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Multiculturalism and the Politics of Nation Building in Recent Cameroon Anglophone Theatre

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Abstract

The works of Bole Butake, Bate Besong and Victor Epie Ngome have become classics of Cameroon Anglophone drama today. The performances discussed here show that not only do they articulate the authors' attitudes, but they also seek to influence the attitudes of audiences towards the nation. Cashing in on a popular desire for change in a society characterised by widespread disillusion, Anglophone theatre presents varying perspectives on reconstructing the nation, based on the vision of each dramatist, ranging at times from mutual reconciliation and recognition of socio-cultural identities to outright usurpation of despotism to usher in democracy.

Les travaux de Bole Butake, Bate Besong et Victor Epie Ngome sont devenus des classiques dans le théâtre anglophone camerounais d'aujourd'hui. Les spectacles que nous traitons ici montrent que, non seulement ils expliquent les attitudes des auteurs, mais ils cherchent aussi à influencer les attitudes des spectateurs envers la nation. Utilisant le désir populaire de voir des changements dans une société profondément influencée par une désillusion répandue, le théâtre anglophone propose des perspectives diverses sur la reconstruction de la nation, fondée sur la vision de chaque auteur dramatique, pouvant aller de la réconciliation et la reconnaissance des identités socio-culturelles jusqu'au refus total du despotisme, pour permettre la possibilité de la démocratie.

Los trabajos de Bole Butake, Bate Besong y Victor Epie Ngome se han convertido en clásicos del Camerún Anglofónico del drama de hoy en día. Las actuaciones analizadas aquí demuestran que no solo articulan las actitudes de los autores, sino que también buscan influenciar las actitudes de los espectadores hacia el país. Haciendo uso del deseo popular por cambio, en una sociedad caracterizada por su extensa desilusión. El teatro anglofónico presenta perspectivas variadas de reconstrucción del país, basado en la visión de cada dramaturgo, variando a veces desde la reconciliación mutua y el reconocimiento de identidades socioculturales hasta la usurpación incondicional del despotismo y la transición a la democracia.

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This essay is concerned with the way contemporary Anglophone theatre reveals the nature of power relationships between the English-speaking and French-speaking communities in Cameroon and how this relationship has affected the country's ambition towards nation building in the postcolonial era. The concept of the nation as a harmonious polity that takes equal interest in promoting the various agendas of its diverse groups is a privileged project of the post-colony. In a country dominated by Francophone hegemony since independence forty years ago, the question of English-speakers and French-speakers co-habiting has become a contentious one in recent times. Official discourse ranks the country as a success story in nation building. The state prides itself on constructing a peaceful, harmonious and progressive nation within the Central African sub-region where most other countries are plagued by economic woes, protracted ethnic and civil wars. The reality, however, is that since the early 1990s, amidst persistent economic troubles, a section of the English-speaking elite, pointing to the marginalisation of Anglophones, have been agitating for the secession of their community from the political union with their French-speaking compatriots. Another group of Anglophones opposing this secessionist creed prefers working for the consolidation of unity between the two communities. Those in this camp have been labelled sell-outs and self-seekers who play second fiddle to Francophone hegemony.

As Anglophone nationalism grew in the political sphere, in the cultural arena Anglophone theatre emerged from its timid past to assume an aggressive posture, as it sought to stage and articulate its political message. Anglophone dramatists contribute to recasting the Cameroonian predicament â€”by providing an understanding of how existing realities are framed, and how these realities might â€” be changed and improved.â€” As minority writers, their plays acknowledge the desire for physical presence and identity, a desire which always requires a kind of centre even when they deconstruct another centre. This centre privileges Anglophone identity within the mainstream political power structures. As Muller has stated, â€”it is self-evident in the current political and economic situation that presentations and narratives of, by, and about minorities, outsiders and cross-cultural conflicts will remain important. [The plays in this study] which are particularly impressive and provocative â€” stimulate thinking about the past, the struggle to locate oneself, and in the process of learning what and where the heart or the centre is.â€” (1994:9-15) Thus, recent Anglophone theatre in Cameroon is not only about revealing the nature of political and economic domination by one group over the other but also a militant reaction to it. Such engagement by Anglophone dramatists implants them within the vanguard in the battle for the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse in nationalism, in the search and definition of an appropriate identity not only for the Anglophone but also for the subjugated masses be they English-speaking or French-speaking. However, the attitudes of these dramatists towards nation building and the way they express it differ.

This paper will focus on the performances of Victor Epie Ngomeâ€™s *What God Has Put Asunder*, Bate Besongâ€™s *Beasts of No Nation* and Bole Butakeâ€™s *And Palm Wine Will Flow*. In March 1998 the Obasinjom Players performed *What God Has Put Asunder* before an audience that was predominantly Anglophone at the Alliance Franco-Camerounaise in Buea, the capital of former West Cameroon. In March 1990 and October 1991, the Yaounde University Theatre produced *And Palm Wine Will Flow* and *Beasts of Nation* respectively, before a predominantly English-speaking audience in Yaounde, the current capital of the country located in the French-speaking region. In the portrayal of the cultural, historical and ideological affiliations that inhabit the plays, which the performances tried to articulate, I set out to understand how these shape the manner in which individuals in the larger community express their belonging or otherwise to the hegemonic discourse of nation formation.

What God Has Put Asunder

What God Has Put Asunder performed by the Obasinjom Players demonstrates a high degree of faithfulness to the spirit of the text and also to its dramatic form. This form borders on the conventions of Western prosaic realism to articulate the writerâ€™s challenge to the hegemonic concept of the nation, such as is defined by the ruling class dominated by Francophones. This is portrayed through the image of an orphaned girl Weka, who is raised by white missionaries, marries Garba, is later exploited and maltreated, forced to abandon the union and is taken to court. According to the ruling elite, Cameroon is a progressive nation at peace with its two principal communities. As will be seen in this essay, Epie Ngome rejects such an assertion. His play suggests that Anglophones have been subjugated by Francophones for close to forty years, since political independence. The focus of the performance then, demonstrates the rejection of the union and a determination to define and establish a strong Anglophone identity as equal partner in the power equation. The performance pursued the possibility of looking beneath the cosmetic setting of contemporary political arrangements. This is symbolised through Wekaâ€™s experiences, especially her desire to quit her marriage and enter a loose union with Garba. In this regard, the production shows how the writer attempts to dismantle the dominant discourse of the ideological â€”Other.â€” The name â€”Wekaâ€” is formed from a collapsing of â€”Westâ€” and â€”Kamerunâ€”, the German version for Cameroon. Weka therefore stands for West Cameroon or English-speaking Cameroon. The deeper symbolic meanings emerged largely through the performers themselves. The lead actress in Wekaâ€™s role convincingly portrayed the sufferings of her character throughout the play. From her accent and mannerisms, it was clear to the audience that she personified Anglophone Cameroon. Wekaâ€™s problems begin when she marries Garba. Her decision to marry Garba represents the plebiscite through which Anglophones made a conscious decision to join their Francophone compatriots. The performance was therefore a reconstruction of historical memory, emphasizing the marginalisation of Anglophones from the centre of power by the Francophone hegemony, and how that is now being resisted.

Ngomeâ€™s nationalism is not just a feeling of attachment to a set of ideals that characterize a nation, but the articulation of those ideals. This implies fostering a harmonious society by creating opportunities for equal social, economic and political progress for the various members of the society. Wekaâ€™s break with Garba points to the fact that such opportunities are not open to all members of the society and suggests Ngomeâ€™s opposition to a system that exploits and marginalises Anglophones. Such an exclusive and totalising form of nationalism he opposed through a number of performance strategies.

Firstly, the actress who played Weka the protagonist, convincingly portrayed the character as a weak and submissive person, demonstrating how susceptible Weka is to exploitation and marginalisation. Through the use of Anglophone mannerisms and accent, she showed that Weka represented more than a private individual having problems in marriage. When she leaves Garba, accusing him of wanting to assimilate her, she says:

WEKA: He has been forcing my children to learn his own mother-tongue, and to forget mine with which they grew up; I must abide by the customs of his clan not mine... (53).

The audience immediately understands that this is in reference to the 'assimilationist' tendencies, which the Francophone-led government sometimes displays. Weka opposes such motives the way Anglophones have always opposed them in real life.

Another strategy Ngome used to project Anglophone opposition and identity is a play-within-a-play. In this he dramatised a biblical text about the high-handed and arbitrary nature of King Herod's rule, which reaches a murderous level when John the Baptist was beheaded for attempting to speak out against the cruelty of the system. This dramatic subtext has a direct parallel in the political system in Cameroon. The fictional character that plays John the Baptist's role, 'Austin NGOM', alludes to and celebrates the late popular Anglophone politician Augustine Ngom Jua who had the courage to challenge the inequities perpetrated by Francophone leaders. For emphasis, this play-within-a-play was presented on a raised platform a bit higher than the rest of the stage, epitomising the need for Anglophone resistance. Furthermore, the actor who played this role was bold and fiery in comportment in order to capture the real-life nature of the late Anglophone nationalist leader. Jua was one of the few Anglophone politicians who could oppose the late Ahmadou Ahidjo, who ruled Cameroon with an iron fist for twenty-two years after independence. Ahidjo orchestrated the unification of the former West Cameroon and East Cameroon to form the United Republic of Cameroon through a plebiscite popularly known as the 'Peaceful Revolution' of 20th May 1972. This is now being celebrated each year as the 'National Day'. Some Anglophone nationalists have argued that the plebiscite was a contrivance to force West Cameroon to join East Cameroon, because instead of asking only Anglophones in the plebiscite whether they would like to join the Francophones in a unitary state, Francophones with their numerical strength were allowed to participate, thereby influencing the outcome of the vote.

Further to accentuate the resistance, Weka's opposition to the exploitation and maltreatment by Garba comes immediately after the mousetrap. When Weka finally breaks with Garba she takes her children along:

WEKA: My children took straight off with me (36)

Her abandonment of the marriage does reflect Ngome's condemnation and rejection of the system and the union. He has even manifested this attitude in his professional life. For any Cameroonian familiar with the government-owned radio station in the 1980s and early 1990s, Victor Epie Ngome was one of the most popular Anglophone journalists, because he used to produce a programme that was very critical of the political system. He later resigned his job as a sort of protest.

It is therefore obvious that Ngome's objective in this play is to reclaim Anglophones from the margins of an imagined nation constructed by a totalising discourse. What God Has Put Asunder becomes a detotalising 'narrative' intended to reveal the untruths of the nation, and to invest Anglophones with a proper sense of their own identity. This kind of awareness is exemplified in Weka's own self-realization, which enables her to comment about her failed marriage with the benefit of hindsight. She declares:

... how could I have known twenty years ago that he would turn out mean and

beastly? (35)

Therefore this play published in 1992, twenty years after the establishment of the unitary state, in a sense seeks to demand a reassessment of the relationship between the two communities which is rather lop-sided. The growing disillusionment within the English-speaking community has pushed some Anglophone elite to seize on the opportunity provided by the timid "political liberalization process in the early 1990s (and to) openly "protest against the supposed subordinate position of the Anglophones and to lay claims to self-determination and autonomy." (Konings & Nyamnjoh 1997: 207) But even though Weka opts out of the relationship with Garba, it may be too hasty and a parochial reading of the play to imply that Ngome suggests that Anglophones and Francophones cannot co-exist because of the inequalities that abound in the political union. However, he understands the complex problem of nation building in a multicultural society like Cameroon. His understanding transcends the parochial view that the limitations of nation building in Cameroon is situated in what is known as "The Anglophone Question."

Ngome shows that Cameroon's problems with forging a viable nation comes from the two major implications of the totalitarian notion of the nation. This notion includes constant subtle machinations by the government to force Anglophones to abandon their own cultural identity and assimilate with that of the Francophones. Besides this, the nature of totalitarian government implies a self-seeking political elite in alliance with imperialists to exploit the masses. This much is indeed subtly dramatised throughout the play. Weka was brought up in an orphanage run by Reverend Gordon and Sister Sabeth - both British - and was given away in marriage by them. This is an allusion to the colonial and neo-colonial British influence in Cameroon. On the other hand Garba's relationship with Louis, a Frenchman, is described by Weka thus:

... Louis taught Garba to feel like a member of his own family. To this day, even as an old polygamist and father of a brood of brats, Garba does nothing without asking Louis first. Would you believe, for instance that Garba lets Louis keep his money for him and cannot buy anything without Louis's blessing. (37-38)

This is a satire on French colonial policy of assimilation and neo-colonial meddling in Cameroon. Ngome explores this theme further by showing that when Weka leaves Garba, Reverend Gordon brings in Jim from Tennessee to help rehabilitate her. But she refuses all offers Jim makes because according to her, it is: self-reliance first.

The court scene afforded another occasion for the performance to reinforce the philosophical foundation of the playwright's counter-hegemonic discourse of nation building. From the timid and weak Weka the lead actress demonstrated the growth and maturity of the character towards the end of the play in the final court scene. At this point the performer revealed how Weka had grown into a strong, courageous woman able to assert herself. This self-assertion represents Ngome's concept of the Cameroonian nation which includes a strong Anglophone community that can assert its own culture while equally respecting the Francophone culture and identity. This is the message of Anglophone empowerment which comes out at the court scene, clearly stated by the Judge who presided over the case between Weka and Garba. He declares:

... the marriage remains subject to confirmation between husband and wife- on a one-to-one basis. It shall become void once any of the two parties concern objects thereto ...the couple shall continue to live in physical separation ... that the couple are under injunction to be of good conduct to each other... (58)

This indicates that Ngome is not an Anglophone separatist. He encourages the union between the two regions constructed on the basis of mutual respect and the provision of opportunities for all to express their identities and partake equally in building a viable nation devoid of neo-colonial manipulation. Thus, the significance of the overriding symbol of marriage in Ngome's play lies in the fact that it reveals the philosophical foundation of his counter-hegemonic discourse which espouses a cultural syncretism. This may be compared to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's position in *A Grain of Wheat* where the marriage

between Gikonyo and Mumbi, is "symbolically associated with Kihika's dream of a Kenya, that belongs to [all] and where everybody [should] have a share in the common shamba ... The soil belongs to the Kenyan people..." (Buell, 1994, 91-92)

Beasts of No Nation

While Ngome employs the marriage symbol as a dramatic strategy to explore the complex problem of nation building in a multicultural society like Cameroon, Bate Besong performs the nation quite differently. *Beasts of No Nation* is a punchy piece that paints reality as it is. It was produced with the same forceful reality by the Yaounde University Theatre during its premier in the largest hall on Yaounde University campus. The reaction to this production was instant and tremendous. A government functionary came to watch the performance and was booed as he left the hall just before the play came to an end. He was considered a spy for the authorities. They shouted after him in Pidgin "Man no run." This implied that the play was an attack on the enemy of the people and that the opponent was already capitulating. It was evident that the performance had successfully achieved the writer's goal of arousing the people's anger against the powerful elite.

The play has no linear plot like *And Palm Wine Will Flow* and *What God Has Put Asunder*, no clear-cut story that rises, twists, turns and falls, It has no clearly defined characters; rather they are silhouettes representing abstract figures. The play is mainly built up as a series of episodes like single pictures, each with its own story, a mosaic on bare cardboard. These pictures conjure horrid images in poetic lines; that are sometimes meaningless and enveloped in a general mood of melancholy. To portray the waste and uselessness of the Cameroonian society the playwright exploited elements of Theatre of the Absurd. The **Yaounde University Theatre's** version of *Beasts of No Nation* is a medley of stories, mounted on a bare stage except for solitary props that stood for the lavatory, conjuring a sense of waste and disillusionment. It played out as a series of attacks on the Francophone-led political class for oppressing Anglophones and the masses, and equally attacked Anglophones for being inactive and complacent in the face of oppression.

To link it together, scenes were produced as fast moving snapshots of a still camera. This was done through character portrayal. "Narrator" was the principal and omnipresent character who personified the pace and sombre mood of the production. Throwing in allusions to factual contexts and through improvisation the central actor who played the Narrator tried to portray the moral decay and hopelessness of leaders in Cameroon. He declares early in the play:

NARRATOR: Where there is no vision the people perish. And I find no vision here...I myself have seen the very corrupt in power flourishing like coded bank accounts overseas. (5,6)

The rest of the play, driven by these initial comments, is concerned with either the subjugation of Anglophones or the condemnation of the powerful elite for impoverishing the people by stealing public money and in addition brutalizing them physically in order to force a dominant ideology on them. This portrayal takes a cue from those initial comments by the Narrator.

Achilles Mbembe has aptly underscored the brutality of the state in most African countries. He states tersely that "the post colony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and political machinery which ... constitute a distinctive regime of violence." (1992:3) The Narrator illustrates this further:

NARRATOR: ...the soldiers had done their duty and wiped out the dreamers.

Also Besong parodies totalitarian leaders when Aadingingin (himself the supreme leader of Ednouay (Yaounde spelt backwards - according to Besong's play the seat of the oppressors and ruling class) declares:

AADINGINGIN: You will be put in a torture chambers ... Theyâ€™ll chain your hands and feet ... Bottles will be broken on your head.

Beasts of No Nation shows how the political elite in Cameroon has exploited ethnic and regional difference to reconstruct identities that divide people along economic and political lines. For instance, in self-mockery â€™Crippleâ€™, â€™Blind-manâ€™ and the rest of the â€™Night-soil-menâ€™ use the expression 'Anglos carry your cross alone'.

In relation to the powerful condition of the Francophones English-speaking Cameroonians are marginalised in virtually all public positions. They have been unable to hold the most powerful position, that of President. They hold only the less powerful ministerial posts; English is rated second to French and there are fewer economic infrastructures in the Anglophone region. Ethnic bias is also a cankerworm in the social fabric in the country. Blind man makes a mockery of it when he says:

BLIND MAN: ... my brother-in-law is BEAC and my younger sister is the PS of Alhaji Magida Ewondo-Ndingi, Director of Contracts in the Ministry of Secret Contracts and Honey in Gidigis. (19)

In the eyes of the government, national unity seems to be a lopsided notion that only pertains to Anglophones who must integrate with Francophones into the political union and their mainstream culture never the other way round. Cripple hints at the vexing problem of national unity by aping security officials who harass citizen for identification papers:

CRIPPLE: Why havenâ€™t they got their professional identity cards, Mr. Mayor? Without one, they are not integrated. (24)

In response to Cripple, Blindman says:

BLINDMAN: ...Anglos will always write petitions. It is in their make up.

This response, which has no bearing on Crippleâ€™s comments is an example of the writerâ€™s use of incoherent dialogue, a feature of Theatre of the Absurd. Employed here, it serves to reveal more weaknesses of which the writer accuses Anglophones. They always write petitions, which serves them no good, instead of taking effective action to fight for their liberation

Besong aims at deconstructing the narrative of oppression instituted by the ruling class. In this regard, he constructs a rhetoric is based on a revolutionary nationalism similar to that of Amiri Baraka, Femi Osofisan and Ngugi wa Thiongâ€™o. The play is a call to revolutionary action because the oppressed are given a voice. They are encouraged to fight for their freedom. Narrator spurs Anglophones and the rest of masses to embrace this action:

NARRATOR: ... it appears you will soon have to decide to fight or run...

In the end, the Night-soil-men storm Adinginginâ€™s office but are fought back. Though the forces of domination still hold sway in the country, the battle between the people and their oppressors is not over yet in Cameroon.

This production of *Beasts of No Nation* had an instant effect on the audience, as noted earlier. The majority who were Anglophones thought that their predicament as a people had been perfectly portrayed; they felt empowered and applauded the performance. There were others, a few Francophones and Anglophones in authority who were angered, who condemned the play. The

playwright was even taken away and gaoled after the performance. In an observation that has been widely published, a government official who attended the performance expressed his sentiments bitterly:

It is a clear political pamphlet directed to the regime in power. The author holds the thesis that Francophones in power are responsible for the economic crisis because they are producers of waste and embezzlers of public funds the author equally, and this is the central thesis (philosophy) of the play, that the Anglophones of Cameroon are marginalized and confined to undignified roles like carriers of excrement. The play ends with an appeal for rebellion and disregard of the present authority the playwright took to the stage to publicly declare that the future of Cameroon is uncertain and that chaos can set in at any time. Consequently he appealed to the audience, for the most part Anglophones, to get themselves ready to carry out their choices. I think in my opinion, that at the time when the government is exerting great and constant efforts to make Cameroon a united country in which the two communities co-exist in brotherliness, (sic) it is unacceptable that intellectuals should promote divisions and conflicts. (Biatcha 1996:222-223)

And Palm Wine Will Flow

In *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, Butake's organizing element is poetic ritual. This is a syncretic fusion of terse realistic images and African ritual. Through this Butake explores the possibilities of mediating between the material and the spiritual. This mediation becomes a process of transformation. Ultimate change as suggestive of the play comes about by subverting despotism in order to achieve collective freedom and unity among social groups. In the performance, the focal point of the drama is the merging of the spiritual and the material. The catalysts in this process are Shey Ngong, his First Wife and the Palm Wine Tapper. The articulation of the process relied heavily on the three actors who played those characters and the set design. These elements aptly conveyed the sentiments of the play because they were constructed in local culture and colour. For instance their costumes, setting and character reflected Cameroonian reality.

The play explores the possibilities of building a society that fulfils the dreams of the people. This commitment reveals similarities between Butake, Besong and Ngome. However, Butake differs from the others in the way he articulates his attachment to the nation. He dramatises oppression and resistance to it not merely to present the issues. His vision for a new society is concretised even in the way his characters struggle and succeed in overthrowing dictatorship. While Ngome's technique is built on historical symbolism, and Besong's is on re-inventing theatre of the absurd in contemporary realism, Butake's thrives on ritual realism.

Ritual is the organizing structure of *And Palm-Wine Will Flow*. The play does not only employ ritual to lay bare the ritualistic nature of reality, but uses it to negotiate contemporary reality. It deploys a certain revolutionary primordialism in ways that traditional beliefs and aesthetic forms ... (are) reborn in the midst of depictions of (post colonial) protest and the violence that responds to it. (Buell 1994:82). In this sense, Butake's re-invention of culture parallels

Ngugi's construction of tradition ... an example of what Arik Dirlik calls Marxist Culturalism. This culturalism deploys culture as liberating practice, criticizing the conventional notion of tradition as a burden of the past upon the present, an inert legacy that shapes the consciousness of people with its own prerogatives (ibid., 76). In Buell's words, although *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* is steeped in tones of primordialist nostalgia it dramatises the beginning of a modern political movement that emerges from the shackles of an autocratic feudalism. But this modernity is transformative because it tears down the repressive structures of the feudal past to establish its own features that empower the masses. (76) The play is set in a traditional Cameroonian village, and the predominance of ritual elements together with a reliance on proverbs as an overriding linguistic feature, add up to conjure an effect of primordiality. As a site for the contestation of power the play positions villagers against their greedy, corrupt and totalitarian chief. His word is law. But when he decides to confer a title on one who does not deserve it, he paradoxically initiates the course of his own downfall. It will take a ritual ceremony, the poetic invocations of the gods and ancestors, to mobilize the revolutionary forces that will bring this about. Shey Gong, the chief-priest, sets the process in motion with the following prayer:

SHEUGONG: Oh Nyombom! Creator and guardian of the land ... grant me strength and wisdom to weather the surging storm. The Fon has lost vision... (89)

Butake dramatises totalitarian power in the post-colony in order to ridicule it. Again, he uses palm-wine, an important element in the ritual process, to achieve this purpose. Palm-wine is used in several occasions in the play, most significantly to celebrate the event which sets in motion the major conflict: The conferment of a title to a worthless person in the village. The constant reference to palm-wine serves to draw the parallel between a totalitarian ruler drunk with power and a drunkard drunk with wine. This image of the leader is laughable because it is constructed in melodramatic proportions. As exemplified in Shey Ngong's comments:

SHEY NGONG: Your Fon (chief) is the Pig who knows only the hunger of its own stomach(91)...When people overfeed like pigs and soak themselves in palm-wine, they take pleasure in desecrating the gods(93).

By ridiculing oppressive leaders Butake hopes to raise popular awareness and popular revolt against such leaders. He employs folk elements the way Femi Osofisan does. In this play, he subverts the ideology of the ritual form. He hijacks the purpose of ritual, to legitimise the hegemonic status quo in traditional societies. In the light of contemporary events, which Butake dramatises, the ritual becomes an empowering element for the masses. Thus, Shey Ngong who is well positioned to combine religion and politics constructs both the ritual and the revolutionary process. Through poetic invocations he summons the gods and the ancestors who in a ritual event incarnate: the form of the Kibaranko in the body of Tapper, and the form of the Earth Goddess in the body of Kwengong. Thus empowered, the Kibaranko causes havoc at the Fon's palace and Earth-goddess inspires and organizes the women's uprising that deposes the Fon. His fall ushers in a democratic dispensation, as Kwengong states:

KWENGONG: The people will rule through a council of elders led by Shey ... The day he takes a wrong decision, that same day the people shall meet ... and put another at the head of the council. (113)

Thus, Butake's drama about oppression and abuse of political power is a tool for consciousness-raising whose agenda is to condemn irresponsible leadership in contemporary Cameroon. This creates possibilities for popular social change and the establishment of democracy.

And Palm Wine Will Flow had its premier in March 1990 at the Hilton Hotel in Yaounde. It gained instant acclaim among the people because it dared to encourage popular change in society at a time Cameroon was suffering the pangs of totalitarian government. At a time the winds of change were blowing from Eastern Europe, Cameroonians were already expressing a subtle restlessness for social and political change. Indeed the play foreshadowed the launching of the first major opposition party in the country's recent history, because its ending suggests a democratic dispensation. Two months after its debut performance by the Yaounde University Theatre the Social Democratic Party was launched. This play is significant in the debate over nation building in Cameroon because it shows people that to change a despotic regime needs collective action.

In conclusion therefore, this essay has tried to show that recent Cameroon Anglophone theatre exposes the contradictions inherent in the hegemonic discourse of nation building within a postcolonial multicultural society such as Cameroon. Such discourse is invented by a self-seeking ruling elite bent on maintaining power. However, the plays discussed demonstrate how writers from their own perspectives participate in reconstructing society through dramatizing detotalising narratives that imagines an all-embracing nation that serve various interests and cultures. Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder* envisages a new society built on mutual good faith of various national cultures desiring to live in harmony. What limits such a vision is absence of a political force to actualise its process. On the other hand, Bate Besong and Bole Betake hinge national salvation on collective participation. But while *Beasts of No Nation* displays a timid attitude, *And Palm-Wine Will Flow*'s style revamps primordial

essentialism, investing it with complete revolutionary energy.

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