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Black Caps and Red Feathers
Patron Publishing House
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Black Caps and Red Feathers is an acutely pathetic enactment of contingent Cameroon and her leaders as they confront and try to circumvent, the inevitability of history - Truth - revisiting them. It is a scary play whose even more scary characters in their abstractness epitomise the enthronement of bastardom as political logic.

Creature, the main character, with a rather over-deterministic will, provides the uncensored medium through which the shameless betrayal of the clan and its citizens is revealed. As a significant representative of those whose "tongues are barbarous" to the halo of political convenience in the clan, Creature is the characteristic political prisoner who has been abused in detention into insanity. His life now, as a "free" man, is a long reverie of pain and horror, as he recalls every second of his incarceration, the inhuman cruelty against him that has been trivialised into popular normalcy, and from which even a prophet (as the quasi Greek Chorus character, Lunatic, calls him) can emerge, broken. His words are the archetypal ranting of Everyman whose collective unconscious is the implicating realm of woe, rot and obnoxious cannibalism. And even then, Creature still targets the blunt claws of such tyranny that ends up ruining its own potentials through a sadistic insistence on collective submission.

In the confrontation, a pro-socialist vision is pitted against the negating hangover of imperialism, recalling the nationalist uprising of the 60s when UPCists challenged the infected foundations of the neophyte nation. In the

play, as a consequence, Womba "[faces] a butcher squad because he had turned terrorist when he was [only] out to save the clan" (10); while on his part Ganje "wanted to see the people's green lawns, their green fields and rubbish heaps swell out fruits for the people themselves" (15). The line between history and art is therefore a very thin one in the play and in this way it attempts a redefinition of our national image as a justification, for and/or against those who partook in shading its changing cycle.

It is in this way too that the play fits within the emerging context of Cameroon Anglophone Drama, to meaningfully vindicate opponents of a Bjornson generalisation. For, from Musinga to Nkemngong, the picture becomes clearer with each new play that is placed on the shelves, and more focused in ascertaining the fertility of such a phenomenon that does not seek to flatter incumbency with Chococam-coated phrases. The consciousness is unique and interestingly so, in its strident estimation of what was, and of what is supposed to be. "My two countrymen," Creature laments, were "lured to the other side of the Great River" by the arch tyrant-deceiver, Traourou, "with throngs of men to betray and cut their heads." The representative victim is Bobe Khom, and reminiscent of Bate Besong's "Grain of Bobe Ngom Jua", the lament is acrimonious: the traitors did not only "sell" their people, but also "changed the course of the Great River" (one of them confesses), only to be rewarded with menial jobs: "They put me in a latrine to wash and kill cockroaches," the other concurs. In this way, then, Nkemngong is concerned with the signposted mentality of a people, which survives even the crudest form of osmotic stereotyping and vindicates them as it were, in history books as fodder for change. It is a mentality that must survive, of necessity, to tell its own storey without gloss. It resists imposed definitions and fights to conquer the insinuations of fear in a desperate moment of enslavement, which

Creature as lord over his remnant possession regenerates in the significant symbol of fire. This is the hope that never dies even in betrayal, and explains why Creature's heap of rubbish is still vital and coveted. The death of Bobe Khom, then, is just attempted killing of such hope, after all, since as the personification of "life", "history", and "posterity", his corporeal existence is in fact not necessary for the ultimate realization of the dreams for which he was killed. The rubbish heap metaphor is thus richly ambiguous from both "national" and "regional" perspectives and in the latter case in particular, the freedom for which Creature craves is an obsession, which like identity, cannot be bargained.

Desire is therefore a powerful motif in the play, and is dramatically juxtaposed with fear and resistance. The consequences of such desire enrich the irony of the play against the bloating excesses of Traourou and the "weakling boy" he had groomed as a successor. They have perfected the art of dosing out terror to those who dare to desire the feathered cap of leadership since, ironically, "to wear the black cap and feather ... you must use your cuffs and ghosts" (19). Such raw dictatorship energizes the instinct to breed more fear against real and imaginary opponents. At the same time, those overtly targeted by oppressive brunt of leadership develop resistance tactics that ultimately become lessons for such leadership: "A king in the clan is supreme but his subjects are more supreme" (48). And this is where Creature as the custodian of Truth is vulnerable. Apart from conventional threats, he also has to confront and try to overcome, domestic and matrimonial recollections especially when he is expected to ransom his wife, Nwi, and children, by denouncing the truth for which he stands. And as he concludes with characteristic stoicism, thereby defining his communal symbolism, "the people can't change their minds

even for a million crowns" (24) even if individuals like the two traitors from Swaart and Mbouhngwi, do so for thirty pieces of silver.

But the characterisation of leadership in the play is not logical with the unfolding of the plot. The contemporary moment of the play's action is in the aftermath of Traourou's fall from power and it is only his shadow that hangs over the action as a significant backdrop for Creature's rich insanity. But the voice of Traourou's ghost (he had been buried abroad) seeks to impose itself on the present, which is inconsistent with historical fact on which the play itself is patterned. On the whole the latter part of the play, especially with the entrance of Voice, weakens the thematic verve by resorting to, and "recounting" the raw material of history rather too closely, especially with a shift in tense-use at this point. It is perhaps the inevitable consequence of such Drama, yet it taxes the poetry of the earlier part of the play into a colloquial medium of blunt, casual fact.

Yet, for all that too, the inconsistency suggests an absurdly amorphous variety of leadership, which is as blindly nonchalant as it lacks a basic definition of itself and vision. For, in *Black Caps and Red Feathers* is conjured a synonymous picture with Butake's Psaul Roi as victims of corrupt and corruptible power, institutionalised and celebrated as the outrageous landmark of political drudgery. Psaul Roi is the supreme Cause while Creature is the predictable Consequence in a dispensation of antithetical sentiments whose common denominator, nevertheless, is the dismal absurdity of the human endeavour to lead with brute force and resistance to being led as such.

The play ends on an apocalyptic note when Creature swoons and we get these "blasts of thunder", significantly suggestive of the moment of

parturition that should usher in "some clansman who can count his ancestors from the beginning of time"; and who will then "lead [a] procession to the ancestral shrine" (49). It echoes a theme that is increasingly dominant in Cameroon Anglophone literature, namely a movement back to the roots to recognise collective self and re-find identity in a moment of spiritual atonement, "wailing at ancestral graves" in the hope that "we might be safe again" (52).

This is the particular achievement of Nkemngong's vision in *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, recommended then as a rallying call for militant introspections into perceptive postures: "... go home," Lunatic, the Narrator-Chorus cautions, ";and cook your herbs/ get colanuts, palmwine, salt/ swines, goats, njieh, nkeng .../ go to Fuandem's shrine/ and in a rite/ weep in the nave till the rocks trembles ..." (52).