

## **Launch of *The Disillusioned African* by Francis B. Nyamnjoh**

**Buea, Cameroon, 1995**

The launch ceremony for *The Disillusioned African* by Francis B. Nyamnjoh was chaired in Buea, Cameroon in 1995 by Prof. Sammy Beban Chumbow, with Francis Wache as Master of Ceremony. The following remarks by the Chair and guest speakers still ring eerily true today, 14 years later. The second edition of the novel was published by Langaa RPCIG.

1. Opening remarks, collocational incongruity, and more by Chair, Prof. Sammy Beban Chumbow
2. Literature and national consciousness by Dr. Talla Kashim
3. African unionism by George Ngwane
4. Transforming the way we see ourselves by Asonglefac Nkemleke
5. How an idealistic disparager uses letters to communicate by Dr. Nalova Lyongo

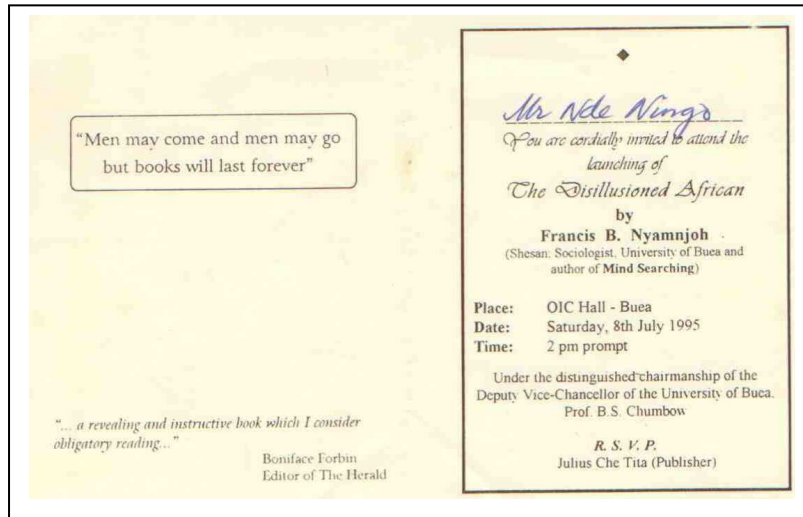
### **1. Opening remarks, collocational incongruity and more by Chair, Prof. Sammy Beban Chumbow's**

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is my singular pleasure to welcome you to this great event – the launch of a book full of promise, including that of becoming a bestseller not only in this country but beyond.

I met the author of *The Disillusioned African* some five years ago, in a rather unusual circumstance. I was travelling to Bamenda from Yaounde and he was travelling to Yaounde from Bamenda, and we met at Makenene-Makenene. For some of you who do not know, it has the same status as Nkemkem for those travelling between the West and the Northwest. It is a place where vehicles stop for passengers to have something to eat and on that day, it seemed we were both heading for the same commodity – bush meat. He came up to me, to obviously know me, and introduced himself and we started to talk on a number of things. It turned out we knew quite a number of people and by the time we had had quite a number of conversations, I knew

I was talking to a profound mind. And this was proven true when he pulled out from his bag a book and gave it to me and autographed it. It was a book he had written titled *Mind Searching*.

I went home and read that book. In those days I had quite a lot of time to read



novels and other things. Now most of the time is taken up with work and memoranda.

Then several years later, three years ago, when we were getting the university in Buea going, we had to think out the quality of staff we needed.

We knew we were going to start a department of sociology within the faculty of social and management sciences.

It occurred to me that this profound mind I had met several years back could be an important element. In trying to locate him, I found he was in a most unusual place for a genuine intellectual. I consider him a genuine intellectual in the etymological sense of the word and even in the words of the venerable Professor Bernard Nsokika Fonlon.

I found the man I had met eating bush meat teaching at a school of youth and sports. Even though it is supposed to be an international school, it occurred to me that that wasn't a place for the genuine intellectual I had met. So we decided to push him out, and the rest is history. He is here with us now actively involved in teaching and research at the University and it is obvious that he has kept up with the calling of *Mind Searching*. This time he has come up with *The Disillusioned African*.

I have had the pleasure of reading this book, which we are celebrating today.

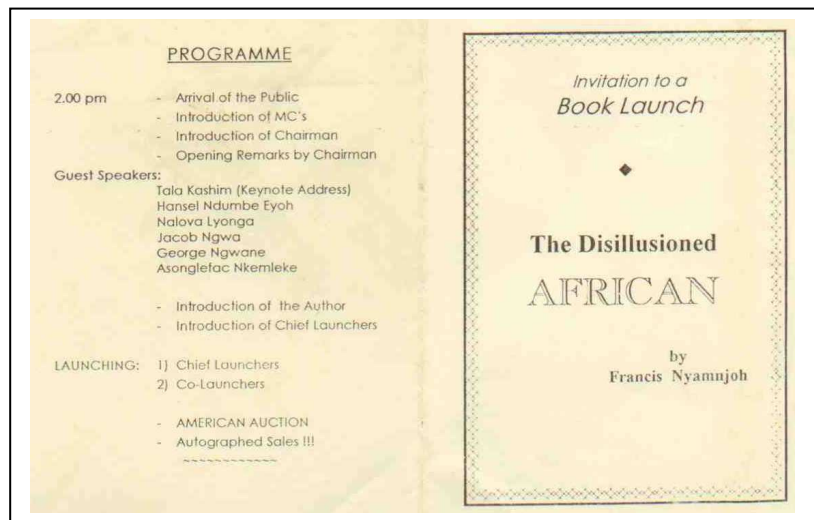
It is a wonderful book because Francis Nyamnjoh has a particular way of saying very serious things in the most unserious manner. He entertains and in the process he

moralises, he teaches, he gives you lessons, he educates. He combines research, learning, experience and philosophy to give you a view of the dilemma of the African.

Yesterday I was in Limbe. Somebody had heard we were launching a book. When asked, "What is it all about?", I said it is rather a non complacent review of the socio-economic and political problems of the African.

Now, I don't know what my role is in this exercise today. The Master of Ceremony has said I should come up and make a few remarks, and that puts me in a situation which I don't like.

And perhaps that is characteristic of us who are disillusioned. We always want something else other than what we have. I think really I would have preferred to be in the place of all the other speakers who seem to have been



programmed to talk to you about this book, because I have spent time reading it and think it is very serious. There are lots of things that can be said.

That's why I am going to, with or without the permission of the organisers, attempt to give you something of my feeling about this book.

The book has messages, not just a message but messages that come entertainingly. I have noted in a whole exercise book quite a number of issues which I have termed good for thought and I want to share one or two with you.

In *The Disillusioned African*, we hear that Africa's greatest enemy is its leaders. Don't you think that's true to a large extent? Why on earth would someone with any self esteem underrate and denigrate what is his in matters of culture? Do you blame the Europeans for believing in the inherent superiority of their culture and values when you yourself have exhibited such damaging impatience with what could have been an alternative?

This is of course a comment, a serious comment, on our going for the white culture and relegating our culture to the background.

When you read *The Disillusioned African*, you read that the tragedy with the African “leader” or elite is that what he knows he does not need and what he needs he does not know. Let’s be clear that “leader” refers to politicians as well as the elite, so that means you and me. Most of us sitting here, we are leaders. And we encourage the production of what we do not consume and consume what we do not produce. The ruling minority of Africa has used attractive declarations of intent to divert attention from political dictatorship and economic apartheid. So there is much food for thought in this book.

Being someone concerned about language and how it is used to obtain effect and results, I, without any effort, grew fond of this author. Here is a man who uses rich language in a simple manner so he is understood by everyone and by most people who read him. In the process, he has a way of creating what we call neologisms or new words which do not (yet) belong to the English language. He has the audacity of introducing into Shakespeare's language words which confuse all types of meanings and reinforce ideas and the things he wants to tell us. I have noted quite a lot of them.

The word “Queendom” you find quite often in the book. The main character of the book, Charles, is writing from London and he refers to the country of which London is the capital as the “Queendom.” Of course you and I might have expected kingdom. But which should we expect if the country is ruled by a Queen? So then we expect a Queendom instead of a kingdom, in the same way that sociologists and political anthropologists have had the pleasure of coining similar words for territories ruled by chiefs in Cameroon. They refer to them as chiefdoms. They couldn’t dare call them kingdoms, for kingdoms are meant for kings over there. Ours are chiefs so you talk of chiefdoms or even fondoms when travelling in the northwest territories.

We find a word like “milker.” Our author uses this word of his in a very specific sense. You want to know who the “milker” is? Look at the book cover. The milker is one who milks a cow and in this book, he refers to the African leaders who milk their countries like cows until they cease to yield any milk.

So the author coins words, new words, or new ways of using them. He uses neologisms to great effect in getting his message across. One other useful language device in this work is the use of related words together in a sentence. We generally expect an author to find words which can collocate or which seem appropriate together. Dr Nyamnjoh does this very well, like most authors.

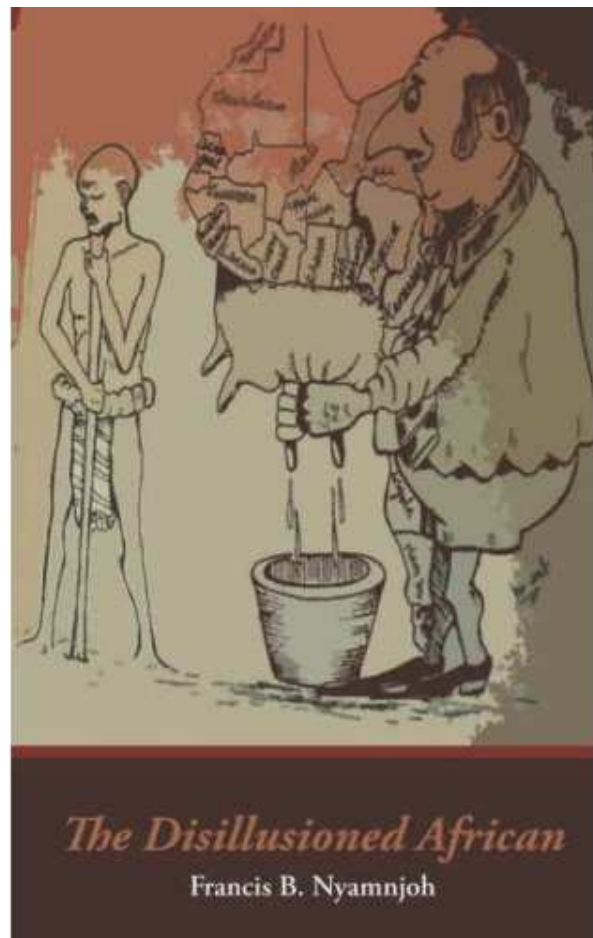
For instance he talks of this head of state who preaches African socialism and yet buys an apartment in Britain for his voluptuous concubine. Voluptuous concubine. Such words conjure up images. They go together. If you believe in having

concubines, there is no sense in having a concubine who is not voluptuous. So you expect to have a word such as voluptuous go along with concubine. There is some congruity in putting those two words together. Great authors do this all the time.

However, we find in the work of our author today, the author of *The Disillusioned African*, another technique. I have read quite a number of authors, so you must believe me when I say that few explore the art of bringing together or collocating words which are strange bedfellows to surprise the reader and produce a powerful effect. Collocating words which are clearly not meant or expected to be together, that's what I call the power of *collocational incongruity* in Nyamnjoh work. Collocational incongruity involves putting together conceptually unrelated words, making them relatives after all.

I'll give you a few examples of the use of collocational incongruity and the effect it can have on the reader.

Nyamnjoh uses the word capitalist to go with impunity to describe how people in Africa seek power to empty public coffers into private pockets to pursue personal



goals with “capitalist impunity.” Two words are joined strongly to convey that capitalism has these effects. Impunity and capitalist together become a “political mosquito.” The context is this: I’d hate to pick a quarrel with anyone in power having been treated like a political mosquito before!

When we think of a mosquito we think of its bite, the pain, the blood sucking and the malaria legacy it leaves. When you take all of these and put them in a political context, then you know what a political mosquito is. And indeed expressing it like this is more powerful than using conventional language.

In ordinary language, something that is public cannot logically be private at the same time, or can it? When something is public you don't expect it to be private. In the west public ownership is characterised by the fact that the property belongs to government and only to government. But in Africa, Nyamnjoh uses two words together to tell us that companies and parastatals are characterised by public private ownership as those in power siphon the revenue from public enterprises into private pockets. No wonder such corporations in our country Cameroon are known as parapublics. And what does this mean? This means that in many of these companies, which generate quite a lot of profits, some of the profits go to government but most are para. A business that is public and yet private can only exist in Africa. It spells misappropriation and Nyamnjoh captures this syndrome very well by the use of what I have referred to as collocational incongruity.

One more example, my friends. Nyamnjoh refers to the shanty towns in our cities as “urban villages,” so you imagine a village transported to the city and you begin to conjure up an image of what he is talking about. He then goes on to refer to the same “urban villages,” these slums in our cities, as “menstruating ghettos.” Again the collocation of menstruation and ghettos gives you so much a sense of the situation of these slums that you really don't need anything else.

Because my role was limited to commenting and I have commented, I think I should allow my guest speakers to go on and speak, hoping I will be given the opportunity as Chair to conclude. If not, you’ll have a disillusioned Chumbow on your hands.

## **2. Literature and national consciousness by guest speaker Dr. Talla Kashim**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I feel greatly honoured and privileged to have been invited by the organisers to address you at this book launch.

We have gathered here to launch the book titled *The Disillusioned African*. It focuses on the Cameroonian predicament which, put very simply, is the lack of national consciousness. I wanted to briefly mention how Francis Nyamnjoh as a creative writer has used the medium of the novel to promote the growth of Cameroonian national consciousness.

Literature has been generally defined as works of art expressed in words which deal with the thoughts, ideas, and concepts of a people. In other words, literature is the expression and product of culture. People of the same culture tend to share a common language and a common literature, thus shared values, assumptions, world views and other fundamental elements of culture help to determine the separateness and autonomy of a particular literature.

The Ghanaian philosopher William Emmanuel Abraham puts literature into two categories – practical and pure. According to him practical literature is intended to influence human behaviour while pure literature is concerned with the decadent philosophy of art for art's sake.

Other scholars adopt Abraham's parameters but they seem to prefer the more flamboyant terms commitment and privatism. This classification of literature automatically raises the issue of the writer's responsibility to his society.

As far as African literature is concerned, the creative writer has the responsibility to make her or his work relevant to society and its concerns. Any African writer who abdicates this responsibility is seen as unimaginative, monotonous and banal. His work will have no source, no rearing, no direction. In fact he will be as irrelevant as the man in Chinua Achebe's proverb, who leaves his burning house to chase a rat fleeing from the flames.

As you all know, I'm not used to talking this short, but since I've another commitment after this one, I must be off. As Prof. Chumbow has indicated, and the

other speakers will elaborate, Francis Nyamnjoh makes himself relevant to the development of Cameroonian and African consciousness. See for yourself when you read *The Disillusioned African*. See how you find yourself, ourselves, within the novel.

### **3. African unionism by guest speaker George Ngwane**

Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to start with a quotation from the book *The Disillusioned African*.

No one would deny that the way to independence in Africa was and has remained rough. Call it flag independence if that pleases your subversive cynicism. In one particular country, the struggle for independence was most violent, tiring and demanding. People were mobilised right from the grassroots to support nationalism with all their might. Peasants were called upon to sacrifice body and soul and win for themselves a place in the future years of democratic abundance. Witchdoctors were asked to use their powers to chase the whiteman away, and diviners were commissioned to consult the ancestors and say precisely when the country would be free for blacks to rule. In fact, all were invited to sacrifice past and present displeasure for future grandeur and plenty. At last, their struggles bore fruit, and what has come to be known as "flag independence" was granted. The white Masked Dancers withdrew to the background and were replaced by their shadows, the black pawns. The dance of the puppets was on.

Indeed Africa refused to concretise even that flag independence when the divergent views on African unity between the Casablanca powers and the Monrovia powers failed to be reconciled during the birth of the Organisation of African Unity in May 1963.

When we became independent, we thought we had won a battle. But a war was lurking on the horizon. Only a strong and united Africa could wage war against lacklustre leadership and neo-colonial exploitation. The war needed people with the vision of Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Tom Mboya and Amílcar Cabral to give Africa a seat of honour in the hall of development. Without a united continental platform, as Africans we became dispossessed. Being dispossessed, we became subordinates. Being subordinates, we were eliminated from our own history. And without a sense of history, which is knowing where we came from, as Africans we lost our sense of direction, which is knowing where we are going. Since then we have attempted to develop Africa out of the history of Europe and America and primarily for the benefit of Europe and America, rather than out of the history of Africa for the



prime benefit of Africa. We have attempted to develop political, economic, and cultural models in Africa out of models from the west and not ones conceived by us.

No wonder therefore that Francis Nyamnjoh complains, "There is western influence everywhere." This influence is so successful that teachers have to carry out field trips with students in Africa partly to bring their own country home to them. Parents sacrifice for their children to acquire values and an education alien to their

***They say we are doomed and bound to remain in this continent where begging from the World Bank has become an economic art and borrowing from the IMF is considered a political victory, yet neither the World Bank nor the IMF has saved Africa from our economic epilepsy.***

culture. Students at secondary schools recite the rise and fall of Fredrick the Great of Prussia, Catherine the Great of Russia, Bismarck of Germany, and Napoleon the Great of France without remembering the names of the unsung heroes and uncanonised saints of Africa. Our educated elites excel in Elizabethan Literature, uphold Victorian Values and remember with connived heartfulness the good old days when they could recite all volumes of Shakespeare.

"Ask any African leader," writes Francis Nyamnjoh, "to name the ethnic groups that constitute his country, and he wouldn't be exact on anything. [...] Ask him to name the major traditional kings in his country and he will betray an ignorance, unpardonable even to foreigners. But ask him to name English or French kings and queens since the inception of monarchy, and he would score a hundred and ten percent."

Ladies and gentlemen, we had independence without being free, without resisting acculturation. According to the historian Basil Davidson, the Japanese resisted western invasion and modernized within their own cultural heritage. They grew hostile to western influence and closed up their islands to outside contact. Named after a Japanese king, the Meichi revolution of 1867 was a veritable revolution of structure and method, modernising the country's political, economic and social aspects in accordance with the ancient teachings of Japanese culture. Japan remained free and modernised. She industrialised from a basis in her culture and history. And we all

know what Japan is today. Even after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki disasters, she can still trade war with peevish America.

Witness to that respect for cultural history, can you still say you do not know why Africa is economically the most powerless continent of the world? Africa is a continent of contradictions – one with the greatest wealth and surrounded by the greatest poverty. Its people are dynamic yet are led by what Wole Soyinka calls an anachronistic bunch of social predators.

The mirage of Europe's material prestige and power still blinds our vision. It must be worth noting, however, that some of the prisoners or pioneers of African freedom believed once upon a time that an African model for a modern future was possible and workable. They believed that the achievements of Africa's past must be relevant to Africa's present and future as are the achievements of Britain's history relevant to Britain's present and future.

But alas, they were slain in cold blood by their own fellow countrymen in conspiracy with neo-colonialists. Their visions were cut midway by the swelling ranks of Afro pessimists and Afro sceptics who see this continent as a product of colonialism and an extension of neo-colonialism.

Any attempt to build Africa's future from a past is regarded by them as naively romantic and downright silly. Brainwashed and even whitewashed, they say Africa has gone so far in her journey toward modernisation that she cannot afford to return and be baptised with the waters of tradition.

I therefore agree with Nyamnjoh when he says, "The African ulcer is a chronic condition that calls for more than individual sacrifices." The cross is too heavy and the path to Calvary too long and thorny for the single minded enthusiasm of a lone crusader. It needs the collective energy of an entire people, driven by mass outrage and sense of possibility.

Indeed no African country individually can have any serious meaningful impact on the world scene. Yesterday the cry was for Pan Africanism which is a concept of looking backwards for our identity. As I see it today the task of *The Disillusioned African* is to embark on the messianic journey to what I call African unionism.

Pan Africanism was founded on a romantic image of identity, and African unionism should be born of the realistic value of survival. Pan Africanism according to Colin Legum flowed out of the experience of widely dispersed peoples who felt discriminated against. As I see it, African unionism flows out of the challenge of a collective resourceful people who are capable of asserting their world view. African unionism is the podium from which we can render ourselves both the dignity and the development that the continent and its peoples deserve.

Pan Africanism permitted us to see the world as Africans. It was like a continental philosophy that tended to obliterate national parochialism. But the rise of nationalism blocked Pan Africanism and we started seeing ourselves as Congolese, as Ghanaians, as Kenyans, and as Egyptians, and the African identity became blurred.

African unionism can accommodate our national identities and continental unity. We shall therefore start seeing ourselves as Congolese Africans, Ghanaian Africans, Egyptian Africans, and Kenyan Africans.

*We know of western influence, which is rooted in their paternalistic urge to fashion the political, cultural, social and economic order of Africa after their consumption pattern.*

And in that the African identity could be rekindled, but African unionism could be incomplete without the introduction of a unique continental language and a belief system that binds the African people.

I should be able in the near future to speak to you in a language which the Organisation of African Union (OAU) should decree for all Africans, so that our thinking processes could be linked up to our development processes.

Because the greatest colonialism we have suffered is colonialism of the mentality. We need a new Afro-vision, a new African renaissance, to bring better quality of life and more dignity to black people through improved governance, efficient economies and greater freedoms on and of the African continent.

Faced with ideological interest, it is time we stop complaining and start defining the African interest. We know of the American interest, which is one of America for the Americans and believing that what is good for her is good for the world. We know of

the French interest which is one of transforming all her French speaking African colonies into farmyards.

Were I a Frenchman, I would have voted for Jean Marie Le Pen because as he believes in the adage of “la France pour les français,” so I believe in the adage of “l’Afrique pour les Africains.” We know of western influence, which is rooted in a

*African unionism is consciousness of looking backward for our identity, looking forward for progress, and working inward and onward for development.*

paternalistic urge to fashion the political, cultural, social and economic order of Africa after western consumption patterns.

In Africa, we are not interested in looking for a road to the moon when we cannot even get to our villages. We are interested in feeding an intra-African trade, in cultivating an appropriate democracy that meets modern aspirations and traditional virtues. We are interested in rallying around the flag of the OAU. We need trade, not aid. We need tractors not tanks. We need collective self reliance, not condescending charity.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Africa should resist becoming the laboratory of alien models and plastic civilisation. We should resist becoming governed. We should resist becoming prisoners of dependency and bad governance. For the most part, the leadership of Africa today is not the one Africans deserve. Leadership today is saddled with pawns and puppets who are making Africa the laughing stock of the world.

Africa can only be what Africans want it to be. A new generation of African leaders has to emerge – one inspired by the vision of Nkrumah, the determination of Lumumba, the dynamism of Julius Nyerere.

As we march into the next Millennium, let us be armed with the heroic shields of democracy and the patriotic spears of development. And like one people with one destiny, let us fight the war for African unionism.

The raging of missiles and exploding of mortar shells is turning our African skies into clouds of terror and cauldrons of horror. Other battles must be fought, not tomorrow, and not against ourselves, but against poverty, disease, bad governance and unbridled exploitation.

With our sanzas<sup>1</sup> and balafons, with our koras and reeds, let peace and the rhythmic polyphony of African unionism be played and the echoes of the music be heard from Karoo Plateau in South Africa to Mount Tahat in Algeria. Let the trumpet of African unionism blast and the lustre of African communalism shine from the Lompoul Dunes of Senegal to the Cameroonian Grassfields to the Ogo Highlands of Somalia, that Africans may know the richness of their continent and cultures.

If Africa is the continent that gave birth to human civilisation in the days before yesterday, then

Africa is the continent that will give hope to human civilisation the days after tomorrow.

All we need is to hold our hand today around the face of African unionism and our despair will turn into hope and our dreams into reality.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the task of all of us including Francis Nyamnjoh and *The Disillusioned African*. Africa come back home!



<sup>1</sup> [www.africanmusica.org/instruments/inglese/idiofoni/Sanza.htm](http://www.africanmusica.org/instruments/inglese/idiofoni/Sanza.htm)

#### 4. Transforming the way we see ourselves by guest speaker Asonglefac Nkemleke

When I got to know about *The Disillusioned African* by Francis Nyamnjoh, I started asking myself, "What the hell is he talking about?" Thank God I was able to read the book before today. There are books, and then there is *The Disillusioned African*, which is not just a book. It is a piece of art worth reading and digesting. It is like an eerie call. It is like reality revealed.

The disillusioned African, for which this novel is named, is not just every Blackman, but every human being deprived of wholesome life by self-seeking leadership. Nyamnjoh's disillusioned African attempts to distinguish falsehood from truth, reality from mirage, and welfare for the teeming thousands from self aggrandisement.

We cannot continue to blame other people for our misgivings and our disillusionment. The Whiteman might have enslaved us, the Whiteman might have colonised us, and the Whiteman might have raped our economy, taken away our wealth, and left us disillusioned, but he did not do so alone. Our ancestors have a share of the blame. Post independent African leaders also have a share of the blame.

Our leadership can ostracise us. Our leadership can lock us up, shoot us and force us into exile, but it cannot say no to our Whiteman. What a pity! But thank God we have Nyamnjoh to remind us about who we are.

The blood which runs through our veins is the same blood that runs through the veins of the Whiteman. But the benumbed African shies away from his own shadow. We let ourselves be hunted and shaped by inferiority complexes. And we hunger after material luxuries that leave us spiritually poor.

We prefer our vacations in five star hotel suites and exotic western holiday resorts, even if those who breastfed us have no roof over their heads. Inebriated by power, we withdraw like snails into our shells. We accept guns without the technology of producing them. We rule by dividing our peoples into individual tribes. Tribalism has become a national indeed an African cankerworm, eating into the very fabric of our beautiful multicultural societies.

On June 11, 1983, from the heart of Cameroon's national capital, President Paul Biya told the nation that it was necessary for him to state loud and clear that though he was born in the centre he is the President of all Cameroonians.

Well and good. No one quarrels with that. We all have our places of birth, we all have our villages, we all have our divisions and we all have our provinces. And we all have Cameroon. Mr Biya in 1983 was less than a year in power; he was canvassing support from the four corners of the land. That is why he sounded this note of warning.

"It would be a dangerous illusion for some of our fellow countrymen to pretend to have special rights and privileges, especially in the provinces, of appointment to important duties on grounds other than competence and commitment to service of the state and loyalty and allegiance to national institutions. The appointed must, by example, show and spread duty, consciousness and respect for the laws of the republic."

He was addressing the people of the centre south province on June 11, 1983. Excellent talk, meaningful pronouncement. If only the letter and spirit of that talk, coming from a leader who found it difficult to emerge from his predecessor's large shadow, had been respected. Cameroonians took him for his words and turned their backs to more mundane things. When they looked up again, a year or so later, it was virtually too late. At one point, we all remember that of 49 administrative units in the great triangle, at least 27 were under direct authority of the same people. Many parastatals were in the same hands. The language began to change. There was supposed to be no discrimination among Cameroonians, but as we all know there are Cameroonians and Cameroonians apart. There is the ruling class if not the ruling tribe, and then there is the ruled. This spirit is like that cankerworm, which has eaten through and through all of us.

Today we see ourselves more as Aghems, Bafaws, Bangwas, Bakossis, Mbos, Orokos, Nsunglis, Mentans and what have you... Yet, these are but insignificant tribal groups whose offspring are yet to enter the corridor of power. These are the ruling tribes of the land that are told to be patient. "Be patient, friends, your turn is yet to come."

These are the insignificant tribes who are constantly reminded, "Hey, man, don't you know that whatever you do, you are not yet able to wear a Western suit, let alone your tribal loincloth."

The African wallows in mediocrity, glorifies mediocrity, celebrates mediocrity and makes it part and parcel of himself. Mediocrity has become the vector of paternalism. Yes, some are people permanently on the asking and other people are meant to work the earth and produce wealth, which of course is taken away by the privileged class. The same privileged few, who by commission or omission, stepped into the colonial master's shoes when the tide turned.

Francis Nyamnjoh has dreamed our common dream. He has lived our common reality. It should be clear to all of us now and as A.M. Babu says, in his postscript to Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, "...it becomes absolutely clear that the only way out of our current impasse is through a revolutionary path -- a complete break with the system which is responsible for all our past and present misery."

Africa and Africans deserve much better than promises and band aids. We know who our enemies are, and we know where we went wrong. Only we can end the stereotypes attached to Africans and remake Africa.

Africa, where are you? Africans, what are our contributions to wholesome life? Africans, who are you?

I am simply Asonglefac Nkemeleke.

Thank you.

## **5. How an idealistic disparager uses letters to communicate by guest speaker Dr. Nalova Lyongo**

One of the things I took from *The Disillusioned African* leaving aside the tragic messages was the narrator's answer to a teenager who asked him the following question: "In Africa you live in treetops, don't you?" And he answered, "Yes, and the British Embassy is in the tree next door."



This is simply to give you a taste of the humour one finds in the midst of despairing situations in *The Disillusioned African*. The novel is essentially a satire, and the humour that of a satirist.

When we had the Anglophone Cameroon writing conference in 1993, I spoke about how our writers should free themselves of the feelings of despair and of victimhood that characterise our literature.

For in a situation of despair, what usually happens is two things. Either the oppression or victimisation is solved through revolution or war; that's violence. Or else it lingers on and when it lingers on victims become focussed on what they do not have and take for granted or even forget what they do have.

And if that happens also to our writers, then we are victims. Victimisation cannot be a positive heritage for any people, whether Anglophone Cameroonian or African.

Writers have the duty not only to deconstruct but also to reconstruct. At the same time that they deconstruct victimhood, we as readers claim our rights to find a reconstruction of a heritage. And I think this is the significance of *The Disillusioned African*.

Let me present to you the book. We have been talking in almost theoretical terms about this travelogue when the narrator starts to describe the things he sees about daily life in London. And of course there are exaggerations, but did the Europeans not exaggerate about our life? Anyway this is an inherent problem of a travelogue in the sense that you are using your own culture to judge a foreign culture.

There is bound to be the problem of relativity because those values cannot make sense in the same way as your local values. That's one good thing Nyamnjoh has done, to parody some things Europeans think about Africa. In so doing, he deconstructs and reconstructs. He demystifies Europe.

He has revisited an old theme of the scholar in Europe. The novels we had seen before usually depicted scholars who were completely lured by the attractions of Europe – all the niches, all the culture, etc.

But in the case of Nyamnjoh's novel, we are attracted by the power of the disillusioned African who is the narrator, Charles Keba, and struck by how he looks

objectively at what is happening in Europe and then tries to see the relevance of that culture which Africans have inherited.

Most who have written about this theme have done so in a straightforward narrative style. But Nyamnjoh chooses the letter. In fact it is a long monologue because Charles writes four long letters and there is no reply. The fifth letter is the only reply we get in the book, but the addresser addresses the readers, not Charles. In other words we go through four letters to which nobody replies. So what's the point? Why not have straightforward narration? Why use the letter?

Here again are other innovations on the part of the writer who uses a genre, the letter, which is the ultimate form in which anybody can express deep emotions, be they about tragic or very happy events.

The letter has a specific addressee, which makes the writer of the letter confident enough to express those things close to his or her heart. It is a form which also commands the reader's attention. As soon as you open a letter, from the greeting to the closing, you are held spellbound looking for the climactic moment of the message.

The letter, unlike the novel or the play, is a genre which holds your attention and in which the writer compels you to read the letter from start to finish. This form has been used by the greatest writers. Henry Fielding popularised the letter in English literature in his *Pamela* and of course among the African writers you have so many women who have done it, like Mariama Bâ. It is said that when the writer is at her weakest moment, when she is unable to communicate with others, she goes back to the letter. The letter is a moment of withdrawal. It is a private moment of reflection and reinsertion and this is what Nyamnjoh has decided to use to communicate the problems his writer suffers.

The letter has a capacity for suspense and also for anticipation. It is a tool for the satirist and for the aggrieved person who is able to seize the occasion for you to listen to whatever complaint you have to make.

Charles Keba, the narrator and main character, the letter writer in the novel, is aggrieved about so many things. Letters become the vehicle through which he wrestles with his grievances. For example, previous speakers referred to how he writes about the image of people milking Africa as if the continent were a cow. The narrator pointed

out that the person doing the milking couldn't stop even though the cow had ceased to yield. He refers to the majority of Africans as miserable creatures with ticks clinging onto them and biting into their flesh. In some of the passages he refers to Africa as a garment soiled in a million spots.

He goes on to talk about the democratic process saying the debate today is not that of the merits or demerits of multipartism or monopartism, but how to get democratic participation. Keba suggests that "democracy is an attitude of mind, a way of life, a culture." It is easier to claim democratic credentials than to show proof of it. Democracy is merely a tool and we can use a tool to hammer out any shape. Any shape does not necessarily mean a democratic shape.

Charles Keba is equally aggrieved by the problem of tribalism and shows us that tribalism or ethnicism as he calls it is a construct of a westernised elite. He talks about the several faces beyond the mask that want tribalism and exploit tribalism. It is not necessarily the Whiteman who causes all the problems. At the bottom of page 156, he looks at the intelligentsia, the westernised elite, as the biggest tribe in Africa.

Although drawn from the various ethnic groups, the ruling intelligentsia in Africa, thanks to their westernised views and lifestyles, and thanks to the unanimous adoption of the stomach as their only political compass, have constituted themselves into an all powerful ethnic group, the only one which practices negative tribalism. Take away from power the westernised few, and there will be no tribalism as a danger in Africa. But since this is impossible, given the firm grip on society of the westernised few, the only solution is to set the évolués at each other's throats through adopting the politics of division epitomised by multipartism. In advocating this, I am not to be seen to endorse the view that multipartism would necessarily solve Africa's problems; but in a continent where the intelligentsia has a greedy obsession for high office, they might well be given the absolute opportunity to self-destruct. It is only in a divided westernised few that the marginalised of ethnic Africa have a chance. Thus in a way, the Politics of Unity is not what Africans need. If monopartism has had the privilege to fail for three decades, there is no reason why its proponents should be too selfish to give multipartism a chance, if only to fail as well.

He looks at the intelligentsia as an ethnic group that promotes tribalism for political and personal gain.

As an intelligent satirist, he also goes back to the peasants, the peasants whom he considers as people living in the land of the forgotten. He talks about several things ranging from religion to politics to health. I cannot resist reading one more passage, when he talks about religion for instance and asks very important questions. Here Nyamnjoh is talking about the Christian religion.

What a stigmatised God this must be, to whom Africans are forced to go in a particular way following a preselected footpath. Did the Almighty prescribe wheat and wine from the

vineyards of Europe as the only symbolic substitutes of the body and blood of the slain Lamb of God? If He did, was He conscious of the effects this could have on the depleted economies of those countries that don't produce wheat and grapes? Does it mean that the Catholic Mass could come to an end were the world to cease production of wheat and grapes? What is wrong with bread made from maize? or with wine made from the palm of raffia? Just why are God's Polished Pillars on earth so wicked that they slaughter our miserable peasants then proceed to chop off their arms and limbs? Hasn't the African died enough? Isn't the peasant dead and buried yet?

And he goes on with these rhetorical questions, for this is part of the technique of the satirist at work, and there are several such passages in the novel.

After all the criticism in the novel, you come to Charles' fourth and last letter in which he is at the height of his optimism. He is enthusiastic about the change that is going to take place. He explains how the tyrant has been cornered and how we have reached a situation where the tyrant will be removed from power.

African tyranny he says is like a flame in the storm. Its days are numbered by the seconds. At this moment, when the character is at the height of his optimism, he decides to go to Zaire. On the day he arrives in Zaire, one of the opposition leaders also arrives in the country. What does Charles find? That Mobutu's forces are out with grenades and guns and more. Our letter writer is caught in a violent act and loses one of his limbs. He is obliged to flee Zaire without accomplishing his mission. He continues to Cameroon, with all his messages of revolution and hope. Upon his arrival in the country, he finds the Social Democratic Front (SDF) party being launched. In his characteristic style, he goes to the heart of the drama. Six people are killed. Charles loses a second limb. With no arms, he tries to recover, and we don't see any more letters from him. We only come to the final letter written by his friend, not to Charles but to the reader. This friend explains to the reader that even though he had promised not to share the letters Charles had written him, he later realized times had changed and that he should release them. In a flashback we are then told that what we had been reading were letters destined to him and that he had decided to publicise the letters.

With this revelation, we realise that letters – a private medium – were used as a public medium of protest. The person we were reading, Charles, was the authority. I am writing, therefore I exist. I write, therefore I am. And if you do not write then you

are not. But then when we don't get another letter from our hero, you wonder about all the hopefulness in last letter.

The elimination of his voice by his reader to us as readers underscores the disillusionment we find in the title. Finally, the writer we've been reading does not exist. It is tantamount to killing the major character in the novel. Somebody else reports what he is doing, and what does he report?

What Charles did was return to his community of Menchum to work with the peasants to transform them from recreators of traditional dancing – as he says to people – into persons more conscious of their economic potential. You know, people who would become aware of the laziness of city people and influence political change and political progress. In other words, he was working to politicise the peasants. Again, we are left with utopian messages. There is a struggle between the point of view of the friend who believes this can never happen and the capacity for persistence to experience adversity.

We are left in a dilemma. I think the author shows us that you have to go the path to the peasants, when Charles says to hell with the SDF and to hell with the opposition. They are concerned with the eaters, not the eating. The war of the stomachs continues.

However, when you go back and say you are going to work with the peasants, to what extent are the peasants insulated? How free are they from all the problems people in the city suffer? How much idealism can you see in the noble savages!? To what extent is Charles going to succeed?

I will end by saying that I think a major contribution of this novel we have been discussing today is in technique. The author has combined the features of the travelogue with the features of epistolary fiction. He has combined a very public medium with a very private one, letting his text benefit from the ironies that go with using something meant for private consumption in public consumption.

At the same time he has made us think about what we the educated ones have done with tribalism and how much we have exploited the ethnic divisions in our towns for leadership purposes. To move away from that, we must look to the peasants, politicise them and bring them into a new awareness of their own potentials, empower

them to make political decisions. Doing so is complex and raises other problems, as peasants are not living in enclaves. Peasants live with us and you can see what is happening to them today when politicians decide to politicise them.

*The Disillusioned African* leaves us thinking about these problems. The main character has been beaten, but he hasn't despaired. We should not despair and our writers should not despair.

You will raise more questions and it is up to us to continue to think about the questions and problems and possible responses and actions.

*Thanks to Franca Mbu for the transcriptions that enabled the sharing of these remarks with those who were not physically present at the 1995 launch ceremony of The Disillusioned African.*