STIKVALLEI (THE ENIGMA OF THE RED LAKE)

Frank Westerman

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Historical Novel, Non-Fiction

Frank Westerman's *The Enigma of the Red Lake* (2015) combines literary journalism with investigative reportage to reconstruct the 1986 Lake Nyos disaster in Cameroon. The book explores how local communities, scientists, writers, and authorities read and narrated the mysterious catastrophe, destroying old myths and creating new ones. Among the discussed themes are fiction versus science, and the failure of risk communication across cultural, political, and linguistic divides.

Year of Publication	2013
Publication Place	Amsterdam
Editor	De Bezige Bij
Entity	1986 Lake Nyos Disaster

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption 1986 Lake Nyos Disaster

REAL EVENT

Time	August 21, 1986
Location	The Grassfields Cameroon
Coordinates	6.438470, 10.298127
Impacted Areas	The Nyos Valley
Base/Complex	The Nyos Lake
Typology	Other

limnic or phreatic eruption (according to different scientific hypotheses)

Volcano/Eruption Typology	Other
Anthropization Level	Remote Dwellings, Villages, Huts
Ecological Impacts	Destruction Of Animal Species "3952 cattle, 82 dogs, 3,404 chickens, 8 cats, 552 goats, 337 sheep, 7 horses and 2 donkeys" (Westerman 213)
Social Impacts	Deaths 1746 deaths (Westerman 213) Injuries, Poverty, Social Disruption, Trauma, Forced Relocation, Depopulation, Conflict

Volcanic eruption 1986 Lake Nyos Disaster

LITERARY EVENT

Time	August 21, 1986
Location	The Grassfields Cameroon
Coordinates	6.438470, 10.298127
Impacted Areas	The Nyos Valley
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Post-disaster (consequences)
Base/Complex	The Nyos Lake
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Other
Anthropization Level	Remote Dwellings, Villages, Huts
Ecological Impacts	Destruction Of Animal Species
Social Impacts	Deaths, Injuries, Social Disruption, Trauma, Depopulation, Forced Relocation, Conflict

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Haroun Tazieff
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Varsavia
Nationality	Franco-belgian
Reactions	Rationality, Trust, Sharing Of Information, Self-Absorption

Name	Haraldur Sigurðsson

Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Iceland
Nationality	Icelandic
Reactions	Rationality, Trust, Sharing Of Information, Pragmatism, Cooperation, Scepticism, Doubt, Distrust

Name	Father Jaap Nielen
Age	Old
Gender	Male
Native Place	Wormerveer
Nationality	Dutch
Reactions	Prayer, Irrationality, Solidarity

Name	President Paul Biya
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Cameroon
Nationality	Cameroonian
Reactions	Irrationality, Scepticism, Distrust, Doubt, Concealment Of Information

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Indigenous people
Reactions	Immobility, Paralysis, Fight For Survival, Passiveness, Loss Of Consciousness, Fear, Despair, Trauma, Scepticism, Doubt, Distrust, Irrationality

Name	Politicians
Reactions	Distrust, Concealment Of Information

Name	Scientists
Reactions	Rationality, Trust, Sharing Of Information

Name	Religious people

Reactions	Cooperation, Solidarity, Prayer, Scepticism, Doubt, Distrust, Concealment Of Information

Name	Journalists
Reactions	Sharing Of Information

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Lake Nyos, Cameroon, Frank Westerman, Limnic Eruption, Myth-Building, Storytelling, Haraldur Sigurðsson, Haroun Tazieff, Disaster Communication
Metaphors	"A gigantic reservoir of mineral water" (Westerman 51, my trans.)
Similes	"The loud roar coming from the lake was comparable to four Danish rifles firing simultaneously" (Westerman 187, my trans.) "Like a ticking time bomb" (Westerman 51, my trans.) "Pum! Pum! Pum! like gunshots […] the lake was boiling […] like a cauldron of water" (Westerman 194, my trans.)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Hell, Apocalypse, Cruel Nature, Deified Nature, Gods, Nemesis, Death, Colonisers, Colonised People, Violation Of Taboos, Evil, Supernatural, Mythical Creatures, Hubris, Superstition
Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Frank Westerman's *Stikvallei (The Enigma of the Red Lake) (2013)* deals with a real historical event: on the night between August 21 and 22, 1986, near Lake Nyos in western Cameroon, nearly two thousand people and more than 3,500 livestock mysteriously died after being poisoned by the air, while the lake's water turned red. In a dictatorial country like Cameroon, the tragedy drew international attention and scientific investigation. Westerman's work, which combines scientific inquiry with ethnographic, cultural, and religious investigation, as well as interviews and first-hand testimony, results in a narrative that lies on the border between a novel and a journalistic report.

In the 2016 Italian edition, published by Iperborea, Westerman's narrative is followed by an *Afterword* by Goffredo Fofi, who frames it as a work of contemporary anthropology that confronts the chaos of the modern world through facts, myths, and human stories. Fofi emphasizes how Westerman begins

with a single event and reveals its multiple interpretations, compelling readers to revisit fundamental questions about myth and reality, truth and meaning (306–311). In his novel-reportage, Westerman indeed states that "People are storytelling animals" (22, my trans.), and that the 1986 catastrophe offered him a "testing ground" for exploring how myths and stories originate and "germinate through different narratives" (22, my trans.).

The Enigma of the Red Lake is divided into three sections: "Those who destroy myths", "Those who preserve myths", and "Those who create myths". The first part begins with Westerman's mention of his 1992 and 2011 journeys to the Grassfields Region in western Cameroon to investigate the local lakes' tendence to cause "death and destruction" (12, my trans.), and continues with his exploration of different explanations of the disaster formulated over time. With metaphors pertaining to the semantic fields of war and competition, Westerman describes the confrontation between different scientific hypotheses as "[a] blitz game between colleagues" (13, my trans.) played by "rival teams" (46, my trans.). In a blitz game, decisions must be made quickly, often with incomplete information, and every move is both strategic and risky—mirroring how researchers compete to interpret events, publish first, and gain recognition. Rather than a calm, objective pursuit of truth, scientific inquiry is portrayed as tense, tactical, and competitive, with intellectual prestige at stake. This metaphor highlights not only the brilliance inherent in scientific debate, but also its human dimension – ego, urgency, and the desire to win. Regarding Tazieff, for example, Westerman poses the question: "What gives him such confidence in his own infallibility?", and later adds: "I believe Tazieff was the kind of person who would rather peer into a lava-spewing crater than cast an introspective glance at his own motivations" (43, my trans.). This psycho-biographical investigation highlights how reputation, self-confidence, and discursive strategies influence scientific reliability. It also reflects Westerman's identity as a writer, as he admits that he "cannot completely avoid a character-based interpretation" (44, my trans.) in his account of the Nyos disaster, its myths, and their 'authors'.

After defining scientists as experts who use "measure, experience, and logic to free the world from its false myths" (28, my trans.), Westerman focuses on two main explanations that emerged in the aftermath of the Nyos tragedy. While the Franco–Belgian volcanologist and geologist Haroun Tazieff asserted that the inhabitants of the Nyos valley had died of asphyxiation from a cloud of carbon dioxide caused by a phreatic eruption, the Icelandic volcanologist Haraldur Sigurðsson maintained that a different and rarer phenomenon – namely CO2 rising from the lake as a result of a landslide or whirlwind – had caused the disaster. Sigurðsson had formulated his hypothesis two years before, when the Lake Monoun in Cameroon, had released a similar poisonous cloud, killing many people and animals. The scientists' rivalry resulted in a lack of cooperation since, as Olivier Leenhardt observed, "None of them [was] receptive to anyone else's reasoning anymore" (68, my trans.).

The Indigenous survivors, however, continued to interpret the event through traditional myths and beliefs. For example, a fruit seller from the Bamenda Grassfields told the story of the God Mawes and the poisonous egg. In the local legend, Mawes dwelt at the bottom of the lake guarding a sacred python's egg that must remain wet. Angered by the people's neglect and lack of offerings, he shatters the egg, unleashing a deadly, foul cloud that suffocates all living beings. Conspiracy theories about secret experiments also emerged: The heir of Tang II, a *fon* (tribal chief) of the *kon* people, argued it was scientists who broke God Mawes's egg with their instruments, releasing the deadly gas in the air; another conspiracy supported by the President Paul Biya suggested that foreign powers, such as Israel or Western nations, had tested a secret bomb in the Nyos valley; also Prof. Paul Nchoji Nkwi, an anthropologist who worked at the University of Yaoundé, believed that political machinations were at the origin of the disaster; Priests like Father Cosmas and Bonaventure maintained that French institutions aimed at destroying Anglophone Cameroonians through toxic gases; theories also spread about a deliberate sterilization campaign targeting local women, linked to Western medical teams. Westerman clarifies that these myths emerged as people sought explanations beyond science, reflecting fear, mistrust, and human the need to justify suffering.

In Part I, chapter 29, Westerman quotes the words of the American petrologist, volcanologist, and seismologist Joseph Devine, who states that "We must be careful not to arrange the facts so that they tell *our* story. We must give the facts time to tell us theirs" (47, my trans., emphasis in original). Devine embodies the scientific perspective, which stands in contrast to the arbitrary nature of fiction – based on a personal and creative re-construction of facts.

Westerman highlights how many survivors of the Lake Nyos disaster were not interviewed in their native languages but in pidgin English, a simplified lingua franca very different from standard English. This linguistic gap led to misunderstandings and inaccuracies in their testimonies. Scientist Sam Freeth observed that pidgin English has a limited vocabulary that tends to flatten nuances. For example, speakers used only three basic terms to describe all colours: “white” for light, “black” for dark, and “red” for any primary colour. This made precise descriptions of the 1986 events, particularly the account of the lake’s colour turning into red – almost impossible. Consequently, the locals’ accounts could not be used to demonstrate the presence of ferric oxide (Fe2O3) in the water, which would have supported Tazieff’s hypothesis of a phreatic eruption. In an article published in the *Journal of Vulcanology and Geothermal Research*, Tazieff pointed out how racism underpinned the dismissal of Indigenous accounts.

In Westerman’s view, Sigurðsson’s theory ultimately prevailed over the interpretation of Tazieff due to several reasons: first, it built on the “exceptionality” of the phenomenon, an exceptionality that spoke better” (259, my trans.) – and sold better – to global audiences, especially in the Anglophone world; secondly, Sigurðsson’s hypothesis stimulated further research (i.e. the degasification plants designed by Michel Halbwachs), substantial funding, and political interest in Cameroon; thirdly, even scientific magazines contributed to supporting Sigurðsson’s explanation, as “In their account of the academic dispute, they take into consideration interests alongside facts and arguments. They stitch[ed] together raw data according to the pattern of their political preferences (89, my trans.).

After dealing with the scientific debate, the book shifts focus to broader issues: the role of power, manipulation of information, and the creation of new modern myths. In the second section, Westerman interweaves anthropology, religion, global economy, politics, and spectacle, showing how narratives and symbols are built from Africa to the West. The result is not just a documentary-style novel but a reflection on the contradictions of the modern world and on humanity’s enduring need to create stories that make sense of reality.

In the second part of *The Enigma of the Red Lake*, “Those who preserve myths”, Westerman analyses how the Nyos disaster – either caused by a limnic gas eruption or a volcanic event – entered the cultural imagination, and how its interpretation was shaped by systems of belief and the failures of disaster communication. The “eruption” – if there had been one – had been invisible: there were no lava, no ash, only a lethal exhalation from the Lake’s water. Individual reactions ranged from fear, panic, resignation, prayer, fatalism to distrust in the authorities, while collective reactions included mass conversions, scapegoating of missionaries and accusations of secret weapons. Disaster communication failed at every level: authorities did not inform people clearly, scientists disagreed on the cause, and international aid was filtered through bureaucratic corruption. Westerman underscores how “No one was allowed to return home as long as the scientists were arguing about the causes of the disaster and how to make the valley safe” (127, my trans.).

The absence of visible damage created the ideal ground for the emergence of myths. Indeed, as the event lacked visible destruction of dwellings, commodities, and bodies (only a few corpses showed purplish blisters on their surfaces), traditional leaders, missionaries, survivors and journalists generated narratives to fill the void left by science’s uncertainty. Missionaries, like Father Jaap Nielen, interpreted the catastrophe through Christian theology, presenting it as Satanic or as divine punishment; they renamed children, built refugee camps, and imposed a written biblical culture upon a society founded on oral traditions. These actions marked a shift from Indigenous “risk culture” to imported risk-management, in which guilt, confession and salvation replaced ancestral rituals and sacrifices. Furthermore, the population, stripped of agency by forced relocation and pending scientific disputes, increasingly turned to myth not as irrationality but as a form of cultural resilience. Myths become, as Westerman writes, “a fantastic animal with real bones” (271, my trans.), merging truth with moral meaning. The story of an angry lake God breaking an egg at the bottom of the crater mirrored classical mythologies dealing with Hell, Curses, and Divine Nemesis, while conspiracy theories about French and Israeli weapons acted as modern myths of colonial exploitation and technocratic violence. The book begins with a fact, yet Westerman repeatedly asks, “*what is a fact?*”. Facts become negotiable constructs, stitched together according to religious, political or emotional needs. The second part is a study of who is allowed to speak about disaster, whose version becomes history, and how identity shapes credibility.

Reflecting on Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's *The Masque of Africa*. *Glimpses of African Belief* (2010), Westerman considers how Christianity and Islam took root in Africa partly because they offered written sacred texts, namely stable narratives that provided certainty in times of crisis. He connects this idea to the Nyos tragedy, asking the reader: "How much strength did oral stories still have? Were they not hopeless against the Gospel?" (138, my trans.) The disaster becomes a moment where two systems of meaning confront each other: oral tradition, flexible but fragile, and written religion, fixed and authoritative. After the invisible and indiscriminate deaths at Nyos, traditional explanations rooted in spirits or sorcery seemed insufficient, while biblical narratives of sin, punishment and salvation offered coherence. Westerman's question is not merely about religious conversion, but about what happens to cultural identity when catastrophe demands certainty more than continuity. Do written scriptures prevail because they are truer, or simply because they endure? In this way, the Nyos disaster is not only a geological event but also a cultural turning point, where memory and myth begin to yield to scripture and institutional belief.

In Part III, "The Creators of the Myth", Westerman investigates how the Nyos disaster moves beyond scientific description into the realm of imagination, memory, and national identity. Testimonies like that of Abdul Saidu open the section: "Pum! Pum! Pum! like gunshots […] the lake was boiling […] like a cauldron of water" (194, my trans.), where similitude and onomatopoeia ("blublublu… BBBBBBrrr!") replace rational explanation. Yet other accounts are fragmented or incoherent, such as the two survivors – a Fulani woman and a ten-year-old girl – highlighting the fragility of memory under shock. Westerman notes that for many Cameroonians, Nyos was "an electric shock that awakened a sense of national unity" (196, my trans.), while Cameroonian writers like Bole Butake responded artistically to the disaster. Indeed, Butake composed *Lake God* (1986) which speaks not of gases and craters but of a god of the dead who lives in the lake and sucks life from the people, a mythic counter-narrative to Western geological accounts. The seer Shey Nasema claims the lake "harboured hatred" (199, my trans), giving nature an emotional, vengeful agency.

In this section, Westerman once again asks "What is a fact?", before noting that even the lake itself was renamed after the tragedy: "Nyos, the bad lake, once called Lwi, the good lake" (210, my trans.). This fact of renaming reveals how language can reshape both geography and moral meaning, problematising the notion of "fact". From Umaru Sule's story of survival to rumours in *The Cameroon Tribune* that Americans had predicted the disaster, the interplay of fact and fiction derives from mistranslation, linguistic gaps, and ignorance. Westerman also emphasizes the instability and unreliability of data: the number of deaths in the Grassfields remains uncertain because "people had no documents, no identity papers" (213, my trans.), and entire families disappeared without record.

Over time, myths have continued to evolve into political tools: anonymous pamphlets spread claims of biological warfare, while Western aid money vanished, leaving survivors still displaced after 25 years. In this context, Westerman argues that Bronisław Malinowski's insight is prophetic: "In periods of crisis, myths offer a way out through the supernatural" (283, my trans.). The story of a nuclear test becomes "a metaphor sharpened into an accusation of exploitation", a way to "awaken the conscience from oppression" (284, my trans.). By the time Butake writes to Westerman in 2011, saying the dead have never been commemorated, Westerman recognises that writing the book becomes an act of remembrance, and an attempt to reclaim truth from myth.

Bibliography

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