

NEW ENGAGEMENTS IN CAMEROON LITERATURE: *The Other Side Of The Bridge*

By Bate Besong

Our literature- in a way – can be categorized as a golden window to the past because it contains a record not only of the awesome display of rheumatoid or sclerotic power-but also because – again, if I may I may hazard a guess- it shows that all of us –rootless souls- belong, to a common catacomb whose name is **dislocation**

Part I

Preface To Discourse

No full account of the rhizome density of our national literature is possible - as the editors of *Patrimoine* have so kindly guessed - without adequate and appropriate reference to the alternative writing that has given life to an essential, yet repressed and denied aspect of Cameroonian reality.

It is writing that is a reflection of the multifarious nature of Cameroonian reality and the readiness to decisively take a progressive and radical march towards it that distinguishes new Anglophone literature from the apologetic perspective and transcendental lore of bourgeois sylvan pretensions.

To the Greek celebrated comic poet, Aristophanes, the dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should, besides that be a teacher of morality and a political adviser (Cited in Augusto Boal, 1997:111).

On the Cameroonian muses crowded pantheon therefore, we too have been firm of feet as your own Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, Guillaume Oyono Mbia, Charly Gabriel Mbock, Gaston Paul Effa, Jacques Fame Ndongo, Hubert Mono Ndjana, Ferdinand Leopold Oyono, the immortal Mongo Beti. (But, Ignorance, as Plato remarked, is at the root of most misfortunes).

Our literature has never been a substitute for social action, but being an integral part of the spiritual afflatus of man and a reflection of his psyche, it has definitely been an embodiment of cultural ideology. As an alternative aesthetic that has been held hostage to the received wisdom of a Taleban critical establishment which requires the writer to make artistic and political compromises; to kow-tow, in order to pass, the literature from the other side of the bridge, forcefully registered in the national consciousness and captured the imagination as a unique phenomenon barely a decade ago (See Chris Dunton; 1998, S.A. Ambanasom, 2001).

Sometimes, that aesthetic has been obliged to carry an extra-literary responsibility when prejudiced individuals twist, distort, misinterpret, or ignore facts that conflict with their predetermined positions (A now preposterous example being Monsieur Jean-Stefan Biatcha's obloquy to the Chancellor of the University of Yaounde after the performance of my play *Beasts of No Nation* (1990) during the annual World Theatre Festival at Amphi 700, in March 1991).

Monsieur Biatcha's report makes his case clearer through his own lies, contradictions and other inconsistencies (See Biatcha, Jean Stephane, *Challenge Hebdo* No.0045 du 3 Octobre au Novembre 1991:11). All that happened thereafter is now part of our antecedents of anguish and despair...

That Literature – as you may already guess- is thus a poetics whose lineage has been semi-officially impaled fixed, ostracized, and demonized according to the contumacies of hostile academics in their cynical pursuit of unenlightened, and even grotesque self- interest (See Peter Alange Abety.1996, Edward Oben Ako, 2001).

But, T.S. Eliot in "Religion and Literature " has advice that may be useful to practitioners of such rheumatoid and opportunistic criticism in the following manner:

The greatest of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards, but whether it is literature or not, can only be determined only by literary standards, (Cited in Wilbur Scott, 1974: 43,45).

The writer from the other side of the Cameroonian bridge, digs into history and uses living historical experiences for the positing of his revolutionary vision. His art is nothing but the truthful artistic response to social reality in revolutionary form.

Anglophone literature has really come a long way. Nobody gave it a chance to last this while. It was seen as another flash in the pan. However, that was not to be, as it has survived, and is beginning to enjoy an ever-rising profile.

The pastness of the past is reflected in the present because the artist demonstrates a historical sense which shows that he writes not only of his generation but that it has a simultaneous existence and comprises a simultaneous order. The writer illumines a conscious present, which is the awareness of the past. It is a literature that apprehends Cameroonian history and its stages of development; and it is a literature that has an all-rounded perspective of its (Cameroonian) humanity.

In its attempt to fight for ground and space that literature has contributed, in extraordinary ways to provide an answer to the big question about the essence of existence and has, indeed, through the last decade and a half, nourished the curiosity of so many (Chris Dunton, 1998).

Like any other thing new, it offered a novelty quite strange to mainstream Anglophone writing as it began to confront, realistically, without mystification without recourse to sectarian nostrums “the burning questions of the day” (pace Chinua Achebe).

The paradigmatic metaphors in the genres of poetry and drama especially represent a tribute to human ingenuity. It is a literature that allows for experiments, for

new creative forms, for avant-gardism, for caricature, for synecdoche and metonymy. It is therefore not an isolated, accidental phenomenon.

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Yet, there are people who think that our vivid presentation of the drama of Anglophone Cameroon life accuses them. It is a cross we bear proudly.

PART II

A Colony within a Colony: Background

It would seem that for our nation, the reunification path is more than usually tortuous. At each turn, the Federal system has been assailed by strong, anti-democratic forces. It is a reflection on how extremely heady and self-driven of geriatric morals can become in order to subjugate others to their own whims.

In Southern Cameroons, 1922-1961: A Constitutional History (2001). Professor Victor Julius Ngoh has demonstrated how Mr. Ahidjo’s personal rule was characterized by the ability to circumvent the constitutional guarantees as well as the checks and balances protecting the rights of those who, at genesis, were already marked as “a colony within a colony”.

In a work that is full of vision and eloquence, the historian demonstrates how the constitutional history of Southern Cameroons provide the reader not only with a valuable consideration of the political history of the other side of the bridge, but also established an “important background and base, point for the analysis of political and constitutional developments in contemporary times.

“It can be fairly argued that Cameroon federalism was essentially Ahidjo’s creation. Not surprisingly, it lasted only as long as he judged it necessary. When he felt that it was time to replace it with a unitary system of government, he put his public relations apparatus to work and succeeded to dismantle it in 1972... It was also a testimony to the failure of most Southern Cameroon politicians to put the interests of Southern Cameroons above their narrow-minded personal interests (174,175).

Professor Ngoh’s pioneering research can be acclaimed as the roadmap, or backcloth to the alternative literature that has emerged from across the bridge. 1990 can be considered as the watershed.

The writer has moved from the traumas inflicted by alien cossacks to our homegrown supplant who, being dehumanised by post-colonial seasons of anomie, are now, self-destructive. Our literature is an inevitable occurrence, based on the laws of dialectics, and aen occurrence that is qualitatively and quantitatively enhanced by revolutionary processes. It has been (the writer’s) duty to create patterns of ethical and intellectual order out of the stubborn chaos fermented by errant humanity that returns to haunt our nation, again and again, as a kind of nemesis.

When a wide and deep chasm separates popular dreams of homecoming and the brutal reality of the present; when the landscape within is crowded with groans of deformed souls and confused visions, who cannot locate the ground under their feet, because, hanging in mid-air - to paraphrase the Irish dramatist and poet, W.B. Yeats - they are no longer at ease – the writer has often given sufficient insight into the lives of his characters and into their responses to the events and problems that plague the nation.

The writer from across the bridge has often identified the usefulness of history, for giving a sense of identity to an emergent people. That literature engages in the mobilization of the communal conscience for the health of Cameroonian society.

The artist has become the backbone of the emerging synthesis between the old and the new, since he creates out of the idiom of our experiences, the anguished syntax and sclerotic values of our ambushed ancestry.

The writer from the other side has tried to induce people to reflect upon their consciousness, so that they can begin to ask why things are, as they are, why things are going wrong. Besides, *In other Inquisitions*, Luis Borges Jorge has proffered geysers to the writer of such a tradition in the following terms:

"Those who say that art should not propagate doctrines usually refer to doctrines that are opposed to their own" (1968:87).

However, it is to the historical pennant of Victor Julius Ngoh (2001) that we must now turn in order to garner how history whets the angst of the writer.

The sovereign state, which emerged as a result of the union between the Republic of Cameroon and Southern Cameroons, adopted the Federal system of government and it became styled; The Federal Republic of Cameroon. The Cameroon experience, between 1961, when the Federal system came into being and in 1972, when it was liquidated, raises questions about the nature and purpose of Cameroon Federalism in particular (172).

To Appease an Embattled History

In our work, we were hoping that, like a miracle, our family life would not only have improved by ushering in the warm, mysterious beauty that only the Mungo could inspire, and choreograph.

Our fable was one, which captured the history of a whole generation of a nation, stories which impact on the desire for a reorganisation of society that will eliminate the monopoly of economic resources and privileges by select individuals and groups. We

were hoping that though past efforts have largely failed, future ones may succeed. We have shown firmness, courage, and great trust in the national ideal as creative writing, became for us a salutary canvas for the representation of social and historical mutation.

Deploying a highly historical sense and objectivity, the Aesop from across the bridge threshed a canvas which opened doors, and taught people with the breadth of closest psychiatry, demarcating and exploring individual hubris in communal awareness, and rejuvenation. We have therefore, transmuted the various aesthetic genres into an elastic and appropriate medium for communicating the experience of transition. We have brought to the Cameroon literary space a force from across the bridge that you have merely glimpsed but which we have experienced.

We have turned the past into a living country that continues to speak to the present about the dire idioms of mongrelised power, the great engaging irony of all those gulag archipelagos of neglect embodied in regional apathy; identity crises, psychic disorientation, ethnic hatred, loss of faith, rootlessness, etc. All such recrudescences that make post-colonial reality the holocaust of our collective homecoming. We feel rather fortunate to be part of this epoch-making event.

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