

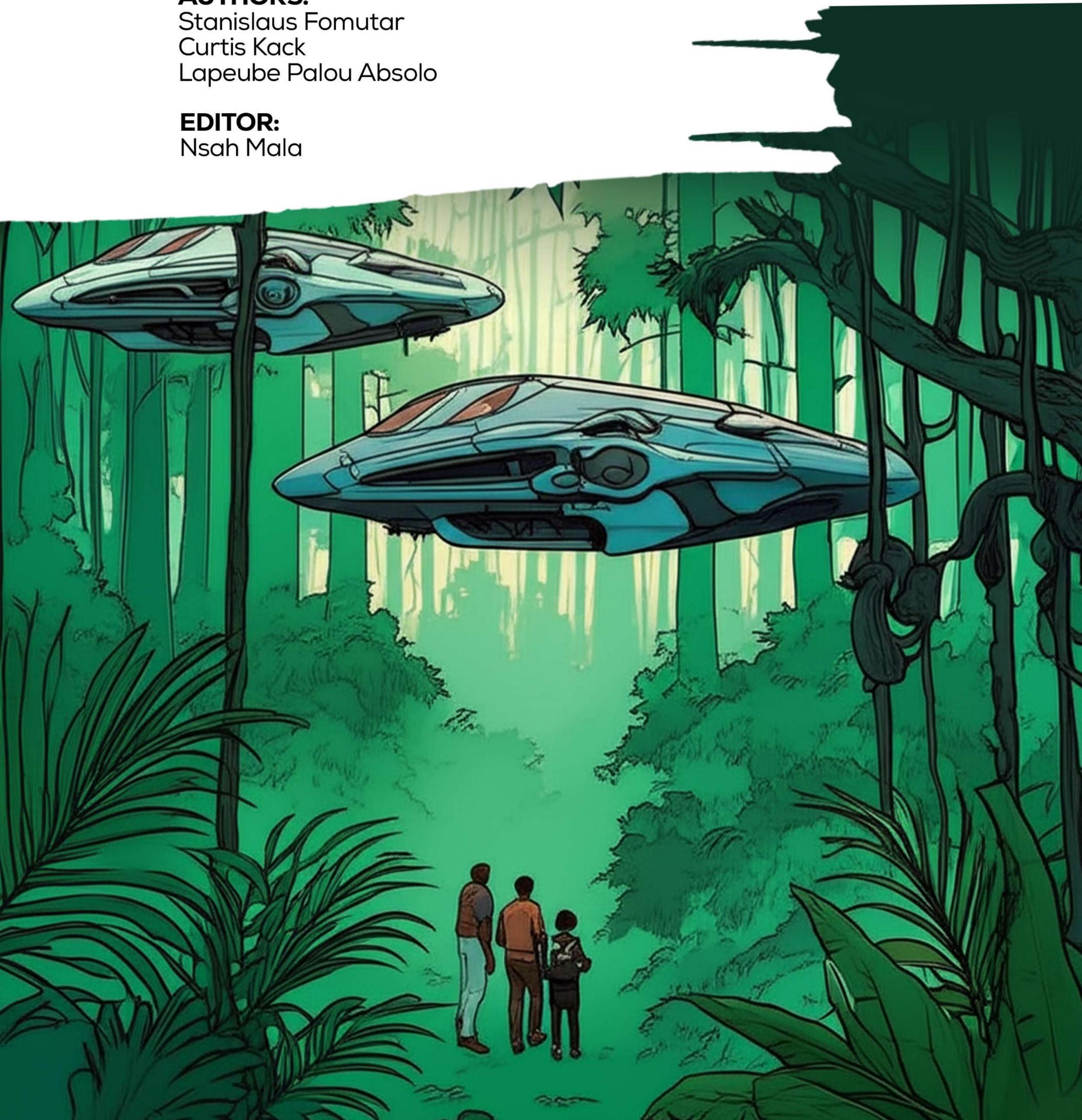
# STORIES FROM THE FUTURES OF THE CONGO BASIN

**AUTHORS:**

Stanislaus Fomutar  
Curtis Kack  
Lapeube Palou Absolo

**EDITOR:**

Nsah Mala



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## Contents

- *Foreword* – Nsah Mala (born Kenneth Nsah), PhD
- *The Multispecies Creature* – Stanislaus Fomutar
- *Yaoundé 2085* – Curtis Kack
- *Restitution* – Stanislaus Fomutar
- *Tongue of the Abyss* – Lapeube Palou Absolo
- *The New Assignment* – Stanislaus Fomutar

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# Foreword

*Nsah Mala*

The world's second largest tropical rainforests are found in the Congo Basin in central Africa.

And the Congo Basin is in serious danger!

Wars for critical minerals. Commercial agriculture and logging. Infrastructural development. Demographic growth and urbanization. Climate change and wildlife trafficking. ...

These and many more are factors endangering the Congo Basin.

In 2022, I defended a multiple award-winning [PhD Thesis](#) at [Aarhus University](#) (Denmark) focused on the Congo Basin. Among others, my thesis won the prestigious [Prix de thèses francophones en Prospective](#) ([Prize for Francophone Theses in Foresight and Futures Studies](#)) from [Fondation 2100](#) (France) and Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie ([AUF](#)) in 2022. In the thesis, I discussed how literary texts (plays, poems and novels) can help in saving the Congo Basin.

The visions — both dystopic and utopic — in the literary texts I studied are designed by single authors or writers for the most part.

As a result, I realized that participatory approaches are needed to design collective visions for the Congo Basin. But how could I make this happen? Then came two sources of funding.

First, the [School of International Futures \(SOIF\)](#) awarded me its highly competitive [Next Generation Foresight Practitioner \(NGFP\) Fellowship](#) in 2023 as a Judges' Choice. With funding from SOIF and NGFP, I began facilitating online participatory foresight workshops on #CongoBasinFutures.

As I had anticipated, the online workshops were not very effective. Turnout was quite timid! And this was mainly due to reasons such as frequent power cuts and unreliable internet connection for most of the participants from the Congo Basin, notably from Cameroon. Meanwhile, an onsite foresight workshop on the Congo Basin I had facilitated in May 2024 in Leiden (Netherlands) — during a conference called "[And Then What? From Narratives and Scenarios to Climate Action](#)" — with European non-dwellers of the Congo Basin was very engaging and insightful.

Therefore, it became clear that I needed to organize onsite workshops in at least one of the six countries of the Congo Basin (namely Cameroon, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville,

DR-Congo, and Equatorial Guinea). Given that most participants in the online workshops (via WhatsApp and Zoom) were from Cameroon, the choice became obvious.

But where would the funding for such onsite workshops come from?

Second, I turned to the [University of Cologne](#) (Germany) where I am the Hub Coordinator for a [Thematic Hub on Planetary Wellbeing](#) within the [UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES Coalition](#). And I secured competitive, generous funding from the Seed Funding for the University of Cologne's Application for a Cluster of Excellence called [Sharing a Planet in Peril](#) (SAPP).

With the funding from SOIF through NGFP and the University of Cologne through SAPP, I was able to organize participatory foresight workshops on [#CongoBasinFutures](#) and [#RoyalAnimalsFutures](#) in Yaoundé, Cameroon, on Saturday 7 September 2024.

In these workshops, we used foresight and futures thinking approaches to explore both undesirable (dystopic) and preferred (utopic) futures for the Congo Basin.

Among others, workshop participants in Yaoundé included writers, filmmakers, journalists, environmentalists, teachers, students, security workers, health personnel, local policymakers, and traditional indigenous leaders (kings or fons).

The presence of Kings (Fons) from Ajung, Din, Oku, and Mbessa — as well as the moral support of the North West House of Chiefs/Kings within the [North West Regional Assembly](#) (NWRA) — was of particular significance. With their presence, we were able to explore a very sensitive biodiversity issue in Cameroon's grassfields indigenous kingdoms (fondoms): the use of some special animals as royal and sacred animals. Most of these royal animals — which include elephants, cheetahs, leopards, tigers, lions, Bannerman's turaco, cowries, porcupines, etc. — are either nearly extinct or critically endangered species.

Accordingly, the [#RoyalAnimalsFutures](#) workshop used foresight methods to explore how to protect these royal animals for present and future generations.

Insights and recommendations from the [#RoyalAnimalsFutures](#) workshop are included in a forthcoming peer-reviewed article. And other avenues are explored for disseminating the insights and recommendations, including sharing the recommendations with relevant local and national policymakers in Cameroon.

Meanwhile, from the online to the onsite workshops, participating writers were encouraged to draw inspiration from the collectively designed future visions and write short stories as artifacts from the futures of the Congo Basin. Other insights and recommendations from the [#CongoBasinFutures](#) will be published in a separate foresight report.

That said, at this point I am very delighted to introduce you to five beautiful stories of the future from the Congo Basin. Stanislaus Fomutar wrote three stories in English. Lapeube Palou Absolo wrote one story in French (which I translated into English). Absolo also wrote two poems in French (which I translated into English) and both the English and French versions of his poems will be published with other poems in a bilingual poetry anthology I am editing: [\*Congo Basin Poetry Anthology – Anthologie poétique du Bassin du Congo\*](#). Stanislaus Fomutar and Lapeube Palou Absolo participated actively in both online and onsite workshops. Curtis Kack, who took active part in the onsite workshops, wrote one story in English.

The five interesting stories you will read here depict both dystopic (undesirable) and utopic (preferred) future visions for the Congo Basin, with more emphasis on Cameroon—for obvious reasons. The onsite workshops took place in Yaoundé, Cameroon, and all the three writers included here are Cameroonians.

As the stories of despair from Kack and Absolo suggest, if nothing is done to protect the Congo Basin now, its continued deforestation will lead to devastating droughts in the southern parts of Cameroon. And also exacerbate the desertic conditions of the northern parts of Cameroon.

Fortunately, there is more hope than despair in the stories from Fomutar. His stories alternate between despair and hope, with hope triumphing in all situations, sometimes after long periods of calamity. In one story, the Fon (King) and his community reconcile themselves back to Nature after an initially unsustainable relationship. In another story, poor waste disposal in some public-transport buses and streets of Cameroon is transformed through sustainable waste management. Yet another story features a multispecies creature facilitating communication between humans and the rest of Nature.

Without further ado, I will now let you plunge into the futures of the Congo Basin and Cameroon through these stories. As you enjoy your reading, kindly reflect and strategize on what should be done to save the Congo Basin! And feel free to share your reflections, strategies, visions, stories, poems, and other artefacts for the Congo Basin using the hashtag #CongoBasinFutures. Enjoy!



# The Multispecies Creature

Stanislaus Fomutar

I heard a voice echoing in the meadows. It spoke in vague tongues as if it were revealing some deep secrets only accessible to aliens. I also heard giggles of a wanderer bird in search of liquid juices. I could see the bird, as thin as a naked wire, its feathers falling off as it fought for survival in the world of the Anthropocene. It was no longer possible to imagine water around that area. The air was dry, and as the bird wandered from one spot to another, its hopes shrinking into despairing sobs, the pain in its lamentation became an illumination to my harsh ignorance.

"The butterfly that flies among thorns will tear its wings." The tongues began to make sense to my ears. "Even your own mind can no longer save you. When you could no longer see the worms, what did you do? Did you notice their absence? God forsaken worms, right? You were still eating and popping champagne as the master and possessor of the world. The reign of terror continued without relent. Then the bees and mosquitoes melted to dust, and it did not concern you. Do you now think you can be free? Ashes will always blow back into the eyes of the thrower. Even if your chains vary, you are not free if they are not free. The future is always in the past and the past is in the future. You should have known this since, and that a building of sand falls as you build it. Mortal man, what is most important as this must be spoken with urgent boldness because it is not coming from a place of comfort..." the voice continued to speak.

As the words pricked my conscience, a certain window opened before me and I saw the earth desolate, abandoned to natural disasters and occupied by aliens. In some parts, the air burnt like fire, flickering in the horizon in the form of mirages. In other areas of the world, the waters raged in violent swashes, swallowing everything on its way. I could see human limbs and heads and different human body parts appearing and disappearing in the water as the water moved. The aliens could live in any condition, hot or cold, and indeed they looked pleased with all that was happening. Henceforth, they will own the earth.

"They did not hear the worms cry." One alien said to the other in-between chuckles, jumping over lifeless human bodies that decayed on their own, no vultures to savour their cheap flesh.

I closed my eyes firmly, hoping to abort the view of such a horrific scene, but it was a vision. I could still perceive its forceful display even if I wrapped a blanket over my eyes. I was condemned to cry the cry of a people alone. What was I going to do? I swore to the heavens, I wish I were dead, not alive to see such malice befall the world. I wished my creator could rescue me from such murderous visions.



I was told that the day I tore the path out of my mother there was a rainbow in the sky that morning, and that though it was February, a heavy downpour breathed new life into our community. Even when the moon had divided into half, it became whole again and remained so till I was a month old. My father said it was a great sign, but none ever explained to me the meaning of such a sign. Each day I asked my mother about it, her eyes would grow deep with water.

"Whoever has been to the mountaintop knows that though from there they can see the entire world, they may not withstand the winds over there if they lose their hold." She would say with utter surrender.

Gradually, I came back to myself and the window to that tormenting scene closed. I choked back to the world of normal people, and I was pleased that nothing had happened to anyone. There were no dead bodies, no rushing violent waters and no mass desertion of the earth. Even though there was a feeling of horror and panic hovering all over me, I could still convince myself that nothing had as yet reached boiling point.

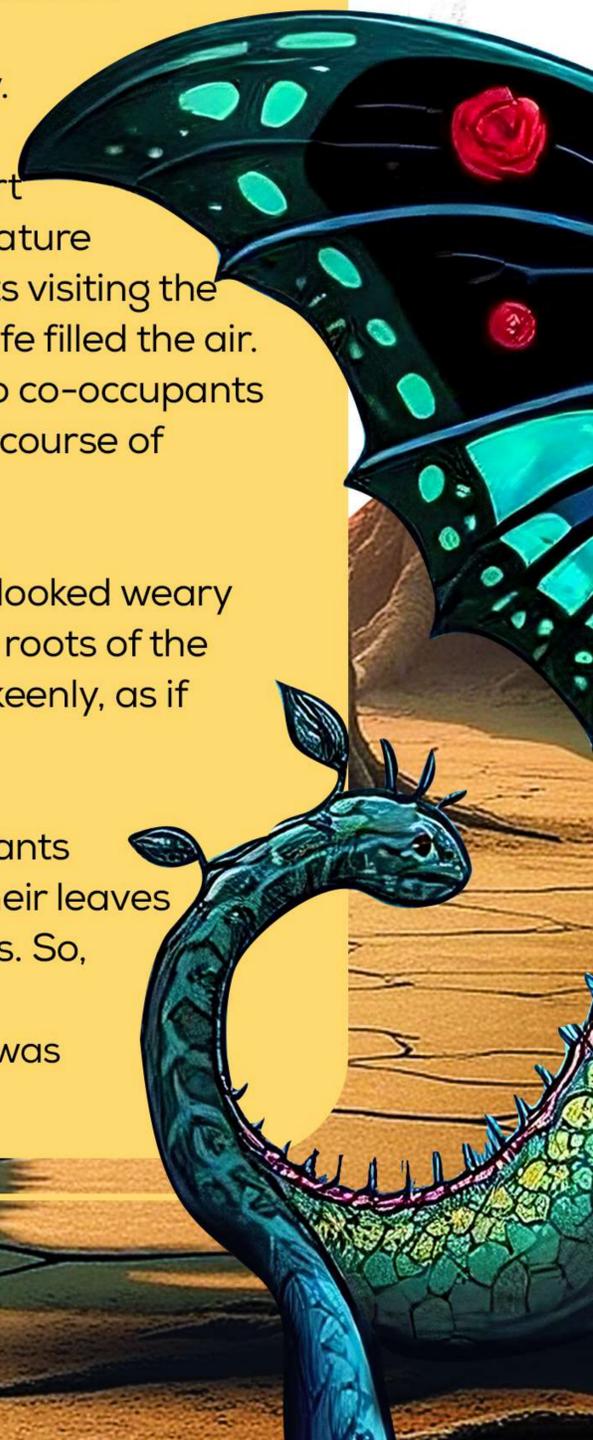
Then I saw another vision. A moving machine the structure of a robot. It could transform into a plant, an animal, a human being, earth or a star. It spoke the language of each species. When it became a plant, it looked like them in everything. It grew like them, and communicated with her environment like them. When it became an animal, it felt like them and could detect and communicate the desires and feelings of the animals. If it turned into a human being, it spoke the language of the area where it found itself. It was a trans-species being gifted with language and super-terrestrial abilities to detect the desires and feelings of any species it could transform into.

I saw it transform into a hibiscus flower in a distant land of vast greenery.

"I am ready ... it is me, your brother. Come and suck my juice and transport my grains to my lovers. It is time for us to multiply our species." As the creature spoke the minds of plants, I saw bees and butterflies and different insects visiting the vast greenery, humming all over the place with joy. A deep fragrance of life filled the air. I felt within me that such fragrance is always a language, the invitation to co-occupants of the universe to visit them with gentleness and cause an amorous intercourse of grains for species propagation.

In a swift turn, I saw this creature in a different setting. There, the plants looked weary and sick. My eyes opened wider and I saw a movement of fluids from the roots of the plants to the leaves. The multispecies creature looked at the movement keenly, as if decoding a hidden message.

"Drought... famine... thirst... hunger." The creature screamed, and I saw plants closing the pores on their leaves. Some grew wax-like substances over their leaves in the form of a coat. Others shaded off their leaves or reduced their sizes. So, I began to understand the behaviour of the plants. They were reducing transpiration in preparation for difficult days ahead. But the human world was dead in slumber and plunder.



"You lie if you think their suffering does not concern you." That voice spoke to me again with much authority. "You cause their pain in your blindness which you think is intelligence; but as they wither, so shall you. As they are losing water, that's how you are losing it too... Do you think you are very special?" The voice laughed, and a feeling of panic came over me in the same way it did when I saw the aliens. "If a dead tree falls, it carries with it a living one. When they die, you die with them, even though you think you are surviving. I am telling you again that their pain is your pain. Work for their joy, because their joy is your joy too." I felt as if my soul was moving out of my body. It was like a great magnetizing force was drawing my soul out of my body in a way I could not fight back.

"Oh dear!" the multispecies creature cried out and turned into earth. Different voices of long-lost organisms were heard talking. They were recounting the sorry tales of their murderous deaths and strangles in the world of the Anthropocene. "Our silence can no longer guarantee our existence. It has caused us the deepest injuries." In their death, they spoke vengeance to their surviving kind. "Speak out our pain, lest they wipe our variety off the surface of the earth".

"I am tired. I do not want to be seeing all these things. Take this gift of vision away from me if you will not tell me of what purpose it is. I can no longer bear it. Let me be." I cried out.

"That is my gift to humankind." The voice spoke to me as I gazed at the multispecies being. It changed into different types of existing and ever-existed beings simultaneously, at the speed of light, displaying its competences. The commanding voice began to talk to me again... "You have been blind and deaf to the pains and messages of sister beings. I am restoring continuity

between species. Henceforth, you will hear them when they talk and receive the messages they send out for the right actions. When they cry that you are stepping on them, you must retract, because if they cry today, you will cry tomorrow. Since their pain is your pain, their cry is also your cry. Through this gift, you must make apologies to them, that they may silence the vengeance they are speaking against you. Speak to them through it, tell them your worries and wishes and ask to know what they want. Do not be forceful on them, and what you want from them, you must henceforth obtain only through negotiation, not grabbing."



"In your sittings..." as the word "sittings" was uttered, I saw different parliaments all over the world. "... you must have this creature among you. You must let it speak the minds of your brothers and sisters, for if their pain and joy are yours, who then are they to you except brothers and sisters? You must listen with genuine intentions, for even your malicious sense of manipulation cannot save you from their vengeance if you provoke their wrath anymore. Anything you want to tell your brothers and sisters, tell this creature, and she will carry it to the right quarters. Before, you talked about the world, and made decisions about it alone as if you are the only occupant. That will no longer happen. From now on, you must consult fellow co-occupants. You must listen to them. Again, you are still free to act in self-proclaimed blindness. You know, when you have opened the eyes of the blind, they want to return to their darkness. However, it is good you have seen everything from the beginning. You will flee from this place and save the world of the stupidity it has endured for too long."

I saw parliaments in the world speaking and listening to the multispecies creature. It foresaw with insight, and spoke the views of other beings with soothing eloquence. It took from the world of humans and communicated to the rest of creatures and took from all other creatures back to the human world.

As I began to ask myself questions about the nature of its existence, its origin and where it had been ever since, I got a tap on my back. That was how I was awakened from a long dream.

How can anyone ever know at any point in time if they are not dreaming? Could this whole life be a dream? Should our dreams inspire us or plunge us into fear? What about those who do not dream or imagine dreaming? Are they dead at birth?

The end.



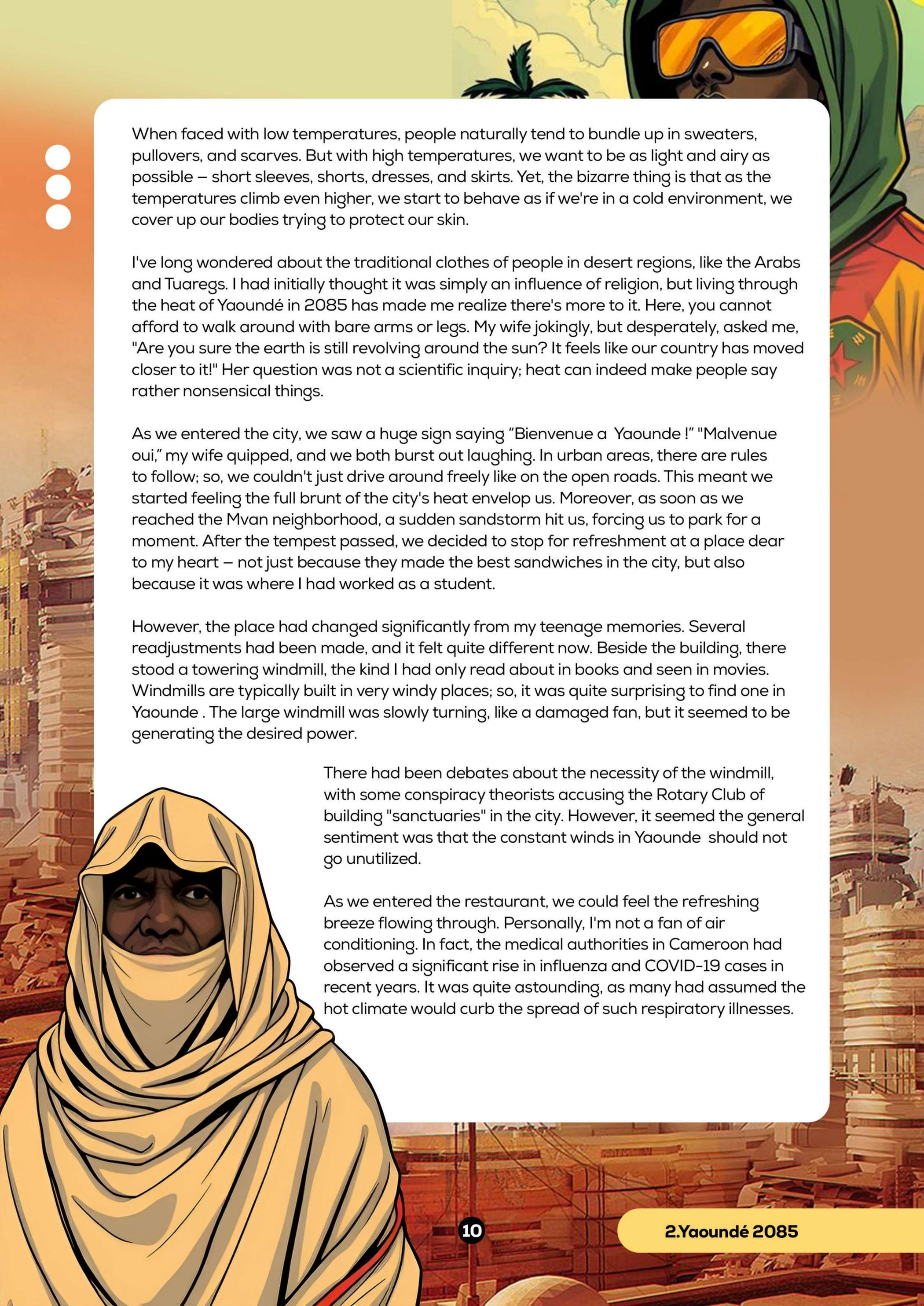


# Yaoundé 2085

**Curtis Kack**

As I rode towards the capital city of Cameroon, Yaoundé, with my wife Nalova, I wrestled with these thoughts. I had spent an entire week in Kribi with my family, but it was time for me to return to the capital. Vacations are good, but we need money to afford them, and to have money, we must work hard. That's life's golden rule. Unfortunately, these days, we have to work even harder. My children, Awasum and Manga, were reluctant to come back with me; so, I had to let them stay for a couple more weeks. Only Epolle was undaunted enough to return to Yaoundé with me. But the city was not what it used to be. The closer we got, the more we could feel the oppressive heat.

Unfortunately, the air conditioner in our car was damaged; so, we had to open all four windows as we drove. Honestly, if I could, I would have removed the windshield itself to get some relief from the oppressive heat. The paradox of heat is how it affects our choice of clothing.



When faced with low temperatures, people naturally tend to bundle up in sweaters, pullovers, and scarves. But with high temperatures, we want to be as light and airy as possible – short sleeves, shorts, dresses, and skirts. Yet, the bizarre thing is that as the temperatures climb even higher, we start to behave as if we're in a cold environment, we cover up our bodies trying to protect our skin.

I've long wondered about the traditional clothes of people in desert regions, like the Arabs and Tuaregs. I had initially thought it was simply an influence of religion, but living through the heat of Yaoundé in 2085 has made me realize there's more to it. Here, you cannot afford to walk around with bare arms or legs. My wife jokingly, but desperately, asked me, "Are you sure the earth is still revolving around the sun? It feels like our country has moved closer to it!" Her question was not a scientific inquiry; heat can indeed make people say rather nonsensical things.

As we entered the city, we saw a huge sign saying "Bienvenue a Yaounde !" "Malvenue oui," my wife quipped, and we both burst out laughing. In urban areas, there are rules to follow; so, we couldn't just drive around freely like on the open roads. This meant we started feeling the full brunt of the city's heat envelop us. Moreover, as soon as we reached the Mvan neighborhood, a sudden sandstorm hit us, forcing us to park for a moment. After the tempest passed, we decided to stop for refreshment at a place dear to my heart – not just because they made the best sandwiches in the city, but also because it was where I had worked as a student.

However, the place had changed significantly from my teenage memories. Several readjustments had been made, and it felt quite different now. Beside the building, there stood a towering windmill, the kind I had only read about in books and seen in movies. Windmills are typically built in very windy places; so, it was quite surprising to find one in Yaounde . The large windmill was slowly turning, like a damaged fan, but it seemed to be generating the desired power.

There had been debates about the necessity of the windmill, with some conspiracy theorists accusing the Rotary Club of building "sanctuaries" in the city. However, it seemed the general sentiment was that the constant winds in Yaounde should not go unutilized.

As we entered the restaurant, we could feel the refreshing breeze flowing through. Personally, I'm not a fan of air conditioning. In fact, the medical authorities in Cameroon had observed a significant rise in influenza and COVID-19 cases in recent years. It was quite astounding, as many had assumed the hot climate would curb the spread of such respiratory illnesses.

Further research revealed that most city dwellers spent a lot of time in air-conditioned environments – at home, at school, at work and in cars. This over-reliance on AC was having a detrimental impact on public health. While trying to improve living conditions, sometimes human efforts can backfire and end up being dangerous for the environment and for ourselves.

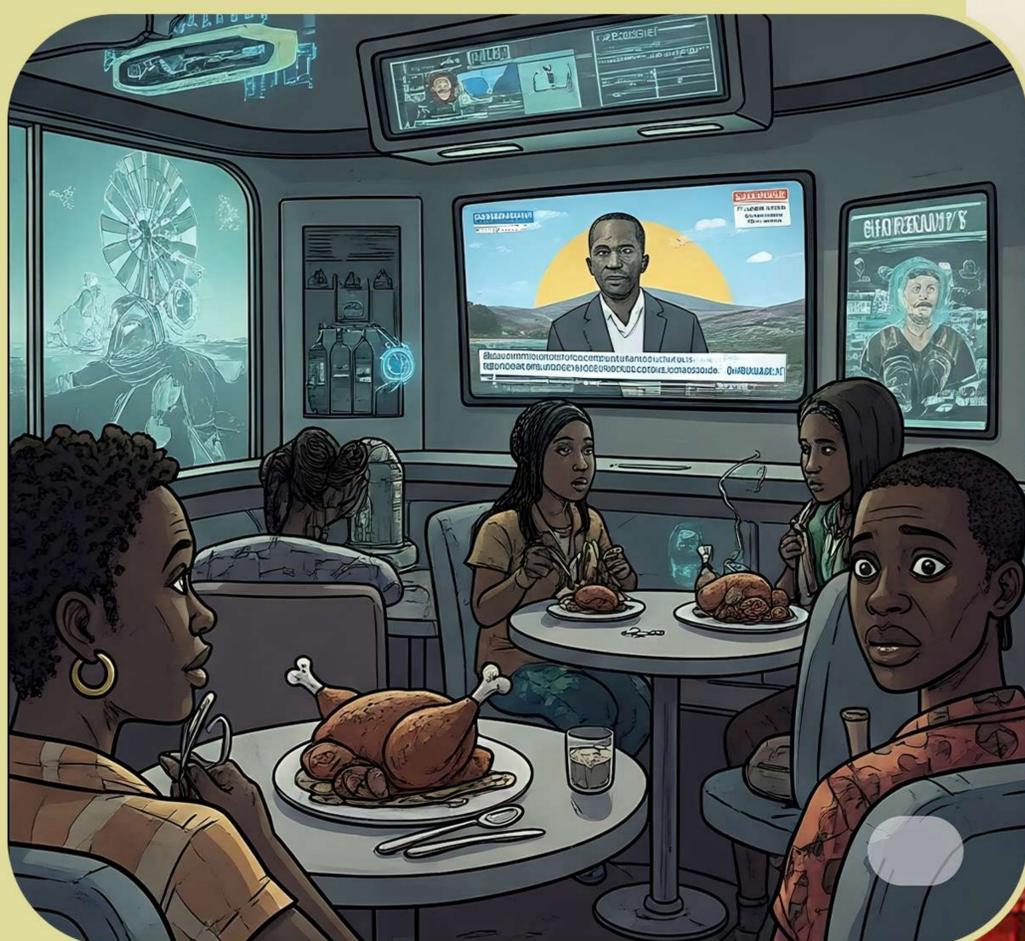
As I sat down facing my wife, I recognized a familiar face on the TV screen – the captain of our national football team, the Indomitable Lions of Cameroon. He was giving a press conference ahead of the next day's match at 9 pm. Since Cameroon lacked the means to build air-conditioned stadiums, all official national team matches had to be played at night. This was to accommodate the players who were accustomed to the climate-controlled conditions of their European club stadiums. Without this arrangement, many of the top players from Cameroon might have been prevented from representing their country by their reluctant clubs in Europe.

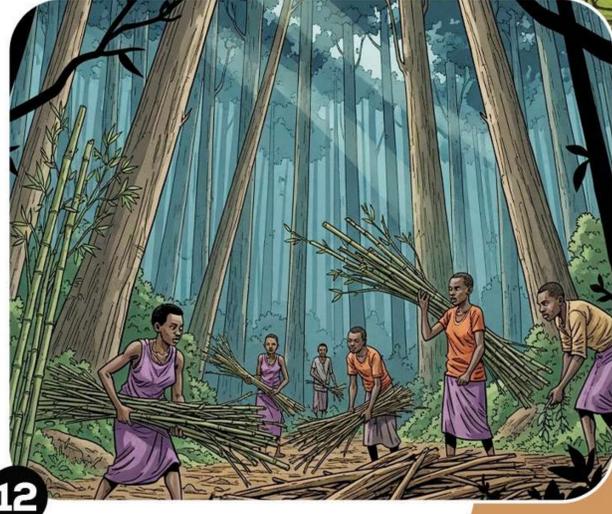
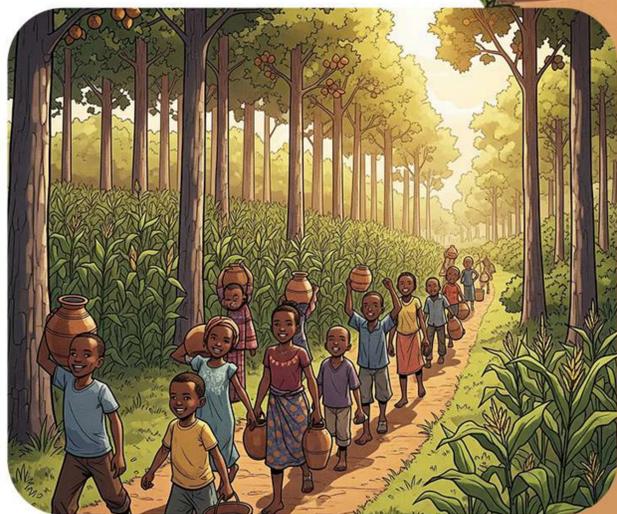
I picked up the menu to order my meal. Traditionally, I would have opted for roasted fish, but the conditions in Cameroon had made it scarce and prohibitively expensive, like caviar. So, I settled for chicken instead. The price difference was not significant, but the poor quality of the available fish made chicken the more appealing choice. The oceans had been messed with!

As I waited for my food, watching the TV, a breaking news flash appeared at the bottom of the screen. It reported that Cameroon was suffering from a severe drought, which was impacting the agricultural sector. As a result, the country would have to start importing more chicken and eggs, leading to a drastic spike in poultry prices in the coming months.

I stared at the screen in dismay, and soon noticed agitation spreading through the restaurant. People were picking up their phones, sharing the news with concerned expressions. My wife showed me a WhatsApp status relaying the same information. All around, I heard people exclaiming in frustration, "Weey ce pays!" (What a country!), and even "Seigneur Je sus, reviens!" (Lord Jesus, come back!).

As the waitress brought our meals, I knew this might be one of the last times I could afford to eat chicken for a while. Climate change had no shortage of surprises for us in Cameroon and the Congo Basin!





# Restitution

## Stanislaus Fomutar

I remember how it used to be. How we followed thin trails through kola nut forests and corn farms to the streams down in the valleys to fetch water. We went to palm bushes around or to the forests at hill tops to fetch dry bamboos and fallen branches of eucalyptus trees for firewood.

When the nearest stream was smoked to bare earth by the roasting dry season sun, we walked distances for water. And, indeed, the chatter in the caravan walk to bigger streams made long distances seem to be nothing. We scrambled to fetch water for the elderly, and we were taught it was the noblest thing to do. At the stream, we would go in search of raffia nuts, blackberries, passion fruits and all sorts of wild delicacies that soothed our youthful exuberance.

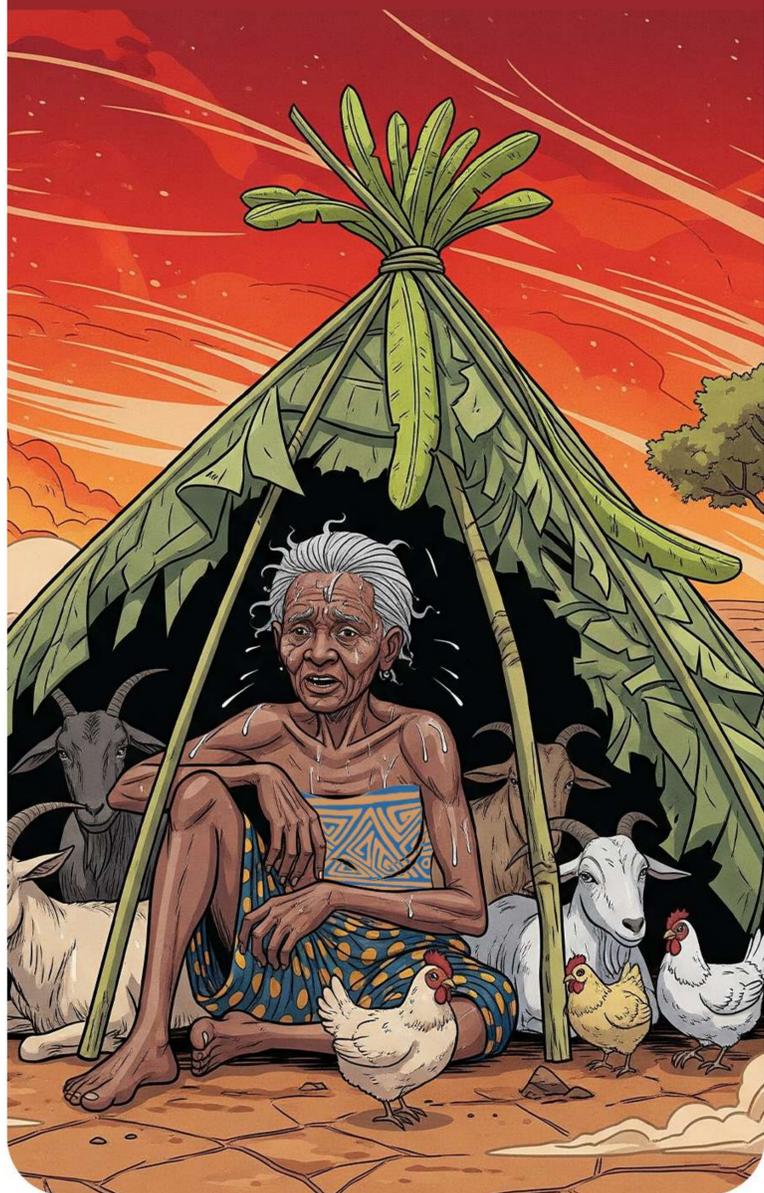
The forests were dark and monstrous. No one went fetching wood in the forest alone. It was there in the forests that different animals hid to come out in the night and steal from people's farms. We were told that in some parts of the world, such forests harboured human eaters and traffickers. As such, fetching firewood as well as water was a collective endeavor.

There is the drama of one particular morning, when we woke up breathing vapours of warmth into the freezing environment. That morning, as the fowls retired from their roost, birds singing, amazed at the folds of cotton smoke hanging over the burning twilight, we sang with them. I had mastered the twitters of different birds and could effectively mimic the weaver bird in particular. The glow in the sky, which shone in yellow and grey, had the intensity of sharp flames, like prolonged sparks from a welder's shop. In that state of amazement at the works of nature, we heard an ululation: "Wililili wir a nway wir a nway... wiri wa wiy oh" (Green grasshoppers, green grasshoppers, come and harvest some).

Everyone knew it was Ba Lanjo. It was not his first or second time making the communal call. Often, on his way to his palm bush every morning, he would be the first to notice a troop of mushrooms sprouting from the earth over an extended piece of land. Then, he would raise an alarm as was the tradition. Everyone would come out, each with their calabash bowls or containers, calling out neighbours to come and share in the free gift of nature which an individual was not to keep to themselves.

That particular morning, just within the last days of the rainy season, before the coming of the dragon flies, official announcers of the dry season, the green grasshoppers had come again. I picked my own container and took the lead while my siblings followed. My father had taken time to weave wet bamboo laces round my calabash. He said I had broken all his calabashes in careless play and rough-handling. With the lace, the calabash would fall and roll on the ground and would not be broken. Before the sun could emerge from behind the cotton smoke properly, the whole place was filled: jesters, hunters, farmers, mothers, fathers and children were all there. The communion was deep. That was in the early nineties, when my right hand could barely touch my left ear.

As my mind flashed back on those memories of old, a thick muscle of red-hot wind, burning like the fiery winds that blow over your face as you pass across the scene of a fire incident, inflated my light shirt and burnt all over my body. It felt like I was being rolled over the steaming heat in a barbecue. Children started crying and adults joined them too because no one knew what to do. It felt like we were all locked up in an oven, like bread in baking pans.

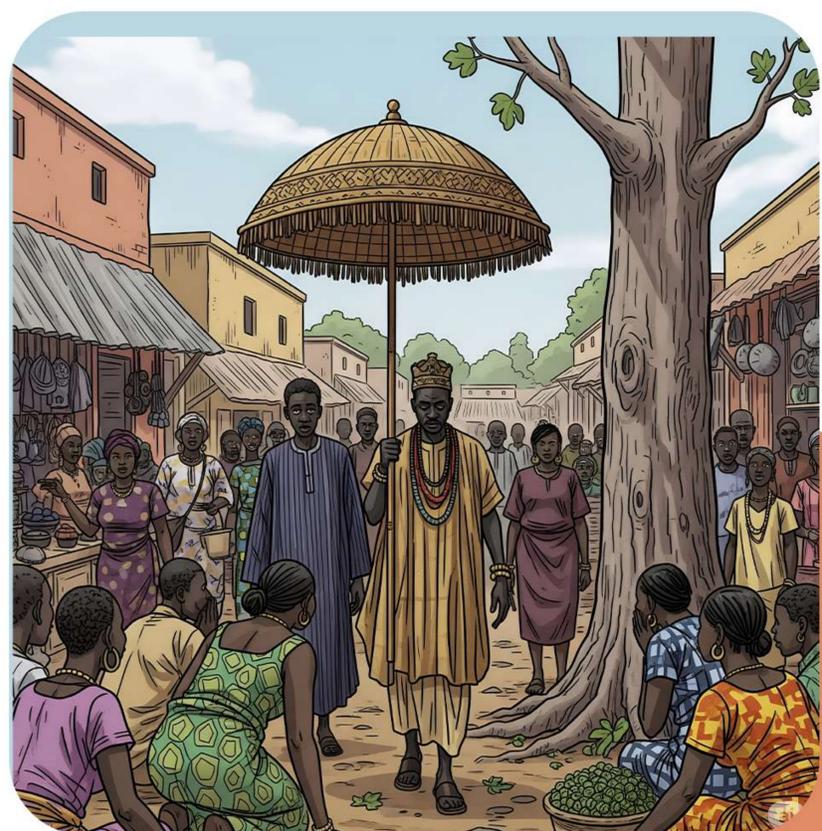


I am seated in the shed of plantain leaves almost naked. The pants, only meant to cover what everyone covers from the merciless sun, become less comfortable. We were told old age comes with peace and rest. But I have begun to regret why I had prayed for a long life and prosperity. What is a long life in hell fire? What is prosperity when you have to leave all your wealth and fight for space under scarce trees with goats and fowls?

I can perceive heat waves curling in the horizon like mirages. The earth is boiling, and there seems to be no difference between walking bare-footed and wearing shoes. Each footstep is nothing less than walking on blistering bars of iron roasted red. The whole fendom (kingdom) is thrown into chaos, children, the elderly and animals dying together. Everyone is looking forward to a message of hope.

Very early in the morning of the week's market day, everyone gathers around the market square. They are out on a summon from the palace. Perhaps, there is a pending appeasement. If they were still worshiping the god of the sun, they would consult him. Maybe witches and wizards have gone to God knows where, and what they have brought back is fire. A sorrowful murmur is spread all over the market as people are whispering from mouth to mouth. The dead left back home unburied and there is a smell of dead bodies stinking in every breath.

A boing hum is heard from one corner of the market, and everyone turns their attention there. It is the Fon (King) himself. No royal procession, no protocol. Only the bearer of the royal umbrella, made out of bamboo splinters carefully knit together with help of raffia fibre to appear like a small roof held above the Fon. The Fon moves with his head bowed low, and when he has reached open space at the entrance of the market, beside an age-old fig tree which has grown pale and desolate, he stops and the bearer of the royal umbrella motions everyone to maintain calm. Women bend low, with their hands on their knees and men bow down their heads, cupping their mouths with their palms.



"...Verdzekov (Forest dwellers). That is who we were. We came from the forest. And how did we think we would survive without it? When you made me king, I promised security of life and health. I am not vindicated holding on to this title if I have to watch things fall to naught every new day. I have come here today void of every protocol because we share the same fate. I have slaughtered animal victims as our fathers did. I have consulted with the elders in council. We have gone before our ancestors. They say we hold the yam and the knife. They say the same hands with which we lit the fires all over the world should be used to put them off. It is morning, but we are already melting in the heat. I have come here myself for one thing, and if you have not heard a word from my mouth, hear it now. You must open your ears widely and wait impatiently for the message that will be communicated to you. When it comes, do as it says. At this desperate moment, all we need is hope. Return home and find shelter before it is hotter than we can survive in the open."

The Fon returns and sits with his close collaborators in the innermost courtyard in the palace. They have waited for the government until grass has grown on their feet. They have been promised many things at lip service conferences. They have received groups of people in the palace promising the same things but fulfilling none. Would they not take their own destiny in their hands?

As they discuss, a messenger enters with a woman who bears different styles of marks all over her body. There are some with the shape of half-moons, visibly dark on her jaws, some of stars on her arms. She breathes mystery, her entire face as deep as the darkest side of the Bui River in the heart of the rainy season when it starts washing away neighbouring farms and pulling down mighty trees. Each time she moves, her footsteps spread vibrating currents all over the floor as if the soles of her feet make electrifying disconnection and reconnection to the nerves of the universe hidden beneath the earth.

"She sees today and tomorrow." The messenger reports. "Speak, woman. We have heard a lot about you. Shall we all die without respite?"

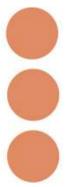
"I only speak what I see..."

"What do you see? Can you help us?"

"There is only one solution, which is out of my reach. I am seeing a person who is in a pool of water, yet he is dying of thirst. As he bends down to drink, the water volume reduces and disappears if he reaches ground level. But as he gets up erect, the water rises to his neck. What can I say? There is only one woman, the mother of crickets, in-law to the bees and relatives of beetles and green grasshoppers that you have all murdered. You do not have food because you have driven into extinction her family and where she has escaped to, I do not know. How do you think you could approach her, if you know where she is, and do you think it normal if she accepts to grant you an audience? If you see her, you will have a solution to your problem..."

"Can you tell us more about this woman?"

When the Fon asks this question, his eyes open beyond the physical. He sees a woman with the wings of crickets, the head of a green grasshopper and the belly of a beetle, having the colour of a bee. Her age, he cannot tell... She wanders around wetlands, river banks and valleys and eats only grass. Her excrement is made up of seeds and eggs of different insects which she commands to come into being. As she moves along, and passes out, new things come into life.



"She does not live in a house and has no latrine or toilet. She lives with her brothers and sisters and family. If she comes here and wants more bees here, she would call 'bees... bees... bees...' and when she passes out, the waste will subsequently turn to bees. The same happens if she wants crickets or beetles or green grasshoppers. Without small things, there cannot be big things. She does not make big animals and trees be, but when she brings into life smaller ones up to crickets, and grass along river banks and valleys, big animals and trees gradually come to be." Explains the woman with different marks.

"We would do everything to have her here. Just tell us what to do."

"You cannot commend her. You cannot see her when you want. She appears when she wants. You may start by not poisoning her kith and kin anymore. Do not kill her kind. Till you have truly repented, and she is pleased with your efforts, she would not do anything. When you are ready, she will be here, and you will not cry for anything. It is up to you to make the decision."

The Fon sends his collaborators back home to sleep over what they have just heard and report to the palace the following morning for what must be done.

"We have said no one should go close to the Bui River again for whatever reason. No one should cut a tree around it or burn a fire around there. The only thing one should have with the river is crossing the bridge over it. No farm around the river must be fertilized or poisoned with chemicals. No one should trespass the forests at Taayav and Roo Ntseni anymore. We have not said do not go to your farms or do not work for more yields in whatever you do. You have only been given limits to what you have to do. If we want a better world, it must be clear in our minds that we cannot have it without any form of sacrifice. The sacrifice must be painful, and when we have attained our objectives, knowing the pains we went through, we would never fall back to our past errors."





# Tongue of the Abyss

## Tongue of the Abyss

### Lapeube Palou Absolo

Manaouda woke up that day from a fitful sleep that had not allowed him to close his eyes, reduced to thinking about the strategies he had to cook to earn the next day's pittance. On top of that, there were other tasks, each no less important than the other: looking after his children, feeding his family, fulfilling his responsibilities. Coming from a middle-class family of which he was the eldest, he had been forced to leave school in order to assert his birthright, at the risk of losing it to a richer brother. Manaouda had a lot to do with brothers and sisters to look after. He had to do everything. That's the way things are in Africa. So, he diversified his sources of income. He mainly raised livestock, worked the land in the rainy season and got by with the mototaxi (motorbike used as a taxi) in the late hours when he had to offer himself to the gods of sleep. He had no rest. But he still managed. Manaouda answered all the family's calls. He honoured his responsibilities. But at what price? In any case, it didn't matter whoever was the man we now called Dad.

Welcoming the dawn with legs as stretched as they were transformed was one of the few experiences he had had. But he tried to get up, in response to a bell he had just heard thundering, probably from a church nearby. Prayers now abounded at dawn for reasons known to the townsfolk. The loud speakers were opening their throats in the high places of the city's many mosques. They couldn't take it anymore. Only the invocation of the Most High could deliver them from these misfortunes and get them out of this dark night.

Tongue  
of the  
Abyss



Many families were practising news-phobia, because nothing enchanting was being said on television any more. While TV used to entertain with films and light-hearted programmes, or provide information about opportunities, this time it had become an instrument of psychological torture. Manaouda still glanced at it when the power came on sporadically. When the news wasn't revolving around a suicide, the murder of a mother by her child or the imprisonment of a citizen, it was hovering around an embezzlement of public funds that few newspapers would mention. They also echoed a wave of deaths whose origins lay in the food crisis, the heat, the wars over resources; and the scale of these wars had nothing to borrow from the Rwandan genocide to instil fear.

Manaouda, stunned, wondered if what was happening to his cotton legs was a consequence of these contingencies. Was he too nearing the end? He thought as much about the many tasks he was carrying out because of the constraints of time, and because of old age, which he was far from being a militant for. Suddenly, his daughter Madjole entered after having impressed the door with a few light flicks of her wrist. She sat down on the mat once she had let herself in, pallidly handling, in turn, the ants in agreement with funeral eulogies. Some of them were obviously waiting, sticking out their antennae in search of the measly food. Others were whining about the abyss that was gripping the world more than humans cared. As much as ants perished, humans died. The heat had reached its peak. Wartime!

As usual, Manaouda and her daughter reviewed the family's overall situation. But there were no major worries on the horizon, apart from the bad weather they were experiencing, which they had learnt to make part of their routine. And so, there was nothing to report apart from the wish to be able to adapt. Manaouda had fulfilled all his duties. But then, the sadness that seemed to have invaded his daughter's throat caught his attention. He couldn't resist wanting to know more. With her hands under her chin, she said, turning her head to translate what her father, sitting on the huge sofa drenched in the morning sweat, with the footstool between his legs, could not imagine: that she had just failed the police competitive exam.

Manaouda was so overwhelmed by despair, doubt and disappointment that he was left stunned, coitus and taciturn. He had hoped that this time the hook would catch the fish. He believed that life was going to put the smile powder in the family's mouth after years of efforts regularly snatched away. He still had to try and try until he was disgusted.

He wrapped his palms around his face to disguise his anxiety about a daughter in need of consolation. A father's duty. His head then dipped, revealing pathologies of desolation. He was overwhelmed with grief, not because she had failed, but because they had mobilised the few resources they had. He did everything he could to hold his anger in his heart. But this was attempting to ignore the damaging power of accumulated frustration.

It is like a bomb that cannot be deactivated and ends up claiming many victims, of which the war in Eastern Congo is the archetype. He expressed his regret and ended up whispering deep inside himself.

This sentence on his face did not escape the vigilance of his daughter, whose scattered gaze was about to strike at the same time the photos of her mother on the whitewashed wall and the environmental protection signs above the television set. His round eyes, soaked by a pool of tears, turned towards a traditional sewing machine, resting next to a pot of an old flower. But his reaction caught her daughter's attention as she lifted her head, shaking away the trickles of tears that filled her thin, sad child's face.

No sooner had he finished invoking the Holy Trinity to come to his aid in the face of these uncertain futures, than his wife called out to him from the door in a voice that could split a metal sheet like a thunderbolt. In her hands she held the basin, stained with a profusion of colours, from which drops of red millet porridge for the goats were oozing out at regular intervals. She paid no attention to the gloomy atmosphere that had taken over the whole sky in the living room, staring at a newspaper on the table, the source of which she didn't know, but on which she could read:

"Floods in Mayo-Danay claim 11 lives, 198,378 victims, 103,000 houses destroyed, 185 primary schools and 13 secondary schools flooded."

"40 children killed by suicide bomber in the Far North."

"France to help the Cameroonian State."

Sadness was the marker of the times. Happy were those who did not seek to know more. Woe betides the curious. All you had to do was open a piece of paper torn by the hurricane's teeth to be confronted with bad news. But this newspaper was not his wife's business. Her business was selling her doughnuts. Farming. Helping her husband. Looking after her family. So, she stuck her head inside and said to her husband:

"My husband! Can you come over? There's something at the entrance. I don't know what has happened. It's just witchcraft."

He didn't have time to finish as he immediately went outside to follow in his wife's footsteps, brushing aside the traditional greetings from the neighbourhood that came from left to right. He crossed the gutters as if they didn't exist, invaded by piles of rubbish and scattered plastics. Eventually he took the corridor that would lead him to his farm as quickly as possible. There was nothing to be seen in the street, which, now more than ever, was devoid of passers-by. For lack of rain, the mandawa (groundnut) sellers who embroidered the alleyway with their wares had been dismissed. The soya ministries had come to a standstill. There were no more animals to turn the wheels of the ministry. Cattle were perishing and the surviving dogs had plenty to eat. The few mototaxi (motorcycle) riders were calling in vain to customers who were leaving in different directions, feeling their way along the rain-slicked ground. The trays carried by the hawkers were empty of items. Inside the balaclavas and hijabs, the locals ruminated, undressed and talked alone about inaudible subjects like mad people.

In single file, they continued walking, their faces fragrant with anxiety. A wave of the ochre odour of slaughtered animals and dead bodies in puddles, the exact source of which he didn't know, swept down his nostrils, making him want to spit. He rushed to find out what it was all about. Taking the corridor that led them to the farm, he tried to dispel the uncertainties that strangled him at the thought of losing the rest of his riches, at the sight of chains of robberies pouring in. Lord, I hope what I'm thinking about isn't reality! Manouda said to himself with a heavy heart.

When he arrived, he was surprised by a sad welcome to which he was never accustomed. His goats did not greet him. At that moment, his footsteps were fuelled by curiosity. He hurried over and saw the putrefactive state of the rest of his farm. He hurriedly opened the wire fence that served as an enclosure and swept his gaze over the whole dormitory, from the sheep's compartment to that of the goats and passing by the cattle.



He had skilfully invested in and organised his farm with unmatched tact. After graduating from the Ecole Normale Superieure (Higher Teacher Training College), with nowhere to turn, he set about setting up a livestock project. He raised the money to make it happen.

Manaouda went round the whole farm, looking sadly and in turns at the sheep in agony. Some were in the eternal arms of sleep, wrapped in colourful shrouds. Some were chewing on the previous day's food to the rhythm of the mourning of their companions spread out along the four corridors. He then went to the goat compartment, where two survivors were spraying saliva on the goats that had lost their lives. In the cattle compartment, there were no survivors. A head was trying as best it could to gather the remnants of life scattered between its legs. His wife, whose eyes were completely soaked, was staring at him, holding her heart in her hand in case there was a scandal. She followed him and helped him collect the hard-earned corpses.

"What are we going to do with them?" she asked in a faraway voice.

Question to the absent subscriber. He had nothing to do with questions like that. He had to mourn. In his mind, several images crept in and ideas were created. Sometimes his memory, now plastic iron, would tell him: You have to be able to overcome life's challenges. You have to be stoic in spite of the dramas and circumstances. At other times, he could feel it echoing in the depths of his heart: life is pointless. You have to know how to let go. Leave things before they leave you.

Stoic about what? It's an illusion. It's for philosophers and writers who see the Congo Basin, for example, shattered into bits of mist, but continue to make a marvellous portrait of it all the same.

It occurred to him to call in a vet to identify the source of the problem. This could not happen without investigations being carried out. A member of staff arrived in his dark white coat. He moved from one compartment to another, feeling each animal's genitals and squealing every time he lifted its head. Mr Aminou, chief veterinary officer at the Louggeo Centre, let all the questions Manaouda asked him pile up. This raised even more doubts. Mr Aminou was not Jesus to give back life to the dead. When he had finished inspecting the whole place, he took off his mask to give Manaouda the results of the autopsy.

"Sir, we've been all over the farm and I've seen what you've seen. It's alarming and ultimately demotivating. But you can lose everything in the blink of an eye. In fact, all these animals died from suffocation. They ate inappropriate food because, as you know, just like humans, animals have to eat healthy. So, the food you gave them yesterday was poisoned. What's more, they weren't drinking enough water."

But Manaouda had built a personal well in his homestead to solve the water problem affecting his entire neighbourhood. The river shared by the people had dried up completely, and the trickle of men draining into it could only end with the intervention of the forces of law and order to bludgeon those who were using force to gain access to the precious liquid. He dug his water reserve solely for his livestock farming activity. But he was too naive to think that he wouldn't end up suffering the same general reprisals to which the whole town was subjected. Water was becoming scarce and it was necessary to be sparing to ensure the next day.

"Lord! I don't understand a thing. It's the same food they've always eaten without anything happening to them.



And we've always made sure in the family that everything is clean, right down to the plates they eat from. We used to be able to give them water three times a day. But with the water crisis we're in today, to the point where people don't know where to get their water, we have to admit that it was difficult to continue with the same logic."

Acknowledging his vulnerability and the pain Manaouda was going through, Mr Aminou, the vet, went out of his way to comfort him by giving him a course in personal development.

"You know that not everything works out the way you want it to. Everything has its opposite. You live today, you die tomorrow. It's a bit like that. The important thing to remember is that it is highly likely that they ate the cowpea leaves that had been sprayed 30 minutes before they were cut and sold on the market. Whereas it is advisable to touch them only after a whole day. After eating them, all these animals were affected at the level of the intestines, which did not delay immediately to rot."

Manaouda stuck a finger in his mouth to stifle the breath of desolation and disappointment that was forcing itself to escape. Beside him, his wife was trying to hold him back by inviting him to pray. It's God who does everything. If He is able to take humans back through death, it is the same for the animals that humans have always considered as prey.

"If we had been informed in time, we would have managed, even with difficulty, to recover some of them. Insecticide is very dangerous. It destroys the grass and makes the soil infertile. It kills slowly. That's what farmers are using more of these days. All our land is now castrated and agricultural produce infected. We also have to be careful with fertilisers, which give a false illusion of production."

No sooner had they finished inspecting the premises than the shrill hum of a machine fell silent at the entrance to the farm. The wrinkles on Manaouda's surprised face showed his uncertainty. He would never have imagined or accepted being told to believe that such an individual would turn up at his homestead on such an obsequious day. Beyond his waistline, which overhung the branches of the neem (*Azadirachta indica*) tree bordering the limits of his homestead, a man lightly clad in a waistcoat of a finished orange hue, followed by a slender young girl, both entered, wearing white helmets. But he immediately recognised their identities and waved to his wife, pointing disdainfully in the direction they had just come. It certainly wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. You could see it in the confidence of their footsteps and the easy-going atmosphere of their conversation. Facing them minutes later, the strangers did not delay to introduce the quintessence of their surprise visit. . The man took a notebook out of his bag, wrote down the date and delivered the contents.

"Hello. I'm Ahmadou, the local tax collector for the municipality. This is my colleague Mefo. Our visit falls within the legal framework of policies defined by Cameroonian law. Anyone who carries out an activity has a duty to contribute to taxation for the development of our beloved Republic. I'm sorry for the damage we're seeing, but this is not the responsibility of the State."

Distraught, Manaouda couldn't say a word, reduced to mulling over his confused and scattered thoughts. The veterinary officer, still present at the crime scene, lent him a helping hand by explaining to the tax officers what had happened and the economic blow that the gentleman had taken in the face. The anger in Manaouda's eyes and the embarrassment coming out of his eye sockets had so contaminated his mood that he almost attacked the tax officer who wasn't sharing his grief.

What about him? The tax officer was there to do his job and he was accountable to his superiors.

So, the tax officer retorted:

"I came here just to do my job. The rest is none of my business. And I don't have all day for that. If you don't move quickly, I'll be forced to take your details and you'll have to answer for your actions in court."

His colleague continued to scribble lines in the notebook she held in her hand without saying a word. She discreetly filled in the columns at a steady pace and plunged her head back into her bureaucratic paperwork after glancing at Manaouda like a doctor. Mefo contracted the tissues of her nostrils to deflect the aromas coming from the farm. In a harsh tone, stripped of all complacency, she said:

"We've come to collect the State's share. We have nothing to do with the context. If everyone brings up the context, their marital situation, their family situation or things like that, what will the State live on?"

Manaouda was overwhelmed by the loss of his livestock and harassed by State agents who did not care to sympathise with him. How am I going to feed my children? he asked himself. Suddenly, Madjole entered the farmhouse and slipped a piece of paper between his father's cold palms, whispering words he couldn't understand. He couldn't resist reading it. All the world had united against this famous character. He stared at a power cut notice. The now sad entrepreneur hadn't paid his bill for the month and the State had to claim back its investment, even though Manaouda had been enjoying the glow of the moon for days. When the electricity went off at sunrise, you had to wait until midnight to see its silhouette in the darkness of the night. The Lagdo dam had dried up and was unable to cope with all the growing demands.

One morning, to the surprised discovery of his wife, Manaouda left under the impact of the fatal outcome, causing violent whirlwinds that shook Pitoa for a fortnight. He died of a heart attack.





# The New Assignment

## Stanislaus Fomutar

I stood by the shores, at the far end of Limbe, and feared moving close to the raging waves. As if they were pursuing a furious intruder, they pushed hard coastward with piles of plastics and industrial waste, some local, others international, and deposited them at the banks. Then gently, they disappeared to reappear several times, performing the same ritual, until a huge hip of waste lay where previously there was nothing. How could such an action be performed repeatedly with ever the same efficiency without any form or degree of consciousness? How was that even possible? Was the sea consciously cleaning herself? The way it happened, it seemed there were some invisible hands, sweeping the dirt out. I looked at the world around me and it was a mystery that scared my inquisitive mind. I was in Limbe, one of Anglophone Cameroon's popular coastal cities.

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It all started with a night's journey from the high hills of the Bamenda grassfields through busy bus stops spotted here and there along the road with different hawkers. There were those selling soya and the ones selling roasted fish. Everyone was shouting "soya" "soya", "burning fish", "bitter kola", and forcing their way into the car. And this happened every time the driver stopped either to pay toll fee or bribe a police officer or smoke his cigarette. Other times, he smoked while driving, shouting at the bus conductor to collect the transport fare of passengers they picked by the road side and give him. From all indications, they were all suspicious of each other as keepers of the booty.

There were passengers in the seventy-seater bus who could not wait for the next bus stop. Whether it was bread or miondo or anything chewable, they bought everything. Those drinking juice from cans and plastic containers had the typical use-and-dump instinct in common. While those eating different things from plastic papers dispose of the papers just where they were sitting, those drinking juice would get up gently and stagger to the window while the car moved. If they were close to where a window could be opened, they would draw it wide and then fling the container outside. The behaviour was so common that I began to wonder if anyone cared at all about the ripple effects of such actions. Nursing mothers with disposable napkins, and those vomiting in papers due to car allergies, threw the filth through the windows into the rivers or bushes. Coupled with the cabbages and green spices that people had bought from Santa and packed above their heads in the lockers, the odour in the car was a complex gas that lacked qualification.

When we reached untarred parts of the road, the windows of the car would be completely locked up to block dust smoke from entering into the car. When people say that there is still another hell after this life, I wonder what exactly it would mean for someone who has outlived the cruelty of nasty existence, because there is also earth fire. Even in the rainy season, when it does not rain for two or three days, the road becomes dusty, given the number of cars that ply the road daily. As no one suffocated, it was only the grace of God.

There were provisional bamboo chairs and empty twenty-litre containers for extra passengers that would be picked on the road haphazardly. The chairs and containers would be put on the passageway such that it was impossible to stretch a leg or arm without provoking a neighbour. One would have been helplessly busy throughout the journey if they took upon themselves to resolve all the quarrels and name-calling in the car. Some passengers were just rude for nothing. If someone smiled at them, they would frown; if they were offered a thing by the neighbour, they would not refuse, but it would be received grudgingly as if someone just returned to them what was theirs. When the passageway was full, the bus conductor would take more people to stand by the staircase. Some would enter without being told that they would have to stand. As long as the bus would not stop just for them to step down, they would figure out where to hang their heads and place their feet until another passenger alighted before they would have where to sit. I wondered how people would care about their environment when they did not even care about each other. How could one take it seriously that populating the earth with plastics was anathema, when they stepped on others' toes and added insults and quarrels to the hurt without remorse?

My neighbour opened his mouth widely and yawned carelessly. His teeth were chucked with decaying particles of fish that he had eaten since Santa and started sleeping. You can imagine the combination of such assorted breaths in a poorly ventilated and overcrowded car. Parents who paid for one seat and came in with two children had the highest trouble in the car. If they were not fighting with their neighbours, they were busy struggling to find the easiest sitting position.

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Before we reached Limbe, I had seen all sorts of drama on the road. But at least, it was of great relief to breathe fresh air once more into my constipated organs. We passed by the grave of Alfred Saker whom we learnt in primary school was one of the first missionaries to come to Cameroon. But I could not resist the sight of the broad water body any longer.

That was when I stood by the shores, at the far end of Limbe, afraid to move close to the raging waves. The waves behaved as if they were pursuing a furious intruder, pushing hard coastward with piles of plastics and industrial waste deposited by some locals and non-locals at the banks. Then gently, the waves would disappear only to reappear several times, performing the same ritual, until a huge heap of waste lay where previously there was nothing. And this made me wonder how such actions would be performed repeatedly with ever the same efficiency without any form or degree of consciousness. I wondered how that was even possible. Was the sea consciously cleaning herself? The way it happened, it seemed there were some invisible hands, sweeping the dirt out of the Atlantic Ocean. As I looked at the world around me, it became a mystery that scared my inquisitive mind.

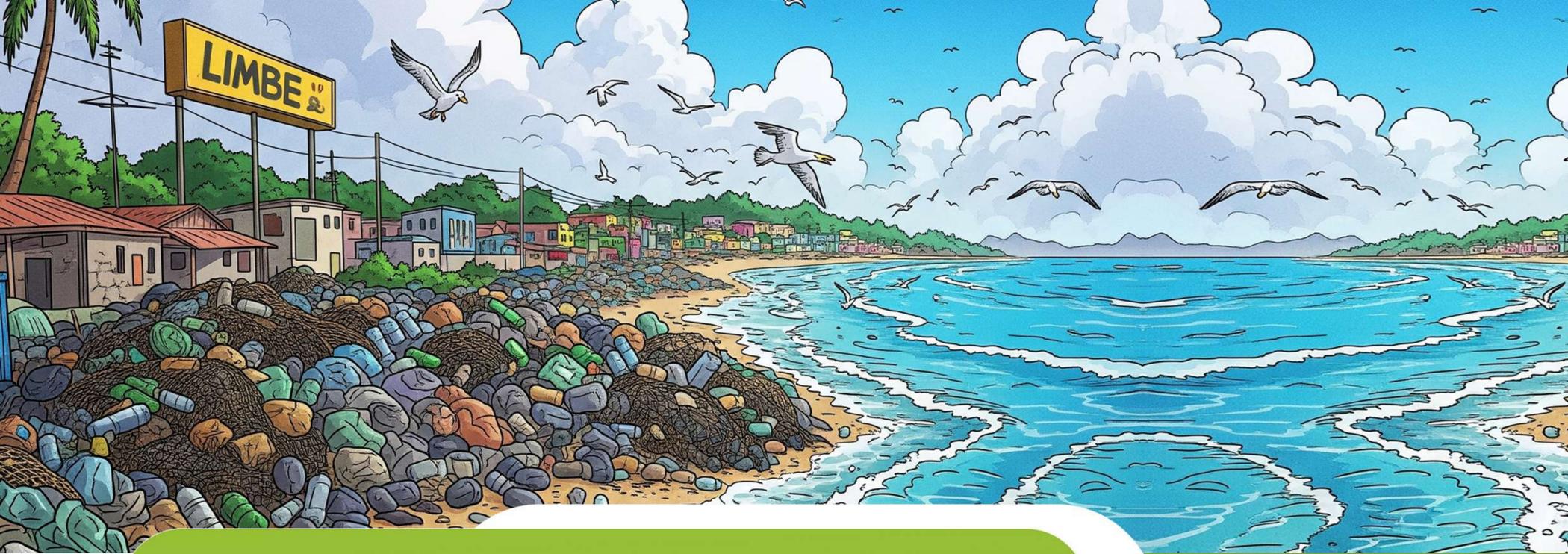
And I wished I could live a quiet life, asking no question, mindless as the trees in the forest, unaware of the future. But what can one do with this burden called mind, whose essence is inquiry? It might have been better to be a plant or an animal or any other thing apart from a human being. Here I am, trapped in this frame. Who even knows the scars of other existents?



How do physical bodies deemed inanimate and vegetative contain a force that attracts or repels from a distance? Are such occult forces also purposeless, thoughtless and mechanical? Who says they cannot fight back? Is this lingering karma also a product of chance?

Oh, thou who art beyond the farthest,  
Hidden beneath the deepest depths,  
Should we be comforted at all,  
That you record with attention  
The quicksand of human babbling?  
Oh, hidden cloud,  
Force of incessant seduction,  
Muse charm of superhuman elevation,  
Should we be sad and desolate?  
Is there a cure to this encroaching mortality?  
Mortality beyond humanity.  
Have we hastened to complete what you did not start?  
When it all began,  
Like the clap of sudden thunder,  
Pulling us deep into the memory of time,  
When we followed light from burning bamboo splinters  
To termite nests and cricket holes,  
And tracked whistles of joy at hill tops  
In the hunt for beetles and green grasshoppers,  
Enlivened by cold nights, ever fresh verdure,  
We couldn't imagine it turning this terrifying soon!

All we have are memories of the symphonic blend  
of nature's forces.



When we scrambled over mandarin fruits on tree branches,  
Diving green, red, yellow beetles clutched on iroko elephant grass stems,  
Falling on a multitude of fruits in the bushes,  
Alert every blessed morning,  
Of the partridges' announcement of a sunny day.  
In joyful cackles as they patrolled fallowed green fields,  
Or the fowls' foresight mourning of a rainy day,

As I speak – naked, sweating blood  
In green-deserted cities –  
We've waited in vain, in the soaring malice  
For the sight of a single beetle,  
Farting different mixtures  
From the rubber boxes straddled on our backs  
To the earth, our nurturing ground.  
Tell me, what else is mortality?

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As these thoughts ran through my mind, a light sleep took over me.

I saw the future. Yes. It was so clear I could not sustain any doubt about it. I was undergoing the same journey from Bamenda to Limbe. All travel agencies had a sanitary officer in addition to the bus conductor. There was a dustbin in every car and whoever ate anything had where to dispose of the dirt in the car. There were waste disposal spots at particular spots on the road. At any of such spots, the car stopped and the sanitary officer went out to dispose of the dirt professionally, perishables separately from the imperishable. All companies using imperishable products were ordered by law to contribute a percentage of their income to sponsor the recycling company that took care of the waste they produced. It was a completely different world, a green and clean world.

Gradually, our people became deeply environmentally conscious and it was good going to Limbe. There were no more dirt deposits at the coast.

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I chucked up from sleep to face my reality. Sad! How were we going to live in the world of my dream? How was it going to happen? That was how I left for a leisure trip, and returned with a huge assignment! Indeed, the future has lots of surprises for each person!



