

Historicity and Postcoloniality in Cameroon Poetry

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Article history	Poetry is and has always been a major force in the social and political life of most nations. Cameroon poetry is no different since it captures both the socio-political realities of the people as well as the daily challenges of neo-colonial Cameroon. This poetry is divided into three generations; the first, second and third generations. This paper therefore seeks to explore historicity and postcoloniality in Cameroon poetry. It focuses on the truth value of claims about the past and denotes historical actuality, authenticity and factuality. Postcolonial Cameroonian poetry is x-rayed here as a critical, “prismal” and multi-layered discourse which emanates from the remnants of colonialism—that is, a discourse which views the strengths and weaknesses of the colonial system vis-à-vis its effects on the colonial masses. The paper concludes that historicity and postcoloniality have exerted great influence on Cameroon Literature in general, and on Anglophone Cameroon Poetry in particular.
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Introduction

Historicity and Colonialism have greatly influenced the Cameroonian literary landscape in general and Cameroon Poetry in particular. Cameroon Poetry dates as far back as the Oral tradition, with the traditional poet whose role was to be a keen observer of societal happenings and who had as specific task to inform, educate, entertain and transform society through oral performances. The advent of modern African (written) Literature, which relegated the traditional poet to the marginal spheres, affected Cameroon Oral Poetry. This paper seeks to exhibit the historical trends that have shaped Cameroonian Poetry in a bid to clearly demonstrate the impact that colonialism has had on

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the Cameroonian poet and populace. The paper draws inspiration from generational Cameroonian writers [poets] to enhance the historical and postcolonial dissection of Cameroon's poetic discourse.

The study intimates that the different historical periods of Cameroon's history have indelibly shaped its poetic discourse. Hence, this critical journey adapts a descriptive, historical and retrospective approach to assess how far Cameroon Poetry has come, in order to make projections about the unthreaded paths of this sensitive genre.

This paper hopes to answer the following critical questions generated from the contentions above:

- What is Cameroonian Poetry?
- What are the features of African (Cameroonian) Poetry?
- What are the historical trends that have shaped Cameroonian Poetry?
- How has Post-colonialism influenced Cameroonian Poetry?
- How committed are Cameroonian poets in the discharge of their roles as writers in politics?
- What are the different thematic concerns addressed by poets of the different historical moments?

Operational Definition of Key Terms

For purposes of clarity and comprehension, the terms "Cameroonian Poetry", "Historicity" and "Postcolonial poetics" are worth defining to situate the backdrop against which the arguments will be generated:

Cameroon Poetry is poetry which is written by someone who is Cameroonian by nationality or naturalization and which focuses on issues of real life experiences of Cameroonians. Such poetry aims to 'conscientize', educate, entertain, and, above all, transform Cameroonian society.

Historicity is defined as the historical actuality of persons and events, as opposed to historical association with myth, legend or fiction. Historicity focuses on the truth value of claims about the past and denotes historical actuality, authenticity and factuality.

Postcolonial Poetics could be viewed here as a critical, "prismal" and multi-layered discourse which emanates from the remnants of colonialism—that is, a discourse which views the strengths and weaknesses of the colonial system vis-à-vis its effects on the colonial masses.

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Characteristics of Cameroonian Poetry

African (Cameroonian) Poetry exists in two forms: oral and written. The corpus of this paper rests on the written. Written Literature has features which include: terseness and conciseness in language, rhythm, and obscurity in meaning, expression of feelings and emotions, tone, stress pattern and punctuation devices, imagery through figures of speech.

The above features are all encompassing, as expounded by Boynton and Mack (1992, p. 3):

The subject of a poem may be anything whatever. The subject matter of Poetry is as broad as itself...it includes every kind of mood, problem and experience that human beings know: terror, hatred, madness and despair, love, hope, compassion, joy, birth and death, sex and marriage, youth and age; city, country, animal, machine, the ugly, the beautiful, the brutal, the tender, the solemn, the humorous.

The above quote emphasises the elastic nature of poetry, its service to mankind. It argues that poetry is not limited to given topics, but spreads across all imaginable thoughts. Some of the most prominent stylistic devices employed in poetry include: sarcasm (satire), repetition (used for emphasis), rhyme scheme and parallelism. Today, language continues to play a very sensitive role in modern African (Cameroonian) Literature. African/Cameroonian Poetry projects myriad languages that are African/Cameroonian and informs the Cameroonian cultural/traditional worldview. The modern Cameroonian (contemporary) poet projects his/her culture and tradition through Oral Literature: proverbs, tales, symbols and much more.

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o postulates:

Literature does not grow or even develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape direction and even area of concern by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative Literature and those of other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, where modern Literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against

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the same stunting dwarfing background. (Ngugi, 1972). Ngugi's intimation above vividly captures the thrust of this paper. Historicity is evident through "slavery", "colonialism" and "neo-colonialism". Moreover, his stance that

Literature doesn't emanate from the blues but is given impetus, shape and direction by socio-political and economic forces in a particular society justifies the notion that History and Literature have a symbiotic relationship.

New historicist critics argue that every artistic piece must be interpreted at two levels. On the one hand, the analysis should seek to show the influence which the writer's background has on his/her work; in this regard, a writer is considered as prototype—that is, as a reflection of the collective experience of a particular society. On the other hand, the literary interpretation views an artistic piece not just as a reflection of specific societal realities but also as common human experiences. This section engages in a historical review of Cameroon Poetry and blends it with the Postcolonial trajectories which have prevailed thus far.

It is worth noting at this juncture that Cameroon Poetry is sub-divided into two categories: Francophone Cameroon Poetry and Anglophone Cameroon Poetry; a literary status which clearly reflects Cameroon's history and the remnants of colonialism. This discussion dwells more on Anglophone Cameroon Poets, whose "historicultural" backgrounds are similar to the writer's. Having been groomed in the Anglophone Educational System, this critic/author is most comfortable with analyzing/appreciating poetry which reflects his own lived experiences.

In the early 80s, Nalova Lyonga and Bole Butake were of the view that Cameroon Literature in English was only in the budding stage: still experimental in the main (Lyonga, N., Butake, B., & Breitinger, E., 1993). But today, it seems writers from this class of Cameroonian literature is gradually becoming the most vibrant and famous in the nation. A journey back to memory lane to examine the historical and postcolonial impacts on Cameroonian Poetry will clearly demonstrate the growth experienced in the Anglophone Cameroonian literary world. This historical and postcolonial review of Cameroon Poetry considers different perspectives, as will be illustrated below:

Pre-Colonial Cameroonian Poetry (1930s-1950s)

The pre-colonial era of Cameroonian Poetry experienced a great paucity of literary creativity. The absence of publishing houses, lack of sponsors and the low educational level of Cameroonians at

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the time are all factors that account for such paucity. However, Oral Literature (Poetry) enjoyed great impetus through the impeccable role of the traditional artist. Hence, it will not be surprising to note that this literary period witnessed very few poets on stage, primarily because many more writers preferred to try their hands in Prose and Drama. Nevertheless, general thematic concerns were:

- Lavishly praising the gods of the land
- Hailing the African/Cameroonian culture
- Upholding the African/Cameroonian traditional religion
- Expressing love for nature and its beauty
- Expressing nostalgic feelings of regret and the longing for better days ahead
- Reflecting slavery and praising the Whiteman

Poets like Bernard Fonlon (“Lovely Ve-kovy”), Mbella Sonne Dipoko (*Black and White in Love*) and Bongasu-Tanla Kishani (*Konglanjo*) are often referred to as first Generation writers. These writers seem to have had very little or no burning social or political concerns; hence, much time was spent glorifying nature, expressing feelings of nostalgia, and contemplating personal emotions.

For example, Fonlon’s poetry is engrossed with the overwhelming love for nature and the expression of nostalgic feelings about home—“Lovely Vekovy”—which are exhibited by Lainjo, who leaves Vekovy village for Yaoundé and is astonished by the shocks of city life. This shock pushes him to reminisce about life in the village and accounts for his longing to be home again. In this poem we digest a Fonlonian philosophy which corroborates that of Yvonne Shaka Shaka’s legendary “There is no place like home; home sweet home” song. As suggested by the title of another poem “The Fear for Future Years,” the poet showcases feelings of sadness via his disappointment about the outcome of his youthful life: the cheerless condition of his soul.

Similarly, Dipoko’s collection of poems like “Compassion”, “Boy and Girl” and “Two Girls” recounts his experiences in Europe (especially with his white girl friend), the beauty of the West, poverty, colonial barriers to the Black African enlightenment and much more. It must be pointed out that, generally speaking, the poets of this period are regarded as Western poets because they were not committed to the daily experiences of their society. One can justifiably argue that much of the poetry the pre-colonial era poets exhibited the poets’ concern with art for art’s sake. The advent of colonialism would render art for art sake as obsolete.

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Colonial Cameroonian Poetry (1950s – 1970s)

This period falls within the context of European exploration and the advent of colonialism. Even though by 1970 Cameroon had already declared independence, the colonizer still exerted utmost control of political and economic activities. Writers (poets) of this period play the role of a “watchdog”, a keen observer of societal happenings and a “crusader” for change. They seize the opportunities of the moment to exploit literary corridors to the fullest.

Cameroonian poets (writers) who wrote during the colonial era are often referred to as second Generation writers. Their poetry expresses thematic concerns that ranged from exploration, slavery, colonialism, assimilation, to neo-colonialism. Due to their ability to courageously decry the amoral practices of colonial masters through the exposure of hidden truths, they are referred to as critical realist writers/poets. The principal theme here was culture-contact-conflict, and the aim was to lament the torture, pain, oppression, anger and the exploitation perpetrated by colonizers on the colonized.

Unlike Bernard Fonlon, Sankie Maimo’s thematic preoccupation ranges from social malaise and insecurity to politics, personal issues/affirmation, cultural conflict and political victimization. In his poems “Fortitude”, “I Keep My Peace”, “The Harvest”, “Frustration” and “Black Martyr’s Consolation,” Maimo poeticizes a multi-layered conflict of a post-colonial society located in the binary opposites of the ruler and the ruled, the oppressed and the oppressor, and the margin and the centre within the Cameroonian context.

“Fortitude” was written two years after Southern Cameroons achieved her independence via reunification in 1961, and in 1963 Maimo pounced firmly. The poem captures the new breed of Cameroonian politicians who had already made corruption an institution. The violation/abuse of human rights was being staged with reckless abandonment. The poet showcases the political and moral degeneracy with stunning realism. In “Black Martyr’s Consolation”, the poet laments: “When I pray for bread/Often the powers reached me stone/Had I begged for stone/Would they have reached me bread? (Maimo, 1979)

Here the alternate rhyme scheme and the repetition of “bread” and “stone” artistically reinforce the theme of political marginalization and the insensitivity of the ruling class—each time the masses clamour for bread, they are given stone. Unfortunately, the poet’s tone is consolatory rather than radical. Instead of Maimo reacting to push the masses to action, his solution is “I Keep My Peace”:

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an indication of defeat. It is worth stressing that Maimo, like all other critical realist poets/writers, is known for giving a faithful image of reality without suggesting a way forward. Dzekashu (2014, p. 2) sees the historical moments as phases (specifically for Anglophone Cameroon Literature with ties with Cameroon Poetry): “‘the first phase’ deals with the encounter with Europe or a clash of cultures and covers the period from 1959 to 1984”. He argues further that “the books written during this period are mostly a reaction to colonialism and the changes imposed on the people in the name of colonialism and religion”. Writers here included: Kenjo Jumbam, Joseph Ngonwikuo, Jedida Asheri, Linus T. Asong, Nsanda Eba, Azanwi Nchami and Sankie Maimo. Dzekashu’s (2014) appraisal projects mostly authors of narratives (novelists) to ascertain the view that all three genres of Literature follow(ed) the same trajectories in the different literary eras.

A comparative analysis of the pre-colonial and colonial periods above reveals that the “literary pot” had now thickened by a complete shift from art for art sake to arts for change and posterity. History recounts that colonialism was an experience that the colonized would never wish to relive. Independence salvaged the situation in a way, but African leaders who took over from the white man had learned the ropes better and had inflicted more pain, torture and suffering than did the colonial masters on the masses. This grotesque and inhumane treatment catalysed new poetic perspectives.

Post-Colonial Cameroonian Poetry (1980s to Present)

This period is also known as the Revolutionary Era, or “Avant-gardist” Literature. Writers/poets in this era use(d) satire, sarcasm, symbolism, sustained metaphor and imagery to explore thematic concerns such as moral decadence, corruption, exploitation, bribery, tribalism, marginalization, feminism, political inequality, the infelicities of globalization, and the abuse of natural resources which lead to natural disasters such as global warming, deforestation and much more. Writers/poets who fall under this category are referred to as poets/writers with an alternative vision or as revolutionary poets. Most recently, this group of writers has been labelled as Socialist Realist writers/poets. Gorky (2001) opines that socialist realist art advocates a creative attitude to reality which glorifies labour, intensifies the will to live and advocates the adoption of a new approach to life that evinces hatred of the old world. This old world happens to be a capitalist world, a world which critical realist writers/poets sought to change/modify to no avail. In pursuit of this mission, Ngugi has called on African writers/poets and intellectuals to join the fight against capitalism and cultural imperialism. He said—and this is still relevant today—“I believe that African intellectuals

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must arm themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization..." (Ngugi, 1972, p. 50). Poets in this category include: Nol Alembong, Emmanuel Fru Doh, Bate Besong, and Gahlia Gwangwa'a amongst others.

The "Game" (Alembong, 2013) is one of Alembong's widely quoted poems. Lyonga, Butake, and Breitinger (1993) argue that Alembong's poem comes before the rise of an organized political opposition and its ensuing repression by the CPDM Government. The poem is written before the highly contested Presidential Elections in October 1992. "The Game" expresses the feelings of "Anglophobes" in Cameroon and captures the deception, intrigues, manipulations and election rigging of this period when the ruling party is both referee and player. Consequently, elections are seldom free and fair. The poet thinks that the opposition won the flood Presidential Election of 1992 but also that this election was rigged by the government. The opposition party believes that the rules of the game were clearly spelled out, and they respected the rules to the letter, not knowing that it was all a scheme to permanently keep them far from power.

The abuse/misuse of power is a fundamental theme highlighted in this poem. The absence of social justice and political fairness is once more re-echoed by the poet: "I kicked the ball/And made a goal/In the ground of play/But it was denied me/In the ground of play" (Alembong, 2013, p. 26). One glaring message which the poet seems to project here is that a political party should gain its strength from the masses and not from a particular ethnic or tribal group. In other words, the masses should form the backbone of any political party, and the living condition and welfare of the masses should be paramount in everything that the political leaders do. Thus, the absence of a real democracy in Cameroon in particular and Africa in general can be deduced.

Doh's (2009) "Bamenda Chop Fire" seems to be a coincidental sequel to Alembong's "The Game". The poem unravels the consequences of the flood 1992 Presidential Elections. As a result of the lack of fair play in the "game" of politics, the opposition cried foul and cursed the ruling party for rigging elections, and the government reacted with mass brutality. Bamenda, the capital of the then North West Province and present day North West Region and the birthplace of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), became a battle ground between the protesting masses and the "army of occupation". In the poem the people of Bamenda suffered one of the worst humiliations and military brutality ever recorded in Cameroon's history. Law enforcement officers before the very eyes of fathers and husbands respectively raped daughters and mothers: "The rape of daughters and mothers/Before parents, husbands and children/Brothers and sisters alike." The poet in a very

succinct and optimistic tone insists: "...if your bastard mentor could go/Then you will surely go too/Time is the ultimate judge" (Doh, 2009, p.15).

Artistically, "Bamenda Chop Fire" is rich in a pidgin expression which reflects the masses' readiness to fight against injustice and political dishonesty. Above all, the title of the poem enforces the socialist vision of the poet. Bamenda people against all odds braved the teargas, grenades and gun shots. The repetition of this pidgin expression in each stanza emphasizes the confrontation between the protesting masses and the security operatives in Bamenda.

Gwangwa'a (1995) in "If An Anglophone Must Die" displays conscientiousness and revolt. The poem views the marginalization of the Anglophones as a failure of leadership. The poem exploits a revolting tone to exhort the minority Anglophones, who are marginalized, to fight back. The repetition of "If an Anglophone Must Die" emphasizes the conditionality of their struggle; that is, if they have to be brutally killed by the forces of neo-colonialism, they must put up a brave and spectacular show, their number notwithstanding. "Dogs" and "frogs" are some of the animal images exploited by the poet. He likens the plight of the oppressed to that of a dog but cautions them not take it the way dogs would. Gwangwa'a was influenced by Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" (1919), which was occasioned by the discrimination and hate crimes perpetuated upon African Americans in the United States at the time. Drawing from the experiences of others, Gwangwa'a is aiming for a Cameroonian society where everyone is free and marginalisation of any kind is a thing of the past.

The relationship between the two Cameroons (Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon) has been the nexus of creativity for a long time, and herein lies the 'second phase', which Nfah-Abbenyi (2012) describes as a reflective of the "Postcolonial malaise of a union that never was and therefore in need of dissolution; a union that for others is fragile, diseased, in dire need of healing and reconciliation." Nfah-Abbenyi goes on to say that "Anglophone Cameroon Literature is as such obsessed with what is known as 'The Anglophone Problem', for it showcases the anxieties of a marginalized group of people that is required to assimilate and often deprived of the rights of full citizenship (2012, p. I).

In describing this phase, writer and critic Labang (2012, p.3) opines that "the very basis of this union has been questioned by writers who think that the terms of the union have been violated and that one part – Anglophone Cameroon – is being marginalized". Lyonga (1993) describes this

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period as being marked by the “aesthetics of victimization”. Nevertheless, this phase is not entirely limited to ‘horizontal’ colonialism, especially given that postcolonial themes abound, some of which include gender, hybridity, class and otherness. Some representative texts include: *Bole Butake’s plays And palm wine will flow (1990), Shoes and four men in arms (1999); Bate Besong’s plays Beast of no nation (1990), Requiem for the last kaiser (1991); Victor Epie Ngome’s play What God has put asunder (1992) and Babila Mutia’s play Before this time, yesterday (1995) (Lyonga, 1993).*

Ngeh (2011) submits that “Anglophone Cameroonian Poetry has evolved from the critical realist tradition to the socialist realist perspective.” Ngeh further describes Anglophone Cameroonian writers as illustrative of the critical realist or socialist realist perspective. He maintains that “poets like Benard Fonlon, Mbella S. Dipoko and Bongasu-Tanla Kishani fall within the first generation and are critical realist, and Bate Besong, Emmanuel Fru Doh, Nol Alembong and Gahlia Gwangwa’a fall within the second generation and are socialist realist” (p. 40). Ngeh (2011) further adds that Anglophone Cameroonian Poetry is dynamic as it has moved from mere criticism to activism. Ngeh concludes that “while critics like Omafume Onoge, Ernest Fisher, Maxim Gorky and George Lukacs have used the two concepts (critical and socialist realisms) to “periodise” Literature, the two concepts can also be used as interpretive tools” (Ngeh, 2011, p. 50). Simply put, the poems of this period mostly tell of the Anglophone existence and dramatizes the question of the Anglophone identity in Cameroon’s social, political and economic settings. The poets openly bring to limelight the marginalisation of Anglophones by Francophones, This marginalisation is often referred to as the Anglophone problem, which unfortunately is at its apex today.

Conclusion

The thrust of the above discussion has been to demonstrate the influence which historicity and post colonialism have had on Cameroon Poetry. The pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial perspectives reflected above stem from the pre-textual, textual and the post-textual analytic framework. The generational approach employed in this study unveils the major preoccupations of poets who wrote during the distinct eras. The first generation of poets was committed in glorifying nature, expressing feelings of nostalgia and praising the black culture amongst others. The second generation, who are referred to as socialist realist writers, braved the odds, outrightly condemning the ills of colonialism and assimilation while resisting the exploitative moves of the colonizer. Neo-colonialism, corruption, marginalization, embezzlement and dictatorship have been their major thematic concerns. It is worth stating that the author’s generational classification is synonymous

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with the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras, for Ohaegbu, (2000, p. 10) was right when he argued that “there is no doubt that all literatures express the life-ways of a people and are influenced by time and space, and even temperament.”

To wrap up this poetic discourse, one can boldly opine that historicity and postcoloniality have exerted great influence on Cameroon Literature in general, and on Anglophone Cameroon Poetry in particular. This influence is clearly evident in the arguments projected above. Fandio (2004, p. 8) makes one of the most salient arguments when he declares:

Anglophone Cameroon Literature is there to awaken us from our usual torpor. It testifies to the undiminished intellectual life of the homeland. Every homeland – as you’ll recall – always needs a voice in writing and print; and Anglophone literature, created in the service of Humanity, shuns the concerns of the fragmentary, neo-colonial elite and deals with the experiences of the marginalized in Cameroonian society; workers, the urban and rural masses.

To borrow from BB, “The writer in Cameroon is saddled with numerous problems that include the personal, the social, the economic and the political – but the only solution is to continue writing in spite of these impediments” (Fandio, 2004, p. 12). Hence, Cameroonian writers/poets continue to have reason to execute BB’s literary prophecy as they seize every opportunity of the moment to exploit literary corridors for posterity.

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