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René Philombe and National Consciousness

National unity is problematic in poverty-ridden African countries driven by ethnic and fratricidal conflicts. This fact explains why national consciousness and social consciousness are recurrent and topical themes in African literatures in general and in Cameroon literature in particular. The nineteen-sixties, years of political independence for many African countries marked a turning point in the former colonies' quest and fashioning of cultural identities. National literatures were utilized to circumscribe the borders of the nascent nations. To spur nationalism in Cameroon and in many other African nations, poetry helped create national anthems that remind the people of their ancestors' achievements, sufferings and sacrifices.² Many Cameroonian writers resorted to the *devoir de mémoire* (write to remember) to back the common ideal imagined nation, *the cradle of [their] ancestors*, and *the land of promise and glory* that was shaped by the national anthem. Joining his counterparts, Philombe chastised the colonial period and its evils at the same time he recalled the glories of the pre-colonial Cameroonian society to raise national consciousness.³ Yet the imagined nation that was couched in the national anthem did not come true as the post independence years became disillusionment for the majority of the citizens. National consciousness, which should have been in Fanon's terms "the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people" became a sham (*The Wretched of the Earth* 148).

As political independence came along with its own ills, embezzlement of public funds, autocracy, corruption, tribalism and violation of human rights, there was a need for the Cameroonian writer to re-imagine and rewrite the nation. Philombe hence holds that in a

². In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson posits that there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests above all in the form of poetry and songs (132).

³. Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba*, and Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* were published in 1956 while *Une vie de boy* was published in 1960.

multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and bilingual country like Cameroon, safeguarding national unity is one of the country's first priorities. To achieve this task the ruler and the ruled have to tussle with ethnic quibbles, corruption, embezzlement of public funds, poverty and other social ills.⁴ When Philombe asserts that "a cultural revolution is the best revolution one can undertake for the society" ("La Vie et l'œuvre de René Philombe" 30) he means that the writer, like the politician, should involve in the struggle that aims at building viable political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, prime guarantors of national unity. This cultural revolution is informed by Partha Chatterjee's *print literacy and nationalism* and Frantz Fanon's definitions of national literature and national consciousness. In "Nationalism as a Problem," Partha Chatterjee argues that *print literacy* is instrumental in building national consciousness because *print language* creates *unified fields of exchange and communication* (*The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 164). Like Chatterjee, Philombe firmly believes that *print literacy* is the prime mover of a cultural revolution; he views the school, teachers, literate men, writers and scholars as *avant-gardes* of this revolution.

The creation of the APEC (Association des poètes et écrivains camerounais / Cameroonian Poets and Writers' Association), the setting up of Semences Africaines (a small printing house) and the publication of literary journals such as *Abbia* and *Cameroun Littéraire*, make Philombe rank among the pioneers of Cameroon literature. In "René Philombe, une institution littéraire en peril," Ambroise Kom notes that Philombe has been the most unfortunate among all the Cameroonian writers, yet he is the one who devoted himself outright to building a viable national literature in his country (*Europe* 139). Kom's argument certainly alludes to the numerous cultural initiatives that Philombe took to promote the birth and development of a national literature that Fanon defines thus:

While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature. Here there is at the level of literary creation, the

4. French and English are official languages in Cameroon.

taking up and clarification of themes which are typically nationalist. This may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat because it molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space. (*The Wretched* 239-40)

In other words, national narratives should raise both national consciousness and social consciousness. It's the people's demand for social equity, food, shelter, clothing, education, and other amenities that molds their national consciousness. A national literature thus stems from a people's past yet it concerns itself more with the people's present living conditions. *Addressing one's own people, molding the national consciousness, and assuming responsibility* are three cardinal points of Fanon's definition that underlie my analysis as they lead to the following questions: Do Philombe's works address the Cameroonian people? Do they mold national consciousness? How do they assume responsibility?

Using *print language*, Philombe, raises national consciousness and social awareness. His works *Choc anti-choc* (1961) and *Bedi Ngula : l'ancien maquisard* (2002) examine his country's politics, economics, and culture. They chastise social inequity, ignorance, acquisitiveness, autocracy, corruption and lack of compassion. These ills are what the author terms "iron balls that hinder the progress of African nations in general, and Cameroon in particular" (*Tales from Cameroon* 62).

Although the aforementioned texts have received less critical attention than Philombe's short stories and his novel *Un sorcier blanc à Zangali*, they, more than the latter, bring out the intricate link between national writings, national consciousness and social consciousness. They equally represent two literary genres (poetry and prose fiction) that the author uses as tools of persuasion. Philombe's poetry, even if it raises national consciousness, may prima vista sound personal as it narrates the poet's own experiences through the recurrent first-person narration. As the poetic language may appear esoteric to the masses in the process of sensitisation, Philombe amply exploits the novel's flexibility. As an aesthetic form, the novel is "a

concretely historical narrative shaped by the real history of real nations” (*Culture and Imperialism* 77). In other words, this genre recaptures the past while it gives an insight into the real lives of the people at “a particular stage of [their] history.” As Ngugi wa Thiong'o points out, the analytical and synthetic nature of the novel ensures its aptness to give an “insight into the moving spirit of an era” (*Writers in Politics* 68). Like Mongo Beti and Ezekiel Mphahlele, Philombe contends that African writings should be “a realism which includes poverty, sickness, class-consciousness, the black man’s inhumanity to those of his color” (*African Literature, African Critics* 81).

The African writer should, if need be, voice and equally oppugn the rulers’ and the masses’ ideologies. Philombe’s writings voice and critique both the former and present Cameroonian rulers’ ideologies and the masses’ counter-ideologies. They revisit the Cameroonian nation from the colonial period to the post independence period and endeavor to bridge the gulf between the rulers’ discourses and the masses’ counter-discourses. In his introduction to *Tales from Cameroon*, Richard Bjornson explains this option:

Like Achebe and Ngugi, he [Philombe] no longer regards the traditional anti-colonialist struggle as the most fruitful theme for contemporary African literature. To be sure, he recognizes to overcome the legacy of colonialism, and he remains willing to draw his subject matter from the colonialist era, but his real concern is with the present social structure and the attitudes engendered by it. This new emphasis in his work derives from his own experiences of injustice. (13)

In effect Philombe, the man, the political activist and cultural militant experienced social injustice. Although he is today internationally acclaimed as one of the pioneers of Cameroonian literature, he did not reap the laurels he expected from his literary career. His radical stance that characterizes his poetry, prose fiction and drama earned him a lot of suffering and frustration (*Présence Francophone* 155). Cameroonian administrative and political milieus viewed him as an *agent provocateur*. So branded, he faced the bitter realities of the Cameroonian prisons of the 1960s and 1970s. Confronted with hardships very early in life until his death on 25 October 2001, Philombe lived like an outcast in his society. However, the status of

a social pariah strengthened this populist writer's belief in the power of his pen to reform his society. Adopting social criticism, he used *print literacy* to arouse both national consciousness and social awareness.

Choc anti-choc, a collection of nine poems, was written during Philombe's imprisonment. These poems voice their author's anger and revolt against the inhuman treatment that police used to inflict on prisoners in the Cameroonian prisons of the 1960s. In this collection, the writer revisits the past, the Cameroonian fight for independence and the sufferings that people endured during this period. As Ernest Renan points out, "where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort" (*Nation and Narration* 19). Retrieving the *griefs* incurred during the fight for independence, the following poems solidly build national memories and national consciousness.

"Dédicace," the first poem, is a warning to the oppressors who perpetrate deeds that debase men and women. It brings them to awareness by urging them to eradicate past crimes in order to build a better society for posterity. The chalice-like poem offered to mankind is reminiscent of suffering caused by ignorance. As he retrieves the painful past, the poet raises consciousness and stirs the masses to a revolutionary change. This poem initiates a dialogue between Philombe and his people. He is deeply concerned with the progress of his country which he links to the evolution of its history. The country's painful past should be the springboard that permits a leap into the future. This poem recalls the crimes committed in the past in a bid to jar on people's conscience: "afin que l'humanité toute entière, / se regardant dans le miroir du passé, ait honte des / crimes qu'elle a commis à son / propre préjudice" ("So that mankind, / looking at the / mirror of the past, be ashamed of the crimes it committed to its own prejudice" (7)).⁵ These crimes are fratricidal fights, dictatorship, corruption, and embezzlement of public funds, degrading practices that mar the progress of young nations. It is therefore imperious to eradicate these evils in order to set the foundations of a better nation that the revolutionaries seek in the next poem.

The revolutionaries in "L'hymne des révolutionnaires," replicate Philombe's political militancy. Their fight aims at modeling a

⁵. All translations mine.

more promising future as the persona notes: “Nous sommes les élus d’une aube salutaire. / We are the elect of a salutary dawn”(9). The revolutionaries, as their name implies, are involved in a forward thrust and their irreversible journey towards the future evidences their dream of a better nation.

“Cantilène à un chat,” like the other poems, lambastes the policemen’s nebulous sight. The search for political tracts in the poet’s residence reveals the policemen’s ignorance and inhumanity. They tear mattresses, books and beds that display nothing but their owners’ misery. The poet’s articles do not yield the political tracts because the reasons for such an investigation are rumors and prejudices. As a member of the UPC party,⁶ the poet is as a matter of fact branded a terrorist, a coup mastermind dangerous to the political authorities. The armed men’s inhumane comportment in front of so much suffering, is a sign of short vision. Their authority oriented towards a fruitless goal (*infructueuse battue / a fruitless search*), stands alongside the borders of stupidity. This leads to the puzzling title of the next poem “*Mais pourquoi ?*” This is an unanswered question that hangs out of the bounds of the prisoner’s understanding. He has been sentenced to imprisonment without trial: neither he, nor his aggressors can explain the injunction against him. The policemen’s dumbness is characteristic of their spiritual emptiness, as they have bartered their human feelings for the mechanic power of executioner. Their blatant action is geared to demonic results visible in “*Le chant du maquisard.*”

“*Le chant du maquisard*” is a lament for a country torn by fratricidal fights. The spatio-temporal setting is the eve of Cameroon independence. The colonial army mercilessly decimates the UPC nationalists. Enrolled in a dubious battle, the Upecists find refuge in the bush, a battlefield sprinkled with Cameroonians’ blood. The poet’s exclamation: “*Ce Cameroun en deuil, je l’admire et le plains !*” (That Cameroon in mourning, I admire and pity it!) (17) reveals his indignation and contempt for the soldiers. The latter’s satanic power only breeds corpses, tears and funerals. The poem is a memory of the UPC leaders’ (Um Nyobe’s and Moumie’s) commitment to the building of the Cameroonian nation.

⁶ UPC: Cameroon People’s Union: The main Marxist political party in Cameroon before the country’s independence.

In “Le coeur d’un pendu” the poet, the consciousness raiser, enlightens the myopic dictator and the passive masses. Having engraved terror on the heart and mind of the oppressed, the dictator’s phantasmal invincibility restricts his outlook. It impedes his accurate evaluation of the enemy’s strength. The docile detainees who queue up to be sent to the gallows are as oblivious of their power as the passive masses that cannot unite their efforts against the executioners. Philombe, the only clairvoyant victim, thrusts his heart into the crowd. “Le cœur d’un pendu” presents two types of characters: the executioner and the victim (Philombe). The latter, a visionary, sees a new light that he communicates to the former. In this poem, the man who thrusts his heart is the social critic who rewrites the history of his country. He envisages a new social order where the oppressed and the humiliated regain dignity and authority. By aiding the masses to see the victimizer’s vulnerability, he makes them envision a possible change in “Vision.” The persona in the last poem celebrates those who surmount the hurdles of the past to attain economic, intellectual, moral and spiritual growth, an indispensable asset to the nation’s progress.

“Vision” moulds an imagined paradise from a bitter reality characterized by imprisonment and social inequalities. In this paradise built through bloodshed, children are given food, freedom and peace. This vision of a better Cameroon proceeds in “In Memoriam” which crowns with laurels the martyrs of Cameroon independence. Yet the gift so dearly bought does not materialize the paradisiacal vision. In *Choc anti-choc*, the author sounds a warning against military men who encroach on their citizens’ freedom and civil rights. *Choc anti-choc* admonishes the victors and victims of Cameroon independence to forget painful memories in order to fashion a nation. Renan holds that “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (*Nation and Narration* 11). Among the things that Cameroonians should forget rank heinous political and ethnic rivalries that lead to egocentrism, autocracy, and civil wars which are harbingers of the nation’s death as they symbolize division and enmity. To forget these ills, the rulers and the ruled must change their backward mentalities, a point Philombe reiterates in his posthumously published novel.

While *Choc anti-choc* recaptures Cameroon's colonial past and fight for independence, *Bedi Ngula: l'ancien maquisard* addresses the nation's post independence leaders and administrators. In these two texts, the writer shows that bad leadership is an impediment to national unity. At this point, I will answer the question about the responsibility of Philombe's writings. Quoting Noam Chomsky, Ambroise Kom posits that "The responsibility of the writer as a moral agent is to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them (*Research in African Literatures* 43). Chomsky's *matters of human significance* certainly refer to all the political, economic, social, and cultural issues that influence men's and women's existence and essence. As for the *audience*, the latter includes politicians, economic agents, the armed forces, educationists, the masses, in brief, the whole society that has the responsibility to monitor the *crystallization* of national consciousness. From Kom's statement, it appears clear that Philombe's works are responsible to his society. They replicate Fanon's contention:

The battle line against hunger, against ignorance, against poverty, and against unawareness ought to be ever present in the muscles and the intelligences of men and women. (*The Wretched* 203)

Philombe's writings, as proven in his posthumous novel, are committed to the fight *against hunger, ignorance, poverty, and unawareness*. *Bedi Ngula: l'ancien maquisard*, completed in 1978 and posthumously published in 2002, is set in post independence Cameroon. The country has just acceded to independence and most members of the UPC are systematically accused of subversion and taken to jail. Bedi Ngula, an ex UPC freedom fighter, once released from prison, is caught in the snares of a stratagem orchestrated by Kungu, the village chief, Engogomo, the Sub Divisional Officer, and the parliamentarian Assumu. To assert his people's freedom, Bedi assassinates Engogomo and is re-incarcerated. This novel tackles the problem of leadership because the *crystallization* of national consciousness necessitates good leaders who, as Fanon rightly points out, must "give back their dignity to all citizens, fill their minds and feast their eyes with human things" (*The Wretched* 205). Philombe, to paraphrase Chinua Achebe, asserts that *the trouble with* Cameroon today is a failure of leadership. Leaders, as defined by Chinua Achebe "are role models. People look up to them and copy their actions, behavior

and even mannerisms” (*The Trouble with Nigeria* 31). In *L’ancien maquisard*, Kungu, Engogomo, and the parliamentarian Assumu are bad *role models*. They are a prolongation of the pre-colonial and colonial order that rationalizes slavery and oppression as a basis of societal hierarchy and economic prosperity. Historical evolution therefore means a threat to their authority. They represent anti-democratic neo-colonialists that undermine the progress of their society. They dance on the backs of their compatriots, the same dance the white colonists used to dance.

These reactionaries are fictional representations of corrupt leaders, administrators, clerks and prison warders that Philombe encountered in Cameroon jails and public service “Son Excellence Maguida ... Un géant de l’histoire africaine, cet enfant venu du nord” “(His Excellency Maguida ... A giant of African history, that child from the North)” (*L’ancien maquisard* 287) is a covert reference to Ahmadou Ahidjo, the first President of Cameroon. This reference also stands as a metaphoric representation of post independence African leaders. The Cameroonian postcolonial leaders, perpetrating the same rapacity as their colonial counterparts occasion victimization. In Cameroon, the end of colonization means different things to the rulers and their people. For the former, it is the opportunity to substitute for the colonial masters and to acquire wealth while for the people, independence means barrenness, suffering and misery. The novel specifically points at the difference that exists between African leaders, twentieth century Croesus, and the great masses of hungry people that surround them. Independence, opening a big gulf between the two groups, generates all sorts of evils among which illicit enrichment and corruption rank first.

Illicit enrichment establishes corruption as a legal practice in the public service. Mekinda, a young man, is recruited in the public service only after he has bribed the boss. After his recruitment, he is very swift to adopt corruption. His salary of CFAF 25,000 is multiplied tenfold by the numerous envelopes (bribes) that he collects as *ex officio* rights from small traders before he processes their market license documents. The high cost of living in Yaounde encourages the practice of bribery as the government’s demagogic method of announcing every minor increase in salary sharpens the traders’ appetite for bigger profits. Yaounde, the headquarters of political and

administrative institutions, is not only a jungle where the strong prey on the weak, it is also the enemy of the village. The political and administrative authorities' exaction on the villagers humiliates the latter. Kungu, the chief, extorts goats, fish, whisky and money from the village people to feed the town functionaries who have political authority. The traditional chiefs' position maintained and reinforced in Cameroon by the 1977 decree after independence, leads to confusion and exploitation. Officially, the village chief is the middleman between the rural and the central administrations. Yet Kungu does not act as the spokesperson of his people. He is a swaggerer, a predator, and a self-centered leader who wants to be served and is reluctant to serve others. He is flabbergasted and offended when Tsogo Mama reminds him of the duty of a Senior Divisional Officer which is to secure his people's welfare. Kungu's conviction that the subjects owe him everything while he owes them nothing proves him ignorant of his duties. Philombe's concern about the role of traditional chiefs in building national consciousness is in line with the UN Fourth Conference on the Development of Africa held in Addis Ababa in October 2004. Examining the African chiefs' governance and contribution to the development of their countries, Otumbo Tutu II, chief of the Ashantis (Ghana) made it clear that the duty of African traditional chiefs is to guarantee their people's welfare. They should act as trustworthy lawyers and judges (*Le Messager* 3).

In *L'ancien maquisard*, Tsogo Mama, Bebela, and Bedi Ngula echo Otumbo Tutu's message. These new leaders are progressives; they are diametrically opposed to Kungu, Assumu, and Engongomo who demur to the citizens' demand for better living conditions. Unlike Kungu, Bebela, the Senior Divisional Officer who precedes Engongomo, is an exemplum of *good role models*. In his speech and actions, he suggests practical solutions to poverty. As he advises hard work and pride in labor, he also reiterates the laborers' right to their land and the produce that accrues from it. Even if Bebela's reign is short-lived, it teaches the villagers that it is high time to abandon antiquated practices. The Officer's reply to Kungu shows his wish to end the administrators' mania for illicit enrichment:

Non, je le répète, ces pratiques de l'époque coloniale doivent disparaître définitivement. Le gouvernement que je représente ici n'a jamais donné l'ordre de ruiner les paysans à l'occasion d'une tournée of-

ficielle. (No, I repeat, these colonial practices should completely disappear. The government that I represent here has never ordered the administrator to ruin the peasants on the occasion of an official tour. (216)

Bebela's words that condemn rapacious administrators, rehabilitate the government that usually serves as a cover to unscrupulous state agents who, like Kungu, abuse their authority. In Achebe's terms, Bebela is a patriot who *loves his country*, who *is outspoken in condemnation of his people's shortcomings without giving way to superiority, despair or cynicism* (*The Trouble with Nigeria* 15-16). The altruistic Senior Divisional Officer denounces the colonial administrator's obsolescent practice that creates animosity between the village administrator and the administered. Bebela, who understands that his position does not mean a de facto right to the villagers' property, forecasts the birth of a new breed of administrators.

Similar to Bebela, Bedi Ngula is a good leader. He is the replica of Philombe, the political combatant and UPC militant who, after imprisonment, consents to adapt to the new political environment. As he accepts to join his village and national community, Bedi brings hope and encouragement to the frustrated and disillusioned Nkolazomboans. He achieves this *tour de force* thanks to his faith in struggle and progress. The building of houses with corrugated iron sheets is touted in the novel as a means of combating poverty and backward mentalities. If Bedi exhibits the author's political and social engagement, he also symbolizes Philombe, the agricultural worker who never abandoned the farm and his theory that farming, like politics and writing later, requires engagement. Engagement to farm work is therefore implanted in this character even if the peasant's life is unbearable:

Le travailleur des champs, il est vrai, est un soldat non armé, mais il se voit engagé dans un combat inégal et douteux. Combat contre le ciel trop sec ou trop pluvieux. Combat contre la terre trop pauvre ou trop riche. Combat contre les animaux dévastateurs et contre les agents de l'état cupides ou tyranniques. Combat contre la faim et la misère. Combat contre la maladie et les accidents. The farm worker, it is true, is an unarmed soldier, yet he finds himself engaged in an unequal and dubious battle. Battle against the sky which at times is too dry or too

rainy. Battle against the soil at times too poor or too rich. Battle against devastating animals and against covetous and tyrannical state agents. Battle against hunger and misery. Battle against diseases and accidents. (*L'ancien maquisard* 219)

Bedi's description shows the peasant's courage and engagement on the one hand, and on the other hand, it paints a gloomy picture of farm work. This picture betrays demagogical politicians who denominate the farmer the "fonctionnaire de brousse" ("the farm functionary," considering him "le citoyen le plus heureux de la nation" ("the happiest citizen of the nation") (219). Behind this sad portrait looms the specter of famine that belies President Ahidjo's Green revolution touted as social equalizer since it backs the State's slogan "food for all." Bedi substitutes for the social critic; he and Tsogo Mama subvert the tyrannical and exploitative social order where the politician, the administrator, the lawyer and the town functionary typify demagoguery, loot, pilferage, and thuggery.

As a good leader, Bedi acknowledges his duty vis-à-vis his citizens. He preaches through his behavior and actions. To encourage farming in his village, he himself has a farm that serves as a model to the village people. His active participation in the ekaaz (group work) incites even the most phlegmatic villagers to hard work. When he settles in the village, he becomes the defender of the browbeaten. He protects the peasants against Kungu's malevolence and Engongomo's tyranny and arbitrariness. Since Bedi is near the villagers, the latter choose him to be their chief. But Engongomo, the corrupt Senior Divisional Officer who has replaced Bebel, ignores the people's will and appoints Abada whom the masses have not elected. Engongomo's contrivance that deprives the people of their right reminds Bedi of his duty. He has to lead the people to a better society by setting them free from oppression and humiliation. Everything that celebrates injustice is an obstacle he must break. The drums that sound during Abada's installation symbolize neither unity nor peace and harmony. They embody hatred, discord and revenge: their sound is melancholic, odious, acerbic, and murderous (256-57). When Bedi murders Engongomo, he fulfills his duty. He needs to restore the people's hope of a better society where the drums once more celebrate equity, peace and love. His decision is portent of happiness for the Nkolazomboans as it opens Abada's eyes to the duties of a good

leader who ought to *give back their dignity to all citizens*. Bebela and Bedi Ngula are leaders who embed pragmatism, honesty and wisdom. In contrast to the bad rulers, the good leaders reach a level of abnegation that makes them represent not individuals but archetypes. They become symbols of human suffering, moral rectitude, compassion, and wisdom. They seek to build a nation that restores harmony between the ruler and the ruled because this harmonious relationship is a portent of national unity.

This paper has shown the intricate link between national consciousness and social consciousness in Philombe's *Choc anti-choc* and *Bedi Ngula : l'ancien maquisard*. It has demonstrated that Cameroon's national unity is dependent upon the leaders' and the masses' resolve to foster economic and social equity as well as moral and spiritual values. The Cameroonian writer should therefore *assume responsibility* by enlightening, in a realistic manner, his / her audience on the burning political, economic, social and cultural issues that may jeopardize the nation's life and unity.

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