

## **Bole Butake and the development of Anglophone Cameroon drama: An interview with Eckhard Breitinger**

*Naomi Nkealah*<sup>1</sup>

### **Preface**

*This interview is a “three-legged stool”. One leg, the interviewer, Naomi Nkealah has a PhD in African Literature from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has published widely on various human rights concerns. The second leg is the interviewee, Eckhard Breitinger, who is now deceased. Breitinger has written numerous works of criticism, edited several books and organised many conferences. The third leg is the topic of the interview, Bola Butake, the most famous Anglophone playwright, and author of such plays as Lake God, The Survivors and Palm Wine Will Flow. In this interview the late Professor Breitinger explains how his fascination with Butake’s drama derives from his (Breitinger’s) witnessing the 1992 Bamenda women’s revolt. This sets the tone for Nkealah’s probing questions about the extent of Butake’s “feminist” and revolutionary approach to Anglophone Cameroonian drama. In this dialogue (or perhaps more accurately “trialogue” Nkealah tends to play devil’s advocate, while Breitinger, for the most part, defends Butake’s plays. The interview concludes with a discussion of the influence which Butake’s plays have had on a younger generation of dramatists within Cameroon and beyond.*

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**Naomi Nkealah:** Thank you very much for accepting to do this interview. For the purpose of this interview, would you define for me your relationship with Bole Butake, that is, Butake the man and Butake the writer?

**Eckhard Breitinger:** There are three levels of my relationship with Butake. The first one is a personal relationship. The second is that I'm dealing with his works. As you know, I've written one or two articles on his works. The third is a collaboration we've had over the years. I've supervised or jointly supervised four PhD students with him. I think the first time that we met was in 1989 or somewhere around that time. My first contact with Anglophone Cameroon was through Siga Asanga. While visiting Cameroon I met in Siga's place Bole and Godfrey Tangwa who then had just started doing work with *The Flame Players*.

**NN:** And you have spent considerable time in Cameroon, right?

**EB:** Yes, I've been to Cameroon four or five times. Each time I've spent between six weeks and two months.

**NN:** But you were mainly at the University of Yaounde.

**EB:** Yaounde, Buea, etc. The most memorable time was in Bamenda. I think it was in 1992 that there were presidential elections and then there was a state of emergency. We went there immediately after that. Before that I wouldn't have been allowed into Bamenda. But there was still quite a lot of military and police, and the Ta'kembeng was still guarding Fru Ndi's compound. It was very interesting.

**NN:** You actually experienced that, I mean the women being in action, demonstrating?

**EB:** I didn't see them demonstrating, but I saw them on the road that gives access to Fru Ndi's compound. Together with the male group they were controlling people who wanted to enter the compound. There were thousands of people in the compound, but they had a kind of security check there.

**NN:** Several scholars have argued that Butake's plays, especially *Lake God*, *The Survivors*, and *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, capture the militancy of the Ta'kembeng women in Bamenda. Is that also your opinion?

**EB:** Well, yeah. I mean, let's put it this way: compared to some other Anglophone Cameroonians and the Nigerians, the emphasis that Butake is putting on the power of women is, I think, quite unique.

**NN:** Obviously you've worked with Butake for quite a long time. As a respected scholar and one of the most prolific critics of Anglophone Cameroon literature, what is your honest opinion of Butake as a writer? Would you see him as a 'committed' writer, and in this case I'm borrowing Biodun Jeyifo's use of the term (1985), for to Jeyifo, a committed writer is one who explores social and political realities and tries to propose pathways for humanity. Would you see Butake's writing heading towards this direction?

**EB:** The writing, definitely yes. And even more so the activities which he's been doing broadly in theatre for development. He's been doing all these projects on environmental education, re-forestation, water management etc. He's been to the rain forest areas where he's been looking at indigenous populations, especially in areas where exploitative logging is happening. So definitely he's been somebody who's been involved and who sees all of his tasks as effecting some kind of change. On one occasion he put forward the argument that to effect change you have to change the mentality or the attitude of the elite who are the people running the place, and that he's addressing this group of people rather than working through the grassroots. I'm not quite sure if this still holds true, because I believe his later activities have been very much grassroots oriented. And this has been the big debate between him and other people from other countries because he said if you don't change the mentality of the people who run the place you will not succeed.

**NN:** So the written plays themselves are targeting the elite class?

**EB:** Yes, that certainly is what he said at one point. I think it's in one of the interviews.

**NN:** And Yaounde would be the ideal place to speak out to this elite class? Since you happened to be part of the audience at some of his performances, would you say there was any specific reaction from the audience to show that the plays really hit home or hit their targets – the elite class?

**EB:** Definitely yes. I remember one performance of *And Palm Will Flow* at the Sheraton in Yaounde. This must have been around 1992 with the first multi-party elections. The general atmosphere was sort of change-oriented, and there was definite hope to replace Biya and get Fru Ndi elected and actually installed. But we know that Fru Ndi was elected but not installed in power. That's the difference. I remember that performance in particular because a very strange ambience reigned on that day. The Sheraton which is a super-high extra fancy building was surrounded by ... I mean, the access road was not yet finished, so it was all muddy around the hotel. And also the water system didn't work. And yet, it was this wonderful place with wonderful washrooms, bathrooms, and toilets and buckets with water. On that occasion this was, if I remember correctly, a special performance on the anniversary of the school which Butake went to, an Irish missionary school. It was essentially attended by people who had been students at that school either together or before and after Bole was there. So it was definitely an elite audience and you could see this from the people's outfits. I think there were also two or three Anglophone ministers there who were in Biya's cabinet at the time. I was then very much surprised at the reaction of the audience at the end of the play, which was an agit prop kind of thing, when the actress said we'll never allow one person to govern us, etc. In the Sheraton you had the males in their dark three-piece suits and the women with big head-ties all getting up and dancing and singing along with the actress on stage. On that occasion it definitely had an impact. The other question is of course how long that impact lasted.

**NN:** Right. Did it go beyond the Sheraton?

**EB:** Yeah, did it last after the performance? What I found interesting was that in this particular political situation the articulation of dissatisfaction with how the place was run was something that met with broad consensus from the Anglophone population, including the elite.

**NN:** You have just touched on a point that I remember reading in an article, how ironic it was that these people came to a grand hotel to watch this grand performance and just within the vicinity of that hotel everything was kaput. And people walked out of there, they clapped their hands, they cheered, they applauded, but nothing changed after that. And that has been the story of Cameroon for many years. Nothing really changes in this

environment. So then my other concern would be how effective these plays are in getting the grassroots people to respond to the situation that is facing them. I'm thinking particularly about the Anglophone problem which I'm sure you are very familiar with. It seems to be one of the issues that come up time and time again in Butake's writing. I remember in an interview not long ago he told Chris Odhiambo and I that his writing of *Family Saga* was in response to people always asking him about his stand with respect to the Anglophone problem. So to him that was his ultimate response. My question to you now would be: from your perspective as a theatre scholar, would you say that Butake's drama offers Cameroonians real and practical suggestions on how to resolve this Anglophone problem? I use the word suggestion here deliberately as I'm aware that writers are not there to provide solutions to society's problems but as Achebe says in *Anthills of the Savannah* they are here to ask questions instead. But I happen to believe that as visionaries they are entitled to point out some pathways for their peoples, some future directions so that they don't commit the blunders of the past. Would you then say that Butake does that with respect to the much pressing Anglophone problem?

**EB:** I think Butake is rather engaging in a controversial discussion of the problem. He is positively stating the attitudes and articulating the perspectives of the Anglophone. He compares the abuse of power with a wiser, democratic kind of leadership. And for everyone who knows the situation you'd know that the one is Biya and the other one is the other side... I mean, it is implied, but he doesn't hammer it home directly as in *What God Has Put Asunder*. I remember in one of the very first interviews we did which is published also in one of the volumes [the Bayreuth African Studies series] where he said that in a country like this you don't say things bluntly. I think it was at the first meeting in 1989 when the issue of censorship was still relatively strong. In the published interview, I think I called it a camouflage of tradition where he's using the traditional pattern to show how society should be run politically.

**NN:** So he's using a conciliatory approach rather than a confrontational one?

**EB:** Not necessarily conciliatory, but he sort of puts down the one position. He makes a clear statement about how the place could or should be run. But he doesn't say this is Biya and that is the Social Democratic Front. He's not taking it at a direct political topical level.

**NN:** In comparison to Butake, I'm thinking about a writer like Bate Besong who happens to be very radical. He says his things upfront and has suffered incarceration for what he believes. Many Cameroonians I know have hailed Bate Besong as the kind of voice that Anglophone Cameroon needs to deal with the Anglophone problem. Would you say that such a radical approach is more effective in dealing with the Anglophone problem?

**EB:** It's difficult to say. I mean, the way I experienced the atmosphere in the early '90s I think people were convinced that change was going to happen. But now the Anglophone movement – the oppositional movement – has died down and the former UPC has been accommodated within the CPDM government. A lot that was there in the early and middle '90s were movements for change. But these have slowed down or collapsed. So it is very difficult to say if somebody like Bate Besong would be more effective in direct political terms.

**NN:** Let's talk about Anglophone Cameroon literature in general terms. I'm more interested in how the literature has evolved from maybe 1989 when you first became interested in it until now. What then would you describe as Butake's peculiar contribution to Anglophone Cameroon literature and to drama in particular?

**EB:** I think that there are two things. The one is the internal Cameroon thing. For a long time, and this is also the criticism that Butake and others had with Bjornson and other people, that everyone was talking about Cameroonian literature whereas they were in fact talking about Francophone Cameroonian literature. Bjornson and his big book had only one small chapter on Anglophone Cameroonian literature. There was one other book where Anglophone Cameroonian writing was dealt with as an annex to Nigerian writing. This is one thing that Butake has been more important in than Bate Besong in the sense that he got more international visibility. The debate inside since the late 1980s and early 1990s is that drama in Cameroon is Anglophone and not these comedians in Francophone Cameroon. The second thing is that for the first time Anglophone Cameroon literature gets international visibility in its own right. For me, that's something which is quite important. I'm not quite sure whether I'm correct in this but I think that Butake was more effective than Bate Besong as far as getting international attention is concerned. Because Bate Besong was a radical, he always carried the image of the sectarian with him.

**NN:** And of course Butake started a literary journal at the University of Yaounde in the '80s which encouraged graduate students to write fiction – short stories, poetry etc.

**EB:** That's correct.

**NN:** In one of your earlier articles, you wrote about the censorship situation in Cameroon and how it affected literary creativity. What would you say about literary creativity in Anglophone Cameroon today with the emergence of new writers in the various genres?

**EB:** As far as the censorship situation is concerned I don't know what the current situation is. It looks as if the situation has eased, but I'm not quite sure if this is really true. One of the major problems is still that, unlike journalism, there is practically no outlet for Anglophone creative writing. You mentioned Éditions CLÉ which is a non-government publishing house. But like the protestant church thing they've always been cautious not to be too provocative. There were attempts to create publishing outlets, but as far as I know nothing was really effective. There was one place in Limbe in one of the protestant mission stations, I think it was called Presbook, but I haven't heard about them in quite some time. It seems they've been concentrating on publishing textbooks, because this is where the money is. You don't make money by publishing poetry or creative writing.

**NN:** Just to comment on that, I've always been bothered by the publishing situation in Cameroon, because even the books that are published hardly ever go beyond the country, as you've just mentioned. For me, the question is whether they are so poorly edited that the international literary market is not interested in them or the marketing strategy of the publishing house is not effective enough. Can you comment on that?

**EB:** I think it is primarily the question of getting the books outside the country. Even within Cameroon you might find them in one bookshop in Yaounde. Bookshops are a big problem in Cameroon. I don't know how many bookshops there are. I can think of Fru Ndi's bookshop in Bamenda, but that was essentially a stationery shop where you get pencils and stuff like that for schools. But the bookshops themselves are relatively small. So the distribution network doesn't exist inside the country. And then the other thing is that getting the stuff out of the country is very difficult.

**NN:** I think the problem could also be the bureaucracy of the system. For instance, I was at the University of Buea in December 2008 and I needed a copy of *Epasa Moto*, the journal that is produced at the university by ASTI, the school of translators and interpreters. And amazingly – it was a shock actually – the University of Buea library itself does not have a copy, even though the journal is produced right on campus. I tried to find out from one of the ladies at ASTI whom I spoke to where the disconnection was. Was it that the library did not request a copy or that ASTI had failed to send them a copy? All I got was a number of excuses. So the system has a big problem in terms of distributing scholarly material.

**EB:** Yes, I found that, and Bole and others have also confirmed this, whether with scholarly material or creative material, if you publish your stuff, you get it printed and you get your copies. Essentially, *you* have to organize book launches. You take your copies to the various events where you're going and you sell them there. This is how the books get into circulation. They do not get into circulation through official channels like bookshops.

**NN:** OK. Let's proceed. In 1993, Nalova Lyonga spoke about a repertory of ten plays shaped in the avant-garde mode. If she were to comment on Anglophone drama today I'm sure she would speak of more than thirty plays pre-occupied with the aesthetics of change. How would you describe the evolution of Anglophone drama within the last fifteen years?

**EB:** I believe if you look at the stuff that was around earlier, such as the works of Sankie Maimo, much of what you'll find is conventional, with some sort of school drama structure. There was nothing experimental. But later on, it was more about making structural experiments. If you take *Shoes*, for instance, in terms of dramatic structure and dramatic strategy, it's very different from *And Palm Wine Will Flow* or *Lake God*. With Bate Besong's plays, I've always had problems getting along with them because they are sort of disconnected in their structure. But, definitely, there's an experimental way of dealing with drama in them. In terms of numbers, that is something that is very difficult to ascertain in the Cameroonian context. Unless you want to speak of a canon, because I don't think anyone is still looking at, for instance, Sankie Maimo. Musinga has been playing his own role anyway, but he's always been on some sort of a side track. I remember Musinga always complaining about the academics in Yaounde who don't



appreciate what he's doing. So yes, he operated on a very different level. I don't know if the Musinga style – the farcical style of dealing with social problems – is still continuing.

**NN:** As far as I know he seems to be the only person practising that kind of mobile theatre that moves from place to place. In terms of the thematic pre-occupations of the plays, do you see any evolution in theme, like moving from the clash between tradition and modernity in Maimo's plays to other concerns relevant to Cameroonians, as in Butake's plays?

**EB:** Well, in Butake's plays the situation is turned upside down. The traditional ruler claims to be modern and pre-democratic. The grassroots is operating on a level of being traditionalist – a democratic tradition. With Sankie Maimo, there is nothing like a balance between the concepts of tradition and modern ways. I think essentially the difference is how current issues are now being addressed directly. Bate Besong is definitely one who has been approaching things squarely.

**NN:** Now let me speak specifically about female representation in Butake's plays, which is my main interest. Some critics, and in this case I'm thinking about Christopher Odhiambo and myself, have argued that Butake gives women power in his plays but at the same time he seems to take that power back, and so a status quo of male hegemony is maintained. What do you say to that?

**EB:** I'm not sure about him taking the power back. From my readings, particularly of *Lake God* and *The Survivors*, the women are very strong. Essentially, the women are the ones who get things done and men either resign and give up or retaliate as in the case of the Officer who kills the woman. Is that what you mean by Butake taking the power back?

**NN:** Yes, that too, and the fact that in *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, the undemocratic ruler is ousted and the council of elders is re-instituted—

**EB:**—Which is again male-dominated.

**NN:** Exactly. Kwengong is one of those who initiate the ousting of the ruler but she is not part of the new council of elders or does not play any specific role in the administration of this new order of society.

**EB:** That is interesting, but I don't think I've come to any reasonable conclusion on that. With *Shoes* in particular the text itself is very male chauvinistic. But Butake staged it with four actresses in the first instance. So he sort of played with the gender issue, by showing a discrepancy between the parts and the actors. Looking at the way the casting was done, he was doing some sort of controversial or "opposite casting" on a gender basis. At the moment, I cannot comment conclusively on this, but for me that was something interesting. I believe he was playing with male and female roles and power positions and so on. Then also he was looking at how women play with the given roles.

**NN:** If I think of a play like *The Survivors*, I begin to question seriously Butake's vision of women. In 1993, Nol Alembong voiced his disappointment with Butake for creating a heroic character such as Mboysi and then letting her die in the end. He considered Mboysi's death a wasted effort for both the character and her creator because at the time, and I dare say even now, Cameroon stood in need of revolutionary models, and I'm quoting Lyonga here. What is your response to this assessment?

**EB:** Well, yes, there's something to it. The other question would be what effect would it have? If you think of the kind of conclusions Nol Alembong suggests, I believe he had in mind Mboysi's being victorious in the end. But then I think the end would be flatter than it is. It would be very romantic. The way Butake does it with Mboysi dying and the military officer taking over makes it more open-ended. It shows that the battle has not been concluded. It's still going on. I think in a sense this is more effective. Alembong's suggestion is one you can identify with easily because you have a hero and a happy ending, but the awareness of the controversy is stronger with the open-end approach that Butake chose.

**NN:** In your own critique of the play, you say that Mboysi is at once a saviour of the people and a victim but you do not explore this any further, which could be because your article focused on a subject other than female power. But in my reading, she clearly exercises some kind of power over the men, particularly Ngujoh, Old One and Officer, and in this

way she asserts her sense of individuality. But at the same time she is a woman alone, rendered powerless by an oppressive system and forced to prostitute herself for the sake of survival. Would you not consider this duality in her portrayal as a contradiction in the writer's empowerment project, assuming of course that the rationale behind the creation of the character is to give the text a woman-oriented vision?

**EB:** Mboysi's problem is that she doesn't have the support and backing of her male crew. She is alone. Ngujoh and Old One profit from her prostitution. They're not giving her any support, but they are beneficiaries. I think the argument then would be that she needs backing from the wider society. But there are no other women in that play, are there?

**NN:** Just the one.

**EB:** It is very different from *And Palm Wine Will Flow* where you have women who can organize some sort of traditional ritualistic sanction and have a certain amount of power. The social organization is such that there is a provision for women to take over the decision-making process in a particular situation. But with Mboysi, she is left on her own and that sort of ... I mean, there's no support from any side, neither from her male companions nor from the others. But do we want to pin down Butake in his attitude towards women through the character of Mboysi, I'm not sure.

**NN:** I'd be interested to know more about that from you. Now, there seems to be an element of moralizing in Butake's plays where women are concerned. I want to quote Hansel Ndumbe Eyoh on this one. In his article in *Anglophone Cameroon Writing*, he sees Mboysi as that moralizing force that is supposed to stabilize society but because she prostitutes herself she no longer fits that role; she cannot be the heroic character that we want at the end.

**EB:** I think particularly in the case of *The Survivors*, the moral accusation is going strictly towards the officer. I think you can read it also as a feminist play in a way. On the one hand, there's an officer who abuses his power, and on the other there is Ngujoh and Old One profiting from Mboysi's prostitution. And then there's Mboysi herself in-between the two, trying to guarantee survival for her group. And she's prepared to do anything. She is taking the risks, for instance, the risk of being killed. The question for her is not

the question of the moral of selling her body or self, but to be responsible for the survivors, especially the children and the grandfather. I think Ngujoh is the weak character. I never looked at it that prostituting herself is something that she should not do. I think it's an indication of her willingness to accept a lot in order to secure the survival of her group. If you look at the survivors as refugees I think they are entitled to what she gets for them through selling her body. They are entitled to it even without her selling her body. The corruption of the officer who makes the selling of the body necessary for the group to get the aid food, to which they are entitled, is what brings in the element of morality. So then the moral aspect that comes in is on the side of the officer. He's using his power to get personal gain because he is sitting on the food stuff. The moralistic aspect as I see it is the one against the corruption of the official institutions more than on Mboysi prostituting herself to get what she's entitled to.

**NN:** As a way of rounding up now, what would you say is the future of Anglophone writing or how do you see Anglophone writing within the next twenty years?

**EB:** I really don't know how to answer that. My impression is that the enthusiasm of the '90s seems to have died down to quite an extent. It was of course due a lot to the need for the articulation of Anglophone literature generally. At the moment, I don't know when the next elections are due to take place. And this is of course part of my dilemma. For somebody like myself who's been living in another system where the next election or the next budget does not play such an immense role in how society develops, it's very difficult for me to say what is happening.

**NN:** OK. Your final word?

**EB:** I think what I should recommend is that the base should be broader for Anglophone writing. There should be more people coming in. I don't know if ... I remember the first time I went to Buea there was a Buea writers' club which was trying to organize meetings and so on. I don't know to what extent things like this have survived.

**NN:** It seems that there is a new generation of writers coming up and publishing a lot of work – prose, poetry, drama etc. And definitely more women writers are needed to give the female perspective on things. I had the assurance from Butake that more and more

women are writing in Cameroon these days. So there seems to be some degree of hope for Anglophone literature to be sustained within the next few decades.

NOTE: This interview was conducted with Professor Breitingger at 10:59 on Thursday, 27 August 2009 in his office on the Bayreuth University campus, Germany.