

## Conferences Colloquium on Cameroon Literature and Literary Criticism

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Among Francophone African countries, Cameroon has undoubtedly produced the greatest number of playwrights, poets, and novelists,<sup>1</sup> and this despite the fact that one-fifth of its population, living in the western part of the country, uses English as its primary vehicular language. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few famous names (Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono, Francis Bebey, Guillaume Oyono Mbia), the great mass of this literature remains relatively unknown, even within Cameroon. No complete inventory of Cameroon writing has ever been undertaken, and because there is no national library to collect copies of all published works, many important documents are in danger of being lost. In an attempt to rectify this situation, Prof. Francis Mhassi Manga (Dean of the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, University of Yaounde) organized the first "Colloquium on Cameroon Literature and Literary Criticism" on 18-22 April 1977 at the university campus.

Bringing together 157 novelists, poets, dramatists, teachers, scholars, editors, and journalists, the colloquium laid the groundwork for an inclusive bibliography of Cameroon literary output, and it generated impetus for a number of projects calculated to stimulate future literary and scholarly activity—the creation at the university library of a national archive holding copies of all works by Cameroon writers, the encouragement of national and regional theater groups, the compilation of anthologies of Cameroon literature to be used in the schools, the expansion of publishing opportunities, the establishment of local lending libraries throughout the country, and the institutionalization of the colloquium itself. At the same time, it reflected a genuine and widespread interest in defining the specifically national character of Cameroon literature, and it provided a forum in which writers and critics could (for the first time) frankly and openly exchange views on the present situation of Cameroon letters. By prompting them to discuss and to discover their common goals and aspirations and by causing them to reflect seriously on the richness and diversity of their literary heritage, the colloquium also had a potentially powerful impact on the future direction of Cameroon writing.

<sup>1</sup>First published in Ben Lindfor's *Research in African Literature* (Ohio State University, 1978).

In her opening and closing remarks, the Vice-Minister of Education in consolidating the foundations of a national culture and a national identity—an extremely important task in a country with over 200 distinct ethnic groups, schools, she exhorted writers to work constructively within the context of the national realities, and her very presence at the colloquium seemed to ensure that the highest levels of the Cameroon government.

The colloquium was divided into seven plenary sessions (at which major papers and reports were discussed) and daily working commissions: oral tradition and literature, edition and publication, theater, poetry, novel, essay, and literary criticism. On the general level, two of the most provocative papers were delivered by Macien Towa and René Philombe. In "Les conflits entre traditions avec degrés de intensité during the past fifteen years in Cameroon: Senghor and his followers?" Towa reopened a debate that has raged with varying degrees of intensity during the past fifteen years in Cameroon: what attitude should contemporary Africans adopt toward the "Négritude" of Senghor and his followers? Basically, Towa contends that any traditionalism removing it from the world of flux and rendering it incapable of responding to the actual problems of present-day Africans. He advocates the need to transcend traditionalism by placing primary value upon the creator of all culture—man—rather than upon any given stage of cultural development. In practical terms, his proposal translates into a plea for the rejection of those aspects of traditional culture which hinder technological, political, and human development, while conserving and revitalizing those aspects capable of contributing to the solution of physical, psychological, ethical, or aesthetic problems (e.g., indigenous languages, art). Such an attitude, he contends, would permit Cameroonians to transfer oppressive structures and forge a viable self-image in the contemporary world.

The focus of Philombe's paper, "L'écrivain camerounais face à ses responsabilités civiques," is somewhat narrower than that of Towa's communication, but it too reflects a tendency toward the same universalizing humanism. After reviewing some popular misconceptions about the writer's role in a developing country, Philombe argues that, even under these conditions, literature is as necessary to a people as bread or rice, because it has the capacity to awaken them to that which is beautiful, good, and true. According to Philombe, the authentic writer is necessarily engaged in a twofold endeavor: questioning the abuses of traditional as well as modern society and inciting his people to conceive of a freer, richer, and more satisfying future. To fulfill such a task, the writer must not divorce himself from the political, social, or psychological realities of his environment. Thus, he dare not accept a moral or political vision dictated to him by any fixed dogma or tradition. Ultimately, Philombe is making an eloquent demand for intellectual honesty in literary creativity and criticism—an honesty that is not always easy to preserve when one is confronted by the contradictory pressures that exist in some African countries.

From a scholarly point of view, some of the colloquium's most fruitful work was accomplished by the "oral literature" commission, which was chaired

by Samuel-Martin Eno Belinga. For years, the national research foundation O.N.A.R.E.S.T. has been collecting and cataloguing Cameroon oral literature in preparation for the publication of a definitive work on the subject. Without setting overly ambitious goals for the commission, Eno Belinga (himself a collector of oral literature and a talented player of the harplike "mvet") placed particular emphasis on the need for appropriate definitions and methodologies. In his own paper, "La création musicale et littéraire dans la tradition orale," defines and illustrates the aesthetic principles that Cameroon oral literature shares with all other oral literatures, whereas Louis-Marie Ongomou's contribution, "Introduction à la littérature orale," defends the thesis that orality is central to authentic communication in African society and should be accorded its appropriate role in the future development of Cameroon culture.

The greatest number of papers were delivered on a relatively little-known genre of Cameroon writing—poetry. Although severely attacked for his cosmopolitan and arbitrary emphasis on certain poets, Patrice Kayo's "Histoire de la poésie camerounaise de langue française" records for the first time a number of significant facts and events in the evolution of a rich tradition of written poetry in Cameroon. In "Le problème de la poésie dans le domaine littéraire camerounais 1947-1970," Rashedi Fouda divides this evolution into four major periods: the birth of modern Cameroon poetry with Louis-Marie Fouka's imitative works in a cosmopolitan French style; the reaction against Fouka's "Négritude"-influenced writing of Francoise N'Gibouana (François Sengat-Kuo); the popularization and extension of Sengat-Kuo's ideas in Cameroon by Charles Ngande and the statement of opposing views by Philombe; and finally the redefinition of poetry and the poet in the literary journal *Ozile*, which Fouda himself helped to found in 1970. The Anglophone poet Suma Kor presented a paper, "The Rough Edges of Cameroon Writing," in which he attempts to define the specificity of Cameroon poetry by the nature of the obstacles it must overcome and by its propensity to "hide" something which it is simultaneously seeking readers to discover. The most of Suma Kor's presentation lies in the fact that it makes Francophone Cameroonians more aware of the burgeoning literary activity in Anglophone West Cameroon. A brilliant young scholar, Ousé Ouono, also tries to define the specificity of Cameroon poetry in his "Le poète camerounais et le langage," but his point of departure is essentially linguistic rather than thematic. Because the Cameroon poet has assimilated the conventional language of a colonizer he is generally trying to reject, he naturally attempts to break the accepted constraints of standard French and to destroy the myth that there is any necessary connection between word and object. According to Ouono, this endeavor ultimately draws attention to the certainty of the word and explains tendencies towards absence, silence, vertical series of repetitions, and visions of unachieved universal harmony—tendencies which he discusses to be characteristic of Cameroon poetry.

In "The Future of Drama in Cameroon," R. Nsimbe Eyoh criticizes the unquestioning acceptance of Western theatrical conventions and suggests that Cameroon dramatists need to "draw extensively from the spontaneous and communal nature of traditional art forms," if they wish to produce a genuine Cameroon drama. He believes that such a theater would not necessarily be tied

to stage presentations and that it could well adapt traditional musical instruments, dances, and visual representations of contemporary culture and society to communally functional purposes. Oyono Mbia's contribution, "The Dramatist's Problems in Cameroon," outlines on the basis of his own experience the difficulties confronting the development of a viable theater in a country like Cameroon.

The most well-known Cameroon literary genre—the novel—received the least attention at the colloquium, but the single paper devoted to it, Fame Ndongo's "Le roman camerounais post-colonial: déperdition ou invention," provoked a heated debate. Before an audience including many contemporary Cameroon novelists, Ndongo (editor of the national newspaper) proclaimed that the quality of the Cameroon novel is much lower today than it was in the germanian structuralism, he asserted that literary quality depends on the correspondence (or intelligible relationship) between the world view implicit in the work and that of the social group whose fundamental preoccupations and aspirations the author is translating into literary form. Ndongo's contention is that most Cameroon novels since independence seek to avoid this linkage between social reality and literature and, as a consequence, lack the power to interest the Cameroon public. Instead of finding their own concerns more coherently structured and better expressed in these novels—Cameroon readers (in Ndongo's opinion) are offered ultimately meaningless intellectual strolls in an endless series of never-never lands.

Dr. Bernard Fomlon (editor of the Cameroon cultural review *Abia*) chaired the commission on literary criticism. The interest and animation of this commission undoubtedly reflected the participants' growing conviction that an intellectually probing criticism practiced by knowledgeable critics will be crucial to the development of a national literature. Among the papers presented in this section, "Le texte littéraire camerounais: Approche stylistique" by Gervais Mendose is particularly significant insofar as it constitutes a rigorous application of structuralist stylistics to the problem of defining the specificity of Cameroon literature. Drawing heavily on examples in Oyono's novels and Oyono Mbia's plays, he suggests that the "camerounais" of an author can be measured by the degree to which "interference" from a home language (in this case Bula) brings about divergence from standard French. He also finds characteristic "mixtures" in terms of generic models and sources of inspiration. In addition to Mendose's paper, insightful analyses of the situation were presented in Jean Micolou's "Caractère national de l'œuvre littéraire," François-Borgia-Marie Evemba's "L'expression littéraire: modèle de l'histoire humaine," and Ernest Alima's "L'écrivain camerounais et ses problèmes."

The crucial role of the publishing industry was underlined by Jean Dibang (editor of Editions C.L.F.), who also offered numerous concrete suggestions for ameliorating book publishing and distribution in developing African countries.

As the colloquium drew to a close, it became apparent that its stated goal had been met: the basis for a national bibliography of Cameroon literature had

been established; the contemporary situation of Cameroon letters had been openly and frankly discussed by a variety of concerned participants in a spirit of collegiality and community of purpose; and constructive suggestions had been placed before the public and the government. Whether or not these initiatives will bear the desired fruit remains to be seen, but the first "Colloquium on Cameroon Literature and Literary Criticism" could well have been the catalyst for a renewal of creative and scholarly activity in the country. The proceedings are scheduled to be published in English and French, and it is hoped that they will soon be available to all interested scholars.

1. *Bibliographic data remains incomplete for most areas of Francophone Africa, but what is available clearly indicates the remarkable quantity and quality of Cameroon literary activity. In Thérèse Baratthe-Eno Belinga's Bibliographie: Auteurs africains et malgaches de langue française (Paris: O.R.T.F., 1972), there are 200 entries for Cameroon writers and only 138 for Senegal, the country with the next highest number. In a more recent article, "Bibliographie du roman négro-africain d'expression française," Présence Francophone, n° 10 (1975), 145-52, Jocelyn Robert Duclos lists 27 full-length novels by Cameroonians and no more than 16 for any other Francophone African country during the period 1951-1974. In addition, it is worth noting that more "Grands prix littéraires de l'Afrique noire" have been awarded to Cameroonians than to writers of any other nationality and that Cameroon dramatists have played a preponderant role in the extremely important annual competitions sponsored by the French national radio.*

2. *For many years Thomas Melone was chairman of the Negro-African Literature Department at the University of Yaoundé; his generally favorable attitude toward Senghor is reflected in his De la Négritude dans la littérature négro-africaine (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1962). But in 1966, Jean-Marie Abanda Ndergue began to champion an opposing notion, which he termed "négrisme" and which is defined in his De la Négritude au Négrisme (Yaoundé: C.L.E., 1970). Basile-Juliet Fouza coined a competing term, "négrité," and the resulting debate (in which Towa and Senghor himself took part) raged for several years in university seminars, journals like Cameroon Littéraire, newspapers, and public radio programs.*

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