

Bate Besong: The Man

By George Ngwane

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Bate Besong is Bate Besong. If you call him Besong Bate, it will be somebody else. His name refuses to obey the law of choice. Born on 8th May 1954 at *Ikot-Ansa Calabar*, former Eastern-Nigeria, of Cameroonian parents from *Ndekwai-Mamfe*, Bate Besong (BB) began his secondary education at St. Bedes College, Ashing Kom. While in Kom, his passion for Art was nursed and nurtured as he developed an interest for music, playing in the school orchestra with mates like Kenneth Komtaghi of the "Do Good" fame and earning the show business tag of James Brown (JB).

His academic ambition propelled him to the land of literature – Nigeria - where he obtained his "A" levels at Waddell Institute, Calabar, then got a Bachelor's Degree in English Literary Studies from the University of Calabar, before crowning his academic pursuit with a Masters Degree (emphasis on African poetry and drama) from the University of Ibadan.

While in Nigerian colleges, he was more than a hermit, reserving his active energy to the confines of libraries, pondering over text books that have laid bare this continent of contradictions on the map of the world. He was shy, withdrawn to the timidity of his literary imagination to the point that he dulled his own social life either out of brazen unworldliness or obsessed with the trappings and trimmings of a budding artist. If Nigeria was his Gethsemane, where he prayed and got Literary inspiration, the University campus was his Bethlehem. It was simply the cradle of his artistic perception. He saw the world through the prism of paradoxes.

Nigeria at that time was the cauldron of military dictatorship and Bate Besong did not sit watching idly. He contributed to Literary journals like *Opon Ifa*, *Okike*, *Anthology of Oracle Poets*, *West Africa Magazine*, *Quest Magazine*, *Drumbeats* and the *African Concord*. He also acted as a ghost writer for many personalities including the late Mamman Vatsa, edited some of the fine poems of Niyi Osundare and had his first book *Polyphemus Detainee and other Skulls* launched in April 1980 by the internationally renowned novelist Chinua Achebe.

Yet he was far from being inspired by the novelist for he chose for mentor Wole Soyinka with whom they share the animal imagery of the Tiger owing to their virulent and vitriolic attacks on the system, and also share the animal instinct of The Spider because of their finesse in spinning and weaving poetic webs. And so Bate Besong had unconsciously become the symbol of the Nigerian condition, caught in her political complexities and with her social mores; he was all Nigerian but origin for he fused so intimately with the society and its authors that the temptations of homecoming were kept for a distant future.

HOME COMING

But Home he had to come. The bells of Patriotism were jingling, calling him to serve this country as a visionary; urging him to raise this nation from the abyss of despair to the pinnacle of hope. He came back, armed like an *Obasinjom Warrior*, not with the brawns of a soldier but with the brains of an intellectual; not with the gun of a fighter but with the guts of a writer. His only missile was his pen. It was in 1982 at the dawn of a *New Deal* that Bate Besong came to Cameroon; at a time when Cameroonians were slowly recovering from the deep dictatorial amnesia that Ahmadou Ahidjo plunged all of us into for twenty-five years; at a time when Paul Biya had suddenly become our President; at a time when according to Jing Thomas Ayeh:

Before people even took time to know the President, women in flowing "Kabas" were already parading, the streets, warbling and singing his praises. Musicians got

the hint and joined the bandwagon, then followed by obsequious civil servants. The national religion of Presidential deification was born. Nobody could stop the train of disaster. The whole country had become intoxicated by 'Papa Biya'

Of course, Bate Besong also could not resist the clarion call of the *New Deal*. Writing in *Cameroon Tribune*, November 2 1983, Bate Besong said. "**The roses which were stymied by desert Jackals now flower. A thousand roses now, will bloom**". Yet just a few months after, precisely on 6 April 1984, it was the bullets that flowered and the roses produced petals of blood. We were all carried away in that euphoria, the intellectual, the common man, the cream of the society, the Wretched of the earth.

Bate Besong's first teaching mission was at Cameroon Protestant College Bali where he inspired young Cameroonians with a newfound literary vision. Some of the students he taught in Bali still call him "Master" for he had helped transform the unpalatable literary concepts on the pages of their text books to the gullible facts of literary techniques in the cerebellums of their tender brains. He had won their heads but a lady had won his heart. His literary prowess adorned in a proud and persuasive personality shot Cupid's arrow at the heart out a youthful and charming lady who turned out to be his partner. They accepted each other and till today Mrs. Christina Besong has not only weathered the financial storm, braved the security risks but has given BB, Dante Besong, Mma-Agbor, Ebob-Bessemako, and Harold Mandela Bate Besong

THE AUTHOR

CPC Bali did not only give him a partner. It gave him a benefactor and motivator. Mr. *Jan Deurwaader*, a Dutch who taught Mathematics in the same college, took special interest in BB's works urging him to do more of drama than poetry. Mr. Jan Deurwaader was both a family friend and a literary torch who, according to Bate Besong, "continued to guide him towards the ultimate in populist culture - meaning - the inevitability of unfettered ablode achieved only within the parameters of collective struggle". Even

though Deurwaader lives far away in his home of Holland, their relationship, though clouded with tragic memories, still grows from strength to strength.

While in Bali, BB was Editor-in-Chief of the *English Language Teaching Society Journal* - a journal of Anglophone Cameroon's Northwest Teachers of Language and Literature Society. His major dramatic work *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* was performed at the Cameroon Cultural Centre Bamenda, by the Mutual Drapoets (a group founded by Tangyie Suh Nfor). The same Mutual Drapoets helped in the publication of his poetry collection *The Grain of Bobe Ngom Jua*, which is a course textbook in the University of Yaounde.

After sacrificing for the Presbyterian mission, he got a Government teaching employment in 1985 with the Government Secondary School Mayo Oulo. He was in charge of teaching English to Francophones in a form I school up the under-scholarised North. Nothing wrong with that. As teachers we should be prepared to teach wherever and whenever. But when such a place is called Mayo-oulo, the birth place of Ahmadou Ahidjo we must understand the work of destiny. For how can we explain the fact that a man who was running away from the ghost of a high-handed dictator had to come face-to-face with his cradle? It was this encounter with the past that opened the floodgates of a literary harvest in the future. Bitter with such a case of brain drain, Bate Besong's sojourn in Mayo-oulo constituted his first real professional fight with the Ministry of Education. That fight still continues.

His journey to Diaspora provoked the theme of nostalgia prevalent in his works. It was from the unpleasant distance of Mayo-oulo that he observed the hypocrisy of leadership, a leadership which according to him, had sworn fealty to their Masonic lodges and to each other, to bankrupt our national coffers. The curse on the, heads of the corrupt banditti. There is evidence that evil still survives absolutely and the only good is a cripple, chained to a dungeon of mockery and dust. But their champagne party will end".

Though estranged in the professional exile in Mayo oulo, he never felt loveless and lifeless for like he wrote in one of his poems, "Do not say you are abandoned and deserted friend, for it is the beauty of your exile that has shown how ugly we have become.

And so from Mayo-oulo the cradle of Ahmadou Ahidjo, Bate Besong was transferred to Buea - the cradle of Cameroon Anglophone Civilisation. He is now a tutor at Bilingual Grammar School - Molyko Buea, Literary Editor of *Cameroon Life Magazine* and prolific contributor to all renowned newspapers of English expression in Cameroon. In Buea, he has made more friends than foe- In the classroom, he is a literary mentor; in the off-licences, an accomplished hero and; in the club, an erratic orator. The off licence - tenants long to listen to some of his unwritten poems which he often recites (this time with a higher pitch and a staggered walk); they want to hear him chant the requiem for all the corrupt Kaisers; they want him to unravel the mystery of their misery. Bate Besong is a friend but I do not write to praise him, I write to honour him.

His first serious encounter with the police was when he did a review of my book *The Mungo Bridge*. That earned him a twelve-hour standing interrogation with the police. He came back the following day, his legs weary and his fingers numb. His second baptism of fire was after his very successful show of *Beast of no Nation* in the University of Yaounde amphitheatre. When he was called by CRTV anchor man Eric Chinje for an interview, he was arrested at the Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) Cafeteria on the charges of distributing tracts that could incite the Anglophone populace to rebellion. He was taken to an unknown destination where he was offered the kindest hospitality reserved only for very important prisoners (VIP) at Kondengui campus. Before that, a report had already been sent to CENER (Police agents) accusing the playwright of trying to stir a revolt among students. The report appeared in the French National Weekly *Challenge Hebdo*, No. 45 of 31 October - 6 November 1991

When I look back at that report, I am tempted to believe it for, two weeks after the play was staged in the University amphitheatre, Yaounde University went amok with the wind

of democratic change that was blowing across Cameroon. I also remember in December 1990 during Fale Wache's launching of *Lament of a Mother* Bate Besong presented a paper in which he advised the government to build more prisons the following year (1991) because that year will be one when all Cameroonians would prefer to be incarcerated in prison than see their rights confiscated. It came to pass. 1991 was a year of conflict and crisis, a year of tension and terror, a year of ghost town and Ghost University.

Yet it was under such a hostile political climate that Bate Besong wrote *Requiem for the Last Kaiser* - a book that has earned him the award from A.N.A (Association of Nigerian Authors). This book (play) is a clairvoyant premonition bordering on the theme of leadership myopia; for surrounded by a coterie of tribal and spineless sycophants, 'trapped by the trimmings of power, lulled by the cacophony of an hallelujah crowd and blessed by the hypocrisies of a religious *griot*, the leader refuses to see the grim reality of his own country. Not even the revolutionary voice of the woman, not even the apocalyptic voices of the masses "only his blood can cleanse the land" bring reason to bear on the self-conceited leader; so the play ends where it begins i.e. in the coffin. The play is an extended metaphor and elaborated vision of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* which satirises African dictators.

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