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Requiem for a fallen Polyphemus:
Cameroon's Bate Besong is no
more

Poetry is –
All vines and multi-tangerines
[...]
Nectar, baked pheasants
Epicurean manners for the masses
Poetry is
Hear my prayer
[...]
Cycles of redemption
Love-potions amber, wines
[...]
Soyinka, not Hitler
Peace now, not Hiroshima
Nyerere, not Marshall Amin
Poetry is not the Gulag
[...]
The poet is
Solemn like Spartan fakirs
[...]
In vision, more erratic – if tuned so
Than, Aro inmate
(From *Disgrace Emania-Nkpe*, 2007)

In the first paragraph of *Bate Besong or the Symbol of Anglophone Hope* George Ngwane (1993) says this of Bate Besong: "Bate Besong is Bate Besong. If you call him Besong Bate, it will be someone else. His name refuses to obey the law of choice." In fact, Ngwane's comment is unambiguously very correct for there could have been no better way to introduce any work that aims at illuminating the life of this great Anglophone Cameroonian literati whose works you would never fully understand without knowing him for "the artist and the man are one [and] the conflict in his writings is the drama of his life" (Ngwane 1993: 36). The only codicil worth making to Ngwane's is that the name, Bate Besong, had been reduced by all to his initials – BB – a

household acronym for the scholar/writer whose definition of poetry strikingly and candidly footnotes his view of literary creativity and of life. In the above poem from a poetry collection – *Disgrace Emanyā–Nkpe* – which was launched on March 7th 2007, Besong compares poetry in an extended simile to sweet nectar, to multi tangerines, to cycles of redemption and to a love portion. To Besong, poets are Spartans because they care little about the ordinary comforts of life and even when faced with the threat of death, will never capitulate. He compares the poet to a fakir, a very holy Muslim or Hindu mendicant; someone who will never trade the soul for the profusions of this earth, but will rather remain poor and beg on the streets for bread and water. As erratic persons, poets are expected to do unexpected things because as creators, they enjoy liberation of the mind or the imagination that makes them the most unfettered in the world. This is how Bate Besong recognizes a poet and is unerringly who Bate Besong was. His perception ties in significantly with the idea that poets should be the voice of a people and should consequently, divulge their: “despairs and hopes, the enthusiasm and empathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain [...]” but also a nation’s history as it moved from “freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and from independence to tasks of reconstruction which further involve situations of failure and disillusion” (Iyengar 1968: 15).

Bate Besong the artist could be seen in the light of the olden heroic deity, Prometheus, who, because he chose to help mankind (who was despised by the gods and left to wallow and fagot in despair) was bound by Zeus. His, was the plight of every freedom fighter, and was the lot of Bate Besong who suffered in a myriad of ways in the hands of successive regimes in Cameroon to the extent that he has finally been bound by death. But there is no doubt that as he journeys beyond, Hades, the Greek God of the underworld and Ogun will sail him through; meanwhile Homer, Eliot, Rasputin, Okigbo, Mongo Beti and Dink are warming up to welcome him and Virgil him through to celestial city where he will reside close to his Beatrice from where they can without any reproach and censorship, celebrate their fame in several different creative voices.

Anglophone Cameroon’s ace poet, playwright and essayist, Bate Besong passed away on March 8th 2007, as a result of a ghastly motor accident. This sudden death calls us to question the destiny of man or better still, of life. May be it could better be described in Targorean terms, for man is seemingly a tramp, trapped in a trap of despair confined to a room, conscious of everything around, but with no definite answers to what tomorrow may bring; at the same time, incessantly waiting for a mail from the King: a mail which will offer no hope, but rather, sanction the end of one’s time on earth. I can see that like Amal, Besong’s mail came on his way to the American embassy where he hoped to get a visa which would have enabled him attend a conference organized by the African Literature Association in Morgantown, West Virginia, USA.

Bate Besong would have clogged 53 barely two months from the date of his demise, but the cold hands of death chose to snatch the zombie eater, the *obasinjom* warrior who worried the regime in Cameroon since the days of the *babatura* of the First Republic¹ and incessantly tried to destabilize the CPDM (Cameroon People's Democratic Movement) emergency rule in Cameroon and its idiom of monolithism and political victimization. BB was a teacher, a writer, a thinker, a social critic and activist, and a voice of oppressed Africans in general and Cameroonians most especially. He is described in the *Encyclopedia of African Literature* as one "[c]oncerned with the state of culture in [...] Cameroon [...] Besong's works focus on specific social problems of the period after independence such as injustice, corruption, social, political and economic instability, as well as the sharp inequalities plaguing Africa and the resulting human suffering." (N'gom 2003)

Educated at the Universities of Ibadan and Calabar, Nigeria, where he took BA, MA, and PhD degrees in literature, Besong taught African literature, drama and critical theory at the University of Buea, Cameroon, where he continued to face a situation analogous to internal exile because of his literary inclinations. Babila Mutia, one of Besong's closest friends describes him as follows: "Bate Besong was a man who easily made friends especially when academic and artistic interests or pursuits merged. However, in his enigmatic character, BB was equally fast at denouncing what he considered as dishonesty or betrayal, even to the extent of considering a former friend or mentor, a permanent foe or traitor."

While studying in Africa's citadel of literature, Nigeria, Besong started trying his hands at writing and published his works in a variety of home-grown journals in Nigeria at the same time, serving as a ghost writer to Mamman Vatsa who was later executed by his best friend Ibrahim Babangida (then president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria) for an abortive coup d'état, before launching his first full-length work, *Polyphemus Detainee and other Skulls* in 1980 officiated at by acclaimed international author, Chinua Achebe. That work seemed to have opened up his doors to a ceaseless literary harvest which spewed until his death.

From the venom of his pen, the vigor of his artistic vision, the doggedness of his cynicism and an almost permanent mocking laughter, Bate Besong sometimes appeared to some skeptics and cynics as a dreamer (Mutia 2007). This was evident from his omniscient and cosmic historico-politico cum socio-economic analogies and references that pervade his works. In his commitment as a visionary, BB's personality as the artist-dictator overwhelmed that of Besong the man, who saw every other person as a pitcher; a receptacle to be filled with Besongian lore. That is why BB was usually very quick to seek for redress or apology from any one who hurt him, but was always reluctant to do same when at the guilty end. This paradox that characterized Bate Besong's quintessence brings into sharp focus the controversy and contradictions surrounding BB's writings: be they pamphlets, lampoons, essays, articles, poems,

dramas or docudramas. Once a friend or a model to BB, you could never depart from virtues and values dear to him, for any such person will easily come under his derision. As a friend, Bate Besong never hesitated to share moments of leisure over a drink or two and any refusal of his offers resulted in exasperation. He was vulnerable, enchantingly petulant, conceited, open to censure and eager for praise.

Today, Bate Besong is no more, but he lived his vision of a writer as “a visionary of living truth” (N’gom 2003) for he understood the socio-political parodies that afflicted Cameroon and consequently vouched his life to decrying the feeble, flatulent and opportunistic character of the draculas that have reduced his country to an Elliotian “Wasteland” characterized by what he terms in an interview with Christopher Ambe Shu: a “porridge of ethnic consciousness, bigotry, exclusivist sentiments and narrow-minded irredentism who found Etoudi approval for Ministerial and Ambassadorial appointments, Directorships of Parastatals, Captainships of industry, scholarships for their children, contracts, etc.” They have consequently, entered a Faustian pact with the Mephistophelian regime and sold their souls to attain egocentric ends. It did not take long for BB in his docudrama, *Beasts of No Nation*, to discover the gravity of the fall of the Cameroonian society which he reduced to a bucket of shit inhabited by beasts and nightsoilmen and characterized in shitological terms. It goes without saying that it is on the stage of this dumpster of a country that he found his doom.

Bate Besong was just an extraordinary personality and it is because of his virtues that I have remained in distress and fume with anger since his passing away – distress and fury because even though I am aware of the nature of his death, I have yet to be reconciled with it. It is silly to think that anyone could have protected him, yet I feel somehow that Cameroon failed him, because it is a country that bears all what BB dreamed against. A country that has been taken hostage by some zombies of a clique that God alone can describe. Like others, it is hard for me to accept the naturalness of his death coupled with what I know about what happened to Dr Felix Moumie who was silenced as a result of the scheming of the “godfathers” of the Machiavellian juntas Cameroon has nurtured in the name of political leadership. Besong qualifies such leaders in “The letter of Jeremiah, 47” as scoundrels who “leave nothing but deceit and disgrace as an inheritance for future generations” (*Disgrace Emanyà-Nkpe*). Perhaps, I sound this bitter out of anger because I knew BB as one of the champions of Anglophone consciousness and of suppressed Cameroonian voices. But those who knew Bate Besong would concur that he was an obdurate and a brawny warrior, a ferocious critic of French imperialism and bigotry in Africa, a staunch combatant against oppression who cared for his friends as if they were his bedfellows.

In only 53 years, BB published six plays, five poetry collections and countless essays. From a reading of his works, it is obvious that he was incontestably a metonymy of Wole Soyinka and Christopher Okigbo and he made it clear in his interviews that even though he writes about the plight of the common man, he does not write for

the vulgar understanding of police officers and political morons. It is therefore not surprising that he got initiated into the Association of Nigerian Authors by Nobel Laureate, Soyinka; an initiation which later earned him the Association's award in drama in 1992 for *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*. This 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 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 making the play to end where it began i.e. in the coffin. Loaded with metaphor after metaphor, the play is for George Ngwane an elaborated vision of Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*. BB's works reverberate with certain innuendoes which portray his reverence not only for the classical literary school, but a certain intertextual connection with modernist writers such as Brecht, Beckett and Alfred Jarry. His style is considered "wild and fragmentary (a dialogue modeled on Beckett, but with the characters in the throes of a fit) the effect is bleakly disturbing" (Dunton 1998: 51). It is not surprising that in appreciating BB, Dunton, who knows him pretty well, "mistakenly" categorizes him as a Nigerian playwright for many people refer to him as a Nigerian through *Jus solis* and a Cameroonian through *Jus Sanguinis*.

From the foregoing, it becomes apparent that BB was an institution. I know some will not hesitate to say we still have his ideas, books, lectures, the records of the debates he waged around the country, but BB was a writer you loved as a whole person; a teacher you never would have wanted to miss having; an activist you always wanted to listen to or read from. You loved the way his laugh – always painfully satirical they were – filled the room, his confident walk, the easy, mellifluous voice and the sometimes merciless sarcasm from which he would not spare himself. We will read BB's works time without number, and will commemorate his memory in the years to come, but it will remain so difficult with some of us knowing we will no longer watch him striding into verbal battles, stripping off the lacquer from sinister words, coining and appropriating lexical items like "chopbrokepotism"² and shredding the facade from the face of corruption, nepotism, tribalism, absolutism and all other negative -isms through his acerbic works. However, he leaves behind a creative legacy which defines his creative bravado, for at his death, Besong had the following creative publications:

Poetry collections:

Polyphemus Detainee and Other Skulls (1980)

Obasinjom Warrior and Poems After Detention (1991)

The Grain of Bobe Ngom Jua (1997)

Just Above Cameroon (1998)

Disgrace Emania–Nkpe (2007)

Plays:

The Banquet: A historical drama (1994)

Requiem for the Last Kaiser (1991)

Beasts of no Nation (A docu-drama) (1990)

Change Waka and his Man Sawa Boy (2001)

Once Upon Great Lepers (A play in two acts) (2003)

The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie (1997)

From the list above, it is obvious that a patriarch of Anglophone Cameroon literature; a virtuoso of Africa's battle against neo-colonialism is gone, and like a real chief, he chose not to go alone since in indigenous Africa, chiefs were buried with company. Besong took his own creative and literary company with him making the list of names and of graveyards from the Cameroonian academia to continue growing. The three others who died in the same car accident were Dr. Hilarious Ambe, Bate Besong's close associate and junior colleague; Kwasen Gwangwa, a theatre lecturer and television producer and his driver – great minds who sacrificed the pleasures of the diaspora to stay home and nurture Africa of tomorrow. He leaves behind a wife and six children. No more... I will drop off this pen with these words from St. Thomas Aquinas which celebrates God as prime mover: "*quid quid movetur ab alio movetur* – Whatever is in motion is being moved by something other than itself." We do not know who that unknown mover is, but he/she has done his/her will. In 53 years, Bate Besong fought a good fight, he finished a good race with *Disgrace Emanyā-Nkpe* and he kept the faith. Adieu BB, Adieu Hilarious, Adieu Kwasen. May your souls rest in perfect peace.

Notes

1. Cameroon had independence in 1960 and 1961 and the first president was El Hadj Ahmadou Ahidjo who ruled for 22 years and was deceived to handover power in 1982. He was succeeded by a dictator, Paul Biya, who has been president since then.
2. One of Bate Besong's coinages which lampoons the epicurean nature of Cameroonian politicians who never care about the plight of the masses.

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