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## Anglophone Cameroon literature: A conversation with Bole Butake

**Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi:** Professor Butake, we are here for a conversation about the evolution of Anglophone Cameroon literature with the aim of providing a framework for understanding the issues addressed by the contributors to this special country issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* on Cameroon literature. Thank you so much for talking with me.<sup>1</sup>

**Bole Butake:** It is my privilege.

*You are meeting with me under difficult circumstances and I want you to know how much I appreciate this.*

Well, we thank God that I'm on my feet. We were supposed to have this interview yesterday but I was in the hospital.

*You've had an illustrious career as a writer, as a critic; you spent many decades molding minds at the University of Yaoundé, now known as University of Yaoundé I, and even in retirement, Cameroon Christian University has asked you to come back. Can we begin with what you're doing now?*

Unfortunately, I've not been in good health in the last two years or so but I am still under a lot of pressure because I am still supervising University of Yaoundé students and doing defenses at the Ph.D. level and even at the master's level. Right now in my house here in Mbangkolo, I have six finished Ph.D. theses that I am supposed to read and write pre-defense reports. I'm struggling through two now. I hope I can finish them in the next month or so, which is a very difficult task, and when you are not very well you cannot read more than a few pages a day. In Bali, I do mostly

administrative work in the Faculty of Arts and Social and Management Sciences because we were supposed to start and build a bilingual degree in the Performing Arts and Cinematography but we don't have students. What we do have is English and Journalism. The university is suffering from a shortage of students. The Presbyterian Church thought it might be a problem of leadership, so they changed the Rector and Registrar this January. We have a new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Vincent Titanji, who retired from the University of Buea and the new Registrar is Professor Vincent Tanya. The new Vice-Chancellor issued an announcement for the admission of students for this spring semester that is supposed to begin on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March.

*Knowing your track record, Cameroon Christian University is lucky to have you.*

I think they are lucky because if they didn't really want me—I've been absent for practically four months for health reasons—and were they not very kind people they would have kicked me out. They call every now and again, send messages, and the chaplain when leading prayers always asks the congregation to pray for me, so I think they are really concerned.

*They know that in you they have a gem that will help move this new university forward. We are all praying that you get well soon.*

Things are improving, otherwise I wouldn't be able to sit here and talk with you or hold this conversation.

### **The colonial era**

*In the colonial era, Anglophone Cameroon literature was always yoked to what was happening in Nigeria and never seen as a literature that stood on its own. What are your thoughts about the situation then?*

I would quote Professor Bernard Fonlon who kept saying that we—the anglophones—were not taught the arts; were not taught how to write literature; that we were taught in more practical areas like the sciences. But one would ask Fonlon, what about the Nigerians who were writing literature? How was it that Nigerians were able to create and we in Cameroon were not able to create as such? Despite Fonlon's claim, people like Sankie Maimo were writing, even the late Professor Fonlon himself was writing poetry and a lot of essays. There were a few other Cameroonians in Nigeria who were writing. I remember Nchami and, another guy in Limbe, who wrote a series short stories.

*Were they published?*

Yes, they were published in a volume. At that time, there were very few writers but at least those few were writing. And don't forget that the Igbo presence in the Southern Cameroons intimidated Cameroonians from writing.

*In what way?*

Back then, a woman would go to the market to buy, say, a piece of cloth but before she can ask "how much," the vendor would cut the piece, throw it at her and say, "pay this amount of money." These things happened very often in Mankon Market in Bamenda, North West Region, where you were just coming from. The market used to be at the Police Station in Old Town and these things were mostly happening there. And then of course the Igbos also inundated the market with their Onitsha Market literature with titles like *Veronica My Love* and so on. When anglophone Cameroonians at that time read those things they thought that was the summit of literature and felt they were not even qualified to do that kind of work. Above all, it was the problem of publishing. There were no publishers in Cameroon. Even after independence, the few publishers who started publishing like Buma Kor abandoned it along the way, so in effect, most of the people who published after independence were mostly self-published. It's only these days—I know we are going to come to that later on—it's only these days that I can say, the literature is blooming. There's a lot happening now. One month can't go by without a new publication by an anglophone on the market. The books are coming out even if people are not buying them. But I must mention Mbella Sone Dipoko who published *A Few Nights and Days, Because of Women*, and *Black and White in Love*.

*Many Nigerian writers were published by the AWS. Was Dipoko the only anglophone writer published by the African Writers Series?*

There was Kenjo Jumbam with *The White Man of God*. At least those two. Not too bad.

*Did the presence of missionaries in colonial times influence anglophone literature in any way? Missionaries were mainly interested in proselytizing and when they translated the Bible into indigenous languages, it wasn't because they wanted to learn our languages...*

They did, in a way. Especially, the Basel Mission. The Basel Mission, which is today the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon, encouraged a lot of indigenous literature, especially in the Duala language and Mungaka. At least those are the ones I know of in the Southern Cameroons. If you went to school in the South West Province, which at the time was called Victoria Province, for the first two or three years of your primary education, you were taught in the Duala language but in the

North West Province, which at the time was called Bamenda Province,<sup>2</sup> you were taught in Mungaka. There were also languages such as Kom, Lamso, in which the children were also encouraged to start school. It's only when they got into higher classes like Standard One and Standard Two that they started learning in English. And then of course the missionaries translated some stories from the Bible into local languages which they then read or taught to the people in church and that is how Christianity was actually implanted in those two regions. For the Catholics, it is in Kom and Bango that Christianity took root, whereas in Bali and most of the South West Province, it was the Basel church. You can see that divide.

*Francophone Cameroon had mission-sponsored publishers like Les Éditions CLE, did Anglophone Cameroon have its equivalent?*

No. I'll tell you a very interesting story. I started my career as a writer by self-publishing. When I had established myself as a good playwright, I went to Éditions CLE here and the person running it at the time—he was from Burundi or Rwanda—told me, "No. You anglophones, you go to East Africa for publishing. That's where your own publishing house is. The equivalent of Éditions CLE is in East Africa." "You want me to leave now and go to East Africa?" I asked. In any case, before he left CLE, I had convinced him that it was important. I brought evidence to show him that there were a lot of anglophones writing and that they were interested in being published by Éditions CLE. The next director who took over started publishing anglophones. There are quite a handful of anglophones who have now been published by CLE, although sometimes CLE charges a publication fee.

*Francophones had CLE and the French ran essay and literary contests in La Gazette du Cameroun and people wrote about their experiences but it was always about France and what France was doing for them.*

In fact, the first poets in Cameroon, someone like Louis-Marie Pouka, most of his poetry is in praise of France. He would say things like, without France we'd die here in the forest ... barbarians...

*Does such Anglophone Cameroon writing exist? Writing that was supposed to be a representation of the colony but rather written in praise of the British?*

No. Because the British were not really present in the Southern Cameroons. It was the Igbos and the Yorubas. The Igbos dominated commerce and the Yorubas dominated the administration. So the British Southern Cameroonian dealt with the Yoruba man or the Igbo man. The British influence was limited to the headquarters in Buea, the

seat of the colonial administrator, and in Bamenda was the District Commissioner. Those who went to the Divisions were black people from Nigeria. Consequently, the Southern Cameroonian did not have any direct link with Britain or the British. There's very little literature that relates to Britain in the colonial times. I've tried to do research on that era and I haven't seen much.

*Which means that the two colonial systems of direct rule and indirect rule made a difference in whether the colony was represented or not.*

Yes. It made a big difference with present day consequences. Even today, when a francophone tells you he is going home he is thinking of Paris and that is even the basis of this anglophone-francophone divide because the francophone is still terribly attached to the colony while the anglophone isn't. The francophone has simply turned around and colonized the anglophone Cameroonian. He is colonized by France and he colonizes the anglophone.

*Francophones stepped into the shoes of the Yorubas and the Igbos, so to speak.*

Yes. That is it. You can look at it from that perspective. Even today, the Igbos are still here. Go to Kumba. Kumba is owned by Igbos.

*I went to Mankon Market the other day and there are rows and rows of stalls owned by Igbos.*

Bamenda is even better. There are Igbo landlords in Kumba.

*In Bamenda, Igbos were not allowed to own land. Has that changed?*

No. If an Igbo man owns land in Bamenda he must have been there for over fifty years.

*Or used an indigene to purchase the land.*

Of course, the Igbos with their commercial acumen have penetrated many places. They dominate the car spare parts market here at Nvog'Ada Escalier.

*And Camp Yabassi in Douala. Is this another reason why, in the 1950s, there were a lot more Francophone writers like Ferdinand Oyono and Mongo Beti writing biting criticisms of the colonial enterprise?*

Mongo Beti's *Ville Cruelle*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de Boy*. They were more anti the colony than anglophones and that in effect was because of the Igbo presence in

Cameroon. That is why people massively voted against joining Nigeria in the plebiscite. In the north, with the British Northern Cameroons, it was different because for the most part the language of communication was Hausa.

*There was a communal, linguistic, cultural and political space within which the people co-existed.*

And religious as well. It was not the same down here in the British Southern Cameroons.

*I always assumed that it was mostly because the people in the British Northern Cameroons had relatives across the border in Nigeria but the situation was much more complicated than that.*

Even today, they still go across and visit their relatives in Nigeria and the Nigerians still come across and visit them and with the current Boko Haram crisis, there are more than 30 000 Nigerian refugees living across the border in Cameroon in refugee camps.

### **The years after independence**

*Did things change in the early years of independence for Anglophone Cameroon writing? The decades of the sixties through the eighties.*

There was a change because people became conscious of the fact that there was a missing entity. People like Professor Fonlon, Sankie Maimo; the creation of *Cameroon Tribune*, and so on. Cameroonians started writing in the newspapers, especially *Cameroon Tribune*, and Fonlon tried to justify why anglophones were not writing literature. He published an article in *Cameroon Tribune* and Sankie Maimo, who comes from Basso like Fonlon, said, "Bernard Fonlon missed his spear at the first throw." That started a ferocious argument and debates in *Cameroon Tribune* between those who were for Fonlon's and those who were for Sankie Maimo's point of view. Sankie Maimo stuck to his guns and was the first person to disagree with the fact that anglophones were not writing but pointed instead to a lack of publishing opportunities. He said he first published *I'm Vindicated* in Nigeria with Ibadan University Press, then self-published *Adventures with Jaja*, then came back to Cameroon and couldn't find a publisher for the other titles he had written. At that time, I was already teaching in the Department of African Literature so I decided with Nalova Lyonga, who is today the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buea, to do some research in that area. We actually discovered that a lot of Cameroonians were writing. An awful lot. We discovered people like the late Takere Messack who wrote a lot of poetry and after we mentioned him in the papers, he started publishing and published 5 or 6 volumes of *Kingfisher Poetry*. We also discovered there were many

people writing but who weren't getting published, so we wrote the article in *ABBIA* titled "Cameroon Anglophone Literature: An Appraisal"<sup>3</sup> which people read and some reacted to by self-publishing. I, for one, decided to publish some of the things that I had been writing. You were there when we created the literary magazine at the university.

*The Mould.*

We met every Sunday and read whatever we had written during the week and people criticized the work and we went back and improved it and published it in *The Mould*. Today, people are looking for *The Mould* because of its historical significance. *Here's what you wrote in the Foreword of the first issue we published in July, 1977:* "The idea of a magazine of creative writing for Yaoundé University was first conceived out the need for such a forum for the English speaking community here. We are all aware of the deep concern expressed in many quarters, and most recently in the colloquium on Cameroon writing and literary criticism organized by the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences last April, about the almost total lack of creative writing in English in Cameroon, for various reasons have been advanced and many theoretical solutions proposed. But the question still remains: What is the practical remedy for this ever-looming problem? It was in seeking an answer to this question that I first conceived the idea of a magazine which has now crystallized into The Mould. Having lived in this environment for upwards of eight years, and being aware of the pressing need for some medium of expression for the budding Cameroon creative writer armed with the English language, I became convinced that the best way to proceed would be by thoroughly drilling a small group and asking members of this group to make a lot of material sacrifice. The following pages are the result of drilling and sacrifice. For a start, I have a group of nine students—eight boys and one girl—all from the Faculty of Letters. Most of them are writing for the first time, thus allowance should be made for possible literary flaws despite the drilling they have gone through. The appellation of the magazine, The Mould is indicative of its purpose, which is to form, to mould creative writers of tomorrow. In our meetings we do not just sit back and ask people to write; we try to show them how to write in an intensive course in literary criticism and composition. And in this respect we are in complete agreement with Dr. Bernard Fonlon who has always maintained that the purpose of giving students any literary courses should be not only to make them consumers of literature but also, and above all, to make them producers of literature. It is for this reason that we meet on the first Sunday of every month and take pains to go over what a member presents to us with the utmost care. We also proceed from the conviction that to be able to portray the human predicament in creative writing with realism, the creative writer must be thoroughly conversant with his milieu. Above all, we do realise that the budding Cameroonian writer is particularly fortunate in this respect because of the great repertoire of oral tradition that still remains to be exploited..." It is really strange to look at that first issue and see myself listed as

*one of the Editors.<sup>4</sup> By the way, I was that “one girl” among all the boys! You single-handedly created The Mould with/for your students; you were our Adviser, you were everything to us. Without your vision, your drive, your encouragement, your commitment to creative writing, this new world would never had been our reality. I regret that I never kept all my copies of The Mould. I have a few and some have been eaten...*

*... by cockroaches.*

*Yes. You had to ask, you remember? You said to me, “I hear that you write short stories. I want to see them.” If you had never asked, I’m not sure I would have submitted my work or joined the club. This speaks strongly to the historical importance of The Mould for Anglophone Cameroon writing in the late seventies and eighties. We had no role models and didn’t trust that we could write or that what we wrote could be valued.*

As a matter of fact, if you look at the people who were interested in creative writing at the time, all of them are published. You, Protus Tawang, Alembong Nol ... I don't remember all of you in my old age now but you've all ended up publishing. That's how things evolved and now Anglophone literature is in full bloom.

### **The turbulent 1990s**

*Let’s build on what you’ve said about the decades after independence by addressing the advent of multipartism and liberalization, freedom of the press, freedom of expression, villes mortes (ghost towns), massive demonstrations, in the restive 1990s.*

The nineties came just to add to what the anglophones had been waiting for because in the era when Ahidjo was in power, he said he didn't want any opposition, so everyone was very weary, very careful about what they were doing. Paul Biya came to power in 1982 [November 6] and said he stood for “democratization” and “liberalization.” This opened the floodgates of criticism and writing and a flood of newspapers. Lots of new newspaper titles. Paul Biya said we were now in the age of democracy and liberty and when Gorbachev also opened up the Soviet Union that was a signal that the world was now in turmoil.

*Indeed. That led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.*

Ahidjo was gone and Paul Biya was talking about democracy and liberalization, rigor and moralization; people started writing and pointing out things that were going wrong but the real high point was the launching of the SDF party in Bamenda, against all odds, on May 26, 1990. People got killed. The Chairman of the SDF, John Fru Ndi, stuck to his guts. Some university people were involved like Professor Siga Asanga

who became the Secretary of the SDF party. There were many intellectuals who got interested in the launching of this new party and this opened up other areas of contestation. We began to question why Biya kept talking about democratization, about rigor and moralization, and yet was blocking democracy. I am sure Paul Biya was thinking about what to do about it and finally said that people should be ready for competition even in his CPDM party. He then enacted the Liberty Laws in December 1990. They started encouraging multi-candidates for offices in the CPDM. You could have a slate of three, four candidates in a constituency and the winner would go on to parliament. That's how it all started. And at this time, many newspapers started addressing "the Anglophone Problem." In effect, it was only in Paul Biya's era that this Anglophone Problem drew more critical attention because in 1984, just barely two years after he became president, he went to parliament and passed a law changing the name of the country from United Republic of Cameroon to La République du Cameroun. He had a crushing majority in the National Assembly—there was no opposition party then—and he got the MPs to change the name from La République Unie du Cameroun to La République du Cameroun. Anglophones felt he had just reverted to the French colonial legacy and now saw themselves as a colony of La République. That's the basis for anglophone contestation up till today. Paul Biya has never said a word about the Anglophone Problem. Never. Never. He just ignores the problem and thinks that it is going to go away. I don't think it—anglophones seeing themselves as colonized by francophones; as a colony of Francophone Cameroon—will ever go away because the more he doesn't talk about it, the more it festers, though sometimes it seems anglophones are also tired of talking about it.

*Was the All Anglophone Conference (ACC) in 1993 a culmination of all the anger that anglophones had been feeling about La République?*

Yes, it was.

*It was the first time that something that big organized by anglophones actually took place.*

Foncha was there, Muna was there; every important anglophone political figure was there because that was the culmination of all the anger of anglophones. AAC II followed 2 years later. After AAC I in Buea, Paul Biya started sending his secret agents everywhere, trying to discourage people; bribing them, and giving them posts. That's also when the phenomenon of "homecoming" began. When you are appointed to a post, you go back to your village, you throw a party and thank Paul Biya.

*And the people eat, drink, and then send Motions de Soutien to Paul Biya.*

Yes, it was also at that time that this “Motions of Support” thing started because anglophones thought they were being compensated for something and then francophones took it over and started doing their own “Homecomings.”

*I never knew this started with anglophones who were bought into the system.*

Yes, they were coopted by the system and they celebrated it.

*Two days ago, I was watching news broadcasts marking CPDM’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations and I learned that the name CPDM was coined by anglophones and francophones simply translated it into French as Rassemblement démocratique du peuple Camerounais (RDPC). Biya went to Bamenda “to launch” a new party and didn’t have a name for it!*

He didn’t even have a new party. It was there that he created the whole thing. The people said to him: You see what Ahidjo almost did to you, you have to take this thing in hand.<sup>5</sup> You can’t start off with the old name. You need a new name. And they came up with Cameroon Peoples’ Democratic Movement. Foncha insisted the name had to have the term “democracy” in it. He insisted they were evolving and a name like CNU (Cameroon National Union) wouldn’t do. There had to be democracy somewhere in the new party’s name.

*Are there writers who have been influenced by the secessionist angst or movement; writers whose works personify the secessionist struggle for Anglophone Cameroon independence?*

The one major writer who insists on secession is the late Bate Besong. Bate Besong carries anglophone-ness in him. He insists that the anglophones don’t have a place in La République in his works: *Beasts of No Nation*, *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*, *The Horrible Death of the Talkative Zombie*. He actually mentions Muna by name in *Zombie*. There are a few others expressing this angst, especially in poetry; people like Emmanuel Doh. Some of these writers have cited the secessionist movement and the persecution of anglophones as a reason to request political refugee status in America. Of course, some people go there with trumped-up photographs and hire lawyers because of this state of things. In fact, I remember once when I was visiting the US, I had a six or seven-week workshop/seminar in New York and I talked about my play *The Survivors*. “Are you not afraid of going back to Cameroon?” I was asked repeatedly. I replied that Cameroon is my country. “Why should I be afraid to go back?” I asked. “When you write such things will they not kill you?” they insisted. “What if they kill me? I would not be the first person they have killed,” I replied. You cannot run away from your own country because people are threatening to kill you. If what I am writing is the truth, they’d know that they are killing me for the truth.

*People were excited about this new wave of freedom of expression. How long did that last?*

It was an inflated balloon. If you ask anybody now about Biya, even those who are singing his praises in CPDM, they all know deep within themselves that Biya has failed; woefully. A very simple example: he goes and declares war on Boko Haram in France, not in his own country. He comes back, he is fighting the war and isn't making any headway. How Chad joins the war, we have no clue. The Chadian president came here for a visit; he visited the soldiers in the hospital right here in Yaoundé but Paul Biya hasn't taken time to go up north to visit the soldiers to find out how they are fighting, how they are doing. He is not a serious person.

*And people are contributing money. I saw an item on a television news ticker that said the elites of the North West Region have contributed 80 million francs towards the war effort against Boko Haram. I was shocked.*

Those are CPDM people. If you don't contribute, how are you protecting your post? I haven't contributed anything. They didn't come to me because they know I'm not a CPDM person. But if they know that you are a CPDM man they will come to you.

*But there's no accountability. No one is actually going to find out what has happened with this money. When was the last time we had something like this... When Achidi Achu was Prime Minister...?*

The 1994 FIFA World Cup in America. The "Coup de Cœur" contributions.

*No one knows what happened with the money that was contributed then.*

When I asked Augustin Konchu [then Minister of Culture] about the money, he said, *A l'heure actuelle où je vous parle l'argent se trouve entre Paris et les Etats Unis* (Right now as I am speaking to you, the money is somewhere between Paris and the United States), and that was the end of it. So what is being contributed right now will end up the same way.

*Somewhere between Yaoundé and north Cameroon.*

They put baskets in the shopping mall and ask people to drop in them what they can afford. Who would say anything if you carry the basket to your house?

### **On censorship**

*Censorship got worse in the mid-90s after Biya's freedom of expression balloon deflated. How were writers affected? I remember your open letter, "I Refuse to be Lapiroed."<sup>6</sup>*

When I wrote that letter, I was even surprised that some intellectuals were discouraging me from publishing it. When I finished typing the letter on my typewriter and was leaving the university, the first person I met was my late friend, Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh. I gave it to him. He read it and said, "Bole I would advise that you don't publish that." I asked why not and he said, "No, it's not good. It's very critical and so on and so forth." I left and went to the *Cameroon Post* office at Melen where I dropped off my first copy. I made photocopies and started distributing it. That's how it went around like wildfire. After the 1984 attempted coup d'état, I was called to the judicial police station where I was held for six hours and they kept asking me questions; asking whether I wrote this letter with Gorji Dinka? I said, "I don't know Dinka. I hear he is a very famous lawyer. I am just a university lecturer. I don't see how a famous lawyer will come to me and ask me to write a simple letter like this one." I told them anyone could have written the letter; that they had no reason to bring me in and to keep asking me whether I wrote the letter with Gorji Dinka. Another example is when I directed Bate Besong's play, *Beasts of No Nation* which we performed at the university on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March—World Theater Day. It was very successful. There were more than 1000 people in the Amphi 700. Bate Besong was also there. The University of Yaoundé also sent a delegation to come and watch what was happening. At the end of the play, the representatives of the administration left in anger and went and wrote a stinking report against me claiming I had taken Bate Besong's play and put things in it against Paul Biya, and so forth.

*Clearly, they had not read the play... Not that that mattered.*

Do they read? ... They watched the play. They didn't read it. I was expecting to be expelled from the university. It didn't happen.

*So, in the mid-1990s, intellectuals were slowly being hemmed in and censorship became part and parcel of their lives. Is it different now? Are there new forms of censorship? Has there been a shift in the ways in which writers and intellectuals are being marginalized and how does this affect writing in the 2000s?*

Censorship these days is very covert in the sense that they give you a semblance of free speech, especially on the radio. If you listen to some radio programs, even those done by public or official journalists on programs like "Cameroon Calling," "Morning Safari," "CRTV t'accompagne," you will not believe this is public media. It's only when you listen to people like Tchiroma and Peter Essoka that you know that they are not happy with what is happening because Peter Essoka would not hesitate to clamp down on a newspaper. They control the media—TV, newspapers, radio—and when you go out of step, they call you back to order and if you don't

respect their demands, they suspend you. It has happened many times. And there is a law now that takes things even further. It states that if you publish information which your victim deems incorrect, they can sue you.

*For defamation?*

For defamation, yes. And many journalists have been sued and they end up going to jail or paying fines. That's why I call it covert. We are also self-censoring. When you write something, you read it to yourself and ask yourself, should I or shouldn't I send this out? That's the new face of censorship.

*Does the media contribute to the production and distribution of Anglophone Cameroon writing today? You talked earlier about the debates that Fonlon and Sankie Maimo had in Cameroon Tribune. Are any such debates held today?*

Very little. What's happening is that people do write-ups. If there is a new publication, people do a write-up or go to the radio or appear on TV programs like "Monday Show" or "Morning Safari" where they talk about their new publication otherwise there isn't much going on. Even the plays that used to be performed... I keep asking the young people who are still at the university and those I mentored in the area of performance—and we used to fill Amphi 700 with people—why they are only interested in making money. They scoff at this question saying you can't make money from theatre performances. If you spend money on rehearsals how much money can you get from the performance? That's the problem we are facing now. There are very few performances. If you see any of them doing performances it is because there is a bit of money in it otherwise, they don't bother. It's good that I've retired. It's no longer my business.

*The gold standard you set has now fallen very low.*

Which is very very unfortunate. I coopted them because I thought I was teaching them something. We would go out on workshops to villages in the North West Province and as far north as Pus in the Far North Province.

*"Theater and Development" was very popular. I wasn't in Cameroon but I used to hear a lot about it.*

Today, it is rare to have a seminar even here at the Hilton that will not end with a sketch. Very rare. The organizers of the seminar pay those who do the sketches for them to perform. It's very discouraging. I keep asking myself whether all the work that I did was wasted.

*It wasn't. Let's hope there is a resurgence.*

They are moving more and more into television, film, video. That's where the excitement is. Everyone wants to make a film.

*Do they think that's where the money will be?*

They hope. But even when they do make movies or videos, they cannot get much out of it since the distribution is so poor.

*Money dictates or has an impact on viewership and readership. Publishers want to publish certain stories that can sell; the video market seems to be going in the same direction.*

In Cameroon today, the only thing that publishers are willing to publish is something that gets into the school program—textbooks.

*That means when it comes to the publishing industry, all we have left are publishers like Langaa.*

Langaa Publishing... I sent a number of my plays to the people at Langaa, one of whom I know personally. Nyamjoh wanted to publish some of them and when I got to know from other colleagues who had been published by them how Langaa operated, I told him that I didn't want to be published anymore. But on looking through their website the other day, I saw they've published a collection of some of my plays titled *Dance of the Vampires and Six Other Plays* without my permission. I haven't yet received any copies from Langaa.

*How does that happen? If they can do this to you; a renowned writer...*

Most of the people that I know here that they have published, like Epie Alobwede, were not given a contract; nothing. They give you two copies of the book and if you want more, you pay for them.

*Do authors pay Langaa to publish?*

No, they don't pay.

*It seems they just print the books. Their books are sometimes in need of editing.*

Indeed. They are a printing press. And they are operating like that in America.

*Their address is Bamenda.*

Nothing happens in Bamenda. Go to Bamenda and you will not see Langaa Press anywhere. If you want their books you have to order them and the books come from America. A little 100-page book can cost you 15,000 francs.

*If they operate out of America, I don't understand how they can publish without giving the author a contract? Luckily your plays were already published elsewhere.*

The only thing that I get from America is from Alexander Press. They have all my plays. Every year, they send me a check, at least every six months. At least, they are consistent. But when someone takes six of your plays and publishes them and you don't get anything; you don't even have a copy of the book... By the way, I accidentally found out about the publication because one of my students was working on my plays. I'm not the supervisor but when I looked through his bibliography I saw the book listed and I asked him where he got it. "It's in the market," he said. "Which market?" I asked. He said he got it from Langaa Press.

### **The 2000s**

*Before we talk about the state of Anglophone Cameroon writing today, let me read from the Foreword you—Nalova Lyonga, Eckhard Breitinger, Bole Butake—the editors of Anglophone Cameroon Writing wrote 22 years ago: "In one of the most authoritative publications on African Literature in European languages by Albert Gerard (1981), Anglophone Cameroon Literature figures under the title 'Prolegomena to...' and is placed as an appendix to Nigerian literature. It is not even accorded a chapter in its own right. Ten years later, 1991, Richard Bjornson summarised the state of critical attention given to Anglophone Cameroon writing as zero: 'On an international level, scholars and critics tended to regard Cameroon writing primarily within the context of francophone African literature'... Bjornson certainly did not want to imply that Anglophone Cameroon Literature did not exist, but his statement is correct in the sense that Anglophone Cameroon Literature has been unduly ignored and disregarded by scholars, critics, fellow writers outside the triangle. By throwing Anglophone Cameroon Literature into the huge Nigerian bay when looking at it from an international perspective, and by overlooking it completely when approaching Cameroon Literature from the national literature perspective, both views are revealing: they reflect the two major issues against which Anglophone Cameroon writers react with increasing militancy; they reflect also the rather timid stand Anglophone Cameroon writers assumed in 1977 when they were worried about 'the paucity of Anglophone writing' and adopted a self-definition and an attitude of no-seers." You wrote this 22 years ago. What is your assessment today?*

A lot has changed. A lot of water has gone under the bridge. There are local

publications practically on a monthly basis. Lots and lots of things are happening. And when you add Langaa, you'd see that there are a lot of book events happening in English.

*Judging from my conversations with you and Ambroise [Kom]—you, a writer; Ambroise, a critic—this picture emerges: right now, Anglophone Cameroon literature is booming and blossoming within the country meanwhile Francophone Cameroon literature is blossoming outside the country.*

Outside, yes. It's almost zero in the country. It is true that anglophone writing is more visible today in the public space than francophone writing. There's also the existence of the Anglophone Cameroon Writers' Association (ACWA) and the Eko prizes for literature—jointly administered by the University of Iowa, The Eko Foundation for the Furtherance of Literature and the ACWA—awarded to a writer for lifetime achievement and for emerging anglophone writers. That they receive many entries is a testament to anglophone writing that is out there. I can attest to the fact that Anglophone Cameroon literature is very vibrant and a lot more visible in Cameroon.

*On that note, where are we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

I can proudly say that I am happy with what anglophones are doing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are writing and publishing. Every day or at least every week, on the radio, you hear about a book launch somewhere. I cannot go to all of those things anymore because I don't have the means to and my health is on the delicate side.

*I can't end this without saying that for me, personally...*

... We have to talk female writers. There are many emerging female writers: Eunice Ngongkum, Rosalyn Jua... I've come across at least ten names of women who are writing.

*You've responded to the point I was about to raise that I am personally glad you encouraged me to write at the University of Yaoundé and now I really enjoy writing and publishing fiction under my pen name, Makuchi. "Woman of the Lake," the story I wrote about the lake Nyos disaster was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in America. None of that would have happened without the encouragement you gave me.*

I should have mentioned your name first and your published work.

*How are anglophone women writers doing?*

No, they are doing very well. Although some of them write carelessly but most are doing really well.

*This conversation has been a personal joy for me. I can't thank you enough for doing this.*

No, I can't thank you enough for thinking about me and not some other person.

*You are after all the father of modern Anglophone Cameroon literature! You are the tree that has sprouted so many branches.*

And it all began with *The Mould*. As a matter of fact, most of the people who are writing today at some point or the other published in *The Mould*.

*Indeed. We have all published or are continuing to publish.*

You, John Ngongkum, Eunice Ngongkum, Azonga, are publishing. Beatrice Bime wasn't published in *The Mould* but she is one of those publishing... At some point I was trying to compile everything written by anglophones.

*I remember your computer crashed when you were working on a poetry anthology. Did you recover any of it?*

No, I had to start again from scratch. *Cameroon Anthology of Poetry* is now published.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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#### **Notes**

1. This interview took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, on March 29, 2015.
2. The ten administrative provinces of Cameroon were changed to administrative regions by a presidential decree of 12 November 2008. The South West Province is now known as the South West Region and the North West Province is now known as the North West Region.
3. This was an influential article that for the first time put the spotlight on work by many anglophone writers that was not previously known or readily available to the public.
4. See the inaugural issue of *The Mould: A Magazine of Creative Writing* is the caption, "Meet our Members" and listing the following; all students: The Executive—President, Meh-Zang Muam; Secretary, Alembong Nol; Treasurer, Ekema Momno. Editorial Board—Editor-in-Chief, Pitt Tah Tawang; Assistant Editors—Nsang Henry, Makuchi Juliana Nfah. Adviser—Bole Butake. Members—Limen George, Atanga George, Acha Emmanuel, Ashi Achu Gregory. Meeting days—First Sunday of every month. Publication, First Issue, July 1977 (81). In the inaugural issue, I published a short story, "The Applicant" (54-65) and two poems, "Seasons" (66) and "The World that Welcomed Me" (67). Butake noted in the Foreword that "The Mould is meant to be a biannual publication appearing in January and July of every year." That most fervent wish proved difficult to fulfil because of technical and especially financial difficulties. The second issue was published in May 1978 and Issue 7, the last issue of *The Mould*, appeared in 1981.

5. After Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, stepped down in 1982 for health reasons and his Prime Minister, Paul Biya, took over, it was rumored that the French government—in collusion with Ahidjo's French doctors—had duped Ahidjo into believing that he was near death. Ahidjo remained the President of the CNU party but was forced into exile in July 1983 after Biya accused him of involvement in a June 1983 plot to oust him. Ahidjo denied any involvement. He died in exile in Dakar, Senegal, in 1989.
6. Lapiro de Mbango aka Ndinga Man was a famous anti-establishment musician much beloved by common citizens, and especially young disenfranchised Cameroonians, for his music and outspoken opposition politics. In his pop music, he railed against the government and its corrupt uncaring officials and institutions of power. Lapiro fell from grace when it was alleged he had accepted bribes worth millions of CFA francs—the amount was rumored to be between 20 and 30 million—and coopted by the very government he was famous for lampooning. His fans went on a rampage and destroyed his property. Butake's open letter, published in *Cameroon Post* (No. 98, 1992), made national (and international) news. It was a rebuttal to and rejection of the CPDM's move to similarly coopt him by appointing him to a CPDM delegation to Kumba, Meme Division, to campaign for the ruling party, despite the fact that he has never been a member of the CPDM party. The letter chastised the government for its inability to engage in dialogue with its citizens and mocked its reliance on bribery and posts to manage those it perceived as dissident. As he told me during this interview:

They appointed me to go on a delegation to Kumba with Etoi. I said, first of all, I don't come from Kumba. If it were Kumbo, I might even think about whether to go or not but I don't know anything about Kumba.

*What was the delegation supposed to do in Kumba?*

To go and campaign. It was a CPDM campaign delegation. There was an upcoming election so we were being asked to go and campaign for the CPDM.

*Aah, so the idea is to go on this campaign trail so that people can see you publicly campaigning for the ruling party and then the perks would follow.*

Yah, that's the beginning. For example, that's how someone like Ngolle Ngolle who is making so much noise on the radio these days, got there. Eight days after I refused to go, they appointed Ngolle Ngolle to replace me and he went. He is now chief CPDM spokesman from Kumba. That's how those things work."