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Singing against the State's Guns and Goons: Timothy Wangusa's Poetry and the Quest for Democratic Governance in Uganda

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Abstract

This article provides a close reading of selected poems by Ugandan writer, Timothy Wangusa, to examine his insights on bad governance and to appreciate his stylistic and linguistic richness. These poems are "The Walking Stick," "National Skulls Exhibition," "Africa's New Brood," "The State is My Shepherd," and selected sections from the book-length poem *Anthem for Africa*. I choose a qualitative research approach since my objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation within a particular context, that is to say, the insights on bad governance in post-independence African nation-states, particularly Uganda, as gleaned from the poems listed above. I perform a close reading of the primary texts and document review of the secondary texts. Theme and context analyses are the major methods that guide data analysis. Locating the discussion in Frantz Fanon's theorization of the pitfalls of national consciousness and Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics and that of the aesthetics of vulgarity, the paper highlights Wangusa's penetrating insight into how the rise to power of the military in Africa in general and in Uganda in particular has led to an unfortunate kind of politics—one that valorizes pillage over progress, convenience over constitutionalism, decay over decorum, and death over life.

Keywords: Uganda; bad governance; the military; necropolitics; death; disillusionment

Introduction

Born in 1942, Timothy Wangusa is "one of Uganda's best-known poets" (Nazareth, 1996, p. 459), with six collections of poetry to his name. He taught Literature at Makerere University for over three decades from 1969-2001, before moving to Kumi University, Uganda Christian University, and Bishop Stuart University. He has also served in political offices, including that of Minister of Education (1985), Member of Parliament, Bubulo County, Mbale (1989-1996), and presidential advisor on literary affairs (2001-2017). Although one of Africa's most productive poets and novelists, there is quite little critical engagement with his work to the extent that in the 868-page *Encyclopaedia of African Literature*, the editor, Simon Gikandi, does not find space for an entry on him, thereby forcing Eckhard Breitinger to object: "But if Austin Bukenya with limited creative output is listed, while Timothy Wangusa with an internationally acclaimed novel and several

collections of poetry is not, one can question the criteria employed [to determine who is included in the encyclopedia and who is excluded from it]" (2003, pp. 155-156).

Simon Gikandi observes that the decades following "flag independence" (Okoth, 1993, p. 35) by East African governments are "a period now remembered for the failure of the nationalist project and the emergence of both military and civilian dictatorships" (2007, p. 1). These decades were characterized by something unfortunate: "[T]he barrel of the gun [taking] the place of the ballot box as an arbiter in the way the Africans had to be ruled" (Okoth, 1993, p. 35). Perhaps no country has suffered the terrible effects of a militarized state more than Uganda which saw one government after another deposed through a military coup d'etat as Rose Mbowa explains:

> In the 1971 coup d'etat, Amin ousted Obote while the latter was away at a Commonwealth conference in Singapore. Amin's reign of terror lasted until his overthrow in 1979. After Obote returned to power in rigged elections in 1980 (hence the term Obote II), disappearances and murders continued; Obote was again overthrown in a coup d'etat on 27 January 1985 and General Tito Okello-Lutwa became president. On 25 January 1986, Yoweri Museveni with his guerilla National Resistance Movement toppled him and seized power. (1996, p. 89).

These developments came with a lot of bloodshed and disillusionment, forcing many commentators on the country's affairs to refer to it in depressing terms. Some of the terms referencing bloodshed are captured in the titles of major books on Uganda, for instance *A State of Blood* (a memoir by Henry Kyemba who served as a minister in Idi Amin's government) and *The Floods* (a play by Uganda's most acclaimed playwright, John Ruganda).

It is no wonder that bad governance and militarization loom large in Ugandan literature to the extent that military generals like Idi Amin are declared "the most dominant single factor in Ugandan literature" (Kiyimba, 1998, p. 124). Consequently, much of Ugandan literature is "prominently concerned with terror, especially in the form of institutionalized violence," hence the pervasiveness of state-perpetrated crimes like kidnapping, detaining, torturing, raping, and executions in much of it (Bukenya, 2000, p. 17).

In this article, I provide a close reading of selected poems by Timothy Wangusa to examine his insights on bad governance and militarization and to appreciate his stylistic and linguistic richness. These poems are "The Walking Stick," "National Skulls Exhibition," "Africa's New Brood," "The State is My Shepherd," and selected sections from the book-length poem *Anthem for Africa*.

Research Methodology

The research approach I employ here is qualitative since my major interest is in gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that I am interested in, that is, investigating the relationship between literature and post-independence governance in African nation-states, with selected poems by Timothy Wangusa as a case in point.

I have chosen a case study design which involves "an in-depth examination of a single person or a few people" to "provide an accurate and complete description of the case" (Marczyk, DeMatteo and Festinger, 2005, p. 147). The case in question, as I have already mentioned, is the poet Timothy Wangusa, whose poems on bad governance and the militarization of the state in Uganda/Africa offer a comprehensive understanding of the misuse of power in post-independence contexts.

I employ an interpretivist paradigm focused "primarily on understanding and accounting for the meaning of human experiences and actions" (Fossey et. al., 2002, p. 720). The human experiences and actions here are those relating to governance deficits/challenges in post-independence African states. To understand this problem in close detail, we need to consider the perspectives of the personae that the poet creates, enabling appreciation for "the interpretive processes by which they assign meanings to events, situations, and so forth" (Leavy, 2017, p. 129). In other words, examining their passion and motivation enables the readers to understand what they are up to and what they represent.

I employ close reading, which Nancy Boyles defines as "reading to uncover layers of meaning that lead to deeper comprehension" (p. 90). Barbara Herrnstein Smith similarly describes close reading as "[r]eading individual texts with attention to their linguistic features and rhetorical operations" (2016, p. 57) in order to make observations and reflections "about the style or genre of the text at hand, or about its author, or reflections on the era in which it was written" (2016, p.69-70). The texts in question here are Wangusa's poems that comment on bad governance and the place of the military in African or Ugandan politics, with special focus on the insights that they (the texts) give us on the subject. I supplement close reading with document analysis, which Glenn A. Bowen defines as "a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer- based and Internet- transmitted) material" (2009, p.29). In my case, the materials are the book chapters, journal articles and interviews on Timothy Wangusa or his work. This method enriches the former by providing insights and interpretations that other researchers have gleaned from Wangusa's work, which I in turn draw on to make further analysis.

To analyze the data collected, I identify key themes that emerge from the selected poems to consider what they reveal about the topic at hand—the militarization of the post-independence African nation-state. In doing this, I pay attention to the historical and political contexts shaping the production of these poems.

Theoretical Framework

In "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," Frantz Fanon decries the decadence of the national bourgeoisie as soon as they take over the reins of power from the colonial regime: The army and the police constitute "the pillars of the regime," their strength and power being "proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk" (1968, p. 172). The despotism of the colonial regime morphs into post-independence plundering and massacring, hence Achille Mbembe's contention that in the postcolony there is "violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness" (2001, p. 115). It is no wonder that sooner than later a feeling of disillusionment sets in after independence.

In the poems I analyze in this article, there are several examples of this shameless wrongdoing that Wangusa castigates through different linguistic and stylistic resources, for instance reversal ("The Walking Stick"), biting satire ('The National Skulls Exhibition"), animalization ("Africa's New Brood"), and a mosaic of stylistic devices (*Anthem for Africa*). In some of these poems, particularly the last three, Wangusa dramatizes the blunders and horrors of the military regimes in power with such vividness that the reader cannot help but shudder at how terribly the dreams of post-independence fraternity and prosperity have been dashed to smithereens. Fanon's notion of the pitfalls of national consciousness and Mbembe's idea of the vulgarization of power help me to make sense of the grotesque events that Wangusa sings about in these poems in the context of post-independence betrayal and disillusionment.

The other notion that I invoke in this article, albeit with caution, is that of necropolitics as theorized by Mbembe, that is, the sovereign's power and capacity "to dictate who may live and who must die" (2003, p. 11) and an understanding of "politics as the work of death" (Mbembe, 2003, p.16). Mbembe develops this notion by building on Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics – "the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, race" (Foucault, 2003, p. 202). He also draws on Giorgio Agamben's three-pronged argument:

> 1. The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). 2. The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, zoe and bios. 3. Today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West. (Agamben, 1998, p. 181)

In Wangusa's poems, the necropolitical, as described above, is very clear as there are many horrors he protests, for instance a market woman finding a corpse in the boot of a car as she loads a client's bunch of bananas, or the state extracting economic or political capital from exhibiting skulls of the people who lost their lives in the many wars that have been waged in Uganda. The caution with which I deploy Mbembe's term arises from the fact that his focus is on sophisticated technologies of occupation, domination, and exploitation from slavery to colonialism and apartheid whose aim is the "maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*," with vast populations being "subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (2003, p. 40, author's emphasis). In Wangusa's poems, the necropolitical is deployed at a scale smaller than what Mbembe highlights (the nation in some of the poems, and the African continent in *Anthem for Africa*, "Africa's New Brood," and "National Skulls Exhibition"). However, this does not mean that it is any less tragic or scandalous.

Literature Review

It has been observed by many scholars that Idi Amin's rise to power in Uganda in 1971 paradoxically led to the flourishing of Ugandan literature even as he killed some writers (for instance Byron Kawaddwa) and drove several others into exile (for instance Austin Bukenya, Robert Serumaga, and John Ruganda, to mention but a few). Simon Gikandi (2003, p. 221) writes, "The significance of Amin's era in Uganda lies in the creative impulse it engendered among Ugandans and non-Ugandans alike, leading to almost unprecedented flowering of literature in East Africa, only comparable to Mau Mau literature in the region." As early as 1985, Peter Nazareth observed that Ugandan literature is invested in "warning about and waiting for an Amin, and then protesting about his appearance and the corresponding disappearances his regime occasioned" (1985, p. 9). The latter sees the ghost of Idi Amin haunting Ugandan literature in the sense that the military general prominently features in more or less all the fiction, drama and fiction produced in the country, at least from the 1970s to the 1990s. For his part, Bukenya (2000) sees Amin in all the novels he reads, leaving bloodshed everywhere he walks, while Andrew H. Armstrong sees Moses Isegawa's narrative endeavor in his two novels (already mentioned) as "not only to *record* the chaotic events experienced during the years before and after the fall of Idi Amin, but to *recode*, through the tropes of language (symbol, imagery, and metaphor), the devastating effects of those years on the literary landscape of Uganda" (2009, p. 128, author's emphasis). I see something similar in Wangusa's poetry on bad governance and the military.

There is paucity of critical engagement with Wangusa's work despite the fact he is one of the most gifted Ugandan poets and novelists. There are two full-length journal articles on his novel *Upon this Mountain*, one by Carol Sicherman (1993) and the other by Frederick Hale (1999). The former discusses how the novel's protagonist, Mwambu, unsuccessfully negotiates his way through conflicting cultures (Gishu, British, Christian) and responsibilities (individual and community) as he grows up from childhood to adulthood, if not manhood (depicted in the novel as an elusive gem or project). The latter article astutely reads the novel as "a microcosmic representation of a colonial society's struggle for independence from both the indigenous bonds of its past and the imposed imperial hegemony of its present" (Hale, 1999, p. 96). Unfortunately, these articles say nothing about Wangusa's poetry since their focus is on his fiction.

Published in 2015, Wangusa's second novel, *Betwixt Mountain and Wilderness*, has hardly received critical attention, save for a brief review in *The Weekly Observer* on 28 October 2015, that summarizes the text while explaining the key issues that Wangusa grapples with, for instance the deployment of brutality to determine the outcome of political elections (Kahyana, 2015). The review likewise discusses the depiction of electoral violence in the novel, explaining how Wangusa uses the unfortunate assault on Mwambu—he is attacked by hooded thugs just a day to being nominated for the parliamentary seat of Elgonton South in order to be circumcised (yet he already is)—to comment on the failure of electoral processes in the soon-to-be independent Uganda (Kahyana, 2017). That one of his attackers, Peter Weyelo, takes advantage of Mwambu being critically ill to be nominated for the position of Member of Parliament of Elgonton South, and that he is

appointed Minister of Education after he wins the election, shows how the use of violence is doomed to be the standard way through which people are to access political power in the Uganda soon to be born. I suggest that Wangusa's poems be seen as being in dialogue with the events that take place in *Betwixt*. As with his poetry, the engagement with Wangusa's fiction remains sparse, save for an article here and a dissertation there.

There are two earlier studies on Wangusa's poetry. In a survey of Ugandan poetry spanning 30 years (1965-1995), Ernesto Okello Ogwang observes that "Wangusa's poetry exhibits humor and irony as much as satire, all of which subtly mask and underlie the seriousness of the social commentaries and the concerns with the plight of humanity or for that matter Ugandan social and political setups" (2000, p. 112). Ogwang briefly comments on four of Wangusa's poems in general terms, without specifically focusing on the poet's engagement with the brutality of General Idi Amin's military dictatorship, although *Anthem for Africa*, which is heavily invested in this subject, is one of Wangusa's poetry collections that he mentions in the essay.

Susan Nalugwa Kiguli (2000) spends considerable time discussing Wangusa's poetry, especially "The Taxi Driver on His Death," "The State is My Shepherd," "The Flight," and "Song to Mukokoteni." In "The State is My Shepherd," she sees Wangusa make "a satirical comment on the political instability as well as the failure of the state to look after its subjects," thereby "recreat[ing] a typically Ugandan scene and ably portray[ing] the evil rampant in the Ugandan society mainly caused by incompetent rulers" (2000, p. 123). Unfortunately, she does not look at *Anthem for Africa*, which was published by the time she was writing, and other poems discussed here, which were yet to be published in 2006. I supplement these debates on Wangusa's poetry by performing a rigorous reading of the poems that feature the military, showing the destruction that its personnel are depicted as causing in their nation-states.

Depictions of the Militarized African Nation-state in Selected Poems by Wangusa

I: Metaphor and Inversion in "The Walking-Stick"

The issue of the place of the military in the governance of post-independence Africa is one that Wangusa has grappled with for some time. In "The Walking Stick" (2001), the poet-persona recalls a lecture he attended as a student at Makerere University in 1964, just two years after Uganda's formal or flag independence, in which the professor (the unnamed venerable Ali Mazrui according to the poet's personal communication to me) used the rhetorical device of analogy to equate "organs of Government / To parts of the human frame":

> The executive is the head,
> The legislature is the chest,
> The judicature is the limbs. (2006, p. 16)

One of the students wonders what part of the body the military can be equated to, owing to the ubiquity and apparent power of the armed forces in post-independence states. "Given that the Government is the man," the professor quipped, "The army is his walking stick" (ibid). This analogy sounds harmless if looked at from the perspective of a walking stick being a common prop among elderly people, one associated with frailness as it provides extra steadiness to the person holding it. But there is something deeper that Wangusa is subtly alluding to: the frailty of the post-independence nation-state and therefore the need for a supporting prop for its survival, in this case the army. This is because the walking stick can be used as a weapon in situations where the person holding it is attacked or threatened, say by a stranger or a stray dog. By the professor quipping that the armed forces are the government's walking stick, he is pointing to this potential double function of the seemingly benign tool. The implied meaning—that the government (the "man" in power) takes the army as his personal property ("his walking stick")—is worrying since it points to what became a reality in many parts of post-independence Africa: The army serving the interests of the commander-in-chief (usually the president or

the prime minister), and not of the citizens. This is what I understand the poet-persona to mean when he states thus:

> Come 25th January, 1971,
> Major-General Idi Amin stormed the political stage –
>
> And overnight
> The walking-stick became the man, and
> The man became the walking stick! (2006, p. 16).

The metaphor of a storm used in the above lines is apt since Major-General Idi Amin captured power in a coup d'état (First, 1971) and took the country down a quick tragic path characterized by what Ugandan playwright and poet John Ruganda (1980) referred to as "the floods." The use of inversion, the walking stick becoming the man and the man becoming the walking stick, captures the confusion that characterized Amin's reign as it was difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the government and the army as the two became inseparably one and the same thing. More than 40 years after the fall of Idi Amin's regime, the army continues to play a big role in the affairs of state in a manner that echoes the regrettable Aminian situation of the man becoming the walking stick and the walking stick becoming a man. This is unfortunately the case in present-day Uganda under President Museveni, who has held power since 1986, as Roger Tangri and Andrew M. Mwenda (2010, p. 44) observe:

> The UPDF [Uganda People's Defence Forces] has been run as a de facto personal army of President Museveni to help him hang on to power. Army appointments and promotions are made solely by Museveni. The small Bahima sub-group (20% of the Banyankole ethnic group) have dominated the top echelons of the UPDF. The majority of soldiers and officers in the elite Presidential Guard Brigade (PGB) are also, like Museveni, Bahima from the west of the country. The 12,000-strong PGB comprises the best-trained, best-equipped and best-paid military force in Uganda. It constitutes the president's personalised military machine. Museveni wields strong control over its decision-making structures; his eldest son, Lieutenant Colonel Muhoozi Kainerugaba, is commander of special forces in the PGB. Museveni also keeps it and the UPDF deeply divided so that they are insufficiently coherent to confront him or to overthrow him.

The irony of the above observation is that the UPDF (the Uganda People's Defence Forces) is supposed to be a national army, meant to secure Ugandan borders against external aggressors. The reality, however, is that it sometimes comes off as a private army, meant to entrench personal, ethnic, and nepotistic rule and privilege in a manner that is imperial, hence the term "imperial presidency" used by Joshua B. Rubongoya (2007, p. 189). In this state of affairs, the enemy that the army brutalizes is not an external aggressor, but the citizens who demand that the nation-state be governed in a democratic manner, that is to say, that "the exercise of political authority should be accountable to the people" (Fox and Stoett, 2006, p. 556). Frantz Fanon identifies this partisan use of the army, moreover one whose power is "proportionate to the stagnation in which the rest of the nation is sunk" (1968, p. 172), as one of the pitfalls of national consciousness.

II. The Strange Fruits of Warfare: "National Skulls Exhibition"

In the poem entitled "National Skulls Exhibition," Wangusa sings against the incessant loss of life that Uganda has suffered in different wars it has fought on its territory or in different massacres that have happened there. The poem is in the form of a public announcement:

> A countrywide competitive exhibition
> Of war-time skulls and skeletons
> Shall be mounted on the next anniversary
> Of our permanent party's ascension to power (2006, p. 11).

The motivation behind the exhibition is not to record the tragedies that the country suffered since attaining its flag independence (hence bemoaning the failures of

nationhood), but to promote tourism in a manner that sounds outrightly callous and morbid:

> The prize-winning skulls and skeletons
> Shall constitute a tourist centrepiece
> At Namanve Memorial Holiday Resort,
> While exhibitors with the largest skulls
> Shall qualify to represent the country
> At the All-Africa Festival of Corpses and Bones (2006, pp. 11-12).

The poem employs satire, "a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn" (Baldick, 2001, p. 228). The general failing that the poet attacks is poor governance in post-independence Uganda, a country that its rulers have plunged into war after war, and massacre after massacre as the battlefields that the persona enumerates testify:

> Mukura-Soroti AXIS
> Representing Traitors Roasting Battalion (TRB)
> Luwero-Mpigi-Mukono TRIANGLE
> Representing Bushcraft Resistance Army (BRA)
> Arua-Adjumani-Koboko-Moyo QUADRANGLE
> Representing National Annihilators Front (NAF)
> Kasese-Kilembe-Kichwamba-Kabarole-Bundibujo PENTAGON
> Representing Total Extermination Militia (TEM)
> Kitgum-Gulu-Atiak-Karuma-Apac-Lira HEXAGON
> Representing Lord's Nose-cutting Legion (LNL). (2006, p. 11)

The fictitious names given to the above battlefields allude to particular wars and massacres that have happened in Uganda. The TRB, for instance, alludes to the National Resistance Army's roasting of people it suspected of being anti-government militants in a train wagon in Mukura, eastern Uganda, on 11th July 1989 (Apuuli, 2013, p. 614); the BRA alludes to the 5-year guerrilla war that Yoweri Kaguta Museveni's National Resistance Army waged in Luwero district, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people (Kasfir, 2005, pp. 271-272); NAF alludes to the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) led by Juma Oris (Prunier, 2004, pp. 359-363), the Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF) led by Moses Ali and the Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II) led by Ali Bamuze (Day, 2011, p. 440); TEM alludes to the Allied Democratic Forces (Titeca & Vlassenroot, 2012, p. 154), while LNL alludes to the Lord's Resistance Army led by Joseph Kony (Doom and Vlassenroot, 1999, p. 5).

In the poem, it is suggested that the notion of "the people" is misused as seen in the use of the phrase "the People's Main Museum of Death" (2006, p. 11), which does not sound uplifting in the way a related one, say, the People's Main University or the People's Main Hospital is. It is worth noting that the word "main" suggests that there are other museums of death, although not as big as the one to be constructed, implying that the deaths that the nation has suffered are numerous.

Despite this, however, the persona sounds matter-of-fact in tone, thereby registering a certain indifference to the mass loss of life, if not outright callousness, arising out of sheer opportunism: The determination to turn a people's tragedies into a profit-making business enterprise, that is to say, constructing a tourist-attracting and hosting centrepiece in the form of a holiday resort. The indifference and callousness of the elites are reinforced by the fact that the exhibition is to be a competitive one, with the exhibitors with the largest (and therefore the best) skulls winning a place at "the All-Africa Festival of Corpses and Bones" (2006, p. 11). What is implied here is that the exhibitors are unbothered by the mass(ive) loss of lives of loved ones and the grief that comes with this; what matters is being in possession of the kind of skull that can win a prize and therefore guarantee one an air ticket—complete with per diem and travel allowances—to the morbid continental festival. The wars that produced the mass deaths and graves that make the exhibition possible do not serve the purpose of moving the people in power to resolve that never again should human life be lost in such mind-boggling numbers; to the contrary, the wars seem to be construed as an opportunity to make money by marketing the country, and the entire

continent of Africa, as a theatre of death. Rather than be ashamed of the violent history of the continent to the extent that there are thousands of unburied people who died in wars, the leaders exploit this past for selfish reasons, without thinking about the pain that the survivors of these wars (the wounded, the orphaned, the widowed, and so forth) suffer. The poet uses satire to great effect as he registers his bitterness at the people in power who practice necropolitics: Not only do they cheapen life, but they also differentiate between those whose lives are expendable (e.g. the peasants) and those who are elevated to a position of legitimate 'life' and high status (the politicians and the army personnel in charge).

The poem questions how triumphant militant groups like Yoweri Kaguta Museveni's the National Resistance Army (NRA) inscribe themselves in the narrative of the nation as liberators and heroes by making it clear that the bloodshed through which they wade as they rise to power does not mean much to them. Notice that the poet attributes the massacres that took place in the Luwero Triangle to the Bushcraft Resistance Army (BRA), a thinly veiled reference to the National Resistance Army (NRA), in order to challenge President Museveni's and his party, the National Resistance Movement's oft-rehearsed narrative that it was Milton Obote and his government that were responsible for the massacres in this region in the five years of the guerrilla war. In his first book, *What Is Africa's Problem*?, Museveni writes:

> If you go to a place like Luwero now, you will see skeletons and skulls upon skulls of human beings. In one place called Kiboga, where there was a unit of the Obote/Okello Army stationed at a saza headquarters compound, we collected 237 skulls from there alone. These people were in their trenches, eating and drinking with 237 skulls of their victims around them. We had the same experience in Bukomero, Lwamata, Kaya's farm, Nakaseke, Mityana, Masulita, and Kakiri. All these places are in the Luwero Triangle. If you saw these skulls, you would understand why we fought Obote, Okello, and the rest. (2000, pp. 10-11)

The last sentence of the above quotation squarely places the responsibility of the massacres that produced the skulls on Milton Obote, yet Obote's regime was the legitimate one that Museveni's army fought to overthrow although it was later toppled in a coup d'état staged by General Tito Okello.1 In the poem, Wangusa invites the reader to challenge this narrative by placing the responsibility for the massacres at the doorstep of the resistance army. While this might be the first time a Ugandan creative writer does this, it is not the case in the areas of Ugandan politics and scholarship. In politics, Museveni's former NRA fighters who later joined the opposition (for instance Major Rubaramira Ruranga, Major John Kazoora and Colonel Kizza Besigye) have implicated him in some of the massacres that took place in Luwero (Adyanga, 2015, p. 396). Ugandan academic Onek C. Adyanga accuses Museveni of using the Luwero Triangle human remains for selfish, propagandistic reasons to demonize opponents of his tyrannical hold on power and to harness an "ethnic-centred NRA/M regime legitimacy" (2015, p. 400).

Another subtle critique of President Museveni that Wangusa makes in the poem is his long stay in power. This is captured in the line "our permanent party's ascension to power (2006, p. 11). The word 'permanent' reveals that it is not Museveni's desire to leave power. Indeed, he has been in power for 37 years now, through a combination of means that Roger Tangri and Andrew M. Mwenda identify as "presidential manipulations, election rigging, and coercive measures" (2010, p. 31). One of the manipulations has involved President Museveni allegedly bribing the Parliament to drop the term limit from the 1995 Constitution (Tangri, 2006, pp. 185-186) and later having the special forces to storm the Parliament in order to ensure the age limit that barred him from standing for President once he turns 75 years of age was dropped (Wilkins, Vokes & Khisa, 2021, pp.

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1 Editors' note: The election that ushered in Obote's final term remains a source of sustained controversy. It was endorsed by the "Commonwealth Observer Group" under complicated circumstances, including malfeasance, "electoral manipulation", and "greater [state] resources," employed by Obote's party, the Uganda People's Congress. However, the ultimate factor contributing to their victory was the British-modeled first-past-the-post electoral system (Willis et al. 2017). That said, the writing of this history has been overdetermined by extremely weak, ideologically slanted, reporting by US newspapers and NGOs clearly aligned with US interests. Within Uganda the Museveni government has forcibly prevented any thorough examination of the years preceding and following the war leading to his ascension. For these reasons, we support the author's choice of words here. Moreover, as the following passages reveal, the purpose is not to advance his own position, but to contextualize that intimated by Wangusa. See: Willis, J., Lynch, G., & Cheeseman, N. (2017). "A valid electoral exercise"? Uganda's 1980 Elections and the Observers' Dilemma. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 59(1), 211–238. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26293565.

636-637). To Moses Khisa, the "repeated assaults on the constitution" attest to "Museveni's determination to hold onto power at all costs" (2019, p. 353).

Wangusa's choice of Namanve as the place where the Holiday Resort will be constructed is apt for during Idi Amin's regime, this place was a dense forest which state operatives used to dump those people that they extrajudicially killed on discovering that the bodies dumped into rivers, swamps or water reservoirs "floated to the surface, clogging dams and attracting vultures" (Decker, 2013, p. 134). In other words, the use of the forest as the dumping ground for the dead was one of those characteristics that Mbembe identifies with the postcolony: "a distinctive style of political improvisation [and] a tendency to excess and lack of proportion" (2001, p. 102). But there is something else that the reference to Namanve reveals: Under Museveni's regime, the forest is no more as it has been cut down to make way for an industrial park. Given the role of this forest in providing rain, a role it can no longer perform since it is no more, we see the death of Ugandan forests that Museveni has presided over—a death that saw him push his way to give Mabira Central Forest Reserve to the Mehta group's Sugar Corporation of Uganda Ltd (SCOUL) for sugarcane planting (Child, 2009, p. 241; Médard & Golaz, 2013, p. 560; Hönig, 2014, pp. 55-57). So, while there were physical and political skulls and skeletons in Amin's regime, there are environmental ones as well in Museveni's.

III. When the Hero Metamorphizes into the Monster He Slayed: *Anthem for Africa*

As the title suggests, *Anthem for Africa* is continental in scope: The singer-narrator, Namwenya, straddles different parts of the continent to "recount in rhythmic lines / The shape and pattern of those times, / The people's dreams and the ruler's deeds," well aware of the dangers that this could bring him since "in the midst of popular storms / Poets have perished for bitter poetics / As politic men for diabolic policies" (2021, p. 26). The bulk of the collection contains laments for what man, "the dreadful afterthought of God" (2021, p. 37), has done to fellow humans in the different epochs of the continent, including during colonialism.

The book is complex in structure; its singer-narrator moves about in a zigzag manner, starting with Part One (After the End), then moving to Part Two (The End), Part Three (Flashback I), Part Four (Before the End), Part Five (Flashback II), Part Six (Between the End and the Beginning), Part Seven (Before the Beginning), Part Eight (Flashback III), and ending with Part Nine (The Beginning). This zigzag appropriately captures the turbulence that the fictitious country where the action is set, Afrolandia, has experienced; a turbulence that would render a chronological rendering of events inauthentic. I therefore suggest that the difficulties that the reader meets in making sense of the structure of the book, for instance determining what constitutes the beginning or the end, or deciphering the meaning of a title such as "between the end and the beginning," mirror the messiness of the experiences that the country has gone through. It is as if it does not matter what constitutes the beginning, the middle, or the end in the affairs of state of Afrolandia, since the common denominator in all these stages is betrayal, hence the singer-narrator's conclusion that in this country,

> there is nothing new happens under the sky,
> There is no new wisdom or new foolishness;
> Ever bloody deed enacts its ancient original,
> And every saviour becomes the monster he killed. (2021, p. 24)

It is no wonder that Namwenya asserts that "the horror that once came and went / shall soon come to pass again!" (2021, p. 27), to suggest that Afrolandia is cursed, since its fate seems foredoomed. I find this position pessimistic and problematic since it depicts the country as being ill-fated. It is as if it does not matter how much it tries to put its affairs of state in order; every attempt will result in failure. But if we remember that Africa was "once the one and only world, / When Phoenicia was yet a dream, / And Greece and Rome not yet conceived" (2021, p. 12), it is conceivable to hope that one day, this continent will return to its feet and register greatness similar to what it once achieved.

One of the tragedies that the book depicts is the wanton killing of people as captured in the poem "Horror in a Boot." A boss's former cook, now a soldier, exercises vengeance on his boss for sacking him: He "disconnect[s] the head from the feet," and dumps his lifeless body in the book of his state-provided car. When a market woman sees the body, she exclaims, "Katonda wange!"—Luganda for "O my God!" (2021, p. 70). Tongue-tied,

> She screamed
> Struck senseless
> Hands crazily
> Flying up and down
> And her whole body
> Staggering backwards
> She gasped
> Tottering away. (2021, pp. 70-71)

The woman's response above points to the shock of seeing a corpse in the boot of the soldier's car. It impacts her language: It disintegrates into a phrase (O my God) and then disappears completely since she is struck dumb and senseless. This calls forth Elaine Scarry's work that "intense pain is language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (1985, p. 35). But it is not just her language that suffers: She loses her balance as well, which is seen in the way she staggers backwards and totters away from the horrific scene. A crowd gathers to see what she is fleeing from, and on seeing the corpse, it gets "[t]oo shocked to believe and "[d]ementedly howl[s]" a cry (Wangusa, 2021, p. 71). This howling is in line with Alex Pillen's observation that "carnage leads to an inarticulate state of cries" for dehumanization is an "injury to mankind's linguistic accomplishments" (2016, p. 96).

This does not only apply to the characters in literary works, but to the authors as well: They find it difficult to get an appropriate idiom to capture horror. When Carol Sicherman asked Wangusa whether there was "a need to invent new literary forms to express the chaos and horror" that Uganda suffered between 1971 and 1985, he replied:

> In writing *Anthem for Africa*, I have toyed with old forms. Should it be a stage play? Should it be a novel? I tried my hand at both of these. Eventually I decided I wanted to do this one in the form of verse [...] I tried regular verse, so-called free verse, dramatic verse—there are two poems in which I do that. There is a poem in which I describe a corpse being discovered in the boot [trunk] of somebody's car, and the whole market is thrown into disarray; everybody runs away from this thing, this object. The only way I could do that was to write lines staggered on the pages. Maybe there are other forms, maybe even new words, maybe forms involving an interplay of the languages of Uganda, maybe a work in which many languages may be part of the work. Maybe we need an idiom that has yet to be discovered, maybe a work without words. I cannot specifically say what form one should be trying. (Sicherman, 1992, p. 31)

In other words, while horror destroys language, it paradoxically sets into motion the search for creative, innovative ways that can aptly or effectively represent it. In the area of Ugandan drama, the playwright Robert Serumaga experimented with different forms in commenting on Ugandan politics during Obote's and Amin's regimes, including a wordless drama, *Amayirikiti* (1974), in which "[t]he only character that rises to speak out is the dumb coffin-maker, symbolizing people's speech suppressed out of fear of death" (Mobowa, 1996, p. 92). Wangusa is doing something similar in this poem: He uses short lines, among other strategies, to register the personae's shock upon seeing the horror depicted in the poem.

III. Another Change of Guard: From Africa's New Breed to "Africa's New Brood"

"Africa's New Brood" is perhaps Wangusa's angriest poem in which he directly addresses several African rulers and warlords, castigating them for unleashing immense bloodshed and misery, and their betrayal of the lofty ideals they once stood for. Like Okot p'Bitek's

Song of Lawino, the poem is structured as a lament in which the persona sheds tears for the leaders he mentions, once called Africa's "New Breed" but who have converted themselves into Africa's New Brood. Wangusa invests in alliteration to emphasize the similarity between the names of the rulers and the names of the cities that he castigates in each verse of his lament. For instance, he singles out "Kaguta, Kagame and Kabila," who have turned their respective abodes, "Kampala, Kigali and Kinshasa" into "cities of Africa's torrid and turbulent zone" (2006, p. 1), and then moves to other pairs of rulers at whose hands the citizens have suffered or places where similar tragedies have happened: Sankoh and Savimbi, Adis Ababa and Asmara, and Monrovia and Mogadishu, to mention but a few. The use of alliteration serves to underline the similarity in the state of events in the countries whose cities are named (which themselves represent their respective countries) as well as the similarity in the treacherous nature of the leaders, whom the poet collectively calls Africa's new brood—an animal image that underlines their brutality and inhumanity as I explain in a moment.

The poem is built on a reversal, that is to say, Africa's new breed of leaders converting itself into Africa's new brood. At work here is the use of allusion: When Kaguta, Kagame, Zenawi and Afwerki took power, they were "held in high esteem by Western intellectuals, media, and governmental and intelligence circles, and in particular by Bill Clinton, the U.S. president in power through most of the 1990" as presenting "a stark contrast to the bigman syndrome that had characterized much of the mode of leadership that African countries experienced from the early postcolonial period," thanks to their new "style of leadership, and the radical character of the reforms they envisaged for the transformation of the manner of 'doing politics' in their individual countries" (Oloka-Onyango, 2004, p. 31). Unfortunately, this is no more, since these leaders (the surviving ones) have become a brood—"a family of birds or other young animals produced at one hatching or birth" (Stevenson, 2010). By animalizing these leaders, the poet underlines their brutality and inhumanity as well as mobilizing and authorizing dissent against them in a manner similar to what Syned Mthatiwa sees in the animal imagery of Jack Mapanje targeting Dr Kamuzu Banda's dictatorship: Suggesting that "since they have generated into irrational animals, they can no longer be trusted as leaders and should be replaced" (2012, p. p. 99). For a person's response to a dangerous animal prowling about is to fight it in self-defense.

Wangusa's anger is captured in the directness with which he addresses the targets of his lament and critique in a manner similar to what Sule Egya discerns in Nigerian poetry of the 1980s to 2000s: a tendency for the poets to be "direct and confrontational, and hurl diatribes at the dictators, often referencing their real names, such as the eponymous 'Abacha' by Abdullahi Ismaila or the title of Idris Amali's volume, *General without Wars*" (2011, p. 61). After Wangusa's persona explains the reasons as to why he sheds tears for each of the rulers or rebel leaders that he mentions, he bravely castigates them: "But now shame on you all – / Brood that was lately / Africa's new breed (2006, p. 4). It is as if he has given up on them, hence the tears he sheds for their moral and ethical death, since they have betrayed the ideals that they once stood for—ideals that won them international acclaim. Nothing sums up this betrayal better than President Museveni's grip on power since 1986; a Museveni who once said that "the problems of Africa and Uganda in particular are caused by leaders who overstay in power, which breeds impunity, corruption and promotes patronage" (Nogara, 2009, p. 7). This is the Museveni who has since abandoned the nationalist project to the extent that he sees nothing wrong with appointing his relatives to critical positions in his government, for instance his biological son (who is a full General in the national army and the Commander of the Defence Forces), his brother (who is the chief coordinator of the wealth creation program and a presidential advisor on military affairs), and his wife (who is serving as the minister for education and sports).

Conclusion

In one of his celebrated poems, "The State is My Shepherd," Wangusa depicts a naïve public servant who uncritically considers the state his shepherd, in whose care he entrusts his life/future because it leads him "into realms of political tranquility [and] paths of loans and pensions," besides its "guns and pangas comfort[ing]" him to the extent that he does

not fear walking through a notorious slum, Kivulu, where kondos (armed robbers) are active (Wangusa, 1993, p. 18). The success of this poem lies in its effective use of parody and satire. By imitating the subject and style of King David's Psalm 23, Wangusa shows the persona's equivalence of his state with King David's Yahweh as mistaken, if not foolhardy, for while the latter is omnipotent and all-good (at least according to Judeo-Christian teaching), the former is fragile and capable of destroying the very people it is supposed to protect, hence its ownership of weapons of bloodshed like guns and pangas.

The satire lies in the persona's naivety and gullibility: He has internalized the state's styling of itself as the guarantor of peace and prosperity, even when it is clear this is not the case. This is because the presence of the slum, Kivulu, symbolizes the inequalities between the rich and the poor in this state and the violence that this inequality portends, hence the presence of armed robbers that roam the night. The poem therefore dramatizes the tension between what the state claims to be (the protector of people's lives, property, and freedoms) and what it can actually turn out to be (the destroyer of its own people, their property and freedoms). The poems above depict more or less the same tension: The person heralded as a liberator today no sooner becomes a tyrant who brutalizes and kills the very people that he claimed he had come to power to protect. In other words, the ghost of Idi Amin haunts both the poems discussed here, and the hopes and aspirations of the personae whose lives they dramatize. The leaders who take office sooner than later lose sight of the vision that guided them thereby impoverishing their nations through plunder and ineptitude. They exercise power in such a way that they turn the citizens into docile men and women who will not protest the damnation or wretchedness they are reduced to (Fanon), and since they have the power to determine who lives and who dies, they kill off those who challenge the status quo (Mbembe).

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