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Language and Action in Kenjo Jumbam's Prose Narratives

From the time Jumbam's novels, *The White Man of God*, *Lukong and the Leopard* and *The White Man of Cattle*¹ were published in the early seventies, they have tended to attract the critical attention of many scholars. Bjornson refers to *The White Man of God* as "the best known post 1972 novel written by an anglophone Cameroonian" and to the two short stories as works that "invite readers to exercise their own independent judgement in drawing conclusions about the relevance of traditional and modern values to life in contemporary Africa" (Bjornson 402).

If these works appeal to readers as well as critics, it is because the authorial aesthetic devices used are captivating and persuasive. The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of Jumbam's narrative technique in his prose, to chart his change and/or development, and to determine the characteristic features of his narrative style.

Any critic who scrutinises *The White Man of God*, *Lukong and the Leopard* and *The White Man of Cattle* will be shocked by their apparent lack of narrative consistency. It is as if the author had set out systematically to flout all the rules handed down by Flaubert, Henry James, and Ford Maddox Ford. Objective narration and its attendant

¹ Both stories are contained in one volume and used in Cameroon secondary schools.

qualities of neutrality, impartiality and *impassibilité* are thrown to the wind, as Jumbam's narrators (and quite often himself) enjoy a bonanza of self-indulgence, interpreting the facts, pronouncing judgements, offering advice and digressing at length on a host of subjects ranging from the trivial to the intellectually sophisticated and abstract. Far from adhering to the convention which requires that a story be told from one point of view, his narrators adopt any stance convenient to their immediate purposes (omniscient author, author participation, author observer, etc.) within the confines of the same literary work. Thus, although familiar with western novelistic techniques, having studied English at Cardiff and Leeds, Jumbam chooses quite consciously to discount them in favour of a more instinctive approach. Maybe, like Francis Bebey, he never investigates the way he tells his stories (Bebey 16). He probably goes ahead and writes them without telling himself that such a thing must be done in this or that way. In doing so, his characteristic polytonality emerges quite clearly.

This insouciance produces a form of expression closely allied to that of the oral folktale as delivered by the traditional Bansoan *conteur*.² An examination of the three texts already mentioned will demonstrate the point and highlight other stylistic devices in Jumbam's literary artistry.

As in Ngongwikuo's *Taboo Love*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and Ngugi's *The River Between*, Jumbam's works are set in the past as part of an attempt to articulate a world view that respects the cultural identity of his own ethnic origin while acknowledging the limitations of traditional behaviour patterns. Jumbam believes that Africans can liberate themselves from outmoded customs by distinguishing between what is life-enhancing in traditional culture and what impedes progress towards an enlightened and equitable society. He views European

² Banso is a complex lexical item made up of the adjectival prefix *Ba* (people of ...) and the root *Nso* (tribal area). A combination of these two elements into Banso means "the people of Nso." In recent years, *Banso* has been used to refer both to the inhabitants and the geographical area of the tribe. To avoid this confusion, Banso will be used in this paper to refer to the inhabitants of the Nso tribal area. *Bansoan conteur*, therefore, refers to a story-teller of Nso origin.

intrusion as a mixed blessing that brings forth injustice and opportunity in its wake. Accepting the fact that the past cannot be changed, the author uses fictional narrative to make people, particularly the young ones, aware of the need to synthesise a modern sense of identity from the European and African elements in their historical heritage.

The White Man of God, Jumbam's most serious artistic work, depicts this challenge in terms of a young boy's (Tansa's) struggle to comprehend the complex reality of a world that is interpreted in one way by European missionaries and in another by the adherents of traditional cult practices in his native Nso village. From Jumbam's perspective, these practices are often compatible with Christianity, but young Tansa lacks the discernment that would enable him to reconcile them in his own mind. However, as he naively grapples with alternative approaches to reality, readers of his story recognise how a viable African world view might be elaborated on the basis of Christian love, openness to technological progress, and traditional values that give people a sense of their place in the universe.

The White Man of Cattle revolves around a British veterinarian's attempt to establish an experimental farm and to improve sanitary conditions in Nso country. But the villagers, distrusting the inoculation of their cattle because they believe the cows would be poisoned or become sterile, develop strong hatred for him. When a woman dies after having been accidentally knocked down by his horse, the hostile and frenzied reaction of the villagers blinds them to any rational judgement. They abandon the corpse of the deceased woman on his veranda and her husband hangs himself there. This tragedy and the sense of insecurity cause Major Walters to flee from the village during the night of these tragic events. What remains is the abandoned experimental farm, a decaying monument to the villagers' lost opportunity for a better life.

A similar tragedy is told in *Lukong and the Leopard*, where the Fon's (Chief's) prerogative to marry any woman he desires engenders the self-exile of his arch-rival who, defying him, seizes and marries one of his several wives. The innocent child born of this marriage is attacked by a leopard when he is returning from the market but he outsmarts the

beast by running through the *Mfu* house and shutting the door behind him.³ The beast on his heels is then imprisoned in the house. The villagers hail him for this brave act. In recognition of his achievement, the *Fon* plans to give him a tribal honour by awarding him a red feather. His father, who senses danger because he fears the *Fon* might kill his son, disguises himself and enters the *Fon*'s crowded courtyard where the award is to be given. Not taking any chances, lest his son be killed, he cuts loose the leopard that is tied alive in the courtyard. As pandemonium sets in, Lukong is seized and carried away while everybody escapes to safety.

In the latter works, Jumbam shows the self-destructive limitations of the traditional world view. In *Lukong and the Leopard*, the brave lad loses everything because of the draconian nature of the *laws of the land*,⁴ which would not permit any rivalry with the *Fon*. Similarly, in *The White Man of Cattle*, Major Walter's plan to improve the lives of the people is thwarted by their ignorance of the scientific and technological advances of the Western world.

In all that takes place in the stories, the author does not substitute personal appearances for artistic rendering. He allows the reader to see the characters of the works, to see the people in his native Nso country in action, confining themselves and the values of their past in the empty idealism of the present. Because the characters are pitched against one another, as in the cases of Yaya against her daughter Lalav, or Big Father against Father Cosmas in *The White Man of God*, Lukong against Tamfu in *Lukong and the Leopard*, and the chief against Major Walter in *The White Man of Cattle*, we are allowed to see them and other people of the author's native country in a setting that permits us to

³ The *Mfu* house is a shrine building where the ritual priest, named Tamfu, performs rites to the village totem that is believed to uphold the destiny and spiritual force of the people.

⁴ The laws of the land are traditional norms and conventions which regulate the behaviour and actions of the citizens of Nso. The contravention of any of these *laws* is punishable following a prescribed code of sanctions decided upon by the entire Nso community.

discern their attitudes, aspirations, weaknesses and the limitation of their world view.

When in *The White Man of God*, for example, Lalav bemoans her fate for having a child like Tansa who participates in a traditional rite and when her mother, Yaya, approves of her grandchild's action as pertinent and inevitable, we see two parallel characters that represent two different world views — one modern, the other traditional.

In allowing us to see Yaya and other members of the community directly in action, the author compels us to experience the people's suspicion and the absurdity of the Christian-pagan and/or master-worker relationships that exist between Europeans and villagers within the Nso context. Besides, this technique effectively dramatises Yaya's search for a lasting solution or compromise, her alienation from her daughter's family and the terrible emptiness of those who are unlike her. Thus, through this dramatic mode of presentation, we see the event itself dominating instead of being faced with the overt attitude of the narrator only. The reader listens to no one but the characters themselves and these move as if on stage. As an example, let us examine the episode of the quarrel between the Basel⁵ and Catholic Christian children:

Your white man of God does show that your religion is corrupt...
Your Catholic white man of God sleeps with Lucy.
You ask Felicy or Andreas the cook
What about your Basel white man of God who slept with Anton's
mother in the farmhouse and her dog bit his bottom. (WMG, 100)

Here the author dramatises rather than explicates the corrupt acts that Church authorities indulge in: practices that indeed ridicule and drag the church into disgrace. Such a dramatisation indeed allows

⁵ Basel Mission (simply left as "Basel" in the text) is the name used by the Protestant Church that was established in Cameroon by missionaries from Basel in Switzerland. The Basel Mission church in Cameroon obtained its independence from that of Switzerland in 1957 and became christened: "The Presbyterian Church of Cameroon."

the characters' speech to present and define some essential differences without the author making connections or pointing out contrasts overtly.

Similar results are obtained in *Lukong and the Leopard* in which the effectiveness of the description of the flight and pursuit scene is derived from the cinematic effect achieved through juxtaposition and alternation. Jumbam shifts from describing the Jakiri market scene to describing the leopard pursuing Lukong without using connectives:

He ran breathlessly down-hill. The alarm and the shouting continued louder than before. "Who is that running down there, who is that, who is that, wait, wait, stop, stop..."
 "I am caught," he thought. "I am caught. That Fonki," he said to himself, "he has got me into this trouble" (LL, 13).

Here, the simple, often stark sentences which describe the action are strung together without transition from one to the next, just as the scenes in the works are set against one another without connections between them. A technique of this type gives rise to episodic and disjointed plots.

The episodic and disjointed character of the plots is part of the author's means to emphasise the separateness of groups and individuals within society. The sub-plots are loosely linked to the main plot, just as the Nso people in real life are linked to one objective: the conservation of their values. The lives of Yaya, Lalav, Tansa, Lucy, Big Father, Father Cosmas, etc., in *The White Man of God* and Tamfu and Lukong in *Lukong and the Leopard* only cross accidentally. They do not form one coherent story. This device of multiple sub-plots sometimes threatens narrative continuity by giving the impression of arbitrariness as the author tries to keep our attention simultaneously on a number of episodes which at first seem unrelated. But the shortness of the works together with the vigour and pace of the narration ensure that there is no moment of boredom. Indeed, the stories are at their best when the narrator's speeches assume a simple oral character relying on colloquialisms to capture the mood of the reader.

The very intensity and immediacy engendered by the characters' actions enhance Jumbam's narrative power. He knows how to captivate his audience, excite curiosity and juggle with emotions by withholding vital information or raising tantalising questions while omitting to supply the answers. For example, before the leopard in the *Mfu* house is taken to the *Fon*, the natives, aware of the danger awaiting Lukong, ask: "what would happen to him when he got to Kimbo? Would the *Fon* order his death? What was the law of the land? The law ordered the death of his parents should they ever come to Banso land, but what about their children?" (LL 9) Such statements affirm the dynamic relationship between audience and narrator as well as the latter's tight control over the story.

Jumbam, as it were, consistently portrays the inhabitants of his native Nso country as a dynamic and ingenious people with a deep sense of communal awareness. To depict their communal awareness, the author employs the technique of juxtaposition in shifting from the depiction of Yaya as one who upholds traditional values to the description of the contradictory approaches to Christian teaching by the two priests — Big Father and Father Cosmas. The former sticks to Christian dogmas and is therefore rigid, but the latter is more flexible and tries to understand the people he has come to work with. He represents the true spirit of Christianity. Similarly, the natives in *The White Man of Cattle* hold meetings to decide on the line of action to take against Major Walters, who is supposedly poisoning their cattle or causing them to become sterile. Such communal awareness enhances solidarity and heightens their sense of belonging.

From this perspective, the author's appeal is unequivocally aimed at the African mind, a mind which can identify with the characters in his stories, relate fully to their problems, frustrations and struggles and share their aspirations. The cultural frame of reference is shared by the author, and the audience or reader.

Herein lies the fundamental difference between Jumbam's works and the pre-independence novels of Ferdinand Oyono, Camara Laye, or Mongo Beti which are directed primarily towards a European

readership. Jumbam neither offers cultural explanations nor avoids points of cultural differences in order to facilitate understanding by non-Africans. Gone are the tedious tirades against, or heavy satire of colonialist misdeeds. Now, the emphasis is firmly on telling the tale involving ordinary African peasant farmers, market vendors, local sages, all faced with personal and social problems which are largely of their own making.

To realise that these works are written by an African, about Africans, in Africa, for Africans, helps us to understand why the author has ignored such occidental niceties as aesthetic distance, self-conscious narration, etc. They are alien to his culture. Jumbam feels, in common with many other black artists, that cross-fertilisation, besides being an inevitable process, can only enrich his own heritage, and that in marrying the Western novel form to the African oral tradition, something new, with its own distinctive identity, will surely emerge.

This explains why the author tries so hard to please, entertain and be congenial, why the characters so painstakingly explain events to the reader in order to ensure that he follows without effort, and why they are such gifted performers with their ready nips, witty digressions, lyrical flights and sense of the dramatic. Such are the stock-in-trade of the Bansoan story-teller. And like that story-teller, Jumbam's narrators combine comedy, farce, tragedy and village life. They reflect the horror, joys, fears and indignation of the reader and serve as persuasive agents. They overindulge him and undisguisingly manipulate him. Yet this sort of behaviour strikes a responsive chord in the new, literate African bourgeoisie, be they teachers, clerks or journalists in Nso, Douala, Garoua or Ebolowa. Their point of reference is not Henry James, but the local story-teller whose narrative manoeuvres they are thoroughly familiar with. When an elder tries to counsel Tamfu and appeals to him to listen, the operative word is listen, for his advice has to be listened to when there is an impending danger in the life of a community member or that of the community itself. The words of elders are the words of wisdom. So the elder goes on: "Only a foolish man tries to prove his strength against a wild animal. You say they will laugh at you; better laugh at you when you are healthy than when you have failed and are

badly wounded.” (LL, 21) But Tamfu retorts: “I was made Tamfu to be in the forefront of every danger. If I turn my back on this one, I don’t deserve the title of Tamfu. I will slaughter it or it will slaughter me” (LL; 21). This sounds like a folk-tale in which its hero must first undergo a specific ordeal to attain glory. Tamfu’s decision to kill the leopard and take it to the *Fon* raises fear and heightens tension in the audience. Interest is aroused and suspense is sustained to the end. Each move kindles a new interest to sustain the already established tension. So when the *Fon*’s messenger arrives to announce that the *Fon* wants the leopard delivered to him alive, the matter becomes more complicated for Tamfu and the village community. In this way, we see nothing else but action that captivates the readers’ interest and keeps it at a peak at the end of the story when the leopard is set free by a disguised Lukong’s father.

Like all good story-tellers, Jumbam’s narrators are blessed with a sense of humour and a predilection for irony, and they make free use of both to protect themselves or their friends, demolish enemies, uphold village customs and values or simply amuse. When, for example, Yubin explains what happens to Lukong using metaphoric embellishments such as similes, hyperboles, etc., one would think that he had been there when Lukong and the Leopard were locked in the fight. The real motive for doing this was to hail Lukong as a hero and thereby provoke Tamfu, the custodian of the *Mfu* sacred building, to react and show his prowess and gallantry in a critical situation. Yubin is aware that if Tamfu does not kill the leopard in the *Mfu* house his credibility as the people’s spiritual leader would not only be in jeopardy but could be annihilated. The population would despise him and lose confidence in his ability to protect them.

When the narration and all the accompanying innuendoes from the people fail to cause Tamfu to react, Yubin throws an open challenge that propels his indifference into action:

“Our *Mfu* has caught the *Fon*’s beast,” he went on.

“We are all happy, very happy indeed. There are people saying this and that about the young man who caught the *Fon*’s beast? What they are saying is none of our business; it is for the law of the land to de-

cide, not us. Our business is to take the *Fon*'s beast to him, that's all. As the animal is still alive and in the *Mfu* house, Tamfu should kill it and we will carry it to the *Fon*. Or has any other person the right to kill it in the *Mfu* house? That is what I think, or am I wrong?" (LL, 19-20)

Yubin was heavily applauded. "Yes" the people agreed, "let Tamfu kill the animal and we will carry it to the *Fon* before it gets dark." (LL, 20) Without hesitation, Tamfu took the floor and said:

"I have heard what Yubin has said. I have heard him well and, from your applause, he has spoken the mind of all of you. Yubin didn't suggest that this boy who caught the leopard should kill it. He said that Tamfu should kill it because it is in the *Mfu* house. I have heard him quite well" (LL, 20).

Tamfu's response to Yubin's challenge enables the former to save his pride and honour. He decides to capture the beast alive rather than kill it with a weapon:

"If I take my spear or gun and shoot that animal in there, you and your wives and children will say that a boy caught a leopard with his bare hands and put it in the *Mfu* house and Tamfu killed it with a gun. Is that not what you will say?" (LL, 20)

By saying this, Tamfu asserts his superiority over Lukong and assures the villagers that he is still in control of their spiritual destiny which is symbolised by their totem *Mfu* in the house that bears the same name.

All through this drama, we witness a display of wit, insight, a strong sense of self-preservation and pride by the actors. They use repetitions ("I have heard what Yubin has said. I have heard him well") and inferences ("Yubin didn't suggest that this boy who caught the leopard should kill it.") as rhetorical devices to emphasise, sustain suspension and ensure the participation of the audience. Indeed, the participation of the audience is spontaneous when Tamfu continues in a self-assuring and authoritative manner:

"Yes, I accept Yubin's challenge, but I will not kill it with my spear nor with my gun. I will hold it with my hands and slaughter it with a knife as a man slaughters a goat."

.....
Everybody lifted his head and looked at Tamfu with utter disbelief. There was great surprise in their eyes. They began to murmur their opinions. "No, No," someone said. "I won't be here to see the leopard tear him to pieces." "He is drunk," someone else said, laughing. Others joined him in his laugh. "Tamfu has suddenly gone crazy," another man added. "Let him go there and see what the animal will do to him." Behind the last speaker's statement lurks all the stored up emotion and without pausing, the elderly people try to counsel Tamfu: "Only a foolish man tried to prove his strength against a wild animal" (LL 20-21).

Jumbam's use of dramatised dialogue as manifested above enables him to manipulate the audience's sense of humour and susceptibility to be amazed, shocked, moved, or enthralled at appropriate moments. This lends authenticity and reality to the narration.

Also, as the works are often characterised by direct face to face conversations, Jumbam presents the dialogue in a more direct and dramatic form reminiscent of Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*. At such times, the author is at his most experimental, presenting exchanges in a form usually used by characters on the stage. The characters, usually two, but sometimes three, simply present their lines in turn with little or no interpretation provided by the third person narrator:

Dubila stood silent for a while. Then she said: "The white man of God will come to the mission on Wailun."

"What has that got to do with me?"

"We are told to invite you to his reception."

"Invite who?"

"You."

"Who told you to invite me?"

"The catechist!" (WMG, 46)

Here vitality and immediacy are achieved as the reader is given the impression that he has direct access to the scene. With the stage

presentation type of dialogue, the reader is, in fact, given the impression that he is eavesdropping on a conversation.

Sometimes, however, Jumbam employs direct speech in situations where reported speech would have been considered more the novelistic norm. These include recollections by a character of an earlier conversation or event, the summary of a conversation, the presentations of a group or crowd reaction, what individuals usually say, and inner feelings of other characters. Even though the general effects here, too, are vitality and immediacy, the presentation of a recollected dialogue in direct speech is particularly critical to the success of Jumbam's work, wherein much of the narrative is in the form of reminiscences. What they provide are scenic demonstrations in the midst of narrations which might have become tedious without them.

Also common with the first person usage are the presentations of the thoughts of the characters in the form of internal monologues or what Palmer refers to as "the stream of consciousness" (Palmer 47). Thus, for example, a few minutes before Yaya dies, she mulls over her baptism, and speaking for herself she says: "If I see Ndze on the other side of the hill or if he doesn't recognise me I will tell him that the children have led me this way. That a woman always dies for her children" (WMG, 120).

In this passage the complex view of the workings of Yaya's mind are made clear. No one doubts that she did not want to be baptised. Her baptism has the limiting effect of preventing her from seeing her departed friends and husband. In this way, the reader who initially views the character from outside, is given the impression in the course of the passage that, layer after layer, the character's conscious and then subconscious mind are being peeled away and that he is taken closer and closer to the essential "I."

Such a device allows the speaker to express his feelings and attitudes. On the linguistic level, his role in the speech situation is realised in English through two subsystems: modality and mood.

Modality embraces the modal verbs “must,” “may,” “should,” etc., attitudinal disjuncts expressing possibility such as perhaps, and non-factive conditionals. All of these occur with great regularity when characters are advising others:

“Beware of attractive things. They *may* be snares” (WMG, 33; my emphasis).

Because of the women, Tamfu explained: “Women will come to see it and some of them *may* be pregnant mothers”

“Does a leopard hate to see expectant mothers? ”

“Not that, really, but an expectant mother who sees its eyes *may* deliver a child with shining eyes, and what will she do with a child with eyes like that?” (LL, 25-6; my emphasis)

The unmarked form of the English mood system is the positive indicative declarative. It is Jumbam's use of marked forms, particularly in questions, imperatives and exclamations that allow him to suggest that an individual's inner feelings are being expressed. Thus in catechist Matiu's sermon he reminds the Christians of some basic principles: “You shalt love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul and with your whole strength. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself!” (WMG, 43) Not only do these structures create an effect of intimacy, but many of them express the preoccupation or concern of the speaker for the well-being of the members of the community. They are also most effective in revealing the psychological states and social attitudes of the main characters with maximum force and intensity.

In addition to the voices of speakers who are “inside” the events, the voice of the author as a narrator is often heard very distinctly in the children's stories *Lukong and the Leopard* and *The White Man of Cattle*. Here he assumes the role of the traditional professional storyteller surrounded by children sitting with their hands supporting their cheeks or lying on mats under the village palaver tree at the end of the day. The event is punctuated by enthralled gasps and the occasional crackle of the nearby fire. In both works, the authorial intrusion is not

inadvertent but deliberate, and it occasions a shift to third person narration as demonstrated in the following example.

Lukong saw his opportunity and took it. He slipped unnoticed behind a house, then out unto the road and took to his heels. As he ran downhill, he heard footsteps following him and he dodged into some thick grass. the person following him ran past him, went a few yards ahead, then, not seeing any trace of him, began to come back (LL, 21).

This literary device is dictated by two considerations: Jumbam's desire for greater freedom to express his own views as a native of Nso, and the narrow canvas of the tales told to an audience of children. In *The White Man of Cattle* we follow the activities of Major Walters and the sporadic evolution of the attitudes in the village community. Such manoeuvres lie beyond the scope of a first person narrator, no matter how nimble. Both stories are more tightly focused, both geographically and socially. The struggle here between Major Walters and the village community is too intense and too multi-faceted to be narrated with anything approaching completeness or subject balance by a single subjective agent.

Stokle remarks of Bebey that "it is as though the issue of third or first person narrative stance were of small consequence, as though all narrators were blessed with identical powers irrespective of their angle of vision" (Stokle 107), and so it is with Jumbam. There is the same relish for gossip and scandal (Major Walter's flirting with Litika); the same need to justify or condemn a character's behaviour (the villagers in the *Fon* courtyard, while expecting the *Fon*'s decision to justify Lukong's right to the new title, condemn his father's act which led him to self-exile); the same impulse to interpret the facts as well as relate them (Tamfu explains why he is called Tamfu); the same liberality with both useful and useless advice (Yubin advises Tamfu not to face the leopard with his bare hands). Not only are we told how characters think and feel as the narrator trips freely from one to the other, but we are also informed how they would have thought and felt in certain hypothetical circumstances, as in the following lines:

Everybody was gathered around the *Mfu* house to see Tamfu tether the leopard with ropes. They thought he would open the door and go in and catch the beast like a man catches a goat. some people said that if he opened the door the leopard would jump out and attack anyone it met (LL, 23).

That Jumbam nevertheless also includes more direct authorial commentary can hardly be seen as surprising given the fact that he must have thought like Ngugi, Achebe, etc., that:

It is not enough for the African artist, standing aloof, to view society and highlight its weaknesses. He must try to go beyond this, to seek out the sources, the causes and the trends. . . . By diving into the sources, he can give moral direction and vision to a struggle which, though suffering temporary reaction, is continuous and is changing the face of the twentieth century (Thiongo: 1969 69).

Moreover, there is a generic justification for Jumbam's use of this narrative technique. *Lukong and the Leopard* and *The White Man of Cattle* are in many ways epics, and direct authorial commentary is an integral part of the epic style. The tone of the comments, which is generally ironic and sometimes satiric also has a distancing effect.

Furthermore, Jumbam often switches from direct authorial commentary to using an unnamed narrator who is inside the events, referred to by Larson as the "lyrical centre" or "collective consciousness" (Larson 22). In *The White Man of Cattle*, the voice of this narrator is marked by the presence of the pronoun "you," as used in the following:

To have a relative working with Maja Wata was a thing of pride. If someone offended you, you could threaten to report him to your relative who was working at the veterinary station and he would report the matter to Maja Wata.

The "you" here is the indefinite or generic "you" meaning people in general. Commenting on a similar usage by Ngugi, Stratton notes that "this is only personal by style, not as a result of inherent meaning and thus, although it has the effect of involving the reader in the events, the

bond between speaker and reader is comparatively weak” (Stratton 123). Also, although its use denotes a speaker who is inside the events, it does not refer to the participants in the speech event itself. In other words, there is no first-person narrator, but rather a consciousness through which the experiences of the people are filtered. Such experiences reflect the communal awareness and commitment of the people to a common destiny and identity.

In all of these works too, the main characters at various points take on the role of the first person narrator as they tell other characters their past experiences — in the form of long, first person recollections. For example, in *The White Man of God*, Tansa tells Yaya what happens at the Mission when he goes for doctrine classes. Lalav also recounts her experiences in the Shishong maternity. Such narrative obtrusiveness, reminiscent of certain Augustan and Victorian novels, also takes the form of judgement, justification and condemnation of other characters’ behaviour, of correction of false impression, recollection of earlier incidents or statements which are subsequently proved correct and reveal personal reactions, shock, disgust, perplexity, delight, etc., to the unfolding action. These multiple judgements, justifications and demonstration of grassroot wisdom normally show thorough on-going conformity and contribute to persuading the reader.

Another interesting feature that is common in *The White Man of God* is the occurrence of passages of high ironic causticity akin to those of Oyono’s *Une vie de boy*. When, for example, the *Fon* sends the medicine man, Ta’adom, to cure Father Cosmas, Big Father who objects to the use of traditional medicine on the patient, not only assaults Ta’adom but sarcastically portrays the latter as a quack.

“You see, Sister! You see what I was telling you some time ago? This is the man the *Fon* has sent to cure Father Cosmas.”

“Don’t tell me what he was doing here was supposed to be part of the treatment, Father.”

“That was it.”

“Honestly I took him for a madman.”

“That is how they are. How Father Cosmas deals with them I don’t know.”

"How does he hope the sprinkling of water using a featherfan will kill diseases?"

"Only mad people can understand others." (WMG, 136)

This dialogue is indicative of Big Father's contemptuous and haughty attitude towards a people whose way of life he doesn't even bother to study. All he knows about Africans is that they are good for nothing people who "do not know God; who move about blindly like sheep without a shepherd and are scattered about in the jungles where they will perish for ever" (WMG, 60). With this view firmly rooted in his mind, Big Father sees the villagers as inconsequential and worthless people in all aspects of life. Indeed, at the very worst, he dismisses them as "mad people" because he does not think Africans should be taken seriously. Big Father is not alone in thinking and behaving that way. He simply symbolises contemporary views of most white men towards the black race. For them, the African is incapable of thinking and, hence, is stupid. This attitude is responsible for the marginalisation they suffer in all spheres from the hands of white men.

Such passages occur more frequently in *The White Man of God* than in the other works; this enables Jumbam to concentrate on diagnosing the hypocritical behaviour of idealistic and/or orthodox priests who hide in the canopy of Christian doctrine and dogmas to commit crimes. Big Father, for instance, condemns promiscuity, but he is clandestinely having an "affair" with Lucy. So, under Big Father's airs of superiority and Christian uprightness there lies a weakness that belittles him in the eyes of community members and therefore disqualifies him as a true man of God.

Besides, Jumbam wants to show that by the yardstick of D. H. Lawrence or the objectivist-realist school of Flaubert and Maupassant, the unrestrained, self-assertive priest is unforgivably immoral. But Jumbam cares less for occidental "sacred cows" and even less for occidental critics. His interest lies elsewhere and so does that of his audience. To them, what matters is the recreation of an African essence, an essence in which European and African cultures are complementary and not parallel.

However, although the africanisation of the novel in Jumbam's hands has resulted in the griotisation of the narrator, the licence thus acquired cannot be absolute. His modern *conteurs* are still governed by the laws of plausibility and relationality.⁶ This is one of the flaws in Jumbam's narrative technique. One of the most obvious ones stems from his use of English to animate the African scene. English is mandatory if his works are to reach a wide readership and, as such, remain economically viable. But when thrust into the mouths of characters who are, by and large, uneducated folk, it would undoubtedly become ungrammatical, sometimes verging on vulgarity, or replaced by pidgin, full of embellishments of vernacular phrases and direct misinterpretation representatives. Since, for example, the chief catechist, Matiu, has lived long with the priests, the other villagers think he understands English perfectly. But his ignorance is exposed in the interpretation of the white man of God's sermon to the congregation:

God's will be done. For your part, you must keep the faith burning in you like a light in the dark. In that way God will always be with you. And when you pray, also pray for me.

He says that if you cook God's will it will be done in the same way as cooked yams get ready. That you should always pray but that each time you pray, you must light a lamp. If you have no lamp, you can light a fire. Do not pray in the dark because God does not like darkness. If you pray in the dark, God will not be there to hear your prayer. If you pray where there is a light, God will be with you. And you must pray for him who has taught you how to pray (WMG, 41-2).

The consequence of such priggishness is the obfuscation of ordinary facts and the bafflement of the reader.

Jumbam's dilemma appears to be that he needs a grassroot actor/narrator in order to recreate the rural peasant and urban market scenes with maximum intensity, that is from their very centre. At the same time, he needs a narrator with sufficient education and cultural understanding to allow scope for the articulation of his philosophy in his

⁶ By relationality I mean to designate synchronic relationships among components of acts as well as the durational ones among acts in sequence.

own terms. Unfortunately such incompatible states of being cannot be found inside the same skin. This is why Jumbam feels obliged at certain moments to push his narrator aside, abolish all aesthetic distance, and speak directly to his readers on matters dear to him. As Stokle said of Bebey, it can be said of Jumbam that he often "temporarily abandons his craft as a novelist to mount the soap-box of the moralist teacher. His artistic stature is thereby impaired" (Stokle 114).

Fortunately, the narrative inconsistencies in *The White Man of God* are largely corrected in his later works, *The White Man of Cattle* and *Lukong and the Leopard*, where Jumbam achieves a greater degree of tonal unity. Since the unnamed narrator in them is an educated observer like the author himself, the gap between them contracts to total identification without causing any great disruption of tone. The central characters — Tamfu, Lukong and Major Walters — are likewise endowed with sufficient intelligence, perception, experience or knowledge of the modern world to reflect Jumbam's own views while retaining their credibility. Despite the increased sophistication of both narrators and principal characters, these latter works maintain the freshness and spontaneity associated with professional Bansa folk narrators.

In addition, it can be seen from the narratives that Jumbam experiments with the resources of the novel form. This is reflected in narrators representing the voice of the people and of devices more often associated with drama and a multiplicity of points of view.

The emphasis placed by Jumbam on the collective nature of the characters' experience cannot be overlooked. These experiences are not only representative, but they also enable the reader to have direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the people through an unnamed internal narrator who is one of them (their private thoughts and feelings being expressed by interior monologues), and through dialogues in which they are participants. By doing so, not only does Jumbam achieve a very strong statement of theme, but he appeals to the reader so effectively that the latter eventually feels that the voice of the people embraces his own.

The road towards a perfected African novelistic expression, as Stockle points out, "remains long." But Jumbam, like Bebey, Achebe, Ngugi, etc., has paved the way. "It lies as does African authenticity itself in the fusion of occidental and indigenous forms. And that fusion will be purely on Africa's terms" (Stokle 114). It is from this perspective that Jumbam employs the various rhetorical devices of fiction to apprehend, explore and concretise the Bansa's desperate quest for meaning in their tragically empty world, characterised by ignorance, spiritual emptiness, and a limited world view. He presents a lurid, anguished reality, analogous to the quotidian reality of Cameroon today. No other Cameroonian novelist so far has captured this reality with greater depth, freshness and sensitivity.

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