Pentecostal Hubris as Parable for the Theatre

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The Convert
by Francis Nyamnjoh
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Francis B. Nyamnjoh's academic and creative itinerary has embraced a wide range of subjects and moods. The topography of *Mind Searching* (Kucena 1991) and its sequel, *The Disillusioned African* (Nooremac Press 1995), for instance, fundamentally explore fragmented landscapes in which ethnic consciousness, bigotry, exclusivist sentiments and narrow-minded irredentism have become the determinants of an evolving material culture.

These abnormalities have given rise to the institutional and systemic defacements ingrained in the aberrant mode of national intercourse and further adumbrated by sham-democratization circuses that have brought massive concussions to the aboriginal, neo-colonial Cameroonian state structure. The lack of vision of successive francophone leaders and their legendary obduracy to utilize the gifts and gains of Re-Unification have rendered the federation artificial in structure and content.[1] Clearly, then, the idealism of Re-Unification has been imprisoned in an imploding time-capsule.

Like most expository prose writers and socio-cultural activists, Nyamnjoh has tried to observe, as closely and objectively as possible, the character, the patterns, and dynamics of the evolution of the killer-incisors of the Gaullist power structure in Cameroonian politics; to revisit old ideas and beliefs in line with new findings and realities in his polemical and scholarly writings.[2] By targeting the mediocre calibre of the national bourgeoisie emerging from the womb of the Federal behemoth since 1972, the satirical novelist of *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African*, in true caricatural frenzy, was taking a poke at the idiocy of political leadership (francophone and anglophone) in which the nation's historical journey has been one of constant omissions and ineffectualites.

But, although the combative and utilitarian aspects of these novels were recognized and identified, *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African* manifest no ideological commitment. At the core of the implicit philosophy of Nyamnjoh's noves is the literary manifesto that bourgeois society has not only got to liberate itself and its productive powers from prebendal hubris and distortion, it also has to liberate these same productive capacities from their present prostration.

Conflict, which by its modus operandi suggests contrast, is important to Nyamnjoh's social novels; but it is even more vital to the unity of dramatic structure of *The Convert*, for it reinforces the exploration of the complex and ambiguous relationship between reality and illusion in the theatre.

In *The Convert* - set in Gaborone, Botswana - Nyamnjoh is fascinated with the ethically complex issue of Christian fundamentalism. The preoccupations of members of the Ultimate Church of Christ for better or worse has been the focus of his play.

Whereas in *Mind Searching* and *The Disillusioned African*, the plot is *told*, in *The Convert* it develops before the eyes and ears of the audience with a sense of *now-ness*. The need stemming from performance has affected plot structure in that it has obviously regulated the playwright's arrangement and grouping of his characters and the actions arising thereform. The social problems and psychological pressures which give rise to the born-again phenomenon and the strong addiction of fundamentalist, freak religions are given full rein in *The Convert*.

The fictional Ultimate Church of Christ provides a window through which to appraise the explosion of Pentecostal belief system tapping into the deep veins of human desperation. And, since people in the theatre often define themselves by the way they handle challenge and respond to life, their hopes, their fears and their foibles, it is not surprising that *The Convert* would spring from a plot abounding with so much tension and pathos and containing so many memorable scenes of religious angst and vivid eschatological images of suffering.

Nyamnjoh's play begins with an imbalance of forces resulting in the loss of equilibrium by the tragic heroine, Charity, who seems to have repudiated material goods and sensual pleasures. The uniqueness of the drama as a performed literary art has a profound impact on structure and meaning:

> CHARITY: I abused my flesh in every way as I thought myself queen of the world. I smoked cannabis, downed beer, took strong drinks, Visited medicine men and adorned myself with charms and amulets; I bought the latest dresses in fashion and chased after men to make money. As the most famous girl in town, I drove in the latest cars. Mercedes, BMW, Pajero, Hyundai, you name them. I frequented the best chicken parlours and sampled the thickest wallets in hotels of exceeding comfort. Nothing ever pricked my conscience that what I did was wrong. For I was always in time to confess my sins on Saturday in preparation for Sunday mass, where I was a permanent and privileged communicant. For I knew the priests with some of whom I smiled deep.
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> CHORUS: The Devil at work. What a devious creature.
>
> CHARITY: Then, most suddenly, most unexpectedly, I began to Reap what I sowed. My beauty began to wilt. I had used bleaching creams without knowing of their ugly and harmful side effects. I had hopped into bed with Tom, Dick and Harry, paying scant attention to the ills of lust. Fear took hold of me. But that was just the beginning. I failed my finalsin college and my parents died of grief. My *sugar daddies* fled when my beauty retired. For a year or two I was drained by pain, humbled by hunger and mastered by fear. But then came a glimmer of hope from an angle I least expected
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> CHORUS: Alleluia, Praise the Lord.
>
> CHARITY: Jesus Christ offered me his bosom and tendered me the key to his heavenly mansion. I seized it with vigour and joy; for I thought I was lost. But I had been found. May the Lord be praised (*The Convert*, 12, 13)

The Convert has its internal laws and its own framework, which gives it shape, strength and meaning. There is a deep, engaging humanism that pervades Nyamnjoh's play but it is an emblematic humanism; to speak analogously, of the Aeschylean colouration.

Perspective in the drama is derived from the events, the conflicts and the characters involved in them, all of which have been conveyed by dialogues and non-verbal action of the dramatis personae. The playwright's blend of styles - satiric commentary, tense confrontation, and heightened ritualistic comments - challenge not only audiences but production teams as well.

In more technical terms, Nyamnjoh has paid attention to plot, character and theme. His use of choric elements, stage objects, nightmare visions, mimes and gestures in the theatre to give form to his social vision has been most effective

The theatre does not pretend to be a factual correspondence to human nature and norms. Within the cosmology of *The Convert* itself, we are primarily and unremittingly concerned with the truth of coherence, with how the parts cohere into a total, meaningful pattern. That is the truest epiphany of the theatre as a *LIE*.

Notes

1 See Richard Joseph, *Gaullist Africa: Cameroon under Ahmadou Ahidjo* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing House, 1978) and Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh, *Negotiating an Anglophone Identity: A Study of the Politics of Recognition and Representation in Cameroon,* vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

2 See ibid. and Francis Nyamnjoh, "Cameroon: A country united by ethnic ambition and difference," *African Affairs,* Vol. 98, No. 390 (1999), 1010-108.