

Dance of Scorpions – Lloney Monono’s Dazzling Poetic Waltz

Reviewed by [Dibussi Tande](#)

Lloney E. Monono. *Dance of Scorpions*. Lulu Enterprises, UK. September 2007.

Available on lulu.com and amazon.com

In an article on [Cameroon literature in English](#) published in 2004 in the French language literary journal *Africultures*, Pierre Fandio of the University of Buea noted that while Francophone Cameroon literature has been generally militant in nature, with many of its first generation writers having faced exile or imprisonment, Anglophone Cameroon literature, until very recently, largely focused on romance (“A few nights and days”, “Because of women”, “Taboo love”, etc.) and on “omnibus themes” which “interest everyone but don’t discuss anything of substance” (Sov Mbang the Soothsayer, Lukong and the Leopard, The Good Foot, etc.). In fact, Fandio compares first generation Anglophone writers to the infamous Cicada in the fable of the *Cicada and the Ant*, which spent the entire summer singing instead of saving food and building shelter for the coming winter with fatal results...

Fandio’s disdain for literature that is not socially and politically engaged is shared by Bate Besong, the most militant among Cameroonian English-speaking writers, who believed that no serious poet, playwright or novelist could afford to indulge in writing love songs while “Rome burns”. In a 1993 paper titled “Writers in Transition”, Bate Besong placed African/Cameroonian writers into “two irreconcilable categories”:

- (a) “those who encourage and openly abet their people’s Babylon captivity and thus, toy with trivial and inert literature of songs rather than the substance of social engineering which inflict great damage on the anatomy of the nation,” and
- (b) “those who desire a radical transformation of society through their character of dissent, often using their pen and voice to cause sleepless nights for the oppressors and operators of bad government...”

In *Dance of Scorpions*, Lloney Monono, who is part of the emerging third generation of English-speaking Cameroonian writers, successfully bridges that supposedly irreconcilable gap between the “literature of songs” and the literature of protest. In this impressive anthology of over 100 poems spanning a 17-year period, Monono masterfully navigates the political, social and private spheres without losing the essence of his muse.

For example, in *Lamentations* (p.19), which has echoes of Victor Epie Ngome’s play *What God Has Put Asunder* or Fale Wache’s epic poem *Lament of a Mother*, he bemoans the plight of Cameroon’s Anglophone minority trapped in a loveless marriage with the francophone majority:

With tears I remember -
Yes I remember
How you wooed me
You cooed to me
I was your apple
So young and supple
I was beautiful
Intelligent and resourceful – you said
[...]
The years have overtaken us in marriage
Still papers are crisp at the vicarage
But you now say I’m shit worthless
Nothing but third class
Like the frog drooping its eyes condescendingly
Inverting its mouth in continual disapproval
You hold me in disdain and dismiss me contemptuously

In “Conned” he uses a colorful narrative style to relive Cameroon’s controversial 1992 presidential elections:

Come let's play
John heard them say
Our minds are clean
They screamed
[...]
John! Fans chanted – let's play! Play to win
[...]
T'was foul-play galore
[...]
Still John's goals were numerous
And the applause thunderous
[...]
Then they switched scores
And vehemently swore
John never, never won
Oh, no! he's been conned!

In *Beasts of Burden* (p. 71) he mourns the wasted potential and futile existence of African migrants in the West:

The potential of lands
Abandoned in perennial potentiality
Wrought by no chains or crackle of cane
Yet the parking attendant with a PHD
And ten miles worth of tickets
Fizzles a lifetime of education

And in *An Hour with Consuela* (p. 57) he vividly portrays the intense but casual nature that characterizes fleeting encounters with women of the night.

by the hour was the agreement

but in half I was spent
she – alive and unspent

yet she was a fair trader
and her amourey of tricks as potent as Viagra
returned rigidity with the potency of rising magma
[...]

the phone jingled, she accepted the call
money, bag, make-up not dull
she returned, blew a kiss, then was gone –
hair, looks, boots and all

With a keen eye for detail and a superb mastery of imagery and the English language, Monono's style harkens back to early British poets and much closer to home, to Cameroonian poet and novelist Mbella Sonne Dipoko during his militant years of exile. For example, when reading *African Plight* (p. 124) we are struck by its eerie similarity in theme and style to "Our History", arguably Dipoko's most famous poem, written in 1964. In that poem, Dipoko vividly describes the bloody conquest and exploitation of Africa by colonialists:

And the waves arrived
Swimming in like hump-backed divers
With their finds from far-away seas.
And our sight misled us
[...]
When the sun's glint on the spear's blade
Passed for lightning
And the gun-fire of conquest
The thunderbolt that razed the forest.
[...]

In *African Plight* Monono uses a different imagery to echo the same message of conquest and spoliation:

They came in swarms
Like busy bees
When the weather's warm
Ferrying away nectar to their hives far
The flowers bloomed and their hives blossomed

We watched our culture carefully structured
Clutched and crushed
Our elephants nurtured
Turned into an ivory batch
[...]

Dance of Scorpions is a veritable literary *tour de force* which takes us on an exciting and eventful journey into the past, present and future. It is unarguably one of the finest and the most complete poetry collections to come out of the ex-British Southern Cameroons; one that not only tells the story of a people, a country and a continent, but also that of an individual – his hopes and fears, his successes and disappointments, his triumphs and tragedies.

In this anthology, Monono demonstrates that he is a renaissance man with a solid grasp of a broad array of subjects. His world is one where Zeus the supreme deity, Eros (god of love) Aphrodite (goddess of lust and beauty) Ares (god of Savage war, vengeance, and anger), Athena (goddess of wisdom), Nyx (goddess of darkness) and Socrates the philosopher, all live harmoniously under the same roof.

The only problem with *Dance with Scorpions* is that it is self-published. While there is nothing wrong with self-publishing, particularly the print-on-demand variety, which in recent years, has allowed many brilliant African writers who are routinely ignored by

major publishing conglomerates to finally appear in print, this option - except in rare instances - doesn't give authors the kind of exposure that they deserve, particularly those who are as serious and profound as Monono. Hopefully, a second edition of this anthology will be eventually published by an African publishing house to the delight of poetry lovers, particularly those on the continent who don't have access to online bookstores such as amazon.com.

Lloney Monono lives in England. He is also the author of [Beyond the Promise](#) a play on student political activism, palace intrigues and a coup d'etat in a fictitious African country. The play was inspired by the political turmoil that gripped Africa in the early 1990s.