

# Theatre Performance as a Reconcilable Tool: An Analysis of the Performance of Eyoh Hansel Ndumbe's "The Magic Flute"

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**Abstract**— From late 1980s and early 1990s, the world experienced change. It started with the collapse of the Berlin wall in late 1980s followed by the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990. Oppressed people in developing countries, particularly in Africa witnessed another wave of change and yearned for political liberation. Cameroon was not an exception. Some English-speaking playwrights who believed that English-speaking Cameroon was socially, culturally, politically and economically exploited by French-speaking Cameroon turned to theatre as a means through which they could express their concerns. They wrote, produced, directed and performed plays which called for English-speaking Cameroon to secede from French-speaking Cameroon. Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel was one of the playwrights. However, unlike his peers who asked for secession, he wrote, produced and directed "The Magic Flute" which called for reconciliation. The audiences which watched the performances of "The Magic Flute" responded positively to the call for reconciliation. The reception theory is used in the analysis.

**Index Terms**— Audience, Reconciliation, Theatre Performance, Tool.

## I. INTRODUCTION

"African peoples stand once again on the threshold of an era of profound political change. Not since the crescendo of nationalist political movements during the twilight of European colonialism has popular demand for political transformation been so deep or widespread. In the 1950s and early 1960s African nationalist movements demanded and attained an end to colonial rule and the establishment of independent African states. Today grassroots movements have arisen in nearly every sub-Saharan country to remove autocratic, repressive governments and empower African peoples to reclaim control over their political destinies". (Harbeson et al, 1994, pp.1-33).

With the wind of change blowing throughout the world, English-speaking theatre practitioners believed that the Anglophone zone was grossly exploited culturally, linguistically, socially, economically and politically by French-speaking Cameroon. They also proclaimed that French-speaking Cameroon considered British legacies inferior whereas French legacies were superior. Hence, English-speaking theatre practitioners wrote, produced, directed and performed plays which called for English-speaking Cameroon to secede from French-speaking

zone. These theatre practitioners like the British, believed that reunification between Southern Cameroons and La Republique du Cameroon was hurriedly done:

"...it was the wish of the British that among the alternatives opened to the peoples of Southern Cameroons should be included the opportunity to defer their long term decision for another few years given that freedom of choice exercised too hurriedly may lead to bondage later on and that the people ought not to be asked to vote on choices which they had not as yet fully understood". (Qtd by George .T. Mbone in Africa Star, December 2013, pp. 68 -69).

Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel was among the English-speaking playwrights who wrote in the early 1990s. However, unlike his peers who called for secession, Ndumbe Eyoh wrote "The Magic Flute" which requested English-speaking Cameroonians and French-speaking Cameroonians to reconcile. My concern in this paper is to analyse the responses of the audience which watched the performance of the "The Magic Flute" in 1991, at Hilton Hotel in Yaounde at the time when Cameroon was experiencing the height of political upheaval since the country attained independence. The reception theory is used in the paper. The paper has three sections. Section i briefly discusses the theory used in the paper. Section ii analysis the performance alongside the audience responses. Section iii is the conclusion.

## II. A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THE RECEPTION THEORY

Eagleton Terry asserts that "Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author" (2008, pp. 64-65). Creative writers do not write text books to have them shelved. They write with the ultimate goal of sharing their ideas. Thus, the writer's work is incomplete unless he/she receives feedback from critics. This assertion is indisputable in the domain of theatre. Theatre producers need spectators to watch their theatre performances. There can be no theatre performance without an audience or spectators. Therefore, spectators responses are indispensable to any given theatre performance just as readers' critiques are important to writers. For Wolfgang Iser, his liberal humanism permits readers to provide different interpretations to a given literary text. (Qtd in Eagleton 2008, p.71). A good piece of artistic work does not have one meaning or one interpretation. Furthermore, readers come from different backgrounds. It is from these perspectives that readers provide different meanings and

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interpretations to a given work of art. A theatre performance being a work of art is not an exception. Spectators arrive at different meanings and interpretations after watching a theatre performance.

Turning to Jean-Paul Sartre, he says "Every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written for" (Qtd in Eagleton 2008, p.72). It is not only a writer who has an image of his readers, a theatre producer also has a targeted audience in mind as will be seen in the analysis. Stanley Fish asserts that "reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it does to you". (Qtd in Eagleton 2008, p. 74). Fish also holds the view that "it is only within a given community or institution that the facts of literary study (i.e. genres, periods, authors, texts) are available, and that these facts are as much a product of the community as they are of the interpreters (Qtd in J.A. Cuddon and M.A.R. Habib 2014, p. 594). The audience that watched "The Magic Flute" identified with the content of the play for the simple reason that the issues presented described their daily experiences. As it is serene, reception theory is apt in the analysis of this paper. Having briefly discussed the theory that will be used in this paper, I proceed to the analysis of the theatre performance.

### III. THE ANALYSIS OF THE THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

Ndumbe Hansel Eyoh's "The Magic Flute" predominantly deals with English-speaking Cameroon as the victim of the reunification between English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroons. Furthermore, the play portrays some of the victims in French-speaking Cameroon. In order to depict the issues, Eyoh creates a play based on the problems of a polygamous family. A man dies and leaves his first wife (Mother 1) and her children together with the children of his second wife (Mother 2) who eloped when he was alive. Mother 2 intends to look after her own children. She accuses Mother 1 of jealousy, mischievous deeds, and claims that her children are not properly looked after by Mother 1. In response to these accusations, Mother 1 tells Mother 2 that she tried to establish a good relationship with her but failed. In spite of the fact that Mother 2 detests Mother 1 and her children, the children of Mother 1 love Mother 2 and her children. The play ends with Mother 1 and Mother 2 reconciling and living as a happy family.

The play was performed by Yaounde Children Collective Theatre Troupe (Y.C.C.T.) on Wednesday, 27th March 1991 during Rencontre Théâtrales de Yaoundé, in a hall in the Yaounde Hilton Hotel. The play was also performed in other parts of Cameroon and in Germany. In this paper, I am concerned with the performance in the hall in the Yaounde Hilton hotel. The troupe was made up of children between the ages of seven and twelve. The hall has four hundred seats. It has a stage but there were no dressing rooms. However, actors and actresses changed at one corner of the hall, and did not distract the attention of the audience. The stage property was simple. It consisted of a royal throne and ordinary chairs. Actresses sat in one section while actors sat in another section. The hall was full of parents, relatives and friends of the actors and actresses who wanted to see them on stage.

The audience which watched this play in the Yaounde Hilton Hotel was made up of English-speaking and French-speaking upper middle class. A number of reasons accounted for this: Yaounde Children Collective Theatre Troupe was made up of upper middle-class children. Moreover, the less well-off class could not afford the entrance fee of one thousand francs; they considered Yaounde Hilton Hotel a place for the rich; and lastly, the troupe used Standard English which the semi-educated and uneducated could not properly understand. Hence, this play was performed for the benefit of the upper middle class who are part of the decision makers in the country. Jean-Paul Sartre's assertion that "Every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written for" (Qtd in Eagleton 2008, p.72) is genuine. Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel produced "The Magic Flute" for the benefit of the decision makers in Cameroon at the time the country was undergoing intense political instability since it attained independence in 1961.

The performance began with a violent quarrel between Mother 1 and Mother 2. Mother 1 drew the attention of Mother 2 to the fact that she tried to cooperate with her but failed.

Mother 1: ...God knows I tried, but you would not give me a chance.

English-speaking spectators jeered and said "it is true". They openly said Anglophones' untiring efforts to cooperate with French-speaking Cameroonians are fruitless. The response of the English-speaking spectators indicated their desire for genuine unity between English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroons. Some English-theatre practitioners have expressed a similar view - the desire for English-speaking Cameroonians and French-speaking Cameroonians to work hand in hand. This idea is expressed by some English-speaking theatre practitioners. For example, in Epie Ngome Victor's *What God has Put Asunder* (2003, p. 38), his protagonist, Weka (a representative of English-speaking Cameroonians) says she has tried to make Garba (representative of French-speaking Cameroon) cooperate, but with a phenomenon like Garba, it's plain pointless. Furthermore, Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* (1991, p. 111) portrays English-speaking Cameroonians as people who do not have identity cards. Thus, they are not considered Cameroonians by French-speaking Cameroonians.

The performers on stage and English-speaking spectators articulated the opinions of a significant number of English-speaking Cameroonians. Eric A. Achimbe refers to French-speaking Cameroonians as the oppressors of English-speaking Cameroonians and the occupiers of English-speaking zone (in Pierre Fandio (ed.) 2013, p.29).

The audience got the implicit message and sighed. Son 1 and Son 2 are treated differently because they have different mothers in spite of the fact that they have the same father. To throw more light on the play, some historical facts are needed. Cameroon was a German Colony until Germany's defeat in the First World War. Following the defeat, Germany vacated the territory, and the Treaty of Versailles upheld the partition of Cameroon between France and Britain. France's mandate

is the present French-speaking Cameroon while the British mandate is the present English-speaking Cameroon. These two mandating countries (Britain and France), introduced different social, cultural, linguistics, educational, economic and political policies in their respective mandates ( Ngoh, 1988, p.16). After the departure of France and Britain, following the attainment of independent by the two mandates, the legacies of British policies are deep rooted in the former British mandate. This is also the case with the former French mandate. Thus, in this play, Mother 1 represents Britain, Mother 2 represents France while the deceased father is Germany. Spectators wondered why Mother 2 maltreated her own children. French-speaking spectators drew the attention of the entire audience that Mother 2's hatred goes beyond despising Mother 1 and her children to brutalising her own children. This was a turning point in the performance.

The performance continued with the children of the second wife (Son 2 and Daughter 2) questioning why children whose mother was very healthy, should be treated like orphans:

How can we have a mother  
And now be orphans?  
How can we have a mother  
And she is so unkind?  
She tyrannises us.  
She shouts at us always.

After this scene, some French-speaking spectators asserted that Anglophones believed that they were discriminated against by Francophones because they did not belong to the French community, and did not inherit the French culture; however, English-speaking Cameroonians were not the only victims in the country as it is apparent in the manner in which Mother 2 treats her own children as orphans. Anglophone spectators shook their heads. They had believed that the performance would only portray English-speaking Cameroonians as the victims of Cameroon, but surprisingly, the playwright also portrayed French-speaking Cameroonians as victims. Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel is unlike the rest of the English-speaking playwrights who wrote, produced, directed and performed plays which depicted English-speaking Cameroonians as the only victims in Cameroon. This pleased the French-speaking spectators in the hall.

The performance continued with Mother 2 wanting Son 2 to inherit his father's throne but her family had been cursed with insanity, thus, her son could not succeed his father. Mother 2 was furious on becoming aware of this fact. Meanwhile Mother 1 and all the children (including Mother 2's children) intended to respect the deceased man's last wishes by visiting his village. Mother 2 did not want Mother 1 and her children to do so.

The performance continued with Mother 1 and all the children chanting a sad song and asking how the matter could be resolved:

What do we do to get there?  
Anticipation of future time  
Sends sounds of gladness to my heart.  
Where do we go from here?  
What do we do to get there?

The audience gave their own interpretation of this song. They maintained that the song was asking how Francophones and Anglophones would blend their different cultural and political heritage, and thus build a prosperous Cameroon.

While in the village, Mother 2 tried to persuade the villagers to enthrone her son. However, Son 2 was indifferent as to who was enthroned. This implied that Son 2 only wanted peace to reign irrespective of who was enthroned as the leader.

The hall was full of excitement at this point in the performance. Spectators said their ultimate desire was to have a good leader who would improve on the lifestyle of the people and take the country forward. Spectators' assertion complied with Nyambou Richard who in his article entitled 'Democracy and National Unity', in Cameroon Tribune, Tuesday, May 21, 2002, asserted that:

... It is only when appropriate habits, values and behaviour patterns shall have been inculcated in the governed through the political will of the governors, that national integration shall progressively create in each of us a powerful, authentic and spontaneous feeling of patriotism (2002, p. 32).

The performance ended with a song calling on Cameroonians to live in peace:

Go gently (twice)  
People of our land.  
Hold your torches high above.  
Everywhere you go.  
Go gently, gently, gently.

The audience was pleased with this performance as it ended with the half-brothers and all the members of the family together with the villagers chanting a song which called for peace. The song called for unity and harmony in Cameroon. Eyoh believes that in spite Britain and France legacies that were tearing the country apart, and creating fundamental differences between Francophones and Anglophones, the two community's could reconcile and live harmoniously.

The audience loved the messages of the performance and thanked the playwright for calling for reconciliation. I believed that the reconciliation will go beyond the two main groups - English-speaking and French-speaking. Reconciliation should extend to the various minority groups which consider themselves victims. The assertion of Eagleton Terry that "Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author" (2008, pp. 64-65) applies to the theatre performance of "The Magic Flute". The audience that watched the theatre performance were the consumers, and they cherished the call for reconciliation. Thus, the purpose of the performance was fulfilled.

During an interview with the playwright, he asserted that the Anglophone community was like Mother 1 who endeavoured zealously to work hand-in-hand with Mother 2 but failed, and also like Son 2 who was maltreated because he had a different mother. Nevertheless, he maintained that English-speaking Cameroon and French-speaking Cameroon

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should examine the legacies of Britain and France in Cameroon, select the best legacies, merge these legacies and create a Cameroon culture which many countries will envy and emulate. He said he was very optimistic that the two Cameroons would eventually reconcile.

## IV. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to analyse the theatre performance of Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel's "The Magic Flute" which called for reconciliation between English-speaking Cameroon and French-speaking Cameroon during the apex of political instability in Cameroon. From the analysis, it is clear that the messages of the performance were grasped by spectators. English-speaking spectators confirmed the fact that English-speaking Cameroon was the victim of the reunification between French-speaking Cameroon and English-speaking Cameroon. On the part of French-speaking spectators, they acknowledged the plight of English-speaking Cameroon as the victims of the reunification; but added that there were also victims in French-speaking Cameroon as the performance portrayed. However, like the theatre practitioners, English-speaking and French-speaking spectators believed that in spite of the legacies of Britain and France which were destroying the cordial relationship between English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroons, there was a possibility of reconciliation. Hence, Ndumbe Eyoh Hansel's plea for reconciliation was accepted by the audience which watched "The Magic Flute" on Wednesday, 27th March 1991 during Rencontre Théâtrales de Yaoundé, in a hall in the Yaounde Hilton Hotel. A theatre performance which requests the audience to take positive action must portray the advantages that go along with the request. The audience that watched "The Magic Flute" is fully aware of the advantages that accompany reconciliation.

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