

The Cameroonian Writer, Juliana Makuchi

LIFE AS IT IS LIVED

Helen Fallon

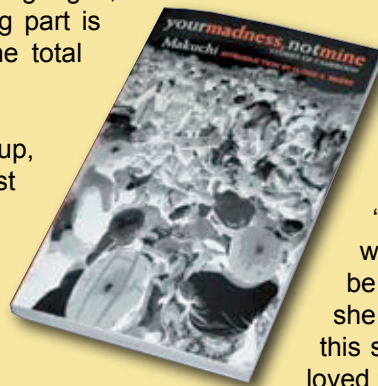
Germany was the first European power to colonise Cameroon. After Germany lost its colonies, following World War 1, the country was divided in two, with Britain taking control of West Cameroon and France taking the much larger territory of East Cameroon. Cameroon has two official languages, English and French. The English-speaking part is home to approximately one quarter of the total population.

Juliana Makuchi, of the Beba ethnic group, grew up in the English-speaking North West Province. Her mother farmed and her father taught in the local mission school. Thanks to their efforts their children received an excellent education.

While attending Our Lady of Lourdes Secondary School, Makuchi encountered writers such as Shakespeare and Chaucer. She later studied African literature in the university at Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital city, where she gained a PhD in African Literature.

While a student she began to write and published a short story. Later she attended McGill University, in Canada, where she completed a PhD in Comparative Literatures, making her the first Beba woman to earn two doctorates.

Your Madness, Not Mine, Makuchi's collection of short stories, published in 1999, depicts life in post-colonial Cameroon, particularly the lives of women as they go about their everyday business. Local, national and international concerns are addressed.



TREACHERY AND TRAGEDY

Childlessness and the agony childless women endure is a common theme among African women writers. In *The Healer*, the narrator tells the story of her aunt, who dearly longs to have a child. "She said her womb was taking its time; it was a late bloomer that needed more time to be coaxed into nurturing the special child that she was going to have. She even claimed that this special one would one day rule the world. I loved my aunt even more when she told me these delightful stories about her very special children who were still refusing to come into the world."

The aunt goes to see the healer Azembe at the insistence of her brother, a civil servant working in Yaoundé. "My uncle claims that this was one of the most difficult and painful decisions he has had to make. You see, my uncle is what we call in the family the staunch Catholic and a well-educated man. He has often been heard dismissing these healers with a sweep of the hand. Charlatans, he calls them."

The medication Azembe gives the aunt and other childless women turns out to be a powerful sleeping potion. Once they are drugged, he rapes the women. Enraged by her violation and by Azembe's betrayal of all the women whose desperate desire for children has brought them to him, the aunt destroys the compound where Azembe practices.

Gradually the aunt recovers, but there is one thing that she cannot forgive. "The stories of all those women were only worth a three-year prison sentence."

BATTLING AGAINST THE ODDS

Female endurance and the ability to go on, despite all the challenges faced in a male dominated society, recurs in the title story, *Your Madness, Not Mine*. The story begins as an account of a woman's developing madness as a consequence of her drunken, abusive, philandering husband's refusal to allow her to work as a typist, the profession for which she had trained.

It closes with the woman's dream of her mother, who "chastised me for wasting my life, sitting and sleeping in my own vomit...It's time to wake up from this slumber and clean myself up."

Makuchi now lives in the United States, an experience which may have influenced her story, *American Lottery*. Paul, a university student, and, like Makuchi, an anglophone Cameroonian, hates the dominant francophone culture at the university and dreams of a future in America. Peter, his friend, once nurtured a similar dream, until his brother returned after thirteen years in the United States "and bored holes, like those left behind on plantain leaves after the passage of hailstones, in his perception of America and the world."

Peter's brother's experience of racism was far from the American dream Paul and his friends had shared. "You spend the good years of your life dreaming of becoming a carefree Marlboro cowboy, you dream of going to America and becoming the best friend of the Carringtons, to whom you'll proudly show exotic Africa. Then you go there and they tell you you're just a black man, you're just a person-of-colour, you're just ..."

In *Slow Poison*, the narrator tells her son Manoji, "Only people struck with witchcraft can suffer such a disease", when she first hears about AIDS. Later she has to cope with the knowledge that Manoji has developed AIDS.



One of the most compelling aspects of Makuchi's short stories is the way she expresses the utter helplessness and hopelessness of the women in her stories. "I am interested in looking at the people who were forgotten – especially the women and children, and how they empower themselves."

(Photo: Ohio University)

She has to endure social exclusion. "Why wouldn't they shake my hand? Why wouldn't they hug me? They withdrew their hands, their words, as if I were a plague...They all fled. The cowards. They deserted me. They were scared of me, as if I were a witch...as if I would curse them with slow poison and watch them die faster than my son."

NOT SO BRAVE NEW WORLD

The foreign exploitation of natural resources is explored from the perspective of a mother in *The Forest Will Claim You Too*. She has watched her environment being destroyed. "There was a time when she could raise her eyes every morning, every evening, and embrace those horizons she could not physically reach but could feel, taste and touch...The forest had instilled admiration, fascination, respect, awe. Then she went to sleep one night and woke up to a new world."

This is the world of the foreign logging company that lures her son to work for them but with disastrous consequences. Her daughter has a relationship with a Frenchman from the company and gives birth to a "timber baby", the term applied to children born after the arrival of the logging company.

Cameroon's most prominent literary voices are francophone. Makuchi's short stories are a welcome addition to the small body of anglophone writing.

Makuchi is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of Southern Mississippi in the United States. ■

Helen Fallon is Deputy Librarian at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. She has taught at the University of Sierra Leone. *Your Madness, Not Mine* is published by Ohio University Press.