

# A word of Introduction

by Bernard Fonlon

I would like to present to our readers this issue of *Abbia*, an issue rich and varied: in it there is History, Sociology, Music, Education; there is Poetry ancient and modern, epic and lyric.

We are also proud of the talent that has contributed to its pages. Readers of our Review are already familiar with names such as Engelbert Mveng, Lilyan Lagneau.

We are happy to count among those who have written for this number M.D.W. Jeffreys, Ph.D., an anthropologist well-known among those who interest themselves in Cameroon studies. When Dr. Jeffreys was Senior District Officer for the former Bamenda Division, which then comprised the present Bamenda, Nso, Nkambe and Wum divisions, he carried on research among the Bororo in that part of Cameroon.

Worthy of note also is the contribution of Dr. Peter Mafiamba, the Cameroon physician, who, side by side with his medical preoccupations, takes an interest in the study of little known ethnic groups in the Cameroon community. In Number 8 we published his *Notes on the Esimbi* of Wum Division; in the present issue he writes about the Ekot Ngba of Mamfe Division.

When those of us who are familiar with that Cameroon tribe called the Vute (or more familiarly known as the *Babute*) think of them, we are immediately reminded

of that musical instrument, the *timbili*, which has become their inseparable companion, wherever they go, and the symbol of the Babute culture. Mr. Gerhard Kubik, an Austrian musician, gives us in this issue a study of *Vute timbili* music.

Those of us who take a keen interest in the promotion of bilingualism in Cameroon will be glad to see the poetic efforts, in English, of two French-educated East Cameroonians, Ernest Alima and Ladislas Oudenlou, both teaching French in West Cameroon secondary schools. When you consider that, two years ago, these boys had barely a smattering of English, it is borne in upon you how far we would have advanced in our way to bilingualism, if our efforts in that direction were more intensive, more organised. I think it should also be observed in passing that, contrary to what one might expect, it would appear that there is a greater effort to learn English, on the part of East Cameroonians, than there is to learn French, on the part of West Cameroonians; which is a pity; for, in this Federation, the Westerners, being a minority, need French more than the Easterners need English. Canadian bilingualism is more pronounced in the French-speaking section of that country.

There are those who have the impression that this Review is intended exclusively for high-brows and such like. The articles that have been published in its columns by Northern Cameroonians like Modibbo Bakari of Maroua and Mal Hammadou Bassoro of Garoua and more particularly the significant contributions of the students of the Lycée of Garoua to the special number 9-10, give the lie to this impression. As further proof that these pages are open to any one who makes a serious effort, we have published in this issue a poem by a little girl, Pauline Egbe, a third former in the Queen of the Rosary

College, Okoyong, in West Cameroon. We hope that this will spur her on to strive harder still and harder and that it will help to stimulate other young potential poets and writers to emulate her effort.

Above all, we feel greatly honoured to publish in these pages contributions from the research of the celebrated Mali traditional scholar and diplomat, Hampaté Bâ. In the first of these, he writes about the Fulani of Macina in Mali. Students of the Cameroon version of Fulani culture will be able to compare notes with him and see for themselves what elements of the original Fulani civilization have been preserved in both communities, what elements have been altered or introduced, in either case, through contact with others peoples.

But what I want to draw particular attention to is the Mali epic *Da Monzon and Karta Thiema* which we have published thanks to the efforts of this scholar.

Lauching this Review, back in February 1963, Mr. William Eteki Mboumoua, the Cameroon Minister of Education, remarked that its coming was timely. This statement was all the more apt as the creation of this periodical took place shortly after the coming into being of the bilingual Federation of Cameroon—a State in which several cultures were pitted together. And it was taken as a matter of course that these cultures, through such intimate contact, must, eventually, commingle and merge. The question which remained to be answered was how this merger should come about: was it wiser that this process of cultural integration be effected under the guidance of the conscious light of reason or was it better to leave it to hazard, to allow it to grope its way, as best as it might, in a sort of blind evolution, uncharted, unchannelled?

*A priori*, we of this Review took our stand for the thesis that cultural integration must be a rational process,

must be directed by reason, knowledge and purpose. That is why we declared that our set purpose was, is, and shall be, to encourage research and creative effort in the cultural field in Cameroon and in Africa; that is why we are determined :

“Not merely to recount what has been, but to share in moulding what should be.”

This issue marks the end of the fourth year of our existence. And, looking back, we can say with modest pride that we have tried to live up to our ambition: we have offered in our past pages contributions which, heeded, would play a far-reaching part in Cameroon cultural construction in fields like Education, Law, Bilingualism; we have laid our pages wide open to research students in History, Sociology, Music, Traditional Literature; we have welcomed into them the efforts of poets, dramatists, short-story writers.

We regret, however, that lack of ample means and the fewness of our friends have combined to prevent us from making a contribution organised, rational and rich to our hearts' desire. Yet we are more than ever determined to keep up the effort in spite of hurdles moral and material.

It is precisely because of this resolve to encourage research into the African past and into the African present, to stimulate African writing, in short, to promote reason-directed cultural integration that, in this issue, we are calling the special attention of our readers, and, particularly, that of budding writers, to the Mali epics on Da Monzon of Segou which we have published in these pages thanks to the concerted efforts of Hampaté Bâ, Mamadou Konaté, Lilyan Lagneau and Eugène Dervain. The first three strove to reproduce these epics as faithfully as they have been handed down, and the last has

readopted one of them in dramatic form. This is an example of how research and creative writing should go hand in hand, should stimulate and serve each other.

It is said that some of the symphonies of the great music-makers were elaborated from folk airs. Those of us who are familiar with Dvorak's New World Symphony and his Cello Concerto and who know how much inspiration this Czech musician drew from the Spirituals and from other forms of Negro folk music in composing these celebrate pieces, have a classic example of what contributions Negro traditions can make in the creation of things sublime. The greatest dramatic works that the world has seen, from Sophocles to Shakespeare, were build up from tales, legends and History. In this field, a writer with an inventive imagination takes a theme from the past, ponders it over, builds upon it, transforms it, enriches it with his own philosophy, experience and feeling and makes it something new, something ageless, thanks to his creative genius.

It is precisely here that the African writers of to-day have their chance.

Theirs is the unique advantage that, whereas European traditions, for the most part, have been exploited and exhausted and the European arts are at a loss what to do with themselves, where to turn for new inspiration, the African past, as a source of material for creative writing, is largely untouched. Those of us who are familiar with the works of a writer like the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, have been able to see for ourselves what a mine of literary wealth African tradition can be, what verve it can inspire, what vibrant life, what unwonted beauty it can confer on modern African writing. For not only can it provide this writing with material at once old and new, instinct with life, rich in pathos, full of dramatic incident;

into the bargain, it can furnish it with new literary forms, new modes of expression that confer something fresh on the foreign languages through which this literature finds expression. African proverbs gleaned from the works of Achebe, for instance, would make an impressive list.

Here in Camroon we have traditions like the *Mvet*, we have local histories which, for having not been given the precision that writing confers, have been enlarged into legend. These constitute a precious mine of literary material.

We thank the Mali group for their contribution and for drawing our attention to a point of such primordial importance to modern African writing.

To-day, an observer can discern two principal tendencies in African literature of foreign expression.

The older of these trends is that whose principal aim was to protest against the wrongs suffered by the African at the hands of imperialist exploitation, to excite remorse in the oppressor, to arouse political consciousness in the oppressed and to urge them to fight to right these wrongs. This literature began, as it were, at the top in this that it addressed itself, first and foremost, to the European exploiter and then to the rising African elite capable of giving effective, militant leadership to the cowed, silent masses. Further-more, this literature, especially the poetry, is often expressed in obscure, almost esoteric, forms borrowed from the European literary schools in which its makers were nurtured and reared; and, for this reason, it arouses little or no interest among the African literate public and remains largely unread, in spite of the renown and the eminence of some of its authors. It is the literature written, for the most part, by Sorbone-educated African intellectuals.

The second trend aims at the grass-roots in this that it addresses itself directly to the African reading public. It draws large inspiration and material from African life, experience and traditions. It bends to its will the European language it uses and blends it harmoniously with African idiom. It looks for approval not from foreign critics, who judge according to the canons established by the European literary tradition, but from the African readers who are better qualified to pronounce upon its authenticity. This literature is read by an ever-increasing number of Africans and its makers are fast becoming popular heroes. It is the literature produced, in the main, by African writers of English expression, especially the Nigerians.

These two literary trends, far from being opposed one to the other, are really complementary; indeed, they can fuse into one. For, once you have aroused in a people a thirst for reading by fashioning for them a literature like Eve was fashioned from Adam, a literature from their own flesh and blood, a literature from a substance that touches them most intimately, a literature in which they can see themselves as in a mirror, a literature which speaks a language they can understand—then, subsequently, the other literature which strives to rouse political consciousness, which seeks to be a weapon against injustice, an instrument for social change or moral reform, will meet minds already prepared, minds a thirst for more and more literature. Indeed, enlivened by the same inspiration, using the same material, speaking the same language as the former, this crusading literature will penetrate the masses, will galvanise them, will mobilise them, for action on a wider scale. For, without the active and enthusiastic participation of the people at large, no war against social wrong can be won, no effort for moral transformation, no crusade for spiritual regeneration can go far.

Already the merger of these two tendencies is being effected by some writers. The novel of the Western Nigerian writer, T. M. Aluko, *One Man one Matchet*, is a skilful blend of both. The first three works of Chinua Achebe—*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*—draw ample inspiration and material from tradition; the last, *Man of the People*, which, by a curious co-incidence, appeared shortly before the first Nigerian coup, aimed precisely at warning his countrymen against the corruption, the intolerance and the abuses that have plunged that federation into chaos and disaster.

Thus, thanks to research into the African past, into African thought, into African customs, into African modes of expression, into traditional African literature; thanks to the exploitation of this research in creative African writing, the new African Literature will be, in a very real sense, the off-spring of the old, and, thus, the African cultural *continuum* will be preserved unbroken.

It is precisely because of all this that we of the Cameroon Cultural Review have espoused so staunchly the cause of this research. It is because of this that we have been so unflagging in our support for the creative efforts of the rising African writers. It is because of this that we have thought it worthwhile to pay tribute to the contribution that our Mali friends and their collaborators have made to this issue.

It is because of this that we have deemed it necessary to stress the point that they strove to make, namely, the essential and primordial part that the old Negro Literature can play in the conception, the birth and the rearing of the new.

Before concluding we wish to avail ourselves of this chance to salute all the gifted writers, both of English and French expression, who already, by works of universal

worth, are spear-heading this new movement in several parts of Africa. We urge, very warmly, those coming after, the budding makers of the rising African literature, in Cameroon and all over the Continent, to follow their example.

Modern African literature by reason of the fact that it is obliged to borrow foreign expression needs to exert a greater and more intensive effort to become really African. I see no surer way of doing this than that it should be steeped in African tradition, should reflect genuine African experience, should throb with the blood of African life. It is when this literature has done all this, it is when it has become a house-hold word, has spread among the masses, is hailed and acclaimed in Dakar, Lagos, Duala, Nairobi and not just in Paris, London, New York or Moscow; it is when it has stamped out from its heart its pernicious yearning for the white man's approval and trampled under foot its crippling dread of his disapproval, that this literature will become imposing with native dignity, will win real independence, will become truly universal, will make an authentic contribution to human thought and human creative effort, and will carve for itself, in the world, a place worthy of respect among the works of the ages.

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