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EDITORIAL

Patrick Sam-Kubam had this to say in the last issue of ABBLA:

If the Literary map of Africa is charted, it would be noticed that, unlike Nigeria, where the blossoming of Literary creativity has been rapid, where works of great achievement in fiction, poetry and drama have flourished, (English-speaking) Cameroon falls among those countries where creative writing ... is at its lowest.

Sam-Kubam is right, by and large.

On the contrary, our French-speaking brethren have been prolific and have produced works saluted the world over, and translated into several languages. And what is more, the most renowned Cameroon writer in English, and who won great acclaim in England and a B.B.C. first prize, is a Francophone — the talented dramatist Guillaume Oyono-Mbia.

Ferdinand Oyono and Alexandre Biyidi, alias Mongo Beti, put Cameroon on the literary map way back in the nineteen fifties when they were still students in the Sorbonne. I was there with them, in Paris, at the time. They are University men.

In the nineteen sixties a new crop of East Cameroon writers emerged on the scene: those who without a University Education have shown, beyond all doubt, that Literary excellence is not the exclusive privilege of University men. The most outstanding among these is René Philippe Ombéde whose *nom de plume* is René Philombe. Francis Bebey is another. We of the Abbia group are proud that it was we who gave the *imprimatur* for the novel that has enhanced Bebey's fame and which won an international prize, and has been translated into several languages. I refer to his *Le Fils d'Agatha Moudio*, in English, *Agatha Moudio's Son*.

Thus, East Cameroon has been far ahead of West Cameroon in Literary Creativity for the past twenty years and more.

Yet, paradoxically, West Cameroon has a longer experience and greater achievement in University Studies than East Cameroon. I visited Lycée Le Clerc, here in Yaounde in the very first term of its existence, back in 1947. In 1946, there was only one secondary school for the whole of French-speaking Africa from the mouth of the Senegal to the mouth of the Congo, the Lycée Faidherbe, where young Sengho studied. But by that time, thanks to the Nigerian connection, there were scores of West Cameroonians with the Senior Cambridge; and Dr. Emmanuel Mbella Liffafe Endeley was a practising physician, followed by Dr. Gwan Nulla soon after. Sasse College was founded in

1938 and in 1946 produced its first batch of brilliant Senior Cambridge holders. And there were Cameroonians in the first intake into University College Ibadan, in February 1948.

What then accounts for West Cameroon's lag behind East Cameroon in Literary achievement?

The first reason, in my opinion (which stands to be corrected) is the utilitarian spirit of the British Colonial system of Education.

They were not ardent exporters of the *British Way of Life*, not to speak of English Literature, during that period. We were educated for *Work* not for *Leisure*, and yet Aristotle preached that Education for *Leisure* is superior to Education for *Work*, because *Leisure* is an End in itself, and *Work* the Means; and the Means cannot be above the End. Literature (not to speak of Music) was almost completely ignored in the English Language. The emphasis was almost totally and exclusively on the English Language. In C.K.C., we plodded, word after word, through a big thick book entitled *Thoughts in English Prose*, the purpose being to make us garner an impressive store of English words and phrases and to master the various structures of the English sentence. Nesfield's *Grammar* was our bedside book.

It was a training in depth, efficient, specialised and most useful indeed, and stood us in good stead; but a judicious apprenticeship in Creative Writing was completely ignored; the essay was the only literary form in the programme and Composition was the only exercise.

Even today, when Literature figures heavily in programmes in School and College, courses and efforts at Creative Writing are given only marginal attention and language standards are falling alarmingly. And the itch to scribble, or even to read, is rare.

The French on the contrary were, and still are, ardent crusaders of their Culture, their Language and the Literature, determined on the formation of an African élite assimilated into their system and converted to and bent, even blindly, on, the defence of things French.

I think that another institution, laudable in itself, but pernicious to Creative effort among the Anglophones is the *Club*. Long nights with buddies and heavy drinking till the small hours of the morning leave very little or no room for creative enterprise. Curiously, though, when you enter the house of a French educated African you find a bar, more often than not, and in that of an English educated African, a library!

The utilitarian strain in the colonial system of British Education has had some salutary results notwithstanding. Just as the East can boast of the best writers, any unbiased observer will admit that the most competent technologists in this country — surgeons, physicians, chartered engineers, agronomists, chartered accountants, world-renowned research men — are English trained; and in their libraries, technical books, more often than not. My quarrel with

them is that they seem to believe that creative writing is no business of theirs, whereas their deep intimate and wide contact with folk of all ranks, and classes, and callings gives them a wealth of information and experience about man and the world and equips them best for Creative Writing. The medical men are the most highly privileged of this group. I know some who are among the deepest thinkers and the most thrilling story tellers I have ever met. But they do not strive to sublimate this wealth of experience into Literature. Too busy with research — that would be their legitimate excuse. But I would say that a little creative writing, now and again, would be, for them, a salutary change and relaxation.

Creative writing is not the exclusive privilege of those who have gone through a faculty of Letters. Indeed, it may be that many a promising creative talent was destroyed by a faculty of letters; and there are famous writers who never saw the inside of a college; and quite a few who exercised other professions — Timothy Aluko, the prolific Nigerian novelist is Public Works engineer, Cyprian Ekwensi is a chemist, Stanlake Samkange, the Rhodesian, is an historian.

Creative writing, (this cannot be repeated too often) is not the exclusive privilege of the Litterati.

The Clarion Call is sounded for everybody, whatever his calling, whatever his level of education, who feels within him, however faintly, the stirrings of the urge to write.

We of the Review will help, not only by publishing what is fit to print, but also by putting before our readers, the young especially, the philosophical, the scientific and the artistic principles from which they may draw inspiration.

Philosophical: by showing them the deepest causes of human behaviour; by letting them see what makes an action or an utterance ordinarily beautiful or extra-ordinarily beautiful, that is, pretty or sublime.

Scientific: by showing them the proximate cause of these acts and utterances.

Artistic: by providing them with examples from writers of world and historic repute who would stir and inspire our youth athirst for creative enterprise.

Thus we fondly hope, and desire fervently, to bring a modest share to the furthering and fostering of Letters to the straggling English-speaking part of this country in particular, and to Cameroon at large.

Bernard FONLON.

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