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**Makuchi.**,. *Your Madness, Not Mine: Stories of Cameroon.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999. xxiv + 157 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89680-206-3.

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**Review of "Your Madness, Not Mine: Stories of Cameroon" by Makuchi**

A problem with stories that are written from and situated so thoroughly in the everyday lives of their characters is the uncertainty of whether the reader will engage with the stories. Is the writing strong enough? Are the stories convincing enough to break us out of our own daily lives, compelling us to take up the burdens and banalities of another's everyday existence? There are quite often larger issues involved in even the seemingly slightest of stories, granted, but without that personal engagement we are left to feel as if we are listening to a lecture, hearing a friend - and one of our more boring friends at that - drone on about the miseries of his filthy tub. Or, worse yet, we might feel as if we are being hectored by some particularly nasty know-it-all.

Thankfully, Makuchi, in her recent collection, *Your Madness, Not Mine: Stories of Cameroon*, avoids the worst excesses of such everyday chronicles. It is, through and through, a collection of stories chronicling the daily lives of Cameroonians – often, but not exclusively, women – who are believably representative and strikingly normal and without affectation. We are lectured at; we do hear too many unrealistically detailed explanations amongst friends; and we do think, occasionally, that yes, we have heard this all before. But at the same time, Makuchi has written some compelling, suggestive, and often touching stories that do bring the reader into the daily lives of Cameroonians. These are lives where the struggle is for some semblance of peace, not one for survival -which would add an unnecessary and distracting gravitas to the stories. As Eloise Briere points out in her introduction (and as is touted on the back cover), "[t]he characters Makuchi creates are survivors" (xiv). This is never in doubt. Rather, their's are struggles to carve out a life, to cope in the face of everyday, pervasive frustration. It is a subtle distinction, and one Makuchi cultivates throughout the collection.

These are also stories of escape: escape not necessarily to a better place but to someplace, anyplace, different. This difference is accomplished not in flight but in crafting another existence from the seeming wreckage that lies about. Makuchi's goal parallels the storytelling of the woman, Sibora, in the story "Market Scene": "It was always about her life, always about all the nasty-little-things, as she called them, that had happened to her over the years, pieces of her life, little vignettes that made up a beautiful tapestry. It was the kind of patchwork whose craftsmanship held you captive, in whose presence you were overwhelmed with awe and ... and inexplicable, profound sadness" (27). These are stories which work to transform and release using the patchwork materials of an otherwise mundane (albeit dispiriting) existence.

It is a lofty and noble goal that Makuchi has set for herself, and one not always achieved. But the collection is very much about the small personal victories and tragedies that afflict all of us - tragedies and victories that in less deft hands might be reworked into colossally significant, weighty, and ultimately unwieldy metaphors for the failure of the contemporary African nation-state, or some similarly portentous construction. We certainly come away thinking of such things: the devaluation of the CFA franc comes up again and again; the role and struggles of women to craft independent lives ("Bayam-Sellum"); the problems and implications of emigration ("American Lottery"); the raping of Cameroonian forests by multinationals ("The Forest Will Claim You, Too"); the corruption of contemporary African politics ("Election Fever") and life ("The Healer"); the ravages of AIDS and willful ignorance ("Slow Poison"); it's all there in Makuchi's stories. So too is a frequently transparent symbolism that never leaves one guessing or questioning the importance of a particular event or object or individual. Of course, to reduce these stories down to such singular "abouts" is unfair. For the true beauty (and tragedy) of the work is that these events are just another bit of the patchwork lives of Makuchi's characters; characters who try to make sense not so much of these larger concerns in

toto but of how these concerns are manifest in their lives. And they press on. It is almost as if Makuchi wants us to make no mistake: the lives of these people are what's important; don't let yourself be distracted by any buried symbolic significance.

These are also stories laced with considerable laughter, if little outright humor. We are all maddeningly familiar with laughter which acts as "the vitamin they consumed for daily strength. It cloaked their sarcasm, their frustrations; it buried their anger three feet deep, where it lay smouldering like hot food wrapped in plantain leaves" (88). Such laughter can become tiresome after awhile, grinding down the reader. And it is hard not to blanche, regardless of one's convictions, when such laughter is introduced as springing from (the rather inartfully expressed) "postcolonial context of daily uncertainties" (88).

In this world, or rather, this part of their lives, the laughter is a laughter described, not evoked; it is a laughter that we, like the young narrator of the story, "Election Fever," cannot fully join in. There is a tense, sometimes sad laughter about cheating husbands and "ashawo": "What was so funny about married men running around? About calling young girls prostitutes?" (70) It is laughter of resignation, as protection, as ironic shield; laughter as a memorial to an innocence never really allowed. Yet in this same story, a smile, a genuine chuckle, creeps over the reader as the grandmother, the grand matriarch of the family, nodding in and out of sleep and blissfully oblivious to all about her, is revealed to be a huckster of the first order, to rival the politicians. We laugh at the grandmother's complicity because we are on her side, we are pleased, and because she has surprised and shocked the narrowly righteous. There is nothing redeeming about the laughter, however.

The story, "American Lottery," is perhaps most emblematic of the general frustrations and struggles of those Makuchi writes of. In place of the beautiful patchwork, "[t]here was a suppressed calm that was bitter, almost poisonous. It spread like a thick fog, smearing dark shadows on their faces. It spoke of anger, frustration, and disillusionment that the young men sitting in the room shared. It sat sour, slimy, like stale food in their mouths" (81). And yet even here, even amongst all this felt tension, perpetual disappointment, and resignation, there is something of the (capital R) Romantic about some of these characters: "He was feeling nostalgic about the riots, the curfews, the strikes, the rallies; even the hysteria that like cerebral malaria sometimes whipped the crowds into a frenzy; the never-ending tug of war with the government. And the deaths." (84) Makuchi does not sneer at such feelings, nor does she, or her characters, embrace such feelings as an unquestioned good. They are, however, acknowledged.

As one might expect in stories that take place in "anglophone" Cameroon, issues of language use figure prominently. The text itself is littered with French and Pidgin words and phrases, both in the descriptive passages and, most effectively, in conversations. Perhaps the most intriguing and effective use of this mixed register comes in the story, "Accidents Are a Sideshow." There is a crash, drivers hop out of cars, unhurt but annoyed, and a verbal melee ensues: mouths wrap around familiar and unfamiliar curses; frustration felt (and vented) at lack of comprehension; epithets spit; meanings clearly understood from half-recognized phrases, shouted. The frenetic pace of the exchange is all so wonderfully muddled. Fluent or not, you are carried through the scene much like Manda, the story's protagonist and one of the drivers: baffled, "following what was going on around her like a bad dream" (110) knowing well enough how the arguments develop, at once confused and amused (or is it bemused?). It is an absolute gem, and while the subsequent explanation overworks the scene somewhat, it is one of those much celebrated marriages of art and life that stays with you as a reader long after the book is put down.

The use of French and Pidgin in the descriptive passages is more uneven in its effectiveness. A glossary of Pidgin and unfamiliar English terms is provided, although its coverage is spotty. Some words are explained in the text itself, with all of the stylistic bumpiness inherent in this particular method. And there are words not explained, which, if you have developed the habit, will send you scurrying to the glossary only to come up empty, and thus frustrated. If you need to look up the meaning of "baluck" or "groundnut" (and find these words in the glossary, as you will), imagine the frustration of turning to the glossary for help with "pikin" and finding nothing. In lieu of a more comprehensive glossary, it seems a better idea to let the context construct your meanings for you, at least on the first reading.

Eloise Briere, who has written the introduction to the collection, provides an outline of the linguistic background and a rough history of Cameroon, but sheds little new light on the substance of the stories themselves. It is a serviceable introduction, and we might even thank Briere for writing a true introduction, eschewing the option of reading the stories in advance for the reader. And for the reader unfamiliar with Cameroonian history,

Briere's introduction will add to an appreciation of the travails of the characters.

Narrative perspective shifts both between stories and within the stories themselves. For the most part this works well, although there are some passages during these transitions from one perspective to another where the narrative rattles along, skipping and bumping as you struggle to make sense of who is thinking what and how we know. Similarly, some narrators occasionally directly address the reader, again with varying success. Sometimes it is rather cloying, but more often than not it seems more an anomaly than either irritant or useful device. To the casual reader, these are lines breezed through; the close reader will pull up, asking "why?" The answer is not always clear, and this break in the flow of the story can be distracting. And some of these narrators are a bit too precocious. To go from juggling stones and wrestling about with one's young friend to observing, "Sometimes I wonder what it means for a woman to endure the things I've seen her [the speaker's mother] endure with my father," (16) seems a bit much for the playful young boy we are introduced to in the title story.

One final note on the structure of the stories. In the first four stories and again in the final story, each begins with the introduction of a dramatic but undefined event. Something has happened, but the reader is unsure of just what has happened. And we do not find out what it is that has happened until the end of the story (in the story "Market Scene" a recurring, plaintive narrative cry is "How could you, Sibora!?" - we don't learn what it is that has happened until the close of the story). These stories take us back in time as Makuchi traces the development of the unknown event, building to the point where the dramatic occurrence either explodes or simply dribbles into the narrative. Clearly a device for generating a degree of narrative tension and suspense, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. The lament after Sibora, quite real and sincere, is also hollow. The narrator knows something we don't and is holding out on us. This uncertainty can overwhelm the drama, hobbling the story - one is too conscious of the device instead of being carried along by the vision. We want to feel, empathize instead of puzzle at these moments.

One could, of course, go on chewing over the particulars of each story and the structure of the whole collection. It is the rather perverse quality of literature that the better a work the more glaring the missteps, and we are that much more aware of the could have beens, and the wish it had been so's. The stylistic hiccups discussed above are that much more glaring for the success that Makuchi has in drawing the reader into her works and setting expectations and desires that, inevitably, are sometimes left unfulfilled. As a collection to introduce readers unfamiliar with contemporary Africa (and the particulars of modern Cameroon), this is an excellent beginning; for the reader more familiar with the situation or with a more literary taste, we can but hope that this collection marks the start of a literary experiment that will continue to grow and develop.

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