

# The Anglophone Cameroonian Writer Comes Of Age Under The Biya Sky (I)

BY BATE BESONG

When I ... used to write plays and novels that were only critical of the racism in the colonial system, I was praised. I was awarded prizes and my novels were in the syllabus. But when ... I started ... questioning the very foundations of imperialism and of foreign domination of Kenyan economy and culture, I was sent to Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. **Ngugi Wa Thing'o** (*Barrel Of A Pen*, 1985:65)

## Beyond Narcissism

David Mandessi Diop was born in Bordeaux, France, on July 9, 1927 of a Senegalese medical officer father and a Cameroonian mother. He went to the University of Montpellier to study medicine, but he had to change to liberal arts because of ill-health. Creativity served as a liberating force that provided both the artist and his constituency, the need for each other's vitality and vision. He left behind one slim volume of poetry *Hammer Blows* (AWS: 1973), which has been described, by the English literary critic, Gerald Moore, in the following glowing but prophetic terms:

In him we hear the voice of a new generation, a generation determined to rebuild Africa by its own efforts, unencumbered by constant demands for internal payment on loans, spiritual and cultural as well as financial. It is a voice, which is beginning to make itself heard in the councils of the nations to the bewilderment of those who stand waiting to collect the alms of gratitude. (*Seven African Writers*. Evans: 1962)

Mandessi Diop was active in his opposition of the Algerian War. In 1948, this reigning poet of anti-colonialism went to Guinea, to teach at Kindia in sympathy with the new

President Ahmed Sékou Toure's rallying resonant cry: "We prefer rags in freedom, to riches in chains!"

Touré had wrested Guinea from France's "tutelary era" for which General Charles de Gaulle had retaliated with typical colonial "promptitude," and bravado.

Hammer Blows was a threat to those who defended the old ways that were leading the continent to extinction. The dramatisation of historical experiences in poetic structure, theme, language, style and setting, is what creates a binding link between this ancestral Arion and us. Unlike the archetypal cultural mulatto and his stereotypes, who often uses his intellectual instruments to cushion his hubris with hind-view mirror of reality, Mandessi Diop's exile, in France, had a great influence on the way he looked at our continent.

This interesting father-figure's work is a succinct demonstration of the plight of the struggling Cameroonian people, and their determination to overcome imperialism and neo-colonialism through combative and creative strategies.

In *Renegade*, for instance, he derides the servile mentality of "the poor brother with: silk-lined dinner jacket/squeaking and droning and strutting in the parlours of condescension" (1973:19). The genuflections of the "pitiable" comrade with "teeth that flash/to hypocritical compliments."

The surreptitious inversion of social values; inherent in the culture of perversion within which – the Northwest or Southwest elite for instance, are presently ensconced, become subjects of raillery.

Rather than see folklore as Cameroon Establishment "Scholars and "Writers" do, the lyricist of "To A Black Dancer", urges his audience to recognise its vitality in providing the necessary cultural linkage not only with the past, but also its dynamic dimension, which provides vital image with the future. Consider this extract from "Dancer":

And the false gods burn beneath  
Your vertical flame  
You are the face of the initiate  
Sacrificing folly beside the Guardian Tree  
You are the idea of the All and the voice  
Of the Ancient  
Gravely launched to attack chimeras  
You are the Word that explodes  
In miraculous spray on the shores of oblivion (1973:13)

It is through exemplary heroism and relentless nationalist struggle for freedom and steadfastness that Cameroonians can articulate their collective consciousness in action. In “Listen Comrades” (1973:20), he delineates the process that oppressed black people are prepared to sacrifice their lives to win back what they lost, both in material and spiritual terms. In the defiant “The Agony of Chains” (1993:11) whose setting is significantly in Dimbokoro Poulo Condor (former name of Con Dao: a group of islands of South Vietnam which the French used as penitentiaries for nationalist leaders), the poet brings to centre-stage, the critical issues facing the state of our union under French neo-colonial rule. His work from the very beginning, is therefore most clearly committed to social struggle. Conveying social and political messages was the prime rotor of literature in a dynamic society.

### **Nothing Personal**

The writer in Biya’s sky tended to turn aside from the complexity and contraction in the New Deal CPDM system that bred rancour, dichotomy, bitterness and other medieval features of troglodyte homecoming; and to cultivate an intense self-awareness; a pseudo-romantic approbation and glorification of the sensual. That animal forces itself in its ogreish character into our begrimed psyche in naked grossness. No wonder then the aggrandizement of some deep-seated perversity and egotism on our television screens as collective coda.

The contemporary practitioner – having become de-personalised and derealised – wants a short cut to immortality though he has cremated the muse in the fugue state of obituary notices. His legacy as a revolutionary intellectual is tadpoled in the sartorial eccentricity of the literary fop. A material seduction that was bound to lead in the end to an implosion, and invariably, to an apparition of intellectual life.

At the bar of history – now, he hangs his head in shame. We laugh aloud placing an arm over his shoulder sympathetically. (We have been co-travellers, I presume?)

Literature can be used as a support for the continuity of the liberation struggle toward *unité nationale*, which is evidently an economic factor with socio-political parameters. The triple encounter between the Kaiser, General De Gaulle and Harold Macmillan should be dramatised, and aesthetically realised within an essentially Cameroonian consciousness.

But, having often lacked the fire and the force to transmute “dangerous” thought into action, the modern writer preferred to take the CNU-CPDM bullet in the back, and not in the chest. And, as frustration and delayed gratifications water the elysian tree of ethnic narcissism, that power of true judgement, which is cultivated, and the sensibility enlarged through a liberal education is atrophied. It would appear that the creative faculty, now almost extinct like the dodo, was defunct in the knowledge of our world, and could thus not deal with them in the mighty leap towards cultural pluralism.

Artistic culture is the palpable recreation of life’s grandeur and struggle; a convincing statement of man’s dilemma and confrontation with colonial and contemporary history. Such culture is closely linked to the society in which it is produced; it mirrors and reflects the attitudes, philosophy and basic assumptions of the time. George Santanyana has warned that a people who forget their past are bound to repeat those errors that led them to the abode of internal attenuations, again and again.

There is no reason to venerate heretic-poets or to fear them, for in many ways, the writer – even if the creative process is one of constant debate and confrontation – is his work. It is difficult to separate the two. The road to our collective liberation can only be discovered in the past.

### **To The Talebans: Aftermath**

(When the Messiah – in revolt – raised Jairius' daughter to life, her parents were beside themselves in ecstasy. Not so for our Court Placebo. He will euphemise his treacheries by venerating kitsch or low art as pasturage).

We cannot assert a Cameroonian identity different from that of our triple, Siamese ontology. Symbol and metaphor should be re-fashioned to communicate with one another and to explain the world around us.

We can construct a Cameroonian renaissance out of the cultural survivals of our curfewed mentality of interiority and thereby free ourselves from habit, explode rationality and create a kathartic kind of rejuvenation through a psychology of violence and revolt.

Cultural pluralism is not only a platform for comprehending the nature of our environment, but it is also capable of effecting change in our enfeebled Republic.

We must try to make sense of it. We must try to give it form and articulation.

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