

# Introduction

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What does it mean to be a Cameroonian woman and to write in English? Makuchi is a Beba woman from Cameroon in Central Africa. She writes in English: not the King's English, not Gandhi's English nor Uncle Sam's English. What is it like, writing in English in a former British colony? Is that experience like putting on a straitjacket bequeathed to the Beba by the British colonizers of West Cameroon? Is the continuing use of Western languages as well as Western standards, religious beliefs, and technologies in former colonies such as Cameroon a measure of the success of colonization? Has the unique Beba perspective on the world been forever silenced by the global postcolonial interests whose watchdog agencies speak for Cameroonians, using the abstract universalist language that inevitably disfigures and shortchanges those they describe?

The short stories in this collection by Makuchi are a foil to such disfigurement. The reader will find no abstract universalist terms here, none of the language one finds in reports on Cameroon by United Nations commissions or the International Monetary Fund. These portraits of Cameroonians bring the reader directly into the heart of the postcolonial world, into the hearts of people. Makuchi's characters, like all

Cameroonians, have been left to deal with colonization's remnants and the ever-present neocolonial umbilical cord that connects Cameroon to both of its former colonizers, England and France. The characters Makuchi creates are survivors; they are scrappy and they are strong, especially the women. As we enter their world and see the neocolonial forces of gargantuan proportions that shape their daily living, Makuchi's pen guides us into a new literary space. She wields her pen like a pioneer's axe in the forest, clearing new spaces in literary discourse that invite us to consider realities we would otherwise never know. And as we read, Makuchi uproots her people from silence and transplants them into new soil, staking out new possibilities for growth, for expression.

It is now nearly forty years since Cameroon gained independence from France and England and many more years since the departure of Germany, the first European power to colonize Cameroon.<sup>1</sup> When representatives of the major European nations, the United States, and the Ottoman Empire gathered around a conference table in Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century to facilitate European penetration of West Africa, there had not yet been time for Africa to recover—if ever she could—from the loss of millions who had been enslaved and taken to the New World.<sup>2</sup> Now the pact signed at the 1885 Conference of Berlin would signal yet another major disruption for the continent: colonization.<sup>3</sup> Colonial empires built on the African continent by Western powers, propelled by their hunger for raw materials and new markets for their manufactured goods, would shatter the fragile balance between humans and the environment fundamental to the survival of small cultures that characterized much of the continent's social organization for thousands of years.

Makuchi's stories are written in English for the simple reason that the Western part of Cameroon came under British jurisdiction after World War I.<sup>4</sup> Before the relatively late

implantation of (mainly mission) schools in the British Cameroons, the verbal arts of Makuchi's Beba people were expressed in the Beba language. The spread of Euro-literature and the growth of literacy displaced local oral traditions. The tales, riddles, and legends that had nourished generations were displaced by Chaucer and Shakespeare taught by Europeans like the nuns at Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School in Bamenda. Makuchi's encounter with Euro-literature at Our Lady of Lourdes would never have occurred had it not been for her mother's vision. Makuchi's mother did not know what kind of world awaited her daughter, but she did know it would be nothing like her own simple farming existence. She knew this new world would require literacy, education, and knowledge of Western ways. So she coaxed even more crops from the land to feed her sons and daughters so that her husband's mission school salary could be used to pay boarding school fees for the children. At boarding school, later at Cameroon's flagship university at Yaoundé, and finally at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, Makuchi became the scholar her mother somehow knew she would be. Not content with a doctorate in African Literatures, Makuchi later earned a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at McGill, the first Beba woman to earn two doctorates.

Cameroon is the only African country to have two European official languages, in contrast with most other African countries where either French or English, but not both, became the official language at independence.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, an imbalance between French and English in Cameroon due to population size and French postcolonial cultural policy. The English-speaking part of the country, which has only one-quarter of the population, does not face the same pressures from its former colonizer as does its French-speaking counterpart from France. Since Cameroon's independence in 1960, France has been extensively involved in continuing to pro-

mote its own culture and education system in francophone Cameroon.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere is French advocacy more evident than at the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon's capital. Bilingual in theory, it was conceived as a place where every student would be able to take any course in either English or French, yet the balance between the two languages weighs heavily in favor of French. As a result, it is the students from West Cameroon, like Makuchi, who become bilingual.<sup>7</sup> In the process they discover what it means to be part of a minority in their own country.<sup>8</sup> They learn that the word "anglophone" has become an insult, used by many, like the shopkeeper in the short story "Market Scene," as the derogatory equivalent of "foreigner" ("tu dois être anglophone . . . Pars, anglose . . . go! go witti your baluck, anglose!"). Little wonder then that in the 1980s students naturally gravitated toward the small English-language intellectual community that was emerging in the capital.<sup>9</sup>

Cameroon's literature in French was launched essentially after World War II in France, where young writers such as Mongo Beti and Ferdinand Oyono wrote anticolonial novels during their student years. Cameroon's anglophone literature was also launched abroad, but in the neighboring British colony of Nigeria, where writers such as Sankie Maimo and Vincent Nchami wrote works that reflected the clash of cultures produced by colonization. As she studied African literatures at the University of Yaoundé, Makuchi perfected her French, encountering few anglophone writers and fewer still women writers in her course of study.<sup>10</sup> While francophone writers had access to one of Africa's first publishing houses, Editions CLE in Yaoundé, little was available for anglophones.<sup>11</sup> Anglophone professors like Bole Butake encouraged budding anglophone writers by founding the student publication *The Mould: A Magazine of Creative Writing*, published by the Department of English at Yaoundé.<sup>12</sup> It was there that Makuchi got her start, publishing a short story in the third

issue.<sup>13</sup> However, during her student years the creative writer would take a back seat to the scholar as Makuchi embarked on a project as part of her graduation requirements for the doctorate. Thanks to her research, the Beba oral tradition has been recorded for the first time.<sup>14</sup>

In *Your Madness, Not Mine*, Makuchi's language is that of Cameroonians—those who are unseen and unheard in official reports, those whose daily lives are reflected in the way they speak. Most Cameroonians speak three or more languages; multilingualism is a fact of daily life. Thus it is simply impossible for Makuchi to create characters that are monolingual.<sup>15</sup> Those who live in the anglophone provinces also use a Pidgin that originally arose in Cameroon to fill the linguistic vacuum that existed between English-speaking Europeans and Africans who spoke their own languages. Its use was limited mainly to trade in precolonial times; since then it has grown in complexity and usefulness.<sup>16</sup> Today it is the vehicle for songs, witticisms, orature, liturgical writings, and sermons and is the most frequently heard language in some parts of Cameroon.<sup>17</sup> When anglophone Cameroonians come to live in Yaoundé, they bring Pidgin, English, and their mother tongues to the linguistic mix in the capital city. In turn they add bits and pieces of French to their own linguistic repertoire. As one of the women in "Market Scene" says, "we had all come a long way from home, we were all in the business of survival." The linguistic mix spoken by Cameroonians in the capital is indeed the language of survival, the language of rural depopulation. Like Sibora's children in "Market Scene," who speak their mother tongue at home, Pidgin with their neighbor, and French—the school language—among themselves, Cameroonians share in the complex linguistic reality of the postcolonial world. Monolingualism is a luxury few can afford in a world where survival requires more than one language. Makuchi is one of the first African writers to not only

allow us to hear the rich linguistic mosaic that characterizes modern Africa, but to also show us how language, class, and power intersect in the postcolonial context.

In *Your Madness, Not Mine*, Western economic interests are far from abstract as we see how lives are deeply affected by decisions made in the boardrooms of Paris, London, or New York. French and Asian logging interests destroy Cameroon's primeval forests in "The Forest Will Claim You Too"—tugging at its social fabric, tearing it as loggers overturn the delicate balance between man and nature. Tearing it so that healers can no longer find the ingredients the forest once provided for their medicines. Tearing it as young women bear "timber babies" fathered by the temporary workers brought in to clear the land. Like the deep marks left on the natural and human order by logging interests, so too does the urban landscape bear the scars of Western economic and cultural dumping. Billboards of the Marlboro Man in "American Lottery" invite passersby into the American dream even as Americans are forsaking tobacco. In Yaoundé, the capital, the lilt of local Bantu languages is scorned for the more progressive-sounding names like Santa Barbara or Dallas. The naming of new neighborhoods for such old U.S. television series reflects the plight of third world television broadcasting, which relies on hand-me-downs because they are the most affordable.

The attraction of the United States comes not so much from the pull of the Marlboro Man, the wealthy Texans of *Dallas*, or other U.S. cultural icons, as it does from the sharp economic decline in Cameroon. The 1990s contrast markedly with the economic boom times of the seventies and eighties, when Cameroon was Africa's success story. Economically crushed in the 1990s, professionals found their incomes reduced by more than half after the devaluation of Cameroon's currency (CFA) and other measures. It was not surprising that Cameroon's intellectual elite should join the African brain

drain currently enjoyed by the United States. Free from the strong attachment to France that characterizes francophone Cameroonians and resentful of the linguistic discrimination they often experienced at home, anglophone Cameroonians were the first to join this exodus. "American Lottery" shows the tremendous pull exerted by the hope for a better life; it also shows an American reality that bears little resemblance to the carefree ways of the Marlboro Man. Coming to the United States means becoming invisible, being defined by a single characteristic—skin color—rather than the complex mass of traits that constitute a person in the Cameroonian context. Coming to the United States means living a symbolic death as the ties to the extended family become more tenuous, expressed only through telephone and internet links. As we see in the liminal poem "Mourning . . . in distant lands," such links serve only to increase the feelings of isolation. Technology does not nurture the African immigrant, nor do the daily encounters with American individualism and racism. Even as the material signs of success accrue to the African immigrant, daily life in the United States is lived as a form of impoverishment.

For many of the characters in *Your Madness, Not Mine*, education is the key to change. Lack of it can mean not only a life of hardship, it can lead to death, as we see in "Slow Poison." In this story ignorance spurs the AIDS epidemic, finding fertile ground in practices and beliefs like the assumption that fat women are free from HIV. The illness destroys not only individuals but society as a whole. The common practice of shunning the infected breaks the ties that normally bind the African family. Education is not, however, a means to the restoration of broken social ties, particularly where women are concerned. The modern educated woman in the story "Your Madness, Not Mine" lacks the autonomy of the simple market trader Mi Ngiembuh in "Bayam-Sellam." While for

her the only escape from the powerlessness of modern marriage is succumbing to rage, the more traditional Mi Ngiembuh finds self-realization—marriage or no marriage. Using the solidarity between market women, she creates a trading empire. The state must eventually bow to the resistance of the women in Makuchi's story, when the devaluation of the CFA franc threatens Mi Ngiembuh's business. The plucky leader of the market women knows how to respond to that threat.<sup>18</sup> Under her guidance, the women strike, bringing trade to a halt and causing the government to declare a state of emergency. Their strength derives from the twin pillars that support women's action: the sacred nature of their work in the production of both life and food.<sup>19</sup> While women's agency was a force to be reckoned with by British colonial administrators, today it is often no match for the pressures emanating from the West.<sup>20</sup> The traditional seat of women's power is hard-pressed to effectively resist the external forces that are shaping and transforming Cameroon. Like traditional women everywhere, the old woman in "The Forest Will Claim You Too" is reduced to powerlessness by her country's neocolonial economic relationship with the West.

Traditional women's agency is not always thwarted nor is it collective, as illustrated by the crafty grandmother in "Election Fever," quietly helping herself to the "pork" politicians dish out in the weeks before elections, giving her granddaughter a lesson in the use of politics. "The Healer," on the other hand, shows the extent to which women lack agency when faced with childlessness, a situation that can spell disaster for many women, but which has much greater social significance for African women. Childlessness can suggest such women bear a curse and that they are society's deadwood. The prospect of having no descendants is frightening because it means that there will not be the "social security" children normally provide for parents. More frightening still is the

prospect of having no afterlife, for who will properly bury the childless and keep their memory alive, as only offspring can do? Such deep-seated fears are fertile territory for charlatans, such as Azembe in “The Healer,” who claim to use traditional “remedies” to heal infertility.

The range of Western impact on Cameroonian life, from language to religion and economy, would seem to indicate that colonization has indeed been successful in this Central African country. If colonization was successful for the West, was it so for the rest of the world’s nontechnologically based cultures? One must not be too quick to declare victory because if Makuchi is able to write as she does, then there is a place for counterhegemonic perspectives. There is a way for a different consciousness to assert itself and make its way in the world. Perhaps this is the consciousness that will begin to loosen the stranglehold the West has on the rest of the world. Whatever the outcome, it is singularly healthy that Makuchi knows that the madness the West has spread around the globe is in no way hers.

## **Notes**

1. After Germany lost its colonies in World War I, Cameroon was divided in two, with England taking over West Cameroon, along the border of Britain’s Nigerian colony, and France getting East Cameroon, a much larger territory.

2. Figures vary, but between six and fourteen million Africans were captured, enslaved, and—for those who survived the horrors of the slave ships—brought to the Americas to provide the labor for the development of the new lands that Europe had claimed for herself. As Africans working on the plantations in the Americas produced wealth for Europe, Africa was robbed of the possibility of economic self-sufficiency. The Berlin West Africa Conference took place a scant thirty-six years after France abolished slavery, following England’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807. Slavery would continue in Brazil until 1888.

3. German Chancellor Otto von Bismark presided over the Conference of Berlin, 1884–85. The objective was for Europe to take steps to implant “progress, commerce and civilization” in Africa. This prepared the way for the carving up of Africa among European powers, who later signed bilateral accords respecting each other’s rights to specific geographic areas.

4. Cameroon is made up of ten provinces; its two English-speaking provinces are in the west, the other eight are French-speaking.

5. See “Language and Language Policy in Cameroon” by Beban Sammy Chumbow in Ndiva Kofele-Kale, *An African Experiment in Nation Building: The Bilingual Cameroon Republic since Reunification* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980), 281–312.

6. France’s involvement in almost all her former colonies extends far beyond the cultural. It is not unusual to find French advisors at key points in many governments, nor is it unusual for French businesses to have a quasi-monopoly in certain areas. For instance, in francophone Cameroon all textbooks are imported from France. French troops have never left the continent and are only a phone call away, should any of France’s African “friends” be in a difficult situation. The currency is still the CFA franc, which was used in colonial times. While in French territories such as Martinique the CFA has been replaced by the French franc, the CFA franc is still in use in central and West Africa. In 1994 the French devalued the CFA franc, with dramatic repercussions all over West Africa. France maintains a coalition of over forty French-speaking countries worldwide through what is called La Francophonie, supported by an aid agency, Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique, created in the twilight years of France’s colonial empire.

7. “For many years, the number of lecturers [using] . . . French at the University was superior to staff using . . . English . . . ; so that despite its constitutional bilingual status, the university was, for over a decade, essentially a French language university.” In a response to the need for bilinguals, “a special bilingual degree programme was introduced in the Faculty of Arts” (Chumbow, 292–93).

8. The Cameroonian constitution was recently modified, officially recognizing minorities and their special needs.

9. Dr. Bernard Fonlon contributed greatly to the creation of this community. Fonlon, who received university degrees in Ireland and England as well as at the Sorbonne, staunchly defended the merits of bilingualism when he was a government minister and later as head

of the Department of African Literatures at the University of Yaoundé. He shared his love of classical music through his Sunday afternoon radio program, which stimulated the postcolonial cultural climate in Cameroon, as did the journal he founded, *Abbia*, one of the first to be published in Africa. For many years this journal was a forum for both anglophone and francophone intellectuals. For a detailed examination of the anglophone-francophone situation in Cameroon, see Richard Bjornson, *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 278–310.

10. Although Marie Claire Matip published the novella *Ngonda* in 1954 (Yaoundé: Librairie “Au Messager”) and Jeanne Ngo-Mai published her collection *Poèmes sauvages et lamentations* (Monte Carlo: Editions Regain) in 1967, the first full-length Cameroonian novel written by a woman, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury’s *Rencontres essentielles* (Paris: Imprimerie Edgar) was not published until 1969. These works were not studied in university programs. Anglophone women writers began writing poetry and short stories while students at the University of Yaoundé in the 1980s. See Nalova Lyonga, “La littérature féminine anglophone au Cameroun,” *Notre librairie* 118 (July–September 1994): 29–35, for a more complete discussion.

11. In an interview, Sankie Maimo, whose *Sov-Mbang: The Soothsayer, Drama* (1968) was the only anglophone work published by Cameroon’s Editions CLE, complains that even though his works were published as early as 1959, they are not read (*Mould 3* [May 1979]: 1–6). The lack of critical attention given to Maimo’s work reflects the stranglehold of the French-trained intellectual elite on the reception of literature in Cameroon.

12. Today anglophone students have their own university, the University of Buea, which was founded in 1994. Creative writing continues to be fostered among students by Professor Nalova Lyonga, who encourages them to publish in *That Rocky Place*, a journal of creative writing about women that she publishes in the Department of English at the University of Buea.

13. “The Visiting Card” is a tragic story about the common practice of wealthy older married men who use high school students as prostitutes or mistresses. Makuchi’s character, a high school boarding student, has a brief sexual encounter with an older man. She commits suicide after returning to her dormitory and reading the calling card the man has pressed into her hand: the man is her father.

14. Makuchi has made a significant contribution to the debate surrounding the place of gender in writing by African women. She places it in a pan-African context and argues that it is possible to develop an indigenous African critical theory. See Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana Makuchi, *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality, and Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

15. Readers will note that Makuchi writes in Cameroonian English, not that of the United States. Cameroonians have "naturalized" British English, changing it to fit their needs while retaining most spelling conventions.

16. Michael Kelly remarks, "A number of common grammatical features distinguish English-based pidgins from English. For example plurals are marked differently (e.g. 'dem' is added behind the singular form of the noun) or are unmarked as they are implicit in the context: 'plenti man no get woman'. Genders may be marked by appropriate adding of man/woman: 'woman fowl; man pikin' (female hen, male child)." (Kelly, "Taking Pidgin Seriously," *Abbia: Revue culturelle camerounaise/Cameroon Cultural Review* 31-33 [February 1978]: 287).

17. For a discussion of Cameroonian Pidgin, see Loreto Todd, *Pidgins and Creoles* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

18. See remarks on the CFA in note 6.

19. Women produce virtually all food crops in Cameroon, not only to feed their families but also to supply urban centers. The children they produce provide prestige and social standing. These two modes of production are the pillars of their power, the grounding that characterizes Makuchi's strong women. For a discussion of women's work in West Cameroon see Miriam Goheen, *Men Own Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Grassfield* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

20. In "Riot and Rebellion among African Women: Three Examples of Women's Political Clout," Audrey Wipper describes the "Anlu Rebellion," in which seven thousand women in Western Cameroon revamped a traditional organization into a well-disciplined, powerful force for change, staging a series of mass demonstrations that led to their seizing control of tribal affairs (in *Perspectives on Power*, edited by Jean F. O'Barr [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1982], 50-72).