

*Literary Workshop: Cameroonian Authors Discuss their Work with Readers*

At a Langaa –Prince Claus Fund Reading Workshop,  
Buea, Cameroon 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> January 2013

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**Date:** 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> January 2013

**Venue:** Langaa Research and Publishing Centre, Buea, Cameroon

**Time:** 9:00-18:00

**Authors:**

Colin Diyen Ayeah

Florence Ndiyah

Susan Nkwentie Nde

Sammy Oke Akombi

**Host/Facilitators:** Francis Nyamnjoh and Katleho Shoro

**Attendance:** 35 University of Buea MA and PhD Literary Students and 3 Lecturers

**Sponsorship:** Langaa and Prince Claus Fund

**Introduction to the Workshop**

Langaa hosted its second literary workshop on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2013 in Buea. In introducing the workshop, Francis Nyamnjoh stated that this workshop forms part of a series of experiments to expose Langaa authors and their works and to encourage a conversation between Langaa authors and their readers on the social and cultural worlds, visions and concerns articulated in the literary works of Langaa authors. The workshops thus serve as a platform meant to foster discussion between readers – the workshop participants - and the authors themselves. In this way, Langaa authors, their writings, their publishing journeys as well as the very themes within their books become reachable to their audience whose experiences inspire literary creativity.

Making the authors' "inside-stories" accessible proved to be particularly relevant in this second workshop because the majority of the 35 participants were in fact African Literature students from the University of Buea who are currently studying at Master's and PhD levels. Many of them are also aspiring to become creative writers. The students brought along critical tools of analysis and enthusiasm which were clearly reflected through the comments made, questions asked and thoughtful conversations carried out even when the formal part of the workshop was through. To add to the rich discussions were three of the literature lecturers from the University of Buea.

The workshop featured four Cameroonian authors who have published under Langaa. It was divided into two days and was centred on the works of two featured authors. Colin Diyen Ayeah and Florence Ndiyah were featured on the first day while Susan Nkwentie Nde and Sammy Oke Akombi were the key authors for the second day. The general structure of the workshop was such that each author briefly introduced their work and reflected upon their writing journeys in one way or another. After this brief introduction, participants were encouraged to make comments and ask questions to which the authors and other participants responded.

There were a few themes that ran across both days of the workshop and featured in each of the authors' sessions to some degree. Some of the themes explored were the audience of the author, gender within literature, and the straddling of fiction and reality, modernity and tradition, as well as entertainment and education. The most prominent theme was the politics of the Anglophone and Francophone writers and citizens in Cameroon. All four authors were asked to reflect upon their works within the Cameroonian political context especially in light of their Anglophoneness. Furthermore, the authors were asked whether they saw themselves as Anglophone Cameroonian writers or Cameroonian writers writing in English. Although the dominance of the Francophone section of Cameroon is not in question, the answers given by each author showed just how complex and nuanced Anglophone Cameroonian identities are. Moreover, the answers and discussions around Anglophoneness in Cameroon illustrated just how much Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonians are entwined.

Colin Ayeah in his novel, *The Earth in Peril*, did not aim to directly address the Anglophone problems as he has in his other books published by Langaa. Inadvertently, Ayeah's exploration of power relations vis-à-vis the Earth's arms-race resonated with Cameroonian politics. What seemed to resonate most was Ayeah's ability to assert that smaller kings or leaders in power, those with less status, need to be taken seriously by the more superior people in power if destruction is to be circumvented. This message is universal. In her novel, *Blessing*, Florence Ndiyah chose to make her main character, Fatti's, religious struggle the dominant storyline. This focus, however, meant that Florence subtly touched on the Anglophone politics in *Blessing*. Even though Florence Ndiyah did not intentionally set out to take an explicit stance about her Anglophoneness in *Blessing*, some of the dates included in her setting as well as the circumstances around Fatti ensured that the national politics were inscribed. On the other hand, Ndiyah's collection of poems, *I will Fly*, abstractly speaks to questions of Anglophoneness. The collection even features a poem titled 'Anglo!'

Susan Nde, on the other hand inscribed the Anglophone-Francophone politics within her characters. Throughout the discussion around her *Second Engagement*, her characters – husband Gabby (Francophone) and wife Lizzy (Anglophone) – were metaphors for national politics. Through this metaphor, the extent to which Francophone and Anglophone Cameroon is intertwined became quite evident. In fact, separating the two seemed like a Herculean task. Nde also proposed that the history of the categories be considered while another participant quite poignantly suggested that these identities be seen as dynamic and relational. When Sammy Akombi was asked whether he was writing from a Anglophone Cameroonian perspective he retorted that corruption – the principal theme of all his short stories in *The Wages of Corruption* – was Cameroonian. This rich,

loaded discussion around Anglophoneness in Cameroon vis-à-vis literature took many turns. These varying turns reflected the multiplex experiences, frustrations and critical reflections of the writers, critics and citizens who participated in the workshop. It emphasized yet again the role of literature and the writer in cultural production, continuity and change.

## **The Workshop In Detail**

### **Session 1: Colin Ayeah's *The Earth in Peril***

The workshop commenced with an exploration of Colin Ayeah and his Sci-Fi-genred novel *The Earth in Peril*. This book is the first one published within the series Ayeah has written. In *The Earth in Peril*, Ayeah created an imaginary world called Mungongoh through which he views the Earth and explores the arms race.

The Sci-Fi nature of the book was central to most of this discussion. The closing comments of the discussion hailed Ayeah's choice of genre, narrative style and omniscient point of view "avant garde" in terms of literature produced in Cameroon in English. In fact, it was proposed that perhaps fantasy works such as Ayeah's may be the next trend in Anglophone literature produced in Cameroon. What was further suggested was that *The Earth in Peril* be translated into languages such as Russian because of the very fact that it deals with a global issue. Another suggestion was that the book be available as an eBook: "an avant garde medium for an avant garde book" as one Master's student put it.

Notwithstanding the praise given to the author for the book and its highly imaginative style, the Sci-Fi genre also raised a number of concerns for participants. The question of audience was a major concern. In the first instance, the use of figures such as Cassandra and Cleopatra as well as the overall language and metaphors had some participants asking who the audience of such a novel is and whether the author wrote it for an African mind-set or a European one. One participant raised the point that it is the responsibility of an author to first and foremost address the issues of his/her immediate society. What was highlighted in the responses to these concerns was the fact that Cameroon does not live in isolation to the rest of the world and although Cameroon's realities cannot not be neglected neither can the realities that exist outside Cameroon and affect it. While Ayeah acknowledged that writers from abroad had a major influence on him as an author, the names of his characters reflected his immediate society and so too did the issues of corruption, bribery and unequal playing fields in politics. One participant pointed out that the text exposes the differences in tribes and countries while advocating for unity – matters not far removed from Cameroon.

Also highlighted in the discussions around *The Earth in Peril* was the fact that an author can tackle multiple politics subtly while entertaining. As already mentioned, the subtlety of dealing with national politics became one the main themes of this workshop especially where the women writers' works were concerned.

### **Session 2: Florence Ndiyah on *Blessing* and *I will Fly***

The second session was centred on Florence Ndiyah's novel, *Blessing*, as well as her collection of poems titled, *I will Fly*. Ndiyah began by sharing her rather interesting journey in writing. She explained that initially she had studied micro-biology, however, her very first encounter with lab-work made her realise that micro-biology was not what she wanted to do. In the midst of her search for her next move, Ndiyah's prayers were answered when she realized that the prayers she used to write for church were highly appreciated. And thus her talent was illuminated and she began teaching herself the foundations of literature. Today, not only is Ndiyah a literary author, she is also a journalist and a blogger.

Two main discussions were borne out of participants' encounter with *Blessing*. The first discussion arose after the first participant asked Ndiyah whether she was writing from a feminist or a womanist vantage point because her main character, Fatti, is female. Florence responded that her main characters tend to be female (even in the book she has just written); however, she had not consciously decided to take a feminist or womanist stance. Furthermore, her novel was not without strong male characters – Fatti's father is one of them. Notwithstanding, the author's response, a lively discussion around what it means to, theoretically, be a feminist and womanist ensued amongst the literary critics in the room. This part of the discussion was testament to the pluralism that exists in interpreting texts. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the fact that texts have both intended meanings as well as unintended meanings – depending on one's tools of analysis. In deed there were many different definitions of feminism brought to the fore, however, a point that was made more than once was the fact that feminism – however defined – should not be at the expense of men or anyone else. Instead, feminism should seek to encourage and value women in a manner which contributes positively to the broader society. Susan Nkwentie Nde made this assertion quite poignantly in her session. Nde unhesitantly saw her writing as a way to encourage women to find their own voices, tell their own stories and realise their own potential.

The other main discussion that arose from participants' reading of *Blessing* focused on the central storyline of the book: Fatti's struggle in finding middle ground between Christianity and African traditional religion. Fatti's choice of one over the other (by the end of the book) inspired many of the participants to reflect on the everyday interplay between Christianity and African traditional religion in contemporary Cameroon. 'Is it possible for an African to not have traditional religion or to be a *pure* Christian?' There may not have been a consensus to this question; however, the intermingled nature of the two within the everyday was underscored.

Ndiyah's second book, *I will Fly*, is a collection of poems. In introducing this collection Florence read out her abstract which in itself sounded like a piece of poetry. Like *Blessing*, Ndiyah's poetry is written so thoughtfully that one can almost find meaning in every word. This point was made by a participant who thoroughly appreciated Ndiyah's meticulous use of language. When discussing some of these poems and the collection in general, it was clear that once again Ndiyah's work engages with national politics in a subtle manner. This trait, also seen in Ayeah and Nde's works to varying degrees, allows for her poetry to speak directly to a Cameroonian audience but also resonate beyond the borders of Cameroon.

### **Session 3: Susan Nkwentie Nde's *Second Engagement***

The second day of the workshop was centred on Susan Nkwentie Nde's *Second Engagement* and Sammy Akombi's *The Wages of Corruption*. Francis Nyamnjoh who was also at the workshop was asked by students to have a more informal session around his various literary works – a request to which he obliged.

In the third session of the workshop, Susan Nkwentie Nde's work was discussed. Nde's inspirations and aspirations were key in this session. Nde shared her literary journey which began with her mother singing songs in her mother tongue – songs that Nde later discovered were poetry. Furthermore, Nde recalled reading many books from her brother's library at a young age. By the time Nde began seriously pursuing her literary career, she had these experiences as well as the tools of writing instilled in her in secondary school as her foundations.

People, particularly women, interest and inspire Nde to write. This author's first two novels have had women as their main characters – although she is now working on developing male protagonists. Nde asserted that women's stories in Cameroon have not been adequately told especially not through female writers in Cameroon. It is with this in mind that Nde has included various experiences from various women's lives within her work. Once again the discussion around feminism ensued and so too did the question of Anglophonicity.

One interesting question that was asked of both the female authors was whether they identified with any of their protagonists. While Ndiyah responded that she draws inspiration from different places, Nde confessed that she identified with her protagonist Lizzy. Nde elaborated that like Lizzy, she too has aspirations and has managed to accomplish many of these dreams.

### **Session 4: Sammy Akombi on *The Wages of Corruption***

*The Wages of Corruption* is a series of short stories written by Sammy Oke Akombi. Sammy pointed out that the stories initially formed part of a radio program called "The English you Speak". The choice to use a series of stories about corruption for this program was inspired by the fact that Cameroon was announced as the most corrupt country in the world for the second time. Thus, Akombi used these stories – based on actual events - as a means to make people aware of corruption in its various forms. The stories featured in *The Wages of Corruption* have varying characters – from priests to school children - and differing storylines.

*The Wages of Corruption* had participants reflecting deeply and critically on the varying forms of that corruption takes. A correlation between the educated ("the wretched of the earth" as they were referred to) and corruption were highlighted. However, exploration of this idea showed that corruption is not limited to the educated. In reflections, Akombi pointed out that corruption is not corruption on its own. There are many other matters implicated when one speaks of corruption; making corruption far-reaching and complicated in nature. Disturbingly, especially as seen in the story of the little girl, Alice, corruption is sometimes seen as "the order of the day".

As heavy and seemingly discouraging as some of the reflections on corruption felt throughout this session, one of the participants fittingly identified retribution as a pervasive theme running through the many stories. Akombi's stance was that nothing good comes out of corruption in the long run – not for the person who is corrupt and not for the society in which he/she resides. Thus, in the midst of identifying the many kinds of corruption participants encountered daily, the participants were also able to reflect on the negative consequences. Furthermore, participants aspired for better. One participant pointed out that the stories' emphasis on retribution may be seen as a solution to corruption in some sense. Perhaps if Akombi's goal to bring about the awareness of corruption to the fore continues past this workshop, the retributive quality of his stories may very well ask his audience to imagine themselves doing things differently.

All in all, the workshop proved to be wonderfully interactive, insightful and an endeavour worth continuing.

### **Reflections on both workshops from Katleho Shoro, South African and Workshop Facilitator**

If one were to compare the first and the second workshop, it is quite easy to see that the second workshop draws its strength (and successes) from the larger number of participants as well as authors who were involved. The fact that the texts in the second workshop ranged from novels to poems to short-stories was wonderful!

The second workshop, populated with students of literature and Anglophone Cameroonians – however defined (e.g. the minority English speaking community which feels politically, economically and culturally superior and marginalised by their majority French speaking counterparts, whom they perceive as inferior but dominant) – saw a much deeper exploration of the culture and politics in Cameroon as well as a more technical look at the texts themselves. The workshop seemed to be an invaluable exercise for students who not only experienced, first-hand, much of that which was presented in texts but also dealt with the various themes discussed in their own scholarship. Thus, the workshop seemed to be an extension of the classroom and a platform to exercise one's knowledge of one's own society and scholarly skills. Highlighted in both workshops was the fact that a single text can perform multiple, simultaneous functions depending on the approach of the audience. This is a significant point, in view of the increasingly pan-African audience of writers; audiences who are curious to discover and relate to the African continent in its creative diversity, collective predicaments, successes and failures.

The first workshop, hosted in Cape Town in September 2012, allowed for a more intimate and personal atmosphere. Also, because the two texts in question were based in different countries (Kenya and Nigeria) and the participants themselves came from various parts of the continent, there tended to be a more comparative approach to some of the discussions. The perspectives were further nuanced because of the various disciplines from which the participants were based. These differing perspectives, approaches and tools of analysis made for a fascinating exchange of ideas – both for the participants and the authors.

Both workshops had their strengths. Both workshops showed that it is mutually-beneficial and satisfying – for both participants and authors – to discuss, debate and reflect upon creative texts in the same space. It would be interesting to see how the texts of the four authors featured in the second workshop would have been received in a workshop where most participants were not familiar with the issues of *Anglophobeness* in Cameroon. Perhaps someday a Langaa Literary Convention that brings together many authors and participants from different parts of Africa, will allow one to know how such a discussion with these four Cameroonian authors might have panned out. Because the workshops are intended to be experimental, perhaps having sections of the workshop dedicated to hearing authors' readings and engaging with aspirant participants' works, may be fruitful (should time and resources permit). Perhaps the next workshop finds its way to another country as seems to be the trend.

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