot himself in the scuffle with the protagonist.

We're all dead! We're finished! Chantal, We're dead! Do you hear me? I say we're all dead (41)

In a play in which Mutia developed a revolutionary conflict without genuine revolutionary forces, his drama is an artistic construct that is drowned in the vortex of illogicality and terminal ambiguity. His protagonist, Sango Eboa, and antagonist, Tonton Onana (Commandant Sikamba) become mere ideological mouth organs as they are propelled into enwreathed ensigns of the dramatist's artistic design. Another point: By voodooing its audience with the esoteric banalities of oriental cabbalism, and thus manifesting no overt ideological commitment Mutia's minority drama fails to transcend the ramshackled capitalist structure on which the Cameroonian prebendal socius is anchored (Joseph, 1991).

Modern African drama is involved in the struggle between one system of belief and another. Symbolism and parable are major artistic techniques in the drama. Femi Osofisan, like Ngugi Wa Thiong 'O, uses theatre for purposes of national orientation. Their plays attempt to proffer a vehicle for conditioning the Brechtian A' effect, the conveyance of history and myth provide the rich material for these new experiments in African drama. As parables of that experimental theatre, Osofisan's *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels* (1990), for instance, and morality plays whose metaphorical crossroads settings, with their deliberately simple plots, allusions, songs commentaries addressed directly to the audience, offers a need for theatre for entertainment and theatre with a message.

The old man in Osofisan's play symbolises salvation. He attempts to save the minstrels from their sufferings by giving them a test of humanity that they fail, except Omele who relieves the pregnant woman from her prolonged pregnancy and also cures the couple from leprosy. Thus in *Esu and the Vagabond Minstrels*, rather than seeing contemporary folklore as Ba'bila Mutia does, Osofisan very much like Brecht is questioning as well as recognising its vitality in providing the necessary cultural linkage with the past as well as its dynamic dimension, which provides vital images with the future. Osofisan's stature as a dramatist and a dramatic thinker has been widely recognised.

Ba'bila Mutia in *Before This Time, Yesterday* successfully sublimates politics into the rigours of art. In striving to recreate art that has eternal appeal in man's striving to overthrow what tyrannizes the spirit, the playwright construes that the erosion of state legitimacy is what might have compelled the authoritarian, neo-colonial regime to unleash a violent backlash against the forces that were advocating democratic changes in the Cameroon society. Yet, in using drama as a historical necessity, and seemingly abstracting from the historical dialectic to inform and authenticate the depiction of atavistic dysfunctionality, the pathological asymmetries of modern life are not placed in critical perspective, and character is consequently sacrificed for artistic pattern.

**© 2004 Bate Besong**