

Metaphors of State Disability in Cameroon Anglophone Literature: Assessing the Body in Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*

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[...] the body is the site of cultural, political, and gender battles, explorations and assertions. But it is not just that, or not first that. There is an imaginal tissue that exists between psyche and soma that antedates these more overt concerns. There is, in fact, a subtle or an imaginal body and it is this one that the poet offers us for contemplation, to offer by analogy our own wounds to us.

Patrick Dennis Slattery: *The Wounded Body*

Death lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying.

Zakes Mda: *Ways of Dying*

Abstract. This essay, which showcases the inextricable link between literature and social and political science, probes into questions of metaphors of state disability with regard to the textualisation of the body as representation and site of exaction of power in Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*. The body of the postcolonial subject as site of gruesome ideological inscription, the state as (dis)membered body, and the body of the autocrat/absolute ruler as embodiment of state are the different semantic contexts in which the phenomenology and hermeneutics of body is theorized. The grotesque nature and obscenity of the plays are metaphors of the disability of structures designed in autocratic regimes. The different character portraits are not the undesirable branches of society which must be trimmed; they are metaphors of the state as a sickening and unhealthily fractured body. Critically, the body is not only object, but subject in the context of agency, a site of resistance to codifications inscribed on it. The body is not only acted upon, it acts as well. The narcissistic body of the autocrat represents state pathology and dysfunction which is entrapped in the excess of power.

Keywords: Metaphor, disability, body, necropolitics, power and ideology

Introduction

The body, or corporeality, generates a plurality of complex discourses, positive and plausible as well as negative and unacceptable. The body is subject and object of the humanities and social sciences, in fact, it is subject to almost all disciplines, empirical of non-empirical. The phenomenology and hermeneutics of body differ in cultural, anthropological, social, economic and political contexts. This essay is centred on the political construction of disability from artistic representations of the body in Cameroon Anglophone literature, drawing on the examples of Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*. It critically analyses representations of disability as neither natural nor accidental cases, but as artistic designs under which lie systematic structures of autocracy, dictatorship and abusiveness of power in the name of sovereignty. The wretched of the nation (s) are those through whom power struggle and power structures are staged. The monstrosity of the autocratic state must devise ways of containing subjects/bodies. Psychological and physical murder constitutes such organised ways of neutralising, eliminating and annihilating undesirable political opponents.

The body, therefore, is a representational metaphor; it is a site of exaction/violence. The essay goes further to examine, critically, the body not only as object, but subject. This is in the context of body as agency, a site of resistance to codifications inscribed on it. The body is not only acted upon, it acts as well. The state is also a representational metaphor of body. It is embodied in the ruler; he incarnates the wellbeing of the state, and his body is emblematic of state function or dysfunction. The two texts offer the matrix for such critical concerns; they demonstrate variously the dynamics of body and politics of governance and sovereignty.

Semantic Contexts of Body: A Brief Note

Discourses of the body, whether phenomenological or hermeneutic, belong to almost all disciplines. Theorising the generality or particularity of the body is therefore complex socially, culturally, anthropologically, religiously, politically, biologically, artistically etc.; Synnott (1993), Foucault (1995), Turner (1996), Slattery (2000), Waskul and Vannini (2006), Quayson (2007), Kahn (2008), etc. Synnott contends that:

The body social is many things: the prime symbol of the self, but also of the society; it is something we have, yet also what we are; it is both subject and object at the same time; it is individual and personal, as unique as a fingerprint or an odourplume, yet is also common to all humanity...The body is both an individual creation, physically and phenomenologically, and a cultural product; it is personal, and also state property. (2 – 5, 26)

Most theorists of body are on the same conceptual borderlines with Synnott even as they expound in specific discourses on the body.

Waskul and Vannini, arguing that there is no singular sociology of body, appropriate the sociology of the body to a variety of issues: health, sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity, disability, sports, ageing, death and dying (2). The body and experiences of embodiment generate a plurality of discourses, “layered, nuanced, complex, [and] multifaceted – at the level of subjective human experience, interaction, social organization, institutional arrangements, cultural processes, society, and history” (2).

When questions of the body are appropriated in the socio-political arena more diverse and ambivalent views emerge. The institutionalisation of the body in politics of governance is multifaceted and age-old phenomenon. Turner and Foucault have offered enriching research in this direction. Turner has rightly observed that “the human body is an ancient metaphor of political institutions” (175). He theorises the two bodies of the King; physical, and spiritual (in this case the life wire of the community over which he reigns). The king is next to

God and his will must not be transgressed. By extension, power discourse in the postcolony has assumed this dimension with regard to the autocrat. His effigy lends credence to his continued influence and emblem. President for life means being a king...any attempts on his life is considered regicide – treason and the price to pay is horrible. Foucault provides the history of torture of and violence on the body to torture of the soul with enriching insight to biopower and biopolitics.

The body, and political torture, partly inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 5 “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”). Human rights violation as subtle state epistemology – corporeality discourse on political grounds has for centuries continued to be complex and enigmatic. The body has always served as a slate for political codification and inscription, as a performative site of torture and violence. Curiously, the systematic perpetrators of torture and the greatest violators of human rights have often been the very ones who pretend to universally champion human rights.

Theorising the Body and Power: The Postcolony Dimension

Having read Wilfred Owen’s war poems such as ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, ‘Apologia Pro Poemate Meo’ and ‘Strange Meeting’, Beckett’s plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, Soyinka’s *Madmen and Specialists* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt*, Nkemngong Nkengasong’s *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*, Lyonel Trouillot’s *Street of Lost Footsteps* or Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*, it hardly occurred to me at first how much corporeality representation and power discourse they exhibit. Having personally participated in university and national upheavals in my country in the early 1990s and witnessed the untold atrocities meted on citizens engaged in armless demonstrations, demanding democratic reforms and freedom, I was still naive to apprehend the ideological undertones of such occurrences with regard to the body. The experience of watching documentaries on slavery, colonialism, First and Second

World Wars, neo-colonialism, ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the genocide of Rwanda etc., or reading a work like Susan Sontag's non-fictional *Regarding The Pain Of Others* (2003), leaves a clear message of humanity's insaneness against its own very species. They all relate the body to mediums of political signification with different epistemologies of power. Not that I could not associate war, violence and the absurd with disfigurement and physical depreciation. As critical discourses in their own right corporeality studies caught my interest through long sustained discussions with a budding postcolonial scholar, Gilbert Ndi Shang (2012, 2013), my intellectual soul mate whose PhD thesis dedicates an entire chapter on body politics in the postcolonial autocratic state.

Though my textual corpus is Cameroon Anglophone literature, my re-entry into the discourse was through Sony Labou Tansi's venerated *The Shameful State*, a novel which textualises corporal metaphors on absurdist and political ideological grounds. The text is linguistics and body theory itself in creative or artistic form. Martillimi Lopez, the heartless autocratic president, is the postcolonial prototype of sovereignty, of the right to kill, of the right to utilise the body brutally, but whose failing, diseased and degenerating body is symbol of the debased nature of his state (wellbeing) and state (the sociopolitical space in which he exercises sovereignty). Tansi wrote contemptuously against the rottenness of his country and his death was precipitated by the Congolese dictatorial regime's refusal to allow him travel abroad for medical attention.

The inspiring postcolonial critic Ato Quayson has in *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007) concerned himself with cross-cultural forms of disability representation. More particularly, he focuses on the moral and ethical undertones of disability rather than on disability as repository or means of state exertion of power. A number of points mentioned however justifies this essay's trajectory. In the "Introduction" Quayson contends that:

The attitudes that have historically attended people with disabilities have varied over time, but reiterated in all epochs is the

idea that they carry excess meaning and therefore offer an insistent invitation to a series of interpretative and institutional framings. (4) What is fundamental in this excerpt is excess of meaning and different interpretative and institutional matrices of disability. One could therefore extend disability beyond Quayson's context to questions of ideology in social and political systems. His "Typology of Disability Representation" (32 – 53) makes Quayson's delimitations clearer. He reiterates that the text seeks to read disability "as a fulcrum or pivot out of which various discursive details emerge, gain salience, and ultimately undergo transformation within the literary-aesthetic field" (34). The typological understanding of disability representations is fundamental, Quayson contends, since it helps us to examine literary texts in full, and disabled figures should be construed "in the relationship to other characters and to the images, social settings, and broader spatiotemporal concepts that are manifest within the text" (34).

Disability representation in the context of this essay grapples with critically interpreting the authors' (un)conscious imaging of the human body to show the different levels of sovereignty on the psychophysiology of individuals or groups of persons. It argues further on the entrapment of the autocrat's own body as a pathological site in the context of the self-undoing nature of power.

Achille Mbembe is an uncontested historian, political scientist and social theorist who has made significant research on the postcolony, particularly with regard to the thrust of this essay. *On the Postcolony* (2001) and "Necropolitics" (2003) are two seminal works in which he theorises questions of systematised autocratic violence on state subjects. Mbembe discusses the banality of power in Chapter Three of *On the Postcolony*, "The Aesthetics of Vulgarities" (102 – 141). He situates the context in which the question has to be construed:

But the postcolony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence. In this sense, the postcolony is a

particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline...To ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts; but they also resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain. The basic goal is not just to bring a specific political consciousness into being, but to make it effective. (102 – 103)

Mbembe focuses his analysis on Cameroon (which happens to be the historical and political context in which both texts under study are creatively produced) to discuss the grotesque and obscene as “essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination”.

Extravagance of power is extended to every possible dimension in order to produce the desired effects of containing subjects, of rendering political quiescence through performative acts on the body: “To exercise authority is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it, to disempower them not so much to increase their productivity as to ensure their maximum docility” (110).

In the fifth chapter, “Out of the World,” Mbembe advances his convictions, that there is apparently no difference between animals and humans on questions of how abusive and atrocious power has become in the postcolony:

Where power has a carnivorous aspect, killing a human being and killing an animal proceed from the same logic. Like that of the animal whose throat is cut, the death inflicted on a human being is perceived as embracing nothing. It is a death of a purely negative essence without substance, the emptying of a hollow, unsubstantial object that, falling back into loss, “finds itself only as a lost soul.” (200)

The term, carnivorous, is suggestive of power and cannibalism which, even though it may sound unthinkable as political practice, has generated and

continues to generate discourse in political science, not only in the African political landscape but beyond. Mbembe reiterates this phenomenon with clarity:

The fact is that power, in the postcolony, is carnivorous. It grips its subjects by the throat and squeezes them to the point of breaking their bones, making their eyes pop out of their sockets, making them weep blood. It cuts them in pieces and, sometimes, eats them raw. (201)

The myth has been that when autocratic regimes perform atrocity on bodies of opponents their power base is not only consolidated but fortified. However, human blood and parts of the body are a ritualistic repository of indomitability and invincibility. This zombification of power finds apt expression in both Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation* and Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*.

Mbembe's coinage "necropower" wrestles with an extension of Foucauldian theorisations on biopolitics and biopower with regard to contemporary forms of subjugation. In "Necropolitics" Mbembe further articulates the systematic strategies of authoritarian exercise of power on the ambivalent lines of life/death. Necrology signifies death and points to Mbembe's insightful presentation in *On the Postcolony* (196 – 206). How death and the body are related in terms of the monstrosity of power and sovereignty ("predominantly as the right to kill") preoccupy Mbembe's thinking here: "*the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (14; [emphasis in original]).

The essay begins with Mbembe underscoring his thesis, and proceeding with a series of questions which have a bearing on the centrality of this essay:

To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power. But under what practical conditions is the right to kill, to allow to live, or to expose to death exercised? Who is the subject of this right? What does the implementation of such a right tell us about the person who is thus put to death and about the relation of enmity that sets

that person against his or her murderer? Is the notion of biopower sufficient to account for the contemporary ways in which the political, under the guise of war, of resistance, or of the right against terror, makes the murder of the enemy its primary and absolute objective? War, after all, is as much a means of achieving sovereignty as a way of exercising the right to kill. Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power? (11)

A critical examination of some of the questions leads to the following propositions:

- The practical conditions are those of threat, defiance or resistance to sovereignty or its affiliates, and being subhuman, “animal” or mere possession; the “thingfication” of the subject;
- The subject of this right; an autocrat and his sycophants, or a dehumanising structured system or perpetuated ideology, say racist or fascist for example;
- The person is a thing subject to the determining will of the autocrat or implementing ideological machinery, subdued and powerless;
- As to how life, death and the body are inscribed in the order of power, they are a site or space of sovereign experimentation; they both constitute power and at the same time are an “other” to power.

These questions point to a stark reality with which literary theory, especially postcolonial criticism, hardly engages. The recurrent body metaphor has been that of a feminised Africa raped and abused/misused by the West; an Africa of wounds and ulcers continually refreshed and deepened by neo-colonialism and globalisation. Quayson’s work as mentioned earlier is not premised on questions of political power and its exertion on the human body. Let us bear in mind that Mbembe is more focussed on political science in which he shares affinities with Labou Tansi who was a politician and writer. But Mbembe evidently goes beyond Tansi’s influence in situating his discourse on a wide range of human experience, asserting that, “Technologies of destruction have become more tactile, more

anatomical and sensorial, in a context in which the choice is between life and death” (34).

“Necropolitics” is in essence about humanity in its various locations and temporalities. One cannot reduce Mbembe’s discourse only to the periphery of the postcolony which, no doubt, is the centrality of this paper. He cruises through humanity’s history centring on such hallmarks as Slavery, the National Socialism, the French Revolution, the Second World War, Apartheid in South Africa and Palestinian occupation. The common thread which runs through his discourse, however, is institutionalised systems which function “in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creating of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40).

Power and Coercion in the Postcolony: Strategies of Perpetuating Authoritarian Rule

Authoritarian governments are like landmines to subversive and oppositional attitudes of political and non-political activists. This is typical of the postcolony. Landmines signify violence on the body; physical mutilation or dismemberment, leading to loss of life or loss of body parts like arms and limbs. The sovereign has all the technologies of power at his disposal. The psychological impact is scaring and tormenting, but produces obvious intended results. Infliction of excruciating pain in the name of intelligence gathering or merely as a form of punishment and coercive political correctness or re-orientation is the trademark of sovereignty. As discussed above, postcolonial autocratic regimes conceive all means of violence as ways of safeguarding the stronghold of power at all cost. Such means are not to be identified only with postcolonialism, a reductive view often used as a pretext to give a bad name to certain kinds of regimes especially in the South. Instead, Mbembe’s “Necropolitics” has argued incontestably that body violence is ingrained in human consciousness *for all times and all places*. With reference to American policies of intelligence extraction for instance Caleb Smith asserts that “Torture is a ritual through which the political community

reconstitutes itself by spectacularly humiliating and destroying an enemy” (433). No one doubts the international scale of American use of violence in diverse circumstances; no one doubts the support America has given to certain African dictators, particularly the training of their intelligence agents. There is hardly any country which does not have a narrative on violence based on ideological convictions.

In fact, most of what happens in the postcolony is a continuation of what earlier systems like slavery and colonialism instituted. In this section we propose salient structures and instruments of torture – agents or executioners:

- a. Confinement in claustrophobic space smaller than the body – incarceration and stifling conditions;
- b. Space in total darkness – loss of time consciousness and the outside world – at times loss of sight - types of underground imprisonment;
- c. Water cells and immersions;
- d. Torture chambers – electronic and other manual gadgets like pincers, nails, knives etc.
- e. Berets, tear gas, water cannons - not just mere water but that which speaks undesirably to body language;
- f. Orchestrated and staged road accidents or helicopter/aeroplane flight crashes, letter bombs, poison;
- g. The Gendarmerie, the police, the military, spy network and secret/intelligence agents of the state, an orchestrated Kafkaesque judiciary machinery, the prison administrators and guards etc.

Many literary texts represent these different structures and instruments of torture as political devices of biopower and biopolitical control. The list cannot be exhaustive because there are multitudes of diverse and unnamed ways of brutalising the body and mind. Surviving victims who can testify gruesome experiences have always described unbelievable methods other than the ones with which one usually associates torture.

The Body as Site or Space of State Representation

The state as implicitly or explicitly a disjointed body or depleted self is the interpretative matrix of Bate Besong's *Beasts of No Nation*. This text represents different layers of body discourse. Two are important here and constitute what I would call the double narration of the state. This play is no doubt an expression of a depleted narcissistic self; a motherland Cameroon of trouble and existential anguish embodied in bad leadership. It is also a textualisation of incompatible bodies, that is, the unfortunate metaphoric wedlock of Anglophone and Francophone Cameroon. In all, the two represent a form of sovereignty that is self-undoing; the destruction of the state in the name of the state reason (raison d'état).

Corporeality discourse with regard to unholy matrimony, the body being the main medium on which ideology is inscribed, is discernable in *Beasts of No Nation*. Physical disfigurement, body as theatre of knowledge and violence, compute with semantic fields of biopower and biopolitics in the postcolony – the faces of power as discourse and coercion are visible on the downtrodden masses represented by Cripple, Blind man and the Night-soil men. Their very names image their physical and psychological representations.

The writing and staging of this play was exactly like mounting on a planted landmine. Bate Besong lived a literary and social life in which he concerned himself with the poetics of shock, of unequivocally demonising dictatorial regimes that oppressed and sapped life of already suffering masses. Thus the conscientising effect of the play led to the arrest of Bate Besong in April 1991 by Cameroon's intelligence service CENER. He was considered subversive and as menace to state security and tranquillity. He suffered humiliation and debasement which would have been enough to kill him literally, but he held on till 2007 when he eventually died in a conspicuous road accident a few hours after launching his last volatile work, *Disgraced*. A cross section of Cameroonians associate this mysterious death with "accident de circulation" (road accident) which is now considered one of Cameroon's dictatorial regime's

complex network and strategy of eliminating or disabling people who are a “threat”/ “menace” to the system.

Dealsham Aadingigin’s dictatorial declaration after ruthlessly crushing the rebellion of the Night-soil men sheds light on questions of power. The end of the play signals the triumph of Aadingigin’s regime and violence:

Aadingigin fires. Gaston Otshama screams. The others (Night-soil men) flee. Otshama dies. Comrade Aadingigin retrieves the bulky envelop from the dead man’s breast pocket. He kicks the corpse and exults: The Word is my Double Law. I AM THE LAW! (52)

Dealsham Aadingigin is the epitome of sovereignty. Kicking the corpse is like a ritual of adding to the effect of the bullet. He had earlier openly declared to anyone involved in recalcitrance and insubordination:

You’ll be put in a torture chamber. The machine will go in full swing. They will chain your hands and feet and drag you on the floor until you faint. Bottles will be broken on your head (10).

The ways of autocratic abuse and violation of human rights are not hidden in this excerpt. Acts of barbarity and violence are systematically orchestrated to contain subjects. The causing of extreme pain and suffering on the human body is the language/code of the day. Aadingigin is unequivocal about behaviours and attitudes attuned to transgressing the established order. Anatomic deprecation is aptly rendered visible in the autocrat’s speech, and he possesses all the mechanism to ensure effective power control. Blind man no doubt says “Hero-worship is strongest where there is least regard for freedom” (45). This personality cult, usually systematically engineered or forced, seems to be the only epistemology of governance without which forms of violence will take precedence; Aadingigin: “I’ll order torture with regret. You’ll be held in solitary. Your cell will be flooded with water. You’ll be deprived of food and sleep. You’ll be beaten and forced to drink your own urine” (40).

According to Hilarius Ambe (2004: 186) shit and stench are the organising metaphors of the play. The play presents the dregs of society as “the doomed

carriers of mountains of fetid waste in the Ednoauyan city council” (82). He states further that “we experience the stateless and physical material depersonalisation of the oppressed characters pitted against the deliberate insensitivity of their leaders” (195) in a city described by Narrator as a valley of utter darkness and blindness. Referring to Anglophone discourse, matching statelessness and physical depersonalisation portrays the country as partly diseased, as the union of “Anglos” and “Frogs” is paralysed by ailing representations of Anglophones who have been reduced to sub humans or tramps. Metaphors of state disability are discerned not only from the burden and bondage of Cripple, Blind man and the Night-soil, but also from their debased physical appearance.

In *Beasts of No Nation* we can closely examine the oppressed as follows: Blind man may be physically blind but he sees ideologically; his darkened world is not a darkened mind. On the contrary, dark mind in reality is that of the political machinery that has inscribed itself on him. Blind man tells of his plight and that of others, because he knows the brutality of the system so well:

Blind man: Under torture, a man says not only what he has done but what he would have liked to do even if he didn't know it.

Cripple: But before then you'll be tied to a tree and attacked with machetes and harpoons bought...

And the voice of Narrator adds: Don't forget the torture tinkers, tear gas, and water hoses,/Equipment for constant beatings, water immersions, Russian roulettes ...” (30 – 31).

Huge sums of money are invested in procuring and sustaining the structures and perpetrators of torture. Cripple's engagement in the dialogue points to the body as site of codification of state ideology, how the system invests in instruments of torture and what awaits anyone who deters from it. What could his name mean? – a metaphor of a crippling totalitarian system in which the autocrat and his sycophants themselves are beggars depending on an extended self for their source of destructive power?

The Night-soil men are treated with no sense of human dignity; the stifling conditions under which they work as worthless “Anglos” (Anglophones) without identification papers deprives them of citizenship and a sense of genuine nationhood. These characters are political scars; they are indelible marks of state dysfunction and chaos. Far from being isolated individual inventions, they are collective signs of a state metaphorically represented as a diseased and unhealthy body and fragmented mind. The degrading psychosocial atmosphere in which these characters are presented lend credence to authoritarian regimes’ ambitions which Mbembe in “Necropolitics” has rightly remarked as obsessed with “maximum destruction of persons and the creating of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (40).

In his groundbreaking work, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* (2009), Patrick Chabal has rightly observed that questions of human degradation and violence on the body can be caused by the inhuman environmental conditions in which people are obliged to live (152 – 158). The play’s setting Ednouay (Yaounde) is the political capital of Cameroon. It is a synecdoche for the country and represents the non-conducive environmental space which ignites national malaise of its general populace. Chabal construes violence from several perspectives of which two are important in our argument; violence as perpetrated by an autocratic system on citizens/objects, and violence resulting in the degradation of social ethics and laws. The survival of the fittest in such stifling conditions generates forms of violence which indicate neglect and indifference of leadership. *Beasts of No Nation* embodies implicitly and explicitly both types of violence. The play invests scatological images of decay, filth and nausea...the deeper undercurrents of these are telling when matched with the image of a horrible toilet, signifying metaphorically the pathological nature of the state. Autocracy in the postcolony is characterised by bestiality and horror. Dealsham Aadingingin Supreme Maximum Mayor of Ednouay Municipal Council is a prototype beast in whose grip lays a wailing and asphyxiating nation.

The actual conditions in which the Night-soil men operate attest to a systematic codification. Chabal underscores that “the impact of violence on African societies, therefore, is both penetrating and long-lasting. It degrades individuals, dissolves social norms and deflects human energies from more productive activity” (158). Carefully analysed in the context of *Beasts of No Nation*, Chabal’s argument holds true.

Psychosomatic Distortion as National Pathology

Black Caps and Red Feathers is a text in which repression and fear, anxiety of uncertainty, psychic distortion, madness, psychological trauma, self-alienation, death and anatomic mutilation are common phenomena. It shares affinities with Tansi’s *The Shameful State* with regard to excesses of violence meted on the body for political ends.

In his critical introductory note to the play Mbuh Mbuh Tenu asserts that, “It is a scary play whose even more scary characters in their abstractness epitomise the enthronement of bastardom as political logic” (iv). Scary play and scary characters all convey images of unease and non-conducive political atmosphere. Though set on a garbage heap – a metaphor not only of degeneration, decomposition, but fertility and hope as well – the play carries with it signposts of the political history of Cameroon inscribed in the legacy of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism.

The play opens with Lunatic the Narrator chorus setting the circumstances under which to apprehend the argument of this essay:

I had no sleep tonight.
Even now my heart is crammed with monstrosity,
with the voices of death and life.
I had thought to myself
that I shall tell the story in tears
when one morning I shall wake from sleep
to find that I am dead,
believing that we men who wear our cloaks

the right sides are sane and civilised men.

But the wailing voices of future generations
filled my mind
and peals of thunder rumbled in my heart,
and I felt Efuandem's wrath
in his stormy voice that spoke:
"You messenger of the Truth!
You are the divine bat that sees all in a dream!
I sent you to the world to prophesy,
to fill the lives of men with Truth;
now you lie there musing,
feeding on your own thoughts
like the hen that ate its own eggs.
How can you, knowing all that is true,
disdain till after you were dead?
Glory is he who perceives and speaks it plain;
or he becomes the snake that refused fewer legs
because it claimed it was bigger than the millipede
and died having none."

Here at life's farthest end (*Pointing towards the stage*)
is death in life,
a Creature of its own kind,
desolate
on the garbage heap,
pushed asunder by the aberration of logical men.
Here in the world's rejected end
is the destined Afaninkong
the unbending Apostle of Truth
swaddled in the strong stench
of the cadavers of civilisation,

colonies of flies buzzing about him....

I do not intend to wake him from his dream... (*Pause*)

I hear him groan already

Listen to his testimony, (5 – 6)

The character of Creature, introduced at the end of the excerpt, is a good sample of the postcolony's subject on whose body and mind has been written and demonstrated the signs of the times – a visual representation of torture, a dramatisation of atrocity caused on the body.

Mbembe has theorised and philosophised this enigmatic existentialist situation in which Creature finds himself with acuity in *On the Postcolony*:

To think about the end of being and existence (the real referent of these questions) is to be interested in what lies *this* side of the lifeless material thing – not necessarily to establish the status of the dead person or even the survivor, but to see how, in Africa after colonization, it is possible to delegate one's death while simultaneously and already experiencing death at the very heart of one's own existence. In other words, how is it possible to live while going to death, while being somehow already dead? And how can one *live in death*, be already dead, while being – there – while having not necessarily left the world or being part of the spectre – and when the shadow overhangs existence has not disappeared, but on the contrary weighs ever more heavily? (201 – 202)

Through Creature one gets the deeper undercurrents of state action on the body – particular parts of the body excite different dimensions of pain resulting in untold psychosomatic consequences – the narrated but vivid representations of violence on the body. The political meaning is that of wielding power and dominance, usually under the pretext of state sovereignty. Even when life is soaked out of the culprit the ritual performance continues on the lifeless body which is still apparently an obvious site of resistance and counter-discourse.

The scenario in which Creature is introduced embodies metaphorical undertones of a wasted body, and the very signs of human nothingness:

On the side of the heap, facing the fire and the bundle, Creature, aged about fifty, is squatted on a stone, his legs and hands brought together as if they were in chains. He has an exceptionally big bone in his hand. He leans backward, dozing. He is almost nude except for a tattered pair of knickers that reveals his phallus resting on his left thigh. He remains fixed in that position staring thoughtfully into space. (7)

A ready question which springs to mind would centre on the circumstances which account for Creature's present demise. Is he a tramp by choice, fate or force? This description is reminder of the absurdist nature of existence; a typical Beckettian setting of uncertainty and existentialist unease. The name Creature is suggestive of an animal or subhuman, of a prototype of the madness or insanity born of a political logic which is paradoxically disgusting, senseless and inhuman. His transformation is the work of an institutionalised cruel machinery of power. Creature would suggest the image of man in his most rudimentary form; man reduced to his most basic and mere survival, lacking dignity and regard, a state of mere *thereness*.

Creature represents an oppositional ideology to an autocratic regime; he stands for the Truth, for the masses, and the price to pay is too high not only for him but all those who are in the same circumstance. The paradox is that the truth which Traourou's death machinery and repressive rhetoric want to extract from him is Truth's very opposite, Lie:

I spoke the truth. How can I lie to the clan that Ganje was not dead? That he was not killed? When these eyes saw them. Saw the thugs. Saw them drag Ganje into a bush. And on towards the river. When these eyes saw the thugs masked, armed with axes and machetes. How would the clan believe me when even Womba was butchered in plain day light, in the eyes of the clan? When the clan beheld Womba's testes sliced by the butcher squad, his head cut off from

his trunk and taken to the Alps? And the rest of his body was chopped like a piece of bad yam. Said Womba had to face a butcher squad because he had turned terrorist, when Womba was out to save the clan like Ganje. (8)

This excerpt is replete with instruments of torture, its perpetrators and of course the human body and soul as site of ritualistic enactment. What one discerns from the excerpt is the apt representation of “political correctness” perpetuated by a regime which uses the human body as the arena of enacting its barbarity and senselessness. Not only are political activists gruesomely terrorised and murdered, but their bodies are dismembered systematically. A butcher squad slices testes, decapitates, and mutilates the lifeless body. Ganje’s fate is not different:

How can I lie that they did not wrench Ganje’s neck? When they turned the poor man’s neck, and turned until the crack of the spinal bone? Then, quick, quick, they cut off Ganje’s head and put in a black bag. I watched Ganje gurgling to his end. And they found a stone, tied Ganje’s trunk to it and rolled it down into the river...That was the pride of the clan gone. The hope of the clan gone. Mocked on the bottom of a river by crocodiles. His head taken to the Alps for Norman meat. (8 – 9)

Creature does not only tell the pain of others, but also narrates the loss of the emblems of genuine nationalism and hope. Placing emphasis on “the pride of the clan gone” and “the hope of the clan gone”, are signals of a degenerating state rather than a prospering state ridding itself of undesirable elements. While part of Ganje’s body is piecemealed by crocodiles, his head is menu on a human table, justifying the carnivorous and occultand Mephistophelian nature of power: “Traourou! He likes the taste of blood. The taste of fresh testes. The smell of rotting skulls. Real human skulls” (17). Traourou’s source of power is not hidden for there are conditions he meets to acquire and consolidate power: “... if you want to claim the black cap and red feather you must sell your soul to the devil” (19).

Pramod K. Nayar critically assesses different modes of representation and textualisations of body discourse which necessitate examination here:

The denial of human rights is made visible (ironically) not only by the material disappearances of bodies/persons but also within victim narratives and claims narratives. Human rights – their denial, violation and claims – demand narrative. Such a human rights narrative takes many forms: first-person accounts of torture, prison memoirs, autobiographies, testimonials before inquiry commissions, reportage in newspapers, reports by authorities and agencies like Amnesty, and even fictionalized accounts of prison life and violations. (62 – 63)

The form of *Black Caps and Red Feathers* aptly engages this excerpt with regard to Creature's agonising ordeal. Though physically debased and psychically distorted Creature is empowered by Nkengasong to narrate or account for systematic torture and gross violation of human rights characteristic of sovereign claims.

Creature is not only a narrator of his lived torture but the witness of the horrors of others – the “enemies of the state”. The cumulative psychic effects are very disturbing as he narrates for himself and for them. His physical and psychological disability is in essence that of the autocratic nation which writes itself on him. His flies-infested sores and ulcers and psychic disorientation are marks of the pathological state of the nation. He narrates sovereignty on Ganje, Womba, Oumi, Bobe Khom and Yoye – all threats to the “peace”, “tranquillity” and coveted “unity” of the clan – and alludes to all the destitute of the land, referring to Traourou as embodiment of this sovereignty; “you have peeled off the feathers on our backs to dress your cap.” The featherless bird image is telling, since the bird loses its fundamental essence without feathers. In other terms, Traourou has put the country literally on its knees.

Creature narrates the brutality and barbarity which the whole country has gone through, not only the few characters mentioned above:

Three decades, wailing was the laughter of infants and the silent groaning of afflicted mothers. Three decades were decades of fear and terror, with the smashing of fathers' heads and wailing for heads that were lost. Trunks of men littered the streams and the earth. But Traourou was at work, wrenching necks, smashing heads and draining blood... (36)

Human beings lose their essence when drained of their psychosomatic vitality. Citizens or subjects have been sacrificed, rendered sapless and hollow for one man's rituals of tapping and consolidating power which paradoxically ends up in powerlessness.

The Body and Agency

In political practices the body is also a site of resistance. Creature's survival in *Black Caps and Red Feathers* can be construed as an act of resistance, as a strategic performative enactment of resilience, sacrifice and healing. Traourou, a caricature instrument of the exertion of external power, is eliminated and Voice is a mere agonised shadow of his existence. In *Beasts of No Nation* the physical representations of the protagonists bear imprints of ideology, of debasement and abuse. They carry marks of state disembodiment but are capable of resistance. The Night-soilmen who work in physical strain and exhaustion stage a revolution against Aadingingin, demanding freedom. Even though their revolt meets with ferocious rebuttal, their actions are signs of impassivity and consciousness for change.

In "Inscriptions and body-maps: representations of the corporeal" (1990), Elizabeth Grosz contends that the body is never merely a passive and inactive object upon which structures of power are inscribed or played out:

If the body is the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organisation. As well

as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of resistance, for it exerts recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways. (64)

This conviction resonates with the two plays. The socially, economically and politically destitute are codes of autocratic systems and sites of knowledge – power. But they do not just act as though resigned to their fate; their very debasement energises them and gives interpretative grounds for seeing them as generative.

Beasts of No Nation, adhering to conventions of Applied Theatre, advocates a revolutionary consciousness not only to the audience, but from within the text primarily. Narrator, otherwise called “Professor” by the Night-soil men, spurs the seemingly resigned docile men to action:

“O most venerable Anglo ... my co-workers in the field of Shitology don’t have their independence and freedom. It appears that you will soon have to decide to fight or run. A hero goes to war to die” (39). The last statement of this quote, “A hero goes to war to die”, is recurrent in the play and serves as igniting force for the dispossessed to change the circumstances of their lives, perpetrated by a sickening autocracy. The pathological problem is in essence the tyrant and his sycophants who must be acted against. In the last fragment of *Beasts of No Nation*, “Aadingingin and the Night-soil men”, the Night-soil men are imbued with agency; though looked upon as dead living or living dead they possess the will and power to act for change. They are neither an expression of docility nor the permanent triumph of dominant ideology of the ruling class.

The autocrat can never eliminate all his detractors no matter how much power he wields. Creature’s resilience is definitely not a mere act of artistic creation. By some mystery, chance or deterministic force, healing from the devastation and atrocity caused by the autocrat always involves victims and survivors. Creature might not be the time bomb to annihilate the autocrat, but he is obviously a

catalyst to change. He may be taken for a fool, but he is of the Shakespearean type, full of wit. Creature says

I believe in one God, His Imperial Majesty King Traourou the First unlimited. The Giver and taker of Life, I believe in you ...Thank you, my god for not taking my life yesterday. Thank you Almighty for giving me life today... Amen. Amen... (26)

This should not be taken at face level to mean gratitude to tyranny. It is rather an overt mockery, a sly utterance in which is inscribed resistance and challenge. Creature in this context can be emblematic of rebirth. He can be construed as the veritable symbol of recalcitrance and resistance to the soul crushing-machinery which has rendered him seemingly finished and worthless. The garbage heap, far from being a site of filth and stench, of waste and decay, is a site of fertility. His body at this site signifies transformation and carries with it hope of regeneration.

The Autocrat's Narcissistic Body: A Parody of his own Power

The state is a corporeal structure; it is a symbolic construction of body; it itself is a legislative, executive and judiciary body embodied in the autocrat; he embodies the very sickness and madness of his subjects, the very sycophancy of his adherents. Disability is not a discourse attributed to an external other but that which constitutes itself as symbol of nation/statehood. If the dictator incarnates the life of the state, his body becomes the very site on which the health or pathology of the state is metaphorically inscribed. The texts in this study lend credence to the fact that disability emanates from the dictator and not the subjects on whom he exercises sovereignty. Recourse to Sony Labou Tansi's *The Shameful State* throws light on the issue. Not only is Martillimi Lopez suffering from hernia, he is sterile and sexually obsessed. He uses his sexual organs only in the exercise of the banality of violent power. His body is the corpus which narrates his state's ailment; his pathological hedonism and sycophancy delimitate his power to rule. His frail body is a metaphor of state fragility as well in which his power has been nothing but un-reproductive and underproductive. Shameful state, by extension in the plays under study, assumes two inextricably

linked semantic threads; state as sovereign entity and state of mind and body of the embodiment of this sovereignty, the autocrat/dictator.

Beasts of No Nation delineates Aadingingin as the seeker of confessions and as untouchable. The proportion of his body is the might of his rule; “He is fat, extremely fat. The sort of bloated fatness associated with a very juicy toad” (48). Aadingingin’s overblown body is the result of his arrogating all state wealth to himself for self-aggrandisement while citizen/subjects wither in abject misery. This bloated fatness is an inevitable narcissistic pathology which might result in self-flagellation. But he exhibits power which will inevitably destroy itself. The killing of Otshama who is adherent and sycophant of Aadingingin signals how power undermines itself. Otshama dies by Aadingingin’s gun shot. An impending calamity awaits the dictator; his apparently uncontested power bears the seed of his destruction, he has won a battle against the Night-soil men but not the war.

Traourou and Voice designate the same person in *Black Caps and Red Feathers*. Traourou is mercilessly stripped of power by an extended Other whose Mephistophelean power maintained him as autocratic leader. In Act One, Creature’s narration paints Traourou as seemingly immortal and godlike in his control and abuse of power on the body:

Traourou’s cap which no one dared desire. Who could hazard his head by raising his eyes to look at Traourou’s cap? The road to the hole is very smooth. Who dared raised his eyes to look at Traourou’s cap? Your head would have been cut off for the Alps before you brought it down. You would be pounded by berets with the riffle butts, like you would pound bad cocoyams in a rough mortar. Or you are taken to a hole, which induced blindness. There you lose your sight and life and only the body remains to feel the wrath of copper whips. Even Traourou dreamed that someone spied his cap with desire he did not sleep that night. And if anyone crossed his eye in

the dream, and the morning came you were done with before he went for breakfast. (16)

Act Two registers the emergence of Voice – a helpless shadow of a once uncontested site of power. Voice is Traourou’s ghost. Previously omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient, Traourou traverses the same trajectories of the banality of power, and even worse. Voice is the artistic medium through which he articulates the devastation of absolute and corruptible power: “The Alps befouled me and I lost all. Everything that I stood for ... they punctured my heart with a torn and let life seep out of me gradually to my end.”

Corporeal disenchantment is meted on Traourou who once used similar methods of psychosomatic mutilation to consolidate power. His heart is a corporal signifier. As prototype of national life he is disempowered and vulnerable to his own ideology. His body is in turn a performance site of ruthless and monstrous power. Voice continues to lament:

I was an unmatched master in the art of tyranny. But my cap and feather! How it was lost! How easily power abandoned a happy king! Those cunning fellows in the Alps! They took away my life when it was sweetest. When I was at the helm of power. Ah, those sniffing devils in the Alps! They showed me paradise and took it away again. Ah me... (43)

Voice reiterates the self-caused pathology of abusive power and its devastating effect to showcase the negativism of the narcissistic nature of the autocrat as embodiment of the state:

Only power can destroy power. Power, like evil, feeds on its own testes in the end. It does not reign forever. The higher the realms of vaulting ambitions for power, the shorter and fatal the time of its own destruction. (43 – 44)

This excerpt holds true for both autocrats in this study. It goes beyond the political landscape of the postcolony and points to the general history of world dictatorships.

Conclusion

There seems to be no other site on which human beings could cause pain, trauma and atrocity in the same devastating manner that they do on the human body and mind. In the texts under consideration the body is that space on which state sovereignty is exercised both publicly and privately. Biopolitical experimentations are far from generating and enhancing positive resonances in the governmental arena of the postcolony.

The grotesque nature and obscenity of the plays are metaphors of the disability of structures designed in autocratic regimes. The different character portraits are not the undesirable branches of society which must be trimmed; they are metaphors of the state as a sickening and unhealthily fractured body. Significant also is the body of the autocrat which is critically viewed as embodiment of state. Proper functioning or dysfunctioning transcribes metaphors of the body as representation. The pathology of the state is inscribed on the autocrat's body. Nkengasong provides an insightful image of the collapse of the state through *Creature*: "The womb of the clan is heavy with misery and death," *Creature* states. Womb is a very powerful metaphor; a matrix of the nation, but in this context signifies an ectopic pregnancy. A womb heavy with misery and death is emblematic of an undesirable pregnancy, embodied in the autocrat and must be purged to revitalise the land. Paradoxically, the most spectacularly wrought rhetoric of unconditional respect for human rights and enviable peace comes from such sadistic postcolonial locations.

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