

René Philombe. *Tales from Cameroon*. Translated by Richard Bjornson. (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984) 136 pp., \$15.00; \$7.00 paper.

Tales from Cameroon is Richard Bjornson's translation of two collections of allegories, anecdotes, and short stories by the Cameroonian writer René Philombe. Originally composed in French over a twenty-year period between the late 1950s and the late 1970s, these fifteen works reveal the human greed, jealousy, and blindness to its own destructive behavior which Philombe believes divides Cameroonians among themselves.

Bjornson includes a lengthy introduction to the entire collection which is very informative regarding Philombe's life, his rise to prominence among artists and writers in Cameroon, and his conflicts with the Cameroon government. Bjornson also offers his interpretation of several stories in the collection in an effort to help the reader understand Philombe's growth as a writer and his major themes. As a translator, Bjornson succeeds in retaining Philombe's subtle feelings and attitudes towards his subjects—attitudes which force the reader to detect the implicit morals in the anecdotes and stories.

The works in the first section entitled "Letters from My Hut" represent an early period in Philombe's career. They were written in the late 1950s while he was trying to overcome the effects of a serious illness, one which left him paralyzed from the waist down and particularly sensitive to the suffering of others. The style in these stories reflects Philombe's intense reading in classical French literature. The plots reflect his experiments with writing at that time. The works in the second section entitled "Cats' Tails Tales" were written in the late 1960s. By this time he had assumed an influential position in Cameroon cultural life. His works were widely read in his country and he had mastered his own deceptively simple style as well as a controlled sense of plot. The final story "The True Martyr is Me" was composed to be broadcast on French National Radio. It is published here, in translation, for the first time.

Philombe's thematic concern in all of these anecdotes and short stories is with human blindness, or the way people fail to see the destructive nature of their behavior. In one anecdote from "Letters from My Hut," a small dispute among a young boy and two girls escalates into a physical exchange of blows. The adult bystanders are amused by the scene until one woman decides to try to stop it by stepping between the children. When her dress is ripped off in the course of the fight, the crowd roars with laughter rather than come to her aid. The woman's husband, embarrassed for his wife and determined to defend her honor, begins throwing punches at every heckling adult in the crowd until "a savage brawl broke out." In the course of this a life is lost. The implied question is

how could such a minor disagreement among children erupt into such a major tragedy? The implied response is that the bystanders are to blame for their insensitivity and indifference to the embarrassment and discomfort of others. This indifference is what prompts the laughter. The narrator, posing as an observer throughout the story, does not openly state the morals in his stories but a judicious reader gets the point.

A short story from "Cats' Tails Tales" shows how a charlatan became rich because he convinced his village that he had returned from the dead with supernatural powers. Two human weaknesses, ignorance and selfishness, contributed to the success of his scheme. Another story from the same section, "The Path of Ill-Fated Lovers," shows how people refuse to believe that a person could die a natural death. Superstitions thrive and people insist on "mysterious" causes rather than accept an accident or an illness which was visible to the naked eye. The consequences described in both these short stories are dire for the community's welfare. Philombe implies that superstitions are blinding some Africans to the true nature of human behavior. These superstitions impede their progress toward a better and more humane world.

Many of the situations described in this collection are disturbing because of the way women are ridiculed or blamed for instigating the disasters which take place. In stories such as "Little Causes, Great Effects," "Bakamba, Returned from the Dead," "Kazabalaka," and "The Path of Ill-Fated Lovers" women are referred to as "the creatures who are most concerned with their own happiness." They are shown being stripped of their clothes by jeering crowds, fighting among themselves for men's attention, interested in men only if they have wealth and social status, and subject to engage in love affairs even if their husbands shower them with gifts and affection. Philombe's tone of disgust is blatant in these scenes. His implied criticisms of women are unrelenting and more frequent than his criticisms of men, social classes or religious groups. It seems that he makes his points about the weaknesses of human beings at the expense of the African woman.

Tales From Cameroon is an important text. Bjornson's translation enables us to see how one modern French-speaking Cameroonian writer views his world and his fellow Africans. Philombe's criticisms are intended to encourage a change in human behavior and to force his non-African readers to scrutinize their own world accordingly.

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