



# In Memoriam : Bernard Fonlon

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## In Memoriam : Bernard Fonlon

The sudden death of Professor Bernard Fonlon has again inflicted another deep and unavoidable wound on the Negro World and on the world of culture at large. Awarded a *Doctor Litterarum, Honoris Causa* on June 4, 1986 in Guelph, in homage to a genius who had become not only a household name among his fellow-Cameroonians but also an international legend in his own lifetime, Fonlon died suddenly on August 27, 1986, of pneumonia while still in Ottawa. His corpse was flown back to Cameroon and was laid to rest in his home town, Kimbo' in the Nso' area where mourners arrived in droves. One of the attendants reported that « *the whole world was eclipsed there* » while another added that his death was such painful news that it had to be announced by the Head of State, President Paul Biya, especially as it had occurred in the aftermath of the traumatic Lake Nyos experiences. His corpse was flown into the country on the declared National Mourning Day of August 30, 1986. The entire funeral was televised with a hollow look of grief still in the eyes of all those present. This was our final lament for this scholar and great mind whom we all admired and needed so much.

Indeed, the perplexity of President Biya and the entire Cameroonian people in losing such an eminent son of the soil was obvious : not only did it add to the fresh wounds of the Lake Nyos Disaster but it happened in less than a year after the stunning blow we suffered in February from the passing of another great African, Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, who died immediately on his return from a lecture visit to Cameroon. The African intelligentsia and the entire *élite* of the Negro World find themselves expressing the proverbial saying (as we say in Nso', Professor Fonlon's own place of birth) « *rich in people, rich in death* », though we tend to shudder naturally at such experiences as if we need time and someone still to warn and remind us that, not only are great minds of the calibre of Alioune Diop, Cheikh Anta Diop and Bernard Fonlon rare, they ultimately pass away at the least expected moments in spite of our admiration and needs. To face up to this reality, we need to accommodate ourselves to the *fait accompli* and open our minds more than ever before to their messages.

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Bernard Fonlon Nso'kika was born in 1924 and died at the age of 62, shortly after the loss of his mother in November 1985. He had lost his father about a decade earlier. On our way from Yaoundé to Kimbo' for the burial of his mother, I could not but admire the attachment Fonlon had for his parents. He told me how their Christianization, though denounced at first by their extended Nso's family *Faay*, had recently become a force and an instrument of reconciliation among his family-members. For him, it had personally offered another means of gaining more knowledge into the intricacies of Nso' culture which he could never dismiss with a mere wave of the hand. We need not shun our cultures, African or non-African... We continued our conversation without knowing that it was to be our final one.

Fonlon received his primary education at the then Native Authority School, Kimbo', the Catholic Mission Schools Shisong and Kom, Cameroon and then pursued his secondary school studies at Christ The King College, Onistha (Nigeria). He intermittently taught as a Catechist in Nso' and as tutor in Sasse College. He entered the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu (Nigeria) where he studied Philosophy and Theology with the intention of becoming a priest but that goal was not achieved and he next went to Europe and studied at the National University of Ireland, at the Sorbonne and at Oxford. He read the Latin classics at Cork, learned to speak, read and write German and Italian and while in Nigeria he gained knowledge of Igbo culture from the inside.

He obtained his Doctorate of Philosophy from Cork and a Diploma in Education from Oxford. His studies at the Sorbonne contributed to his mastery of French and acquaintance with French writers and civilization which met the exigencies of his thesis entitled *La poésie et le réveil de l'homme noir : An Investigation Into Negro African Protest Literature in English and French*.

He worked as a close collaborator of the *Society of African Culture* and its review *Présence Africaine* from 1958-1961 and then returned to his homeland. He took part in the Second International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists which was held in Rome in 1959. These experiences in Europe brought him into contact with eminent personalities of the contemporary world thus creating in him a love for people like Cardinal Henry Newman and Professor W.E.B. Du Bois.

I can still remember, as a secondary school student, the malaise in educational circles which Fonlon's presence had stirred in Cameroon before he was finally offered government employment. His qualifications were almost unheard of at the time and his experiences were wordly. Worse still, he went on to publish articles which were too good for suspicious minds and there were

not a few ! Yet, in the midst of it all, he always remained a humble and realistic scholar.

His employment with the Government soon saw him serving as a *Chargé de mission* of the Federal Republic. In 1963, he marked a turning-point in the history of Cameroonian scholarship by co-founding *Abbia : Cameroon Cultural Review*, which he deservedly directed until his death. In this period of over two and a half decades, Fonlon launched and gave the review a stamp of quality and reputation. For him, only the best was good enough for Africa and he thus maintained a profile of high international standards of quality and expectation in his articles.

His enormous contribution points to the immensity of his great creative mind which, from primary through secondary, seminary and University education always left milestones behind him. He was a man who gave one the impression of being a born leader (an intellectual leader in this case). Mrs E.M. Chilver (a professor at Oxford) recently observed that « *Dr. Bernard Fonlon was absolutely a leader. Apart from anything else, I learned from him more about French Literature than I had learned in the University. His enthusiasm for academics was what kept him going* ».

Fonlon was a scholar who had learned to discipline himself with the pen above anything else, as can be seen from his writings. His *avant-garde* review of *Things Fall Apart* (« L'Édifice s'écroule ») in *Présence Africaine* (December 1958-January 1959, N° 23) has become legendary. We now list his publications in *Abbia* :

February 1963 : *Abbia* n° 1 :

1. « A Word of Introduction »/En Guise de Présentation », pp. 19-24/pp. 13-18.
2. « African Writers Meet in Uganda »/Les Écrivains Noirs Anglophones à Kampala », pp. 39-54/pp. 55-71.

May 1963 : *Abbia* n° 2 :

3. « The Africanist Gathering in Ghana »/« Rencontre des Africanistes au Ghana », pp. 31-47/pp. 48-63.
4. « The Conference of the Launching of Abia's Maiden Issue »/« La Conférence de Présentation d'Abbia », pp. 3-5/pp. 10-12.
5. « The Fear of Future Years » (poem, written in October 1951) pp. 140-141.

September 1963 : *Abbia* n° 3 :

6. « Nightmare » (poem, written in March 1963) pp. 123-124.

December 1963 : *Abbia* n° 4 :

- « Tribute to Professor Dubois — The Passing of a Great African », pp. 3-15.
8. « A Case For Early Bilingualism » pp. 56-94.

- March 1964 : *Abbia* n° 5 :  
 9. « Will We Make Or Mar ? »/« Construire Ou Détruire »  
 pp. 9-34/pp. 35-56.
- October 1964 : *Abbia* n° 7 :  
 10. « Pour Un Bilinguisme de Bonne Heure », pp. 7-47.
- November 1965 : *Abbia* n° 11 :  
 11. « Idea of Culture » (1)/« Le Concept de la Culture »,  
 pp. 5-30/pp. 31-58.
- July-December 1966 : *Abbia* n°s 14-15 :  
 12. « A Word of Introduction »/« En Guise d'Intro-  
 duction », pp. 5-14/pp. 15-23.
- March 1967 : *Abbia* n° 16 :  
 13. « Idea of Culture (11) — Culture as Fruit and  
 Harvest », pp. 5-24.
- March 1968 : *Abbia* n° 19 :  
 14. « Idea of Cultural Integration », pp. 5-29.
- June 1968 : *Abbia* n° 20 :  
 15. « Participation des Universitaires Chrétiens Camerou-  
 nais au Développement du Pays », pp. 63-77.
- May-August 1969 : *Abbia* n° 22 :  
 16. « The Language Problem In Cameroon (An Historical  
 Perspective) », pp. 5-40.
- September-December 1969 : *Abbia* n° 23 :  
 17. « To Every African Freshman (The Birth and the  
 Growth of Universities) », pp. 9-34.
- January-April 1970 : *Abbia* n° 24 :  
 18. « To Every African Freshman — The Nature of Uni-  
 versity Studies » 11, pp. 9-51.
- February 1973 : *Abbia* n° 24 :  
 19. « Two Every African Freshman — The End and Purpose of  
 University Studies », pp. 9-41.
- 1974 : *Abbia* n°s 27-28 :  
 20. « Ten Years After — A Forward »/« Dix Ans Après :  
 Avant-Propos », pp. 7-23/pp. 25-42.
- 1975 : *Abbia* n°s 29-30 :  
 21. « Le Devoir d'Aujourd'hui », pp. 7-77.
- 1978 : *Abbia* n°s 31-32-33 :  
 22. « Correspondance Avec le Président Senghor »,  
 pp. 19-23.  
 23. « President Ahidjo Receives The LL.D. (Honoris  
 Causa) », pp. 3-7.  
 24. « Editorial », pp. 25-28.  
 25. « Lettre Ouverte Aux Étudiants Africains », pp. 70-  
 150.

26. « Come Lasses And Lads : Let's Tune the Lay »  
 a) Gem of the Highlands. b) Darkie In Erin (poems),  
 pp. 276-279.
- 1979 : *Abbia* n<sup>os</sup> 34-35-36-37 :  
 27. « Editorial » pp. 5-7.  
 28. « To Every African Freshman : Ten Years After — An  
 Academic Testament », pp. 9-55.  
 29. « The Philosophy, the Science and the Art of the Short  
 Story », pp. 427-438.
- May 1982 *Abbia* n<sup>os</sup> 38-39-40 :  
 30. « Res Una Publica », pp. 5-67.  
 31. « Lament for Alioune Diop », pp. 107-110.  
 32. « Idea of Literature », pp. 175-212.  
 33. « Abia Stones — A Forward », pp. 297-298.  
 34. « Some Day Been Day By Loreto Todd, Reviewed »,  
 pp. 402-404.  
 35. « Taboo Love : A Novel by Achang Ngongwikuo,  
 Reviewed », p. 405.

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This is the body of articles which Fonlon has left behind along  
 with the following books :

1. *To Every Son of Nso* (Yaoundé, 1965, Unesco).
2. *Under the Sign of the Rising Sun* (1966, Cameroon  
 Times Press, Victoria).
3. *As I See it* (1971, Catholic Press Buea).
4. *History in the Making : An Open Letter To the Bishops  
 of Buea and Bamenda* (1979, Catholic Press, Buea).
5. *The Task of Today* (1966, Cameroon Times Press, Vic-  
 toria).
6. *Random Leaves From My Diary* (Catholic Press, Buea).
7. *The Rise of Pavel Verkovsky or A Simple Story, Simply  
 Told* (1984, Yaoundé, CEPER).
8. *The Pathfinder* (forthcoming).

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So far the writings of Fonlon during his many travels are still  
 unknown. It is now time that African Universities invite scholars  
 and researchers to study his philosophy of ideas. As can be seen,  
 he distinguished himself not only as a writer but also as a man  
 with special concerns. He held the responsible post of Minister of  
 Transport from 1968-1970 and of Health from 1970-1971. During

this time, he engineered the construction of Duala Airport and founded Cameroon Airlines. In his own home town, Kimbo', he helped to install the waterworks, an act which earned him the title of *Shuufaay Woo Ntoondzev*, thus ranking him among the first nobles of the land. His loss is obviously the loss of a Nso' *Shuufaay*.

Bernard Fonlon Nso'kika (alias *Shuufaay Woo Ntoondzev*) will also be remembered by the *élite*, the politicians and his own fellow-countrymen who could only express themselves and communicate with him orally. However, the entire body of the African intelligentsia will recognize him as their representative among politicians, a man with a philosophy and, when all is said and done, a God-fearing man. To our mind, we believe that he founded a philosophy which might one day reveal itself or be recognized as *Fonlonism* (a new African Christian philosophy). In 1983, the Fon of Oku, basing his judgement on Fonlon's legend-name, gave him the title of *Mkongmoote* (an equivalent of the Oku eponym) which, to say the least, is still held sacred among his people.

If he gained the admiration of all it was, in part, due to his philosophy of the true, the good and the beautiful. Everywhere he sought for « *makers of things true and good and beautiful* » and came to admire Socrates as Plato and the Greeks had portrayed. In *Abbia* N° 1, he wrote : « *There surges in every human being an inborn thirst for the true, the good and the beautiful* » (...) and « *when you see a Socrates at his trial serene and joyful in the presence of injury and death and the lamentations of his friends, you see beauty and power in human character — a hero victorious over fate* ».

In his last major article in the same review (Nos 38-39-40) entitled « *Res una publica* », he set out to strip African societies of contemporary evils using the words of Socrates. Once he had finished, he quoted these words as if in prophecy : « *Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live but which of us has the happier prospect is unknown to anyone but God* ».

If we have emphasized that men and women of Professor Bernard Fonlon's calibre are rare, it is partly because of his realistic insight into the contemporary ills of our societies and partly because, thanks to his numerous publications (especially in *Abbia*), it will take time to find someone with similar talents, character and the will or enthusiasm to replace him. May he rest in peace.

*Bongasu Tanla KISHANI.*