

John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Across the Mongolo* A Review by Dr (Mrs) Eunice Ngongkum

Across the Mongolo, John Nkemngong Nkengasong's first novel published by Spectrum Books Limited, Ibadan, tells the story of Ngwe Nkemasaah, an intelligent young man from the English part of his fatherland, the Federated United Republic of Kamangolo. Ngwe's dream, spurred on by his father Ndi Nkemasaah, is to become another Babajoro, the then ruler of his country. Consequently, after bagging four Advanced Level papers at the G.C.E, he crosses the River Mongolo loaded with symbolism - to the lone University of Besaadi to pursue his education. Instead of achieving academic excellence, a logical stepping stone to his aspirations, Ngwe meets with physical, emotional, intellectual and psychological frustration which pushes him inexorably into madness and near tragedy.

The novelist presents most of the narration in this nineteen-chapter novel through the consciousness of Ngwe, the major character, whose actions, thoughts, assessment of events and appraisal of situations, give the novel its unity. This is commendable as it helps keep the reader in close touch with each change, new thought or feeling developing in Ngwe's mind. Indeed, the novel shows a keen interest in unveiling the psychic responses of its protagonist to events. Ngwe is presented as an extremely sensitive individual who goes through harrowing experiences which unhinge his mind and leave him drifting like a lunatic, full of bitterness against the system in which he lives and operates. The story ends with the welcome announcement that Ngwe's ordeal was timely preparing him for the messianic role cut out for him by the gods (that of liberating his people from slavery in a faraway land).

In this first novel, Nkengasong handles a number of issues, to wit, the situation of a marginalized fraction of a country which unsuspectingly surrenders its freedom, traditions and overall way of life to the oppressor brother. (The major character's

travails come about largely because he is from this oppressed minority). At another level, the novelist makes a statement on the world of the university, a world of its own but which is also an eloquent statement on the state of two uneasy bedfellows unfortunately yoked together by the ironies of history. The place of the tribe in the life of the individual today and the idea of growth, awareness and disillusionment constitute some of the major concerns in the novel.

At the level of techniques, the novelist displays an unusual expansiveness of the creative spirit as he seeks through experimentation to forge a new style suitable to his themes. Oral tradition constitutes a great source of inspiration. Nkengasong appropriates elements of oral tradition not in slavish imitation but with creativity, to weave situations, discuss events and expose characters. He demonstrates a profound understanding of his people's way of life as evident in the effective use of the speech rhythms, religious rituals and customs of the Attah Fondom, which provide the background to the novel. The cohesion of this community triumphs over deviant characters in the likes of Mbe Benu and brings healing to the major character in the work, positing that in the face of a destructive union, health and healing can certainly be found in the clan. The novelist's grasp of historical events is profound and through his character Ngwe, he lashes out at the ironies and cruelties of history.

In all, Nkengasong confronts history in this novel with a style suitable to his theme. The use of rhetorical devices, the dream technique, the madness motif, the images of filth among others are all skilfully employed to make interesting reading.