

EXCURSUS 1

Peter LaSalle on
BUMA KOR & CO.

The printed invitation came to me because a poet friend in Yaoundé had mentioned to Buma Kor that there was an American in the Cameroonian capital interviewing writers. It was the sort of summons that costs a bit of money, because printing rates are high in this African country and there are steep taxes on paper imports.

On the occasion of the inaugural opening of the
BILINGUAL BOOKSHOP
The Management and Staff of
BUMA KOR & CO.
cordially invite the presence of —
to their premises at Mvog-Ada, behind the Dispensary
to witness the official cutting of the Symbolic
Ribbon at 3 p.m. on Saturday 14th July, 1979
R.S.V.P.

Next to it the same invitation in French.

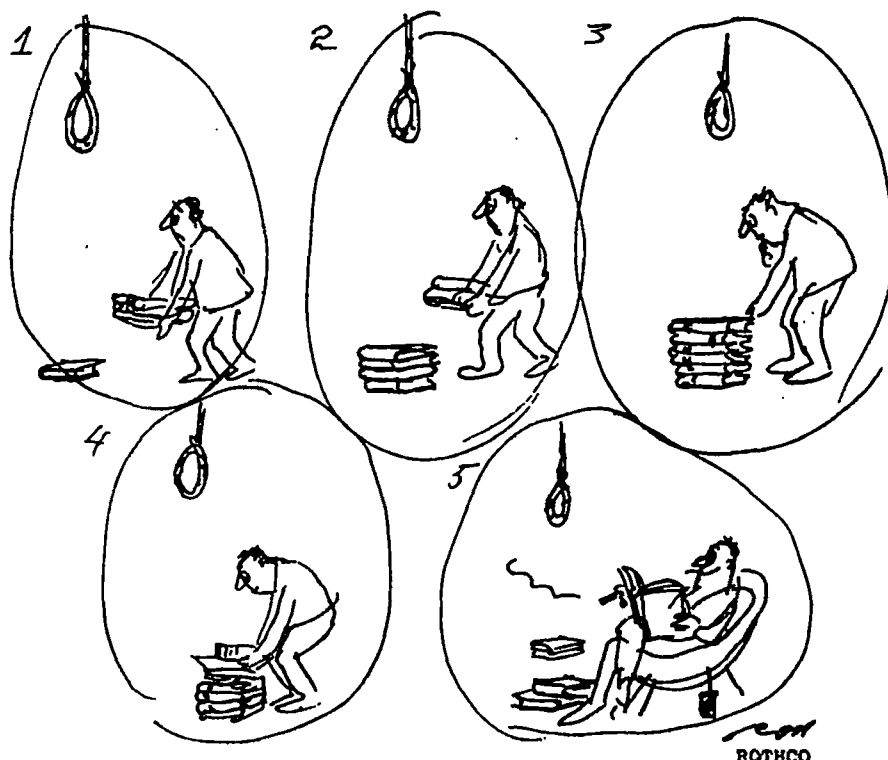
The bilingualism was important. The United Republic of Cameroon in Central Africa was formed from French and British territories, the only such union on the continent. True, the Francophone section is larger and the French language predominates. But the first article of the nation's constitution proclaims both French and English as official tongues, and all secondary school students study both languages. Buma Kor's shop would be the first totally bilingual outlet for books in the capital city. Yaoundé, once French, is an inland city cut out of jungled mountains, a sprawling place of tin-roofed, mud-brick houses, some old colonial edifices, and a few sleek new high-rises for government ministries and banks.

I arrived early in Mvog-Ada, a noisy neighborhood on a hill peppered with bars and record shops. Chickens pecked at mounded garbage heaps. Buma Kor's shop was in a freshly whitewashed building at an intersection of streets that seemed asphalt and rutted red dirt in equal part. It was a day of bright sunshine, with a breeze kicking up the dust and rattling the clumps of banana palms that grew everywhere. A yellow ribbon as wide as your hand flapped across one of the open sides of the shop. In front of the other open side a table had been set up and a woman was arranging bottles and hors d'oeuvres on the white tablecloth.

The guests browsed among the shelves inside while waiting for the ceremonies to begin. I shook hands with Buma Kor, a smiling, goateed young black in a rather too big suit of French cut, a native of Bamenda in the English-speaking part of the country. He explained that besides selling books he would publish titles under the Buma Kor imprint; in fact, there were already three books to its credit. The publishing house would now operate out of the bookshop premises and it too would be fully bilingual. A man of obvious energy, Buma Kor struck me as a natural businessman. He is a poet as well and, according to later information, a former preacher. What better credentials for a successful publishing venture!

In my browsing I noted that Buma Kor had stocked a good selection of books in French, including the literary series put out by CLE, a well-known Cameroonian publisher of the works of Central Africa's poets and novelists. The offerings in English were more spotty: two or three Shakespeare plays in paperback, some novels of the Heinemann African Writers Series, and a large rack of decidedly racy fare, most by a certain Rosie Dixon—typically, *Confessions of a Baby-sitter*, a garter-belted beauty ready for play—that attracted its share of preceremony browsers.

In the small textbook section the *Effective English* series offered by Evans publishers, London and Nigeria,



caught my eye. The uniform jacket design displayed the expected photos of black students engaging in scholarly pursuits—but also, high above all the rest, a long and sleek Mercedes car. Were the Evans people offering this contemporary African power symbol as an incentive for high schoolers? If you study hard, you too can become a high-living businessman or politico, reminding everyone you are a cut above the common crowd? The thought saddened me. Buma Kor's shop also sold tennis and ping-pong balls.

When my friend, the poet Ernest Allma, arrived, he pointed out some of the notables. The man in the blue suit was vice-chancellor of the university and behind him the minister of post and telecommunications. Also on hand were the minister of state for territorial administration and the vice-minister of culture and information. A skeptic might have concluded that with all the government emphasis on promoting bilingualism and with the dedication to that doctrine shown by the powerful ("strong-arm" to some) Cameroonian president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, bigwigs considered this a good place to be seen. But I like to think that these government types, and the professors and writers, came simply to wish Buma Kor well as he started out in the book business in their city. They came to tell him they were behind him in his vending and publishing ventures, that they felt his work would help the country develop something besides the usual line of military hardware and cash crops for export.

The guests assembled on the street below the front steps, where a microphone and speakers had been set up. They didn't work. The speakers of the record shop across the street were working, though, and I feared the ceremonies would be competing with congas, electric guitars, and rock singers wailing in Ewondo and other local dialects. But suddenly there was silence.

The dedication speech was given by an assistant director of the Regional Book Promotion Center of Africa, an organization funded by several black African countries. (Actually, Buma Kor works for the center and, as he told me, would be tending to his duties as head of Buma Kor & Co. mostly during the evenings.) The man spoke in French and couldn't be heard too well. Beside him, waiting patiently, was a pretty little girl of ten or so dressed up in a red frock, her hair intricately braided. She held a pair of long scissors on a plate.

The speaker noted that Buma Kor was certainly well qualified, though he prudently cautioned that one shouldn't expect success too soon. Then he quoted the slogan "Buma Kor was using for his publishing house—"Our literature is not dead" (an observation originally applied specifically to the literature of Anglophone Cameroon, Buma Kor had earlier explained to me). The little girl in red handed over the scissors, the satiny yellow band dropped in two, and Buma Kor announced, smiling, "We can now enter, and watch" . . . he hesitated . . . "and buy." Laughter and cheers of approval. I knew then that, yes, Buma Kor was going to make it.

How like a cocktail party for literati anywhere were the goings-on afterward. The champagne went first and fast, then the good Gold Harp brewed at the local Guinness plant, then the not-so-good Cameroonian beer, then the orange Fanta soda, then the not-so-good Cameroonian brand. The guests sipped and chatted in Equatorial sunlight so bright and strong you could almost touch it. The breeze died down. A young novelist, whose first book had recently come out under the GLE imprint, complained that the publisher had not given him a second look at the proofs. No, he said, he couldn't really explain what his novel was about. The university sort talking with us spot-

ted a lithe actress from the national theatre group and politely (and rapidly) excused himself. A man in sunglasses, a floor-length powder-blue boo-boo and fez made sure I knew he was the *director* of the Regional Book Promotion Center and would have delivered the dedication speech had it not been for another *important* engagement. A fellow lugging a suitcase-sized "portable" radio-tape outfit wandered over from the other side of the street and, with the graceful cheek of the determined crasher, tried to talk his way into a free drink. He had no luck and settled for a beer at La Pirouge next door.

That evening and all day Sunday the national radio (Cameroon has no TV yet) broadcast news of the opening, and when the national daily newspaper came out on Monday, it carried stories and photos. In a small country like Cameroon even the opening of a bookshop rates headlines, but no one can deny that the event had cultural significance for the nation. And it had been a delightful afternoon.

Peter LaSalle, a fiction writer and literary critic, is author of a short story collection, The Graves of Famous Writers and Other Stories (University of Missouri).

EXCURSUS 2

Barry B. Levine on TAKING CUBAN LEAVE

Toward the end of Reinaldo Arenas's novel *Hallucinations* (Harper & Row) the plot takes an unexpected turn: the hero escapes from Havana's La Cabaña prison and makes for the sea where, "swept along by the unending chains of cyclones that are forever rising out of these unquiet waters," he "finally end[s] up on the Florida coast."

Arenas wrote *Hallucinations (El mundo alucinante)* in 1966. Eight years later he was in Havana's La Cabaña prison; fourteen years later he was on the "unquiet waters" between Cuba and Florida, one of the thousands to leave the island via the Mariel Harbor ragtag flotilla. Once again life has imitated art.

After Fidel Castro got himself caught up in the Peruvian Embassy mess—eleven thousand Cubans crowded into the embassy in search of political asylum—he needed to show the world that these people were misfits, the dregs of Cuban society. To do this he made it short-term policy to put on the boats to Key West not only those from the embassy but others he considered of the same ilk: the mentally ill, prostitutes, homosexuals, criminals, religious fanatics.

One of the unintended consequences of this action was to establish models of behavior to be copied by anyone wanting to leave Cuba. The irony of the process is wonderfully captured in a joke that has been circulating here: A young boy goes into a police station and claims, "I am a homosexual, my brothers are homosexuals, and my father is a homosexual."

"But how can that be," replies the official, "isn't there anyone in your family who likes women?"

"Oh, yes, my mother does—you better deport us all!"

Reportedly, officials were promised pieces of furniture left behind should the person ship out or were paid to write on the required forms something indicating deviance. Official identities were exchanged between known criminals who intended to remain and noncriminals who