



NJHS

Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

ISSN 2520-4009 (Print) Online Journal homepage: <http://www.theroyallitejournal.com>

IMAGINARIES OF A POST-COLONIAL CAMEROON NATION IN BOLE BUTAKE'S FAMILY SAGA AND BATE BESONG'S BEASTS OF NO NATION

AUDACE MBONYINGINGO

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies
Moi University

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH ODHIAMBO

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies
Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

PETER TIROP SIMATEI

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies
Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Contemporary Anglophone Cameroon drama mostly deals with a peculiar postcolonial political situation in which two peoples of opposing colonial experiences were brought together to form a nation. Drawing from the tenets of Postcolonial theories, this paper examines how Bole Butake and Bate Besong's dramaturgies imagine and represent a Cameroonian nation within the possibilities offered by dramatic art form. The post-colonial Cameroonian nation can be well understood if it is placed into the discourses around the "Anglophone Problem" and the different experiences of the Anglophone Cameroonians as a distinct category of people in the new nation. This paper also looks at how the playwrights indict colonization of Cameroon (a country with more than 250 ethnicities and languages) by three different European powers, to have further engendered cultural and linguistic differences. The communities that are artistically imagined by the playwrights often invoke a shared past or a cultural essence. The playwrights' projects seek to re-imagine a Cameroonian nation and re-write the Cameroonian history from below. In doing so, they recover the experiences of those who have been hitherto hidden from their history. This paper analyses the plays, among other postcolonial tenets, within Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined political community" and Richards David's idea about "Framing Identities". This study therefore evolves on the premises that, in the plays under study, in imagining a post-reunification Cameroonian nation Bole Butake and Bate Besong adopt different approaches that respectively range from the poetics of reconciliation to the aesthetics of resistance and confrontation to engage with identity politics.

Key Words: Anglophone Cameroon, Post-colonial, Drama, Nation-building, Identity.



Print ISSN 2520-4009

© Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Volume 1, Issue 3, May 2017

From a Postcolonial configuration the Butake and Besong's nation building project attempts to reinterpret and redefine the post-reunification Cameroonian nation. For the two playwrights to realise their imaginings of a Cameroonian nation, they engage their characters in actions and interactions that enable them "to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity", as postulated by Gilroy (1993:19). In order to understand well the playwrights' imaginaries, one would like to look at the national memory or rather a memory which creates a national identity as postulated by Ernest Renan in his seminal essay "What is a Nation?" For Renan "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle" and for all its cults, "that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory, this is the social capital upon which one bases a national idea" (1990:19). This seems to be the post-reunification Cameroon nation which is represented in the playwrights' possibilities of dramatic art form. In fact, the selected plays could be read as narratives that challenge the nation. Therefore, this drama, like any other literary genre, "had to do with not what texts mean but what they are made to mean by dominant critical views, which are then enshrined in educational systems" (Loomba, 1990:84).

Current debates among Anglophone Cameroonian writers, critics and elites stress the "intrigues, fraud, manipulations, betrayals, double standards and dictatorship" (Ambe 2007: 7) as handicaps to the nation-building project. Thus, the two playwrights' engagement with this project concerns, as Ambe further postulates, the "political domination and subjugation, of colonialism and neo-colonialism and of the search of identity and self-determination". In attempting to mimic the structure of the nation, the plays under study are revealing: they reflect these major issues against which Anglophone Cameroon writers react with increasing militancy. The overall argument here is that Bole Butake and Bate Besong's plays participate in the formation of a Cameroonian nation by mapping out Anglophone Cameroonians' shared experiences. In so doing, the playwrights subvert the ideological interests of the West and the Cameroonian ruling class that have long conditioned the relationship between literary imagination and nation building.

We furthermore read from Ashcroft et al. (1995) that post-colonialism does not mean "after colonialism" and that it begun from the moment of colonization. It is thus concerned with the worlds which colonialism in its multiple manifestations confused, disfigured and distorted, reconfigured and transformed. According to the critics, the effects of colonization are felt from the moment of the first colonial encounter and post-colonialism constitutes as its subject the way colonised societies adjusted and continued to adjust to the colonial presence. A strong point from the text further emphasises that "post-colonialism exists". In other words the former colonial masters "presence" continues to manifest its domination and influences in different shapes. In his indictment to colonialism Butake (1996: 24) mentions that :

the colonial experience for the Africans in general and Cameroonians in particular was a very traumatic and psychologically, unnerving calamity. Such early and renowned African writers as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, [...] have treated in a most vivid manner the calamitous iniquities inflicted on African peoples. [...] All of them without exception treat the theme of colonialism in negative terms and their attitudes towards it are that of violent opposition because colonialism was destructive.

An Analysis of many post-colonial African writings shows this destructive force of the colonial enterprise. Anglophone drama in general, and in particular the playwrights' reaction to the legacy of colonialism, support the argument that this drama articulates a network of experiences and visions to offer an engaged critique of the union of the two

Cameroons and the subsequent post-reunification nation building attempts. The playwrights demonstrate a strong attachment to their history, which include colonial heritage and their integrity as leading light for their people who had been deprived of the basic right to citizenship.

In the following discussion of Bole Butake's *Family Saga* I first analyse the myth of origin that led to self-rediscovery and reconciliation as it goes back to the Cameroon nation existence before the arrival of the imperial forces that scrambled the country. Second, Butake's mythical engagement in the play enables us to answer some questions: how do Butake's imaginaries represent the Cameroonian nation within the confines of the "Anglophone Problem"? What, in this play, constitutes the Cameroonian "imagined" nation within the confines of the "Anglophone Problem"? Finally, in this analysis I set out to prove that Butake's *Family Saga* traces the origins of the Cameroonian nation through histories and myths that serve to explain the complexities and paradoxes inherent in the formation of the nation-state.

In Butake's play, the myth of origin is captured from a historical perspective. It is through myth and history that the playwright revisits the role of the western imperialist project and how the present Cameroon nation-state was made in the image of a nation conceived by the colonizer. Moreover, Butake's mythic representation enables us to have an examination and analysis of the linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity of Cameroon. The author dramatisation of the Cameroonian present situation with myths translates his feelings of cultural identity and pride that Cameroonian people have in a society typified by ethnic diversity, shared cultural beliefs and language. But Butake's representation of the Cameroonian nation within the mythic possibilities is obscured by his nationalist spirit which, unfortunately seeks to place the same country in an 'immemorial past' where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned.

Moreover, in Butake's *Family Saga* the stories that constitute the mythical origins of Cameroon transcend individual personal experience and identity. The native myth is reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality and open a way to self-retrieval, cultural recollection and cultural security. The problems facing his characters are of a collective nature and therefore need a collective exploration towards the mythic vision. A more apt reference in this area should be Cochran (2002: 425) who remarks that 'the identity of a political society revolves around the myths and stories that its citizens remember and retell about themselves'. In *Family Saga*, the protagonist Kamala doubts about his true identity in the new deed of agreement and wants at any cost to discover who they really are. He announces his indignation and is still in search of his true origin. It is until the whole family has discovered who they really are that the reconciliation process that has been initiated will be possible. He shares the same views as his own daughter, Sawa who insists on going back to the far past and discover their origin:

Because we don't even know who we are na? [...] But what about our grand-mummy and grand-daddy na? That is the only way to know our identity na? Who are we and how we are family with Kamalo na? Who are we na? Where did we come from before all these problems fell on us na? It is important for us to know our family story na? (56-57)

Again utilising the possibilities of theatre practice as research, Butake uses his characters, specifically Kamala, when he sends out his children — Ngong and Sawa — to the community, to the archives and books, to find out their past as well as that of community. It is the narratives that they recollect as 'mythic' in character that are used as raw materials to explain their true identity. Kamala proposes this:

We have to go back into the whole community and ask the elders of the clan about our history. We have to look into our history books and diaries

kept by people who are known of telling the truth; especially priests, philosophers, travelers and even soothsayers. (57)

The characters' identity—and thus that of the Cameroonian people as a whole—is still unclear and false for them. That is why there is an urgent need to revisit it in order to discover the truth and maybe understand the stereotypes associated with it. The performance of this invented myth of origin; Odhiambo & Naomi (2008: 8) argues, “does not only arouse their consciousness, but also seems to liberate Kamala and his children from their culture of fear and silence.” Because knowledge is power, Kamala has decided first to send his two children — Ngong and Sawa —to find out who they are for a purpose and with a particular notice:

I asked both of you to go out and find your family story. Because if you don't know where you are coming from, you will never know where you are going to. Or you will always take the wrong direction. (63)

If Kamala wants his own children “to know where they are coming from” this suggests that he urges them to discover their origin, their true identity and above all their ancestry, which here is historical or mythic. Kamala himself does not know who, in actual sense, he is. That he was told he is a twin brother to Kamalo is even worse. The two brothers have a lot differentiating traits, be they physical, moral and even biological. But the historical explanations that they were given of how they came to be a family with Kamalo were not convincing, a historical ancestry appears to them as distorted and therefore not a choice here. They rather need a mythical explanation of their true origin. Among other roles of the myth is explanation of what scientific knowledge cannot. Therefore, Sawa and Ngong believe that where their history has failed to satisfy them, myth will necessarily succeed. The mythical exploration enables them to chart out the right course of their life.

Artistically Butake uses myths and history to explain the cultural diversity, linguistic asymmetry, and ideological discrepancy between Anglophone and Francophone Cameroons about who they really are. The colonial history of Cameroon shows that the two major factions that constitute the Cameroonian superstructures resulted from the different imperial dominations. But one can imagine that the very populations that today see themselves with the lenses of Anglophone and Francophone identity had been there before the advent of the British and French. Butake thus re-imagines the origin of the Cameroonian nation by revisiting the myths that function as catalysts to the whole Cameroonian's consciousness. In this project Butake corroborates Renan (1990: 9) who argues that:

Nations in this sense of the term are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them. Egypt, China and ancient Chaldia were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven.

From this quotation Renan confronts the realities of the concept of nation and nationhood as they are lived. The present nations worldwide are a creation of modern man for political and economical purposes. It therefore not, surprising that in their mythical discovery, Kamala's children come back with impressing results which they present to their father as enacted in the play performance. It is Sawa who presents them first:

Grand-mummy is a goddess na? The people say that one day she emerged from the smoking volcano of Mount Kamanda. That is why they call her Kamanda na? She can never die because of her extreme beauty and wealth

The search motif as a dramatic technique here enables the playwright to trace the birth of the Kingdom of Kamanda. Further, the play explores the collateral damages affecting the kingdom: invasion and rape by foreigners and the ensuing conflict between its children is a parody of the colonial history of Cameroon and its post-independent challenges. Since the post-reunification Cameroonian nation has been problematic to represent the writer chooses to use a mythical exposition to capture the ideological and historical functioning of the binaries discussed above. In effect, the plays can be interpreted within the “Manichean dichotomy” in order to put bare the complexities that explain the origin of the Cameroonian nation. In fact, this nation that Butake’s play interprets is “a historical result brought about by a series of convergent facts” (Renan, 1990: 12). The playwright revisits the past in order to rewrite the Cameroonian history marked by ethnic tensions and turbulences. In this project of national, cultural and historical venture Butake’s *Family Saga* is preoccupied by the false spirit of reunification of the two Cameroons in 1961. In addition he uses mythic memory in order to achieve real reconciliation and unity. In unravelling the history of post-colonial Cameroonian identities, *Family Saga* brings the difficulty as to the rationality of the “Anglophone Problem”. Butake paints dramatic responses to the politics of national formation in Africa and Cameroon in particular. The dialogic formulation of the dramatic vision of the post-reunification Cameroonian nation is dealt with in the following section.

Although I have defined the concept of “nation” from a literary and political perspective, it is important to assess to what extent Bole Butake and Bate Besong corroborate, contest or validate it in their imaginaries. Indeed the playwrights grapple with the question of nationhood in Cameroon. Revisiting and relocating this notion within the discourses of “Anglophone Problem” and post-colonialism then becomes crucial. Imagining or narrating the nation became the concern of many postcolonial writers and critics especially in the mid-20th century. The national state, national consciousness or nation-ness became an overwhelming concern because the boundaries or borders delimiting one national state from another had become unclear and questionable. This meant that the concept of nation appeared to be something inscribed in the mind rather than determined by geographical boundaries. It therefore became important for writers “to reflect on this disturbance especially as the nation and its narrative form could inform each other in a complex reflective way” (Ashcroft et al. 1995: 118).

The main form of crisis manifested in Butake and Besong’s selected plays is that of nationhood. They grapple with this crisis and how it could be contained. Read within the framework of Benedict Anderson’s definition of a nation as an “imagined political community”, my argument is that Butake and Besong, in the selected plays, use the vehicles of memory, history and imagination to dramatize the ironies of nation building in Cameroon. In their envisioning of the Cameroonian nation the playwrights paint an ideal picture of what the Cameroonian nation ought to be. Odhiambo (2009b: 171) for example observes that Bole Butake’s vision of the Cameroonian nation is romantic:

though Butake credibly depicts, within the dramatic structure, the problems that militate against the realization of the sense of nation-ness, his own vision of nation-ness remains ever romantic - utopia, so to speak. This is because his own pronounced desires for national unity seems to lead him to some kind of utopia(n) vision.

Butake’s vision of the post-reunification Cameroon nation may be romantic, but in a sense, this can be a way out to terminate the tensions between Anglophones and Francophone. What he proposes as interethnic marriages brings out the idea of unitary spirit that

transcends the linguistic and historical differences. In this light, I perceive in Butake's dramatic presentation an indisputable role to play in redrawing the boundaries of the nation through his narrative. This narrative obviously is informed by memory and history in which the playwrights' nationalism is a trope for such things as 'belonging', 'bordering', and 'commitment'. That nation obviously springs out of many socio-political and historical turbulences that the narratives seek to redefine. That is the reason why Butake's soft tone, through forum, playback and intervention theatre aspires to transform the cultural and linguistic borders in Cameroon into open borderlands, that is, broad new spaces that unite the many different Cameroonian communities.

Family Saga recalls the complicated history of the present day Cameroon Republic with its resultant nationhood crises. Butake does that with some metaphorical names that remind the different forces that have played roles in the colonial and post-colonial Cameroonian experiences. In a mythical narration we are informed that a Goddess named Kamanda emerged from the mountain and gave the nation its name. The mountain in question here is Mount Cameroon and Kamanda stands for Kamerun, the name that Cameroon was having before it was colonised by Germans. In the play *Yaman*, Fiekafhim and Bakingoom represent Germany, France and Britain respectively—European powers that colonised Cameroon. Because after the defeat of Germany during the First World War Cameroon was divided between France and Britain with France taking two thirds of the territory, the two brothers in the play, Kamalo and Kamala stand respectively for Francophone Cameroon and Anglophone Cameroon with Kamalo as the bigger brother and Kamala the smaller brother. Ngong and Sawa, Kamala's children represent the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon – the North West and the South West regions. The “deed of brotherhood” is metaphorically used to refer to the 1961 Plebiscite in which Southern Cameroon under the United Nations supervision chose to join East Cameroon instead of Nigeria as a way of gaining its independence. The “Court of Deeds” is undoubtedly the United Nations Organization.

Crucial to the history of Cameroon is what has come to be known as the “Anglophone Problem”. This problem is the central axis of most of Bole Butake and Bate Besong's plays and other writers such as John Nkemngong Nkengasong, Victor Epie Ngome and Hansel Ndombe Eyoh amongst others. According to Nkengasong (2012: 2), the “Anglophone Problem”:

...is characterised by various forms of resistance to the marginalisation, assimilation, dictatorship and fake democratic practices which have, since the so-called independence, hindered Anglophone Cameroonians from having control over themselves and their destiny.”

The Anglophones denounce the fact that they are considered as strangers in their own country. They regret that the reunification did not bring them what they expected. Nkengasong goes further to explain that “the French colonial policy dominates national life and therefore consciously (or unconsciously) annihilates the socio-cultural, economic and political culture of Anglophones, acquired from their experiences as members of a former British colony” (2). Once the so-called union between the two Cameroons started to raise questions and that the oppressed Anglophones wanted assistance from the former colonial master (The United Kingdom), they got ridiculed that it was their choice. In the play *Family Saga* Kamala is in search of why he is considered as a stranger in a family he believes is his own. His twin brother Kamalo has appropriated alone all what is the family's welfare. The justification he gives is that it is what his father says. Kamala decides to go and consult his own father who retorts:

BAAKINGOOM: You chose your brother against my better advice. [...]. You made your choice. You take responsibility for it.

KAMALA: Yes, father. I made the choice because it was the best. Everyone in the court said it was the best. And you stood there by me. You signed the Deed of Brotherhood as witness. As my father. You stood by me when Kamalo and I shook hands and embraced each other. (20)

This conversation between a “father” and his “son” ironically explains how the union between the two Cameroons was achieved but with hidden agenda. The so-called “brotherhood” was later on changed into a deed of “bondagehood” as it is revealed in the following conversation between Kamala and Kamalo:

KAMALO: You belong to me. That’s what my papa says. If you do not like it here, you can go elsewhere. That’s what my papa says.

KAMALA: All right, I do not like it here. I am taking my things and going elsewhere. Where is the deed of brotherhood that we both signed? I need my share of the resources.

KAMALO: you mean the deed of bondagehood? My papa is keeping it

KAMALA: Keeping what? Your papa is keeping what?

KAMALO: The deed of bondagehood that you signed.

KAMALA: Brotherhood

[...]

KAMALO: Bondagehood! Stop wasting your breath. That’s why I conceive, you execute. Period. (*Removing a document from his jacket*). Here’s a certified true copy, signed and sealed by papa himself.

The terms and conditions of the deeds of brotherhood between Kamalo and Kamala pose confusion. From the very beginning of the play, we are presented with a verbal confrontation which reveals the lack of goodwill to accept the family contract. In fact Kamalo sees the agreement as a form of exploitation while Kamala still holds that it is brotherhood. The reunification in Cameroon that is dramatised here is built on falsehood. As a result, the newly formed family entity is, but a mere lie. In order to fit in the purpose of this study, this family is equated to the post-reunification controversial Cameroonian nation. This idea of nation in this context echoes Simatei’s (2001: 24) observation that it “cannot cohere because it is internally ambivalent, marked as it were by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of its people”. The kind of nation that the play represents therefore revolves around some cultural identities of a minority people in a union with another cultural identity of a majority people. In this unified nation the minority group is seeking first the right to exist as full peoples, not as appendages in the union. In connection with the Cameroonian history, the minorities’ claims are reminiscent of the Anglophone Cameroonians to exist as full citizens of Cameroon and be treated equally like the other partners, the Francophones. This is implicitly the major concern of Besong when he writes *Beasts of no Nation* Ambe (2007:120) argues that in the play the setting and nature of the character drawing are deliberately built to provide a clear picture about the polarized nature of Ednuoay. On the one hand we have the Night-soil men, Cripple and Blind man, described by the playwright as “*the doomed carriers of mountains of fetid waste of the Ednuoay city council*”.

The dramatic development of *Beasts of no Nation* enables us to experience essentially the stateless status and physical, material and depersonalisation of the oppressed characters pitted against insensitivity of their leaders. The doomed in the play are claiming for professional identity cards. This is symbol of recognition as full citizens. One without the card cannot claim their citizenship:

CRIPPLE: They want their identity cards.

OTSHAMA: (*dramatic*) What is a professional identity card, eh? What is a mere piece of paper?

[...]

CRIPPLE: (*parodying*) Money to print identification papers? We have tightened the economic belt to the last centimetre. (134-136)

The Night-soil men, Crippled and Blind, despite their physical deformities have been given a “job” which they are doing very well. However, they are undergoing a psychological trauma which results from the refusal of professional cards. Their job is to carry shit. The image of carriers of shit is very important here because it is metaphorically used to refer to slavery. As mature people, the recognition they are claiming would allow them to enjoy the rights and obligation that any citizen would have in their own nation. However, despite the fact that they have been claiming for the card for years and years and toiled for it so confidently by carrying excrements, they are told to go on enjoying the fresh air produced by the working environment.

Characterization in the two plays, *Family Saga* and *Beasts of no Nation* enables us to understand the post-reunification Cameroonian society that is composed of two major factions as presented in the plays. On the one hand we have the leaders who enjoy all the rights and oppress the downtrodden who are not recognized as citizens and thus only given odd jobs. Besong alludes to the way Anglophones are given minor positions in the highly centralised Francophone dominated country.

From the beginning of the play *Family Saga*, the tension and conflict that exist between the two major linguistic entities in Cameroon are demonstrated by the disagreement between the two major characters, Kamalo and Kamala. But Butake converts this disagreement into an issue that needs to be debated on in order to find a negotiated solution. Butake’s dramatic structure here is opposed to the idea of separation of the two Cameroons as is the case with Besong. At the time of publication of these plays, there were pressure groups in Cameroon that were claiming for separation. According to Ambanasom (2004), the first ever All Anglophone Conferences took place in Buea and Bamenda. The Anglophones crystallized their grievances against the Francophones and enshrined them in the *Buea and Bamenda Declarations*, both of which threaten to separate the English-speaking section of Cameroon as an independent state if certain conditions are not fulfilled.

After examining the shortcomings of colonial and tribal boundaries that brought divisions and tensions among the different groups that constituted the Cameroonian nation state after independence, Bole Butake has tried to imagine new borders for the communities – borders not based on physical or geographical, real or imagined landmarks but on communal values such as solidarity, sacrifice, compromise, hybridity, national consciousness and above all, the will to live together as only Cameroonians.

Most of Butake’s plays have the purpose of going back to history not to assign blame but rather to offer opportunity for reconciliation and renovation: “Nothing can be hidden from the face of the sun!/History can never be changed or forgotten (*Family Saga*, 82).” For him history is therefore only important for remembrance. It has to be remembered simply as a starting point for something new, hence the project of nation building or the relocation of colonial borders. In this sense *Family Saga* can be read as a spectacle designed to remind citizens of the chronic dishonesty and abuse of power which colonialism had bred in generations of native politicians in Africa. *Family Saga* inevitably, Odhiambo (2009b: 3) would argue, invites a close attention to that whole world-view, which encompasses, in a historical sense, his (Butake’s) dramatic imagery and the allegorical figurations in *Family Saga*. Odhiambo observes that:

historically, Cameroon initially was an estate of Germany, then known as German Cameroon. In the post-World War I period, its identity was to

change radically, when it was partitioned arbitrarily and shared disproportionately between the new imperial masters, Britain and France. This resulted in the formation of two entities: an Anglophone minority and a Francophone majority. The two distinct entities, differentially defined by their respective masters' tongue, operated unilaterally until the signing of the accord of reunification, which would later face severe difficulties given the very different cultural ideologies and heritage(s) that each had been bequeathed by the respective colonial master.

It is in this historical background that the question of nationhood/nation-ess within the confines of "Anglophone Problem" can be well approached. Butake uses the allegory of nationhood through a historical myth that engages his characters in delving into old historical narratives that define Cameroon as a nation as was demonstrated above. After a long trajectory of discoveries (of bad experiences and wrongdoings) and self-examination (both at the individual and collective levels), the past enables for the characters to reach some agreements which will produce a promising future.

As demonstrated in chapter two above, the historical and mythical presentation of the "Problematic nation" enables Butake to celebrate the Cameroonian oneness and unity that has been a core value since time immemorial. It is this unity that can liberate Cameroon from its crippling legacy of French and British imperialism. Butake's new borders are based on an imagined union in brotherhood. In fact, it may not be a biological brotherhood of the kind but a union that recognizes the differences. Stage direction of the first movement of the play *Family Saga* is the playwright's presentation of the differences of the two "brothers". It is a presentation that highlights the fact that the two are not one and the same, morphologically and biologically:

Kamalo, tall and fat and wearing a three piece suit, is laughing in an easy chair drinking and smoking and listening to a Bikutsi tune which is very loud. Kamala, a diminutive man in a workaday jumper, enters from backstage. He is thoroughly angry. He turns down the volume of the music

The idea of difference between the so-called brothers already comes out clearly from the beginning of the play. It is emphasized on and proved to be true when the two brothers agree on a search of their identity to prove whether they are truly brothers. Their physiological appearance indicates that the two are not the same. While Kamalo is tall, fat and wealthy; Kamala is a too small man who, because of his being exploited, cannot even entre in the shared estate from the front. He appears from the backstage to express his anger and hunger to Kamalo:

KAMALA: Kamalo why are you so greedy? What happened to my share of the provisions? Why can't you ever be considerate. How many times must I remind you that there are two people living on this estate?

KAMALO: Papa came.

KAMALA: Which papa? You think you are the only one with a papa? Why must your father pest us every time and always taking what belongs to me? And you won't even sweep out the barn and repair the shelves in readiness for the next harvest. (8)

Kamala and Kamalo may be presented as "twin brothers" but they are conscious of the fact that they have different fathers. What annoys Kamala much is that Kamalo is lazy yet his father still comes to empty the barn that the former has filled. At this juncture, Butake

wants us to link the present post-reunification in Cameroon with the colonial experiences. The obvious differences between the two brothers metaphorically represent the geographical boundaries drawn by colonialism in Cameroon where we have one for Anglophones and the other for Francophones (though as the play progresses we come to discover that none of these is bearing any sustainable historical and mythical justification). The research motif as a tool to discover the relation between the two “brothers” has the end result that the obvious differences are merely constructed. These can be effaced not physically but in the people’s imagination through elements of brotherhood— tolerance, selflessness and invention. But for this to be successful it entails the agencies of sacrifice and will— Kamalo has to accept the “force of argument” and not “the argument of force”. The celebration in a form of communal performance of the result of the investigation plunges the whole family into a “liminal” area of experience - a courageous act that aims at changing the patriarch Kamalo and perhaps redeems mankind. By writing a history of the Cameroon as a full community Butake is in part involved in forging the two Cameroons into one nation. Such a project requires outside the political sphere, implanting the idea of nationhood in the citizens of the different regions. According to Gellner (1984: 168), nationalism is not the awakening of nations to consciousness but rather it invents nations where they do not exist. His idea is that the concept of nation should precede the fact of nation. Such a formulation is promising for the project behind *Family Saga*. It indicates that Butake’s fusion of different histories into one federated history could indeed be a precursor to nationhood. [Seton-Watson](#) (1977: 5) on his part remarks that “a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they have formed one”. In relation to the play then Seton-Watson’s idea means that if all that is wanted to form a nation is an idea and the people to accept it, then there would seem to be nothing preventing the formation of the Cameroonian nation as imagined by Butake. Using elements of poetry, music, dance, songs, narrative, mime and influences of Western and local folk traditions; but undergirding them with personal experiences Butake tries to weave new ties of brotherhood in Cameroon as a response to the tragic happenings of the past and their effects in the present.

The problems of identity within the modern Cameroon nation-state and its persistence are a concern of Bole Butake and Bate Besong in their dramaturgies. They make a particularly strong case in affirming the existentiality of an Anglophone identity crisis in Cameroon because there has always been denial by successive Francophone regimes of an Anglophone identity (with the subsequent problem). Here it is important to remind us that in Cameroon the concept Anglophone is on the one hand mainly political. On the other hand it is more ethnic, cultural and regional than simply linguistic. With the current sociolinguistic and political state of the country which makes a primary distinction between Anglophone and Francophone parts, the attachment to English and French languages as icons of linguistic identity is always made prominent. But more so, being Anglophone (or Francophone) in Cameroon becomes so close to having another ethnic identity as observed by Wolf (2001: 223); “the feeling of unity is so strong that ‘being Anglophone’ denotes a new ethnicity, transcending older ethnic ties.”

In the two plays under study, the distant past is made alive to suggest a better future for the Anglophone Cameroonian community. Through the myth of origin Butake in *Family Saga* retells the past by applying modern historical thinking in the guise of common sense to a mythical, non-historical tale. At the end of the play, Kamalo in acknowledging his unforgivable mistakes, makes this pronouncement: “Nothing can be hidden from the face of the sun! /History can never be changed or forgotten. The truth has at last come out!” (82) This truth is the discovery of the true origin and identity of the two brothers, Kamalo and Kamala. Before the self-discovery research Kamala and his children conducted

about “Who they are”, their identity was not known and if so, was often misinterpreted. Thus the exploration into the mythic past enables them to understand the present state of their true identity.

At the beginning of the play Kamalo and Kamala seem to be unaware or too detached from their historical background. That is why the playwright deliberately allows them first to reconstruct their past while projecting them in the future which, in a sense is a transformation of the present. For many postcolonial African dramatists, the past is the mirror of the present. A case in point is [Francis Imbuga](#) (1976: 65) whose protagonist, Jusper, lamented his dismal life in these words: “We have no future until we see it in the past. That is the only time we may know we once had a future”. Like Jusper, Kamala’s present had to be destroyed and replaced by an imagined future which was created in the image of the past. Structurally, this is made possible by the movement of the play from the timelessness characteristic of myths to the contemporariness of the myth in the play:

“Once upon a recent time, in the land of Kamanda, the people woke up from their peaceful sleep with a jolt because a loud rumbling coming from the direction of Mount Kamanda. [...]Never before had the people set eyes on a woman on such exceptional beauty and wealth. Never before had their forebears shown such concern for them by sending a goddess in the form of this exceptional woman of beauty and wealth as witness of their love and concern for the well being of their living. (76).”

To project the future of the nation in building, Butake reinterprets first the past, a past which is brought closer to the present by the use of the time expression “once upon a recent time”. That expression—and not the common “once upon a time”—is deliberately used by the playwright to suit his purpose of reconciling the past with the present in order to project the future. The “exceptional beauty and wealth” that the story-teller refers to is the physical and cultural beauty and wealth of Cameroon before the advent of colonialism. In fact, being a coastal country it is reported to have many minerals which attracted the colonialists.

Besong lays his emphasis on the post-colonial administrative and political elite’s failure to satisfy the desires of their people. Later on his satire targets the Anglophones who had allowed themselves to become doormats and docile servitors all in a bid to secure an anonymous and ceremonial government appointment. This is the case of Chef Otshama Lazare in *Beast of no Nation* who used to be one of the night-soil men and gets promoted to a higher position in the government. Therefore, Otshama is presented as an Anglophone Cameroonian “bridegroom” who was conquered by the Francophone government. Besong refers to such behaviours as they were frequent during the post-reunification period where impatient Anglophones changed camp and political ideology to collaborate with the Francophone regime. When Otshama’s fellow night-soil men started claiming for their professional identity cards, he furiously scorns their request:

CRIPPLE: They want their identity cards

OTSHAMA: (*dramatic*) What is a professional card, eh? What is a mere piece of paper?

NARRATOR: Had Aadingingin’s appetite been smaller, the whole history of Ednouay would have been different. (*pause*) The priesthood profaned. The ark of God take.

OTSHAMA: Comrade Aadingingin makes no mistakes.

NARRATOR: The comrade mayor-in-thievery who makes no mistake does not usually do anything.

OTSHAMA: You’ll be strangled in six stages with a noose of thin wire in Yoko. (134-135)

Otshama, a former night-soil man, is quickly transformed into a faithful messenger of the oppressor for whom he is at any cost ready to die. He has easily ignored his past and wants to remain to power because his present is not delightful. So he fawningly changes into a loyal servant to his Master: “As you please, Your Eminence. I shall do exactly as Your Highness commands. To the last iota. (140)” He now turns back to his former fellow night-soil men. In fact, through Otshama, Besong is critical of the post-reunification political confusion in Anglophone Cameroon when some intellectuals who were afraid of the regime’s oppression looked for refuge in the same government as a way of protecting themselves and their own interests. Earlier in the play, the Narrator, the authorial voice, had warned the night-soil men of their passive spirit as it appears in the conversation between the Narrator and the Night-Soil men:

THIRD: We’ve got a job
NARRATOR: What kind of job?
THIRD: We are night-soil men, aren’t we?
NARRATOR: Are you serious?
THIRD: Of course, I am.
NARRATOR: You may say you are not bitten by a serpent, neither are you sick of the crisis nor do you lack anything. Let me put to you that S.A.P has already bitten you, and you have no future; you are ready to die. (93)

The Night-Soil men’s past and present situation give them no hope for a better future. It is important here to notice that Besong’s references to the night-soil’s men hopelessness opens up a room for the reader to peep into the post-reunification period where history is made manifest.

The essence of Butake’s plays is the unraveling of his sad life story and his expression of a need to belong to an environment of peace and mutual understanding. In his keynote address to the opening of the second conference on Critical Perspectives on Cameroonian Writing at the University of Buea, Butake starts his speech by this remark: “I will begin my discourse by showing proof that I know who I am” (19). I do agree that a writer’s identity must be sought in his/her writing. Then Butake’s works could rightfully be viewed as a dramatic exploration of the nature of the self. His plays in particular reflect national elements which influenced the relationship between Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon. But the question of “Who I am” is instrumental in the playwright’s construction of characters in that he frequently manipulates their roles to project aspects of Anglophone Cameroonians’ life and their ideals. His fashioning of an ideal identity for himself needed to be done to re-examine the identity crisis in his work. The strong affinity that he has with the characters he creates emerges in his efforts to depict an ideal world of existence, a ‘universe seen through the eyes of small, individual life dramas’ as Head (1990: 77) would call it.

I admit with Butake’s dramatic imaginary and how he presents characters who reflect their own ‘life dramas’. In effect in his quest for his identity in a majority Francophone dominated nation-state, Butake’s plays reflect the identity crisis in Cameroon but also personal and internal tribal tensions as a member of the Noni tribe, which is the minority in the Bui Division where he was born (for more details see Butake, 1996). Though a minority tribe, Butake reveals further that “Noni people never hesitated to proclaim their separate identity and even went as far as submitting a memorandum to the United Nations Organisation in New York” (19). However, Butake’s characters in most of his plays embody but the same attitudes as his immediate people of his native village, Bui. Indeed, Kamala and Kamalo in *Family Saga* seek for a unified family.

However, unlike Butake, Besong is concerned with the lost Anglophone identity. To regain it he chooses to use revolutionary characters that mimic the past with an aim to understand the post-reunification Cameroonian state of political affairs. Many of his characters and events to which he refers to, come to life in the world of the plays. This world itself, the ‘creative setting’ is complete and vital enough to contain fast actions of the plays and show them in fast perspectives. At the outset of the play *Beasts of no Nation*, the playwright only engages the Night-soil men and the Narrator in a kind of discussion about their unknown fate. In the progression of events and scenes the Night-soil men keep on making reference to their past and future (which is not mediated by the present) until it is revealed about their awaiting fate by Lazarus Otchama. Such a form of time in which they experience a most improbable number of adventures, and eventually the time of Otchama’s ascension and downfall, is not measured off in the play which does not add up; it is simply days, nights, hours, and moments clocked in a technical sense within the limits of each separate happenings. In the particular play, Besong attempts to sum up the long and hard history of Cameroon into a really short time period, which he magnifies with radical attitudes about the union between the two Cameroons. The curious “philosophy of history” has the effect of handing over the settling of the different historical experiences that the Anglophones have lived in with reference to real time sequences. The title of the play (*Beasts of no Nation*) prepares the reader to understand that the men are not to live long, and that they are only beasts who belong nowhere.

Butake and Besong’s plays reflect a ‘quest for identity’, an identity that is free from the colonial and neo-colonial oppression; an identity that is achieved by breaking away from the values and norms of the Francophone dominant culture. Such development towards self-realization and self-assertion towards Anglophones realities is called, in Ngugi’s words, a process of “decolonising the mind” towards a sense of self-worth. However, in trying to do so Butake thrives to create dubious and controversial characters that belong to an Anglophone identity but more often than not transcend the barriers imposed by their tribal and ethnic confinements as was discussed in the previous section. Therefore, in pursuing this quest, the playwrights employ melodramatic forms as vehicle for exploring the self. Watts (1989: 114 points to a:

[writer’s] means to find a balance between [himself) and the outside world and investigate tensions between subjective and objective that orders our whole life....through wrestling with images of [his] past life and resolving [his] relation to the self that exists at the time of writing, [the writer] is able to search out and assess [his] inner standing and thereby come to terms with reality.

Watts here makes two important points: that finding a ‘balance between one’s subjectivity and objectivity’ is fundamental to the process of identity. In trying to find this balance Butake and Besong use a methodology that enables the characters to rebuild or reconstruct their denied identity. The literary orientation in these plays sprouts from their close scrutiny and consideration of the present identity conflict between the Anglophones and the Francophones in the post-reunification Cameroon.

Bole Butake’s *Family Saga* and Bate Besong’s *Beasts of no Nation* are post-colonial Anglophone Cameroonian dramatic engagements with national and identity politics in the evolution of Cameroon. They are critical interventions or commentaries on that identity evolution and are more importantly concerned with how external dynamics imposed by the European colonization have introduced new identity concepts in the process of Cameroonian historical reconstruction. The linguistic identities create a classification of groups in dichotomous terms of superiority and inferiority and thus blur the very concept of nationhood. The multilingual nature of Cameroon (although officially termed and

treated as bilingual in French and English) and its corresponding multiethnic complexity (with over two hundred and fifty identified ethnic groups) fuel the constant confusion that the ideal Cameroonian goes through as to where to lay the pledge of his identity. Of course in the building of a given identity, the linguistic component is of vital importance because as Giles and Coupland (1991: 107) postulate; culture, for instance, “could be viewed as derived from, if not constituted in, communication and language practices”. On such a platform, therefore, where should the Cameroonian identify himself/herself? With the foreign English or French languages? With his/her native language or with both? These questions are of great importance to the understanding of the identity question in Cameroon since its independence. It is perhaps in this perspective that the playwrights had initiated new paradigms from which the “imagined” Cameroonian nation is idealised. In a sense, the playwrights, to some greater or lesser extent forward some hope of accurately reinterpreting the complex images of this nation, and in that process they offer a realistic picture of the contemporary Cameroonian identity crisis.

In conclusion, this paper aimed at analysing how Bole Butake and Bate Besong imagine and represent the Cameroonian nation within the possibilities offered by dramatic art form. In the course of this discussion, I showed that on the one hand the Cameroonian “Anglophone Problem” takes roots in the colonial enterprise that scrambled the once united Cameroon nation. On the other hand, it had been proven that, in the plays under study, colonialism cannot constitute a justification of the present identity and leadership crises in Cameroon. Through the vehicles of memory and imagination Bole Butake and Bate Besong attempt to revisit and reconstruct the histories of their “imagined communities” but which in a general sense reflected the experiences of Cameroon nation building crises. Using elements of myth and history, but supporting them with personal experiences, Butake tries to weave new ties of identities in Cameroon as a response to the tragic happenings of the past and their effects in the present. The two playwrights indict colonialism and independence nationalists as responsible for present day identity and leadership crises in Cameroon. More often than not, in their attempt to creating characters who were the makers of their own histories, Butake and Besong confronted the subjects and the worlds that had produced them. Indeed, Bole Butake and Bate Besong manifest a desire to articulate the standpoint of the downtrodden and to enable the “subaltern to speak”. The subjects are empowered in fighting for their rights, engaging negotiations and dynamics of power and resistance.

REFERENCES

- Ambanasom, S. A. (2005). Book Review. *The Post No* 0639: 8.
- (1994). *Education of the Deprived: A Study of Five Anglophone Cameroon Plays* Buea: GRIAD.
- Ambe, H., (2007). *Change Aesthetics in Anglophone Cameroon Drama & Theatre*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 83.
- Anderson, B., (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Revised edition. London: Verso.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths G., & Tiffin H. (1995). *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. (First edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group: London.
- Besong, B. (1990). *Beasts of no Nation* Limbe: Nooremac.
- Butake, B. (1996). Writer as Visionary. *Epasa Moto: Critical Perspectives on Cameroon Writing*. 1.3, 19-26.
- (2005). *Family Saga*. Yaoundé: Editions CLÉ.
- Cochran, E.C. (2002). Joseph and the politics of memory. *The Review of Politics* 64.
- Gellner, E., (1984). *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basic Blackwell.
- Giles, H., & Coupland, N. (1991). *Communication Accommodation Theory*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Gilroy, P. (1993). *The black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Head, B., (1990). *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Imbuga, F., (1976). *Betrayal in the City*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Loomba, A. (1990). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Nkengasong, J. N. (2012). Interrogating the union: Anglophone Cameroon poetry in the postcolonial matrix. *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48:1, 51-64, accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.03:51> on 25 February 2015 from 2010.542068
- Odhiambo, C.J. (2009b). Whose Nation? Romanticizing the Vision of a Nation in Bole Butake's *Betrothal without Libation* and *Family Saga* In *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 40 No. 2, 159-172.
- Odhiambo, C.J., & Naomi E. N., (2008). On the Margins of Orthodox and Applied Theatre: Memory, Expiation and Healing in Bole Butake's Play, *Family Saga*. *Applied Theatre Researcher/IDEA Journal*, No. 9, 1-12
- Odhiambo, C., J., (2009). Whose Nation? Romanticizing the Vision of a Nation in Bole Butake's *Betrothal without Libation* and *Family Saga* In *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 40 No. 2, 159-172.
- Pakenham, T., (1991). *The Scramble for Africa*. London: Abacus.
- Renan, E., (1990). What is a Nation? In *Nation and Narration*. (Ed.) Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 8-22.
- Richards, D., (2010). *Framing Identities* In Chew Shirley and Richards David (Eds.) *A Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature*. London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Simatei, P., T., (2001). *The Novel and the Politics of Nation Building in East Africa* Bayreuth: Bayreuth African Studies, 55.
- Watts, J., (1989). *Black Writers from South Africa*. London: Macmillan.
- Wolf, H. G., (2001). *English in Cameroon*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.