

African Performance Review
Vol 2 Nos 2&3 2008
pp 132-134

Book Review

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Ambe, Hilarious N (2007) *Change Aesthetics in Anglophone Cameroon Drama & Theatre*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies 83, 220pp, ISBN: 978-3-939661-02-3, €24.95

Reading Hilarious Ambe's study about the aesthetics of Anglophone Cameroon drama and theatre brings the concern of the late Bate Besong regarding the view of what he called the 'new theatre' sharply into focus. Ambe's work explores the literary theatre in English in Cameroon from the late 1980s, using a linear political/historical paradigm. Ambe links the rise of Cameroonian theatre in English in the 1980s to the worsening conditions of living and the people's general disenchantment with the political machinations of the Francophone leadership, as well as to the riots and demonstrations against the government. The theatre reacted to all these circumstances by changing from drama that re-presented history to a form of protest theatre whose style is committed to revolutionary aesthetics and to seeking, by way of educating the people, a transformation of Cameroonian society.

Change Aesthetics is divided into six sections. The first section, 'Historical-literary Paradigms', presents a general overview of the political structure of Cameroon from the colonial era, and the constant struggle of the English-speaking part for relevance and acceptance by the French speaking dominant part. The section also establishes the framework of Cameroonian theatre from its development as representational through a sharp shift to an association with the political cognition of the politically suppressed English-speaking Cameroon.

The next four sections, 'Tragic and Faceless Representations', 'Experimenting with Form: Bate Besong's Early theatre', 'Redefining Self

and Identity' and 'From Excentrics to Incentrics: Two Playwrights of the 1990s', explore the drama of five major Cameroonian dramatists writing in English. Ambe raises the influence of the theatre of Wole Soyinka on Bole Butake's 'tragic' drama (*Lake God, The Survivors*) because of his focus on disaster, 'human wastage and bleak representation of human existence in a society at the threshold of change' (p. 52). He links this metaphor of waste to lack of political development and administrative incompetence particularly after the Lake Nyos gas disaster of 1986. The dramas of Butake and Hansel Eyoh, according to Ambe, are representations of the historical perspective with minimal critical examination. The thematic considerations revolve around 'social forces and groups, not individuals, [who] would successfully work out strategies that may eventually bring about an amelioration or betterment of the conditions of any oppressed and exploited people' (p. 79).

Bate Besong has always been pessimistic in his dramatic outlook and Ambe points out how Besong's historical parodies highlight stagnation, inactivity and representation of 'political barbarity, betrayals and double standards' (p. 14) in Cameroonian political history. Besong's early drama, like that of Butake, concentrates on the waste and failure of the post-independence political leadership, and neo-colonialism, which alienates the common people. Structurally, early plays like *The Most Cruel Death of the Talkative Zombie* take after the European modernist drama of Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. Conversely, Besong's later plays, including *Beast of no Nation*, shift from being reflective to evaluative, and providing artistic commentaries and indictment of Cameroonian post-colonial reality.

The political rising of the early 1990s by the Anglophone Cameroonians to make their socio-cultural position relevant in the national polity influenced the later plays by Butake – *And Palmwine will Flow* – with an optimistic view about the emergence of popular rule, and Besong's optimism about the future of the people in *Requiem for the Last Kaiser*. Hilarious Ambe, with this book, has launched a literary platform to re-create the debate about the post-colonial frustration and inadequacy of Anglophone drama in Cameroon drama to determine their contribution to the re-formation and re-configuration of the society. The book robustly argues that the drama reflects the possibilities of a changing political consciousness. Anglophone Cameroonian drama from the 1990s is protest theatre, dealing with the injustice of the internal colonisation by the French 'leaning' leadership, and the issue of identity.

Ambe concludes that the trend of Anglophone drama in Cameroon points to determinism and a re-ordering of experiences in a radical artistic form. This brings to the fore the discussions I had with the late Besong in November 1990 about the engagement of his drama with the hegemony of leadership and his conscious attempt to merge indigenous theatrical techniques with Western textual dramaturgy. Ambe has succeeded in combining all these obscure discussions into an important study.