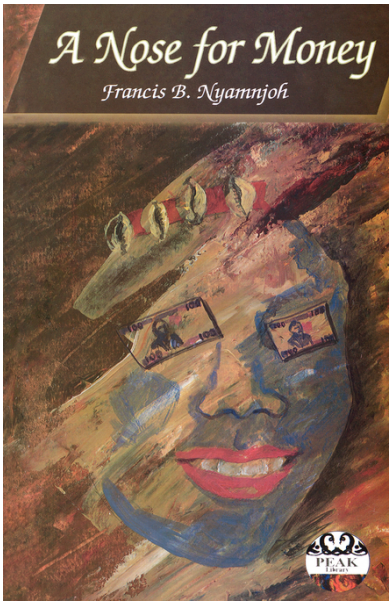


**Africa's Power Elite Castigated: A Critical Review of *A Nose for Money*** (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers, 2006, pp.212, ISBN: 9966254277) by Francis B. Nyamnjoh, reviewed by Primus M. Tazanu (Ph.D.).

## Introduction

Francis Nyamnjoh's *A Nose for Money* is a synopsis of the lifestyles and experiences of the power drunk elite affiliated with the present political leadership in the land of Mimbo. It is a courageous book. Through Prospère, the main protagonist, we understand that individuals could prosper in Mimboland if they have the necessary connections to the centre of power which is concentrated in Nyamanden, the capital city. Once in the system, the connected individuals become brutish, wild and have untamed appetite for exploiting state resources for private interests. The book ends with a revelation that these seemingly invulnerable public figures are not different from ordinary people. Just as normal citizens, these elite experience insecurity, they react to rumour and are embattled in matrimonial strife.

## Discussion

With deep patriotism, a strong sense of humour and exceptional talent, Nyamnjoh plunges very deep into the socio-economic and political world of Mimboland, revealing a festive world of deceit, opportunism, infidelity, insecurity, ignorance and a perfectly organised statecraft based on theft, insider-insider trading and secrecy. The story reveals and reviews the state of Mimboland politics that has headed in an uncomfortable direction for any concerned observer. Corruption is neither controlled nor controllable and with a combination of money and personal connections, anyone can gain the necessary security and protection when he or she chooses to ransack society in any domain. Seen from this standpoint, a centerpiece of the book gyrates around a governance tactic metaphorically expressed in Mimboland that a goat eats or is expected to eat where it is tethered. This is a selfish and destructive form of governance, which allows those with common exploitative interests to churn up and defraud the state through bribery and corruption in unimaginable forms.

The author sees power elites in civil service as "starving vultures, ready to pounce on the living." Prospère initially does not make sense of what he encounters on his arrival in Nyamandem. He considers himself a victim in the "atmosphere of corruption and thirst for money, which greeted him" (p. 132). After living in Nyamanden for a while, Prospère realises that he actually passed through the normal channel on the way business is done in the public service:

> Unable to do otherwise, and anxious to avoid blackmail of any kind, Prospère had allowed the goat to eat where it was tethered. They had become friends, and henceforth Matiba had tipped him off about this or that government contract and had provided him with vital insider information… (p. 170).

In fact, the practice runs across all segments of the society. Even businessmen, believed to be bringers of good fortune to the society have "little left…by way of alternatives" (p. 133). Prospère has to either succumb to the system or see his millions perish, a situation any right thinking man would avoid at all cost. As an insider of the system and coming from the same tribe, Matiba tells Prospère that no businessman, no matter how industrious he is, can succeed on his own without government assistance and benediction (p. 141). By belonging to the system, one gets benefits and chain of blessings that are beyond belief as confirmed by Prospère's economic ascendency and his reflections on elite practices in the capital:

> But his businesses might not have taken off as rapidly as they did, had these friends not been in government at the time that he came to Nyamandem…In fact Prospère sometimes wondered if being in government, meant anything other than an opportunity to fill one's mouth and pockets and siphon as much as one could…The individual belly, not the community belly, was said to be the heart of politics and ambition for power in Nyamandem and the country at large (p. 160).

*A Nose for Money* is a grassroots book which aims at stirring debate on the state of a nation that lives in phony unity and peace. The book volunteers and sacrifices on behalf of the people, to act as a spy into the lives of politicians and their cronies who practice what Jean-François Bayart (1993) has famously described as the 'Politics of the belly.' It is a type of politics characterised by fierce competition over state resources that are eventually siphoned into private pockets. In *A Nose for Money*, the elite do not care about the welfare of their poor "compatriots in the cramped garbage dumps of the peripheries of the city" (p. 141).

Being an elite and belonging to a privileged class also have attributes of flamboyancy and arrogance associated with consumerism, demeaning of local school system and the allure of the West, especially France as the model (pp. 154 - 158). A captivating summary of the privileged elite of Mimboland cannot be more vivid than what we read of Prospère who suddenly:

> … bulldozed his way into membership of the évolués, a privileged class of people whose nostrils were conditioned to pick up only the smell of waded notes (p. 157).

At the other end of the spectrum are the disillusioned, disenfranchised and impoverished citizens who bear the consequences of bad governance as symbolised in the character Monique, one of Prospère's three wives. Monique's character represents innocent Mimbolanders who are dying silently in pain, with plenty of love for their country despite being subjected to torturous leadership, repression, political trickery and the callous disregard for their enfeebled voices. They are those who want to know the truth. A *Nose for Money*, acting as a representative of the grassroots, castigates the leadership through the voiceless thoughts of Monique:

> And why did he decline to say anything about his first wives that could help her understand what sort of women they were? … Should such insensitivity continue, Monique wondered what her life would be in Prospère's villa of polygamy. How was she going to cope with co-wives and a husband who couldn't read her feelings? (p. 165).

Monique's cries denote the inattentiveness of leadership to the people who live precariously on the fringes of the political scene. They are either unable or reluctant to be involved in the opportunistic destruction of Mimboland. The unfortunate leadership is further criticised by a cleaner at Matiba's Ministry; he openly proclaims his dislike of the power elite, whom he believes have "eyes to see" yet blindfold the "sightless" (p. 98).

The book mocks and punctures the pride of power elites. Having presented them as great people with great power, the author then turns around to show where they seek protection and security—from diviners, living in the periphery of cities and in remote villages. This revelation informs the seemingly powerful leaders that they are also vulnerable to rumours, deceit, insecurity, opportunism, infidelity and most of all, the diviners — be they quack or real. Prospère is dismissive of rumours that has developed in various forms to tarnish his image and source of wealth. Of particular worry to him is the rumour that he killed his third wife by entering into a "secret pact with the devil through a dangerous form of witchcraft known as Nyongo…[in order] to maintain his riches, and even become richer" (p. 184). Witchcraft accusations are never taken lightly in many African countries where sudden wealth, invisible sources of riches and selfish accumulation of wealth are often associated with occultic practices. In the case of Mimboland where official channels to referee leaders' sources of wealth are almost inexistent, rumour plays an important role in provoking leaders to either act or react. By contacting diviners in order to protect themselves, their wealth, businesses and positions, the book reveals the comfortable double standard with which elite jostle around when faced with insecurity. For example, as part of a system that permits double standards backstage, Prospère does not feel uncomfortable when he bribes, signs pact with the devil, consults diviners or marry more than one wife (he had three!) which are all forbidden by his Catholic faith. We are made to understand that the elite are constantly on the lookout for the most potent diviners. Take the example of an honourable Anglophone vice-minister who praises a famous diviner (mungang man), just at the very moment Prospère wants to know the truth about his late wife and also to exonerate himself from rumour that has developed around it:

> He's quite a famous man, Ngek. People leave Nyamandem, important politicians and businessmen, and go there for him to fortify them, to alter their misfortunes and protect their good fortunes (p. 183).

Quite demeaning is the great millionaire, Prospère, trekking through areas inaccessible to cars, just like other important people in Mimboland, in order to consult at Ngek, the great diviner. In the course of interaction between Prospère and the diviner, we understand that the great businessman is quite shallow. Ngek constantly addresses him "big man" in order to prick his bloated pride as a father of eight he in reality is not. He is at the mercy of the diviner in the desperate quest to know the truth about his wife's death. And when the truth is revealed the great businessman

> …became weak and confused. Sweat gushed out of him in great profusion. He sat speechless, starring at Ngek with bewilderment, and wishing it were a dream. He looked like a helpless victim of witchcraft (p. 199).

The predictive power of the book cannot be underestimated. It does not fail to foresee that a barren and unproductive leadership concocts ingredients for internal revolts, the seeds of its own destruction. In a theatrical atmosphere, Prospère tells Ngek, that he has eight children but the old man's response is chilling:

> You no get no child…Even this woman them here know say no child they born be your own (p. 198).

While Prospère and his retinue are caught in a tense atmosphere, the relaxed mungang man continues to display his authority over the hurtful truth and proof of Prospère's impotency. He tells Chantal and Charlotte (Prospère's wives) to confess the truth about their infidelity and also about the true fathers of their children. To his request:

> They said that when they both realised that their husband was sterile, they started going out for their children…both women had preferred to make children with outsiders rather than see their marriage sacrificed (p. 199).

*A Nose for Money* illustrates that no matter how controlling a leadership is, there is always a way out, even if in a distant future. Chantal and Charlotte maintain their positions in the matrimonial home through deception and manipulation. Despite providing all security he deems utmost to his wives and combined with blindness, Prospère is drawn aback in the end when he realises that his unfaithful wives do not only have one, but four children each from outside.

And they are pregnant again! This reminds me of Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* where though only one yam is demanded, the people bring more than one to sacrifice to their new god, upon rejection of their god who has failed them. In the case of *A Nose for Money,* this rebellion to the ideal norm of matrimony is perhaps a message that a passive revolt inevitably builds up against any unproductive and unpopular leadership. A blind Prospère had failed to recognise a version of the silent rebellion:

> Charlotte and Chantal would not dream of such thing as a driver… [It] was unnecessarily extravagant. And Prospère had either forgotten or given up his earlier idea of using a driver as a spy. They would rather Prospère himself drove them if he was so adamant on having them driven around (p. 174).

After realising that he has been a fool and unthinking, Prospère goes out and kills himself. Just as the leadership he supports, he did not know himself well and the small issues he ignored and neglected are the very ones that pulled him down. In the same way like Mubuto Sese Seko and Idi Amin, Prospère lived as he would never die, but died as he never lived, in a remote area untouched by the deception and trickery of the leadership that he embraced and supported. The two policemen:

> …both arrived at the hut…hoping to startle Prospère, and to ask him to…behave like the big man he was. But what they saw was worse than they had expected. On the floor, buried in his own blood, was Prospère (p. 202).

It is undeniable that Prospère is a hero; a prosperous conqueror, to be precise. His ability to learn the rules of the system, integrate fast, manipulate and fabricate lies to meet his needs, make him a Mimbolander of enviable quality. As a main character, we tend to share his tragedy just like in many tragic stories. But this feeling for a fallen hero is short-lived in *A Nose for Money* because Prospère's tragedy is not a tragedy of the people. It is a tragedy of the ruling elite who stubbornly ignore and deny citizenry basic fundamental human rights. Prospère's unchallenged ventures signify the unabated exploitation of the population by leadership. He of course was more interested in filling his belly.

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