

Emma Dawson (ed.), *The Spirit Machine and Other Short Stories from Cameroon* (Critical, Cultural and Communication Press, 2009)

The Spirit Machine and Other Short Stories from Cameroon has nine chapters. It begins with the 'Introduction' written by Emma Dawson, followed by the short stories. The title story, Ba'bila Mutia's 'The Spirit Machine', is a story about the rites of initiation into adulthood of teenage boys practiced by a community of Cameroonians living in the village Mbelu. The main characters in this story are Yebila, his son Gabuma, and Ivo the driver of the earthmoving machine. This is a story about tradition that meets modernity (the earthmoving machine), and how a rural Cameroonian society handles it. To them it becomes a marvel. It enchants them until it is connected with the supernatural and labeled as the spirit machine.

The next story in the collection is titled 'My First Million' written by Florence Ndiyah. The cabinet is being reshuffled. Later when the announcements are made, we realise that the narrator, Mr Sama Max, has been elected as Minister of State. Sama's life changes due to his new position. Due to his corrupt ways he becomes a millionaire as well as a womaniser. However, his luck does not hold. He hears on the news that the cabinet has been reshuffled again, and he is no longer a minister. Though the narrator feels cheated by the government he is not that dejected. The author conveys the idea of corrupt politics in third world countries. Through this image we are made to wonder whether Cameroonian politics are really unstable like the picture that is given to us through the narrative.

The third story is Mbuh Mbuh Tenu's 'The Betrayal'. We are told about the main character: 50 years old Dr Alexander Timbong, a lecturer at a university. We are presented with a man that is living an empty life. Does he represent the Cameroonians at large? The reader gets the impression that there is no salvation in Cameroon until one has to migrate to escape the 'depression' that the monotonous Cameroonian life has put on its citizens.

'Kakamba' is written by John Nkemngong Nkengasong. The protagonist Kakamba goes to the Younde University Teaching Hospital for a checkup and has to go through a HIV/AIDS screening test. Kakamba represents the Cameroonian man who is the future of the country. Through this character we are taken through the 'terror' of HIV/AIDS. The narrative concludes aptly with Kakamba's mother's advice: 'if a snake bites you then flee next time even at the sight of a millipede' (69). It educates its readers to be more careful when dealing with sex. The moral is that it is better to be safe than sorry.

The subsequent story is titled 'Jury of the Corrupt', written by Wirndzerem G. Barfee. This story is a critique of the Cameroonian public administration. Manga proposes that Dongo join the Anti-Corruption Unit. He says he will work it out for him. Then he tells Dongo that he will be able to make money in the unit through bribery. The price to enter the Unit is one million in Cameroon currency, which he gets from Dongo who borrows the money from a money lender.

The bribes do not come in as was discussed by both friends. Dongo cannot pay off his loan. Eventually he is asked to be the president of the jury of a national art competition. He seeks his chance, but fails miserably when his accomplice turns against him. It ends with his death. The reader initially gets the idea that the

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Cameroonian public administration is corrupt. However, the idea changes as the story reaches its climax. The authorities that investigate the case and the act of suicide that is carried out by Dongo tells us that immorality does not win; there is always a price to pay.

'A Lie Has A Short Life' is written by Eunice Ngongkum. We are introduced to Baamoh, a student union leader, who is determined to change things. There is a strike, but the government's intervention has resulted in the arrest of three students. The government is said to be insensitive to the sufferings of the people. It is stated in the narrative that the economic crisis has imprisoned the spirit of the whole nation. However, the Univambe students were not passive. The students held on to the motto: 'Never give in to what is wrong. Always stand up for what is right' (103). Thus, Baamoh leads the students, and is shot dead. This story criticises the authorities, and their treatment of dissenting voices. The notion that is put forth is that there the government is stringent and heartless.

Job Fongho Tende is another Cameroonian writer in this collection of short stories. His story is titled 'The Lost Art'. The place is Younde, but the date 2150 AD. By placing the story in the future the author cuts us from reality. We the readers will not try to associate the story to current day Cameroon. We are introduced to the main character Meko. In the story it is revealed that it is dangerous now to identify with a religious body, especially the Catholic Church. The price is one's life.

Oscar Chenyi Labang's 'The Visit' is the eighth story in the collection. It starts at Tih Kungwe's house. Kungwe, Tih Kungwe's son is not excited about the visit because he has experienced failure before. There has been talk about the visit before but nothing has transpired. Pa Ngeh, a wise old man, sits and tells a story to his audience – the villagers. It is a story about two brothers, one who can control his wife and another who cannot. When Pa Ngeh stops telling his story and looks at his audience, they are all of the mind that if one cannot subdue his wife he becomes her slave. This story is double layered. There is a frame story, the visit, and then the narrative about the two brothers that marry sisters is placed inside the frame.

The last story in this collection is titled 'Sour Juice' by Sammy Oke Akombi. It is harvesting season and Jacobo together with his whole family work on his orange farm. The oranges that they pick are sour. Jacobo feels dissatisfied. He goes to the Agricultural office, but he cannot find the reason for the sour taste of the oranges. Then Jacobo decides to go to his village, and complain to the oldest and wisest man there. He asks Jacobo how he got the money for the project. Jacobo tells him that the money was some sort of a manna from heaven, and tells him how he got it. The old man says that the money was ill gotten gains. Thus the reason for the sour oranges. He advises Jacobo not to trust money that one has not worked for.

All the nine stories in this collection portray the lives of the Cameroonian people. Though the stories are fictitious they manage to make us wonder if there is some reality in them. Some of them portray the corrupt and struggling Third World. We empathise and sympathise with the characters in the fictions.

This collection is a substantial piece of work. It takes the readers into the heart of Cameroon through its literature. We find that the stories are very informative and intriguing. By reading them we want to know more about the culture and politics of the country.

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