



Grotesque manifestations of power in *Dance of the vampires* by Bole Butake

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This article is an analysis of *Dance of the vampires* by Cameroonian playwright, Bole Butake. It looked at how the play projects itself as a narrative of the nation and, conversely, how the nation in the play functions as a narrative text on which ideologies of power are inscribed or expunged. Butake's vision of the nation encompasses various discourses of power that are explored against the backdrop of the grotesque in systems of domination, as enunciated by Achille Mbembe. This article argues that whilst the play hinges on the ambivalence in power relations, the writer's vision is un-ambivalent in its utopian conception of political change and its gendered representation of women within nationalist discourses.

Groteske manifestasies van mag in *Dance of the vampires* deur Bole Butake. Hierdie artikel is 'n ontleding van *Dance of the vampires* deur die Kameroense dramaturg, Bole Butake. Dit het die maniere ondersoek waarop die toneelstuk homself projekteer as verhaal van 'n nasie en omgekeerd, hoe die nasie in die toneelstuk as 'n narratiewe teks funksioneer waarin magsideologieë ingeskryf of uitgewis word. Butake se visie van die nasie omvat verskeie magsdiskoerse wat ondersoek word teen die agtergrond van die groteske in sisteme van dominasie, soos uiteengesit deur Achille Mbembe. Die artikel voer aan dat, terwyl die stuk van die ambivalensie in magsverhoudings afhang, die skrywer se visie onambivalent is in sy Utopiese konsep van politieke verandering en sy geslagtelike uitbeelding van vrouens binne nasionalistiese diskoerse.

Introduction

The performance of power is a key thematic construct in postcolonial African literature. Various studies have shown that power relations are complex and heterogeneous, precisely because humans are complex beings who negotiate a multiplicity of identities. Michel Foucault (2004:29) conceives power as something that is exercised through networks, and individuals in these networks are in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. Where power exists, notions of dominance cannot be eliminated. In the context of state power, the performance of dominance often takes on grotesque dimensions. Mysticism, fetishism and superstition combine to create an epistemology of fear. Whilst mysticism promotes the idea of a ruler's durability, invincibility and unchallengeability, the invocation of superstitious fears is often a 'powerful weapon of terror' (Anyangwe 2008:161). Power then becomes concretised as a cult – an oppressive machinery marked by arbitrariness, monstrosity and brutality.

In 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', Achille Mbembe (1992:3) argues that the obscene and the grotesque are 'intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed'. Using Cameroon as the focus of his analysis, Mbembe demonstrates the varied constructions of obscene and grotesque images in the performance of state power. In his view, obscenity is used as a 'means of erecting, ratifying or deconstructing particular regimes of violence and domination' (Mbembe 1992:5). How so? The natural processes of eating and defecating are turned into metaphors for satirising greedy self-enrichment and the propensity for wastefulness. Such images of obscenity strip the state of its façade and expose its banality to ridicule.

Still speaking with reference to Cameroon, Mbembe (1992) shows that the linguistic register of the totalitarian state is that of signs and symbols relating to human physiology – the belly, the mouth, the phallus – making the body the central theatrical spectacle on the postcolonial stage. In addition, the executive arm of the state is violence, which, paradoxically, creates both submissive and subversive subjects. Mbembe (1992) indicates that the performance of power in a postcolonial context has several manifestations:

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1. the zombification of both the dominant and the dominated
2. the disempowerment of the rulers and the ruled
3. the dressing up of extravagance and frivolity in the mantles of nobility and majesty
4. the leadership's pursuit of a lecherous lifestyle through festivities and celebrations
5. its propensity for vulgarity and obscenity
6. its maintenance of an active sexuality that subordinates women to its pleasures
7. its use of public ceremonies to consolidate its power.

These various manifestations point to an ambivalence that is intrinsic to power. The Cameroonian playwright, Bole Butake, has sought to engage with the nuances of power through various plays that challenge totalitarian politics and its bizarre dispensation of power. Butake started his writing career as a short story writer and moved into drama in 1982 when he converted one of his short stories into a drama script known as *Betrothal without libation* (Butake 2005:5). Between 1982 and 2005 he had written, performed and published a total of nine plays, some of which have become part of the canonical writings of Anglophone Cameroon. To date, he has continued to influence scholarly engagement in Cameroon through his drama and film. The play chosen for analysis in this article is *Dance of the vampires*, which is one of Butake's plays that has not been widely subjected to in-depth critical study. Whilst the plays *Lake God*, *The survivors* and *And palm wine will flow* have received considerable attention from scholars with diverse interests (Alembong 1993; Nyamndi 1996; Jick & Ngeh 2002; Ngwang 2004; Odhiambo 2009), *Dance of the vampires* has remained fairly marginal in the scholarship. Few critiques have delved into its representation of hegemonic power in a postcolonial context. Mforbe Pepetual Chiangong has attempted a detailed study of the text, but her analysis is limited to a semiological interpretation of various theatrical elements – masks, costume and lighting – that Butake employs to create a world of fantasy (Chiangong 2011). By pursuing a close reading of the text, I intend to show its specific contribution to postcolonial discourses on power and domination.

This contribution is particularly in terms of how *Dance of the vampires* projects itself as a narrative of the nation and, conversely, how the nation in the play functions as a narrative text on which ideologies of power are inscribed or expunged. In *Nation and narration* (1990:1), Homi Bhabha speaks of 'a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it'. This assertion implies that, whether in the imaginary or real world, ambivalence characterises the performance of power as a national project. What then is Butake's idea of the nation and how does he construct or deconstruct ideologies of power within this imagined nation? This article explores discourses of power in Butake's narration of the nation and argues that the playwright's representation of an African kleptocracy exemplifies and reinforces notions of power as complex, ambivalent and intoxicating. Mbembe's theorisation of the obscene and the grotesque in state politics is helpful in understanding postcolonial encounters between

rulers and their subjects. His analysis of the discursive relations between those who wield power and those over whom power is wielded, provides a valid framework for the analysis of power politics in *Dance of the vampires*. Before delving into the analysis, however, it is important to provide some background of the play.

Background of the play

Dance of the vampires was first written and performed in 1996, but was only published in 1999 as part of the collection *Lake God and other plays*. Although Butake had written over five plays by this time, none of them existed in published form. In 1996, however, a performance of one of his other plays, *Shoes and four men in arms*, at the Bamenda Congress Hall impressed Thomas Búrge, the then director of Helvetas Cameroon, so much that he made a grant available that enabled Butake to consolidate his drama into an anthology that was eventually released in 1999 (Butake 1999a:3). The anthology contains six plays that formed the core of Butake's dramatic oeuvre at the time of publication: *The rape of Michelle* (1984), *Lake God* (1986), *The survivors* (1989), *And palm wine will flow* (1990), *Shoes and four men in arms* (1992) and *Dance of the vampires* (1996).¹

Dance of the vampires first appeared at a time when public outcries against the government and the ruling party in Cameroon, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), were at their highest. The political climate of the 1990s was one of turbulence and instability. There was gross discontent with the single-party state of President Paul Biya. Clamours for the introduction of multi-party democracy intensified until the Social Democratic Front (SDF) was launched in May 1990. Still, the country continued to be rocked by mass demonstrations that echoed the call for a national conference to re-assess Cameroon's political path. Election fraud in 1992, which re-established Paul Biya as President, only helped to fuel opposition to the government.

Though a pluralist party system had been a welcome change, linguistic and ideological differences continued to threaten the unity of Cameroon as a nation (Konings & Nyamnjoh 2003). English-speaking Cameroonians mobilised themselves into a lobbying body and came up with two documents: *The Buea Declaration of 1993* and *The Bamenda Proclamation of 1994*. In these two documents, the militants 'called on the ruling government to address the question of the continuous marginalisation of Anglophones in Cameroon' (Ambe 2007:162). By 1995 the leaders of the lobbying body, now operating as the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC), had the regaining of autonomy for the former Southern Cameroons from The Republic as their ultimate mission. One can then see clearly that by the time Butake launched his play *Dance of the vampires* in 1996, the political atmosphere was conducive for the reception of a work that addressed the nuances of power politics in Cameroon.

Through the literary, Butake exposes the violence of hegemonic power and introduces the possibility of an

¹Although *Betrothal without libation* was Butake's first play written in 1982, it was not part of this collection and was only published in 2005.



alternative form of government that combines military efficacy and people power. This is a utopian vision that would have been heartily embraced by audiences at the time this play was first launched. Christopher Odhiambo (2009:159) argues that 'in Butake's dramatic imaginary, the project of the nation and nation-ness are highly romanticized' and he bases his argument on the two plays *Betrothal without libation* and *Family saga*. Interestingly, this romanticised vision of the nation resonates in *Dance of the vampires* and is encapsulated in the military's extermination of the tyrannical leadership of Psaul Roi. Through military intervention, Butake seems to be involved in a project of expediting the toppling of exploitative and oppressive governments. To provide a rationale for the soldier's actions in the play, the playwright resorts to the gothic mode through which he constructs tyranny as a grotesque manifestation of a ruler's conscious defiance of limitations on his power. Tyranny therefore becomes an inscription on the nation that needs to be expunged for the dream of nation-ness to be realised.

Discourses of power in *Dance of the vampires*

In his article referred to earlier, Mbembe speaks of an 'intimate tyranny' that is reaffirmed by a set of rituals that are intimate in nature. By intimate he refers to the degree of their interconnectedness, which effectively makes them a 'unitary system of ensnarement'. This intimate tyranny, like vulgarity, is a hallmark of state politics in the postcolony. It becomes a system that is cemented through the subjects' internalisation of oppression to the point where they 'reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life' (Mbembe 1992:25). Once cemented, tyranny transforms itself into a cult where rulers manipulate power and the ruled vacillate between powerlessness and power usurpation. It is this kind of chaotic order that Butake depicts in *Dance of the vampires* and he does this effectively by resorting to the gothic mode.

Gothic literature has to do with representations of the supernatural, fantastical, monstrous, uncanny, unfamiliar, ghostly, mysterious, hideous, bizarre and haunted (Danow 1995; Hurley 2007; Punter 2007). It is a literary mode that can be found in many literatures of the world. Gerry Turcotte (2005) indicates that the gothic mode has been a part of Australian literary expression since colonial times. In Russian literature, Vsevolod Meyerhold was one of the most outstanding playwrights whose production of theatre of the grotesque constituted a 'conceptual consistency' (Symons 1973:66). Writers resort to the gothic as 'a vehicle for ideas about psychological evil – evil not as a force exterior to man, but as a distortion, a warping of his mind' (MacAndrew 1979:5). In *Dance of the vampires*, however, Butake employs the gothic to engage with evil – not just as a psychological problem that affects the ruling monarch, but also as a disease that gradually infects the ruling class and permeates the ranks of the masses to the point where neither the rulers nor the ruled can be seen as guiltless.

In *Dance of the vampires*, Butake uses images of the grotesque to enhance the epistemology of authoritarianism. The play is peopled by vampires, wizards and goblins. It is replete with other grotesque decorations and paraphernalia, such as the cries of owls and bats, which heighten the atmosphere of eeriness.² From the opening scene one has a feeling of being transported into a world of the magical – a world reminiscent of that in Ben Okri's *The famished road* (1992). The howling laughter of persons unseen, the masked figures performing a cult dance, the struggle for dominance between the forces of good and evil and the eerie voice celebrating the dance of the vampires all contribute to ground the play within the gothic mode. This early introduction of grotesque images fittingly foreshadows the monstrosity of Psaul Roi's leadership, which emerges later on in the play when the monarch commands the army to shoot down citizens whom he perceives as disrespectful to his authority because they dare to question his leadership style. It also situates the play within a gothic mode that defines power as negative, destructive and insidious.

What then is the significance of the gothic grotesque in Butake's play? I argue that it enables the writer to project tyranny as unnatural, unnecessary and, perhaps more significantly, incompatible with nationalist efforts to rid Cameroon of imperialist domination. Psaul Roi is cast as a gothic villain – modelled after the Dracula character in 19th century English literature. Like the Dracula that wields immense power over everyone and everything surrounding him and who is clearly a creature of supernatural evil (Senf 1988:31–32), Psaul Roi usurps absolute power from the vampire cult and plunges his kingdom into a bloodbath. He preys on humans and, though we do not see him literally drinking the blood of his victims, there is a suggestion that he derives his power from the people's blood. This comes through during the meeting of the vampire cult when he insists that two thousand souls be sacrificed in order for him to be initiated. The tone of indifference with which he pronounces the price of his initiation indicates that he has lost all sense of humaneness. In this setting, he is no longer a human being for he has no conscience. The play thus suggests that the performance of power often takes on grotesque dimensions in which bloodshed, human sacrifice and violence dominate the postcolonial stage. This assertion is given credibility by the specific setting Butake chooses for the meeting of the vampires – where Psaul Roi is present to the ignorance of the vampire members. The following stage direction is quite informative:

Darkness accompanied by eerie sounds of night birds. Orchestra music of Kwifon and Lum with shrieking Dikang and howling Nkow. Sound sustained as lights are turned on revealing a completely masked figure in red, his back to the audience, in the middle of a white circle with black candle alight in left hand. In his right hand a staff of office dominated by human skull. As music fades gradually four other completely masked figures in red enter walking backwards. Each has a red candle which is lit from that of the figure in the middle of the circle in one of the four cardinal points (Butake 1999:154).

2. In many societies in Cameroon, the owl is seen as a bird of bad omen. Its appearance and concomitant eerie cry is believed to announce impending tragedy. Likewise, when a bat comes out during the day, it is interpreted as a sign of bad luck.



This stage direction unveils what McEvoy (2007:216) describes as the ‘uncanny nature of theatricality itself’ for technology, in terms of lighting and stage machinery, is used in this scene to create credible sounds that add to the supernatural effect, transporting the reader or audience to the world of the magical. The music itself is a premonition of an impending horror, as the Dikang is described as ‘shrieking’ and the Nkwo as ‘howling’. The writer’s choice of costume for the vampires is quite significant, as red is a colour associated with death by its invocation of the image of blood (Chiangong 2011:130). The presence of masked figures, red candles and human skulls also foreshadow death. Darkness, night and the colour black all create apprehension for the evil that is about to dominate this imaginary world. Butake effectively employs several theatrical ornaments, including costume, sound and lighting, to project Psaul Roi as a tyrant that deserves to be eliminated.

By contrast, the army general Nformi is portrayed as the hero of the nation. In the final scene of the play he becomes Butake’s executor of justice. He commands the expulsion of Albino (who represents Western imperialists) and his fellow countrymen from the land and instructs the soldiers to arrest Psaul Roi and his chief collaborator, Song. The latter are put in a cage and taken to the marketplace where their ‘monstrosities shall be exposed to the wrath and glowing vengeance of the people they were supposed to serve’ (Butake 1999b:173). Their ultimate punishment is that ‘they will spend the rest of their days counting their guilt on the faces of their victims, and so measure the consequences of the macabre dance of the vampires’ (Butake 1999b:173). Nformi thus prescribes psychological torture for Psaul Roi and Song – a sentence that is ambivalent as it could be seen both as a form of punishment and as a means of rehabilitation. One notes a succinct irony here wherein Nformi, the ‘heroic saviour’ of the nation, condemns the violence of the state, but employs subtle forms of torture in executing justice against perpetrators of violence. By subjecting Psaul Roi to an endless confrontation with the victims of his brutality, Butake turns the tables of power, thus reinforcing Foucault’s notion referred to earlier on that people submit to power as much as they exercise it.

A major ambivalence in *Dance of the vampires* is in terms of how state power is regulated as protection against tyrannical domination. The play seems to suggest that power is subject to regulation, whether people desire that regulation or not. Again, Butake posits this notion through the gothic world of the vampire cult. The vampire cult, the play tells us, is the body that maintains a balance of power between the king and the council of elders. It regulates the king’s activities and ensures that no single family stays in power for longer than custom allows. As the ruling monarch, however, Psaul Roi is not thrilled by the prospect of leaving office. He is so determined to have absolute power that he defies the cult by gaining access into its ranks. His sudden presence in their meeting, in the form of a masked figure surrounded by grotesque objects, denotes a destabilisation of the natural

order of the universe. His eventual eviction from power thus becomes a form of divine retribution for his defiance of state law prohibiting him from the vampire cult. Though the play seems to be influenced by the theory of the divine rights of the king evident in Shakespearean drama, it demonstrates (perhaps as a criticism of the theory) that even divinity needs to be called to order if it works against the equilibrium of the cosmos and the preservation of the human race.

Interestingly, though, it appears that the power of the vampire cult in protecting this imaginary nation is quite limited. Psaul Roi gains access into its assembly by bribing and threatening Song, its chief priest. If the state’s regulatory body can be so easily permeated through offers of material security, how hard is it then for tyranny to dominate the national polity? One is inclined to read Psaul Roi’s tyrannical leadership as being sanctioned by the very body that claims to regulate power, especially when one considers what transpires after Psaul Roi has been initiated into the vampire cult. The following extract highlights a major flaw of the vampire members:

Centre: A vampire monarch assumes the role of chief vampire. We are undone.

Psaul Roi: What is the use of being a monarch without absolute power?

South: Chambaiy, I want my share of the booty before we proceed. There is nothing left to protect in this land.

East: I will also like to own my share. What shall become of the land?

Psaul Roi: After the initiation we shall all go to the palace in procession and I will give you money. That is what you need, not power. (Butake 1999b:155–156)

As shown above, rather than condemn Psaul Roi’s transgression in emphatic terms, the vampires request their share of the country’s wealth. Their attitude reflects what Mbembe (1992:14) describes as the ‘violent pursuit of wrongdoing to the point of shamelessness’. It is clear from the quotation above that corruption has eaten so deep into the hearts of the ruling minority that society’s future welfare is shelved for personal gains in the present. The ‘politics of the belly’ reign indomitably as the social struggles which make up the quest for hegemony and the production of the State bear the hallmarks of the rush for spoils in which all actors – rich and poor – participate in the world of networks (Bayart 2009:235).

Butake shows that banditry and theft have become an intrinsic part of national politics and that it is through this clandestine distribution of wealth that leaders extort electoral support from their subjects. The violence of the postcolonial leader is therefore not to be understood within the context of physical brutality only, but also in the sense of the leader’s shameless distribution of state resources amongst his chief supporters – an act that serves as a conspiracy against the masses as it imposes on them an endemic deprivation. Such tendencies, in Butake’s view, are impediments to the realisation of nation-ness.



Butake's vision of the nation, however, must be made an actuality in the imaginary world of the text, which is why the army is brought in to evict corrupt and corruptible forces and to restore some semblance of order. The play ends with a great deal of optimism with the army taking control of state politics. There is promise of change – a change not only in political structures, but also in the manner in which power is exercised. Nformi's pronouncements in the final scene seem to suggest that henceforth no vampire ruler will be tolerated and that the people will be given the chance to express their views about the government without fear of execution. As in many of his other plays, Butake's vision in this play is informed by Marxist ideals of social justice and the erasure of class boundaries – giving power to the people. Hence the symbolic representation of the marketplace as a space where hierarchies are dissolved to make way for equality and the communal resolution of problems.

As earlier argued, in *Dance of the vampires* the nation functions as a narrative text on which ideologies of power are written or re-written. Butake's nation is a textual inscription of the complexity and ambivalence in relations between the rulers and the ruled. This is revealed in *Dance of the vampires* through unexpected twists in the plot in which the ruled are seen engaging in various ploys to subvert the power of the rulers, as when the soldiers revolt against authority and the masses conspire with the army to disempower the leadership. The masses move beyond verbal protest and embark on a strategic plan to cut down Psaul Roi's power base: 'when they don't want to pay tribute to their monarch they set the markets on fire' (Butake 1999b:160). By burning down the markets, which are the source of Psaul Roi's economic capital, the people gradually erode his power and, in fact, usurp some of that power for their own ends. The play thus dramatises the ambivalence in power by showing that power is never static, fixed or guaranteed. It is within its very nature of fluidity that tyranny thrives. Mbembe (1992) points out that:

The production of burlesque is not specific to [the dominated]. The real inversion takes place when, in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power so as to reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power in its violent quest for grandeur makes vulgarity and wrongdoing its main mode of existence. It is here, within the confines of this intimacy, that the forces of tyranny in black Africa have to be studied. (p. 29)

By this Mbembe implies that both the powerful and the powerless are engaged in the performance of power and this interconnectedness creates multiple avenues for the emergence of tyranny. Mbembe's assertion is corroborated by the following succinct observation made by Bayart (2009):

Contrary to the popular image of the innocent masses, corruption and predatoriness are not found exclusively amongst the powerful. Rather, they are modes of social and political behaviour shared by a plurality of actors on more or less a great scale. (p. 238)

Essentially Butake inscribes on the nation imagined the notion that power relations are complex and exist at a multiplicity of levels.

Another significant inscription is the notion that power is intoxicating and that intoxication in turn breeds tyranny. Psaul Roi is described as 'an alcoholic who happens also to be drunk with power' (Butake 1999b:167). His performance of power takes the form of ruthlessness, violence, the total silencing of dissidents, as well as the elimination of every trace of opposition. This is evident when he orders the soldiers to kill any citizens who oppose his rule, referring to them as 'vandals' (Butake 1999b:160). His cruelty even extends to non-citizens, as seen when he reprimands Song for coming to tell him about Albino's insults 'instead of punching him in the face and putting him under military custody' (Butake 1999b:170). Power, as the play suggests, is a cult – membership to which seems to be conditioned by the institutionalisation of violence. Butake's representation of dictatorship affirms Kubayanda's (1990:5) assertion that 'postcolonial dictatorship in Africa concerns itself with repression, which, in effect, means the arrest, exile, execution, or consistent harassment of dissident voices'. Psaul Roi's reckless instructions to the army to 'shoot to kill' results in his own elimination by the same army. The irony highlights the degree to which power intoxicates and how that intoxication in turn becomes a source of disempowerment.

An important aspect of Butake's narration of the nation that must be critiqued is the manner in which women's bodies are constructed as sites for the advancement of male power. Psaul Roi suffers from sexual impotence, which he claims necessitates his quest for absolute power. The following quote is informative in terms of how the play associates hegemonic power with the gendered manipulation of women's bodies:

Psaul Roi: ... Right from my early childhood nothing had ever tickled me down here. Nothing. I didn't even have any leanings towards the opposite sex. So I turned my energies to more useful opportunities. When you have power the rest of the land lies at your feet. But always it turned out that money was not enough. Aren't women curious beings? I have seen men who have given up their manhood in order to be wealthy. Others like me gave it up for power. But no matter how much wealth you put at the feet of a woman she will never be satisfied until you can make her tick. And they tried to escape with my wealth since they could not get their he-goats into the palace to service them. So I had them snuffed out (Butake 1999b:159).

This speech establishes a link between Psaul Roi's sexual impotence and his quest for power. It suggests that he strives for absolute political power as a way of compensating for his deficiency in sexual power. Because of his demasculinised state, he is unable to subject women to what Mbembe satirically calls an 'active penis' (1992:9). In this instance, Butake subverts Mbembe's postulation about the sexual excesses of the postcolonial leader. His protagonist is a leader whose sexual impotence debunks the myth of the phallus as an instrument of domination. Psaul Roi's inability to experience sexual desire effectively robs him of the potential to establish sexual dominance over women. Tyranny therefore becomes an alternative mode of domination for this postcolonial statesman.



Beyond the killing of dissident citizens, Psaul Roi's tyranny is also couched within sexual terms. He uses women as commodities for the decoration of his palace, which explains why he is deeply resentful of the 'he-goats' that his women cannot sneak into the palace to 'service' them. Mbembe's assertion that 'the everyday life of the postcolonial bureaucrat consists of ... bawdy comments in which the virtue of women comes under scrutiny' (1992:24) takes on grotesque proportions in the imaginary world of Butake's play as obscenity is employed to validate a regime of oppression. What I find problematic in this instance is that women's bodies are foregrounded as instruments for the advancement of male political power, but their subjectivity is completely obliterated. Liz Gunner (1994:4) speaks about the 'ambiguous relation between woman and nation' and with this we begin to problematise the ways in which the female body is centred in nationalist discourses and how nationalisms, in turn, expunge the female subject from the centre of discourses. In *Dance of the vampires*, women are spoken of in stereotypical terms, but are not in a position to respond to or counter the reductionist framework by which their subjectivity is defined. This, in my view, is a profound disempowerment of women within Butake's narration of the nation.

This disempowerment of women within Butake's imagined nation is further evident in the fact that in *Dance of the vampires* women exist as absented presences, as the political stage is dominated by male actors and the lone female character exists only in the gothic world of the text. Mary Russo (1994) states that:

the reintroduction of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the 'grotesque body') into the realm of what is called the 'political' has been a central concern of feminism. (p. 54)

A feminist concern in Butake's play is the role he assigns to the female grotesque body. East is the lone female character and the only female voice within the vampire cult. She is represented as the iconic Mother Africa figure – mother of the nation and giver of life. When Psaul Roi demands initiation into the vampire cult, she responds by stating:

East: (*female voice*) I am the home of the sun that bathes the land with radiance. I am the womb that peoples the land. Two thousand is too much blood; for the spirit of fertility condones not the wanton shedding of blood. The spirit of the circle flows from my heart through my arms embracing North and South, extending West, a human spirit. (Butake 1999b:154)

This extract reveals that the two thousand souls to be sacrificed for Psaul Roi's political survival are begot by East. This is further confirmed when she exclaims: 'Two thousand human beings from my loins! This is madness' (Butake 1999b:155). East is thus depicted as the mother of the nation – the symbol of fertility and fecundity. She is 'the sun that bathes the land with radiance', denoting her centrality in the nation's growth processes, and 'the womb that peoples the land', signifying her significant role as both the giver and nurturer of life. In her is vested the 'spirit of fertility', which 'condones not the wanton shedding of blood' (Butake 1999b:154). It seems that even as a gothic character, East cannot escape the confines of domesticity (Milbank 2007:155). She is the embodiment

of motherhood at its most excelling performance, for every time she speaks (and she only speaks five times throughout the play) there is an unhidden trace of wisdom that graces her speech and a visibly impressive sense of foresight (call it sixth sense or motherly instinct, if you like). This is what Florence Stratton (1994:172) refers to as the 'romanticization and idealization of motherhood'. As Nnaemeka (1998:9) has pointed out, African feminists are not averse to the idea of motherhood, nor to maternal politics. However, if every time the image of the African woman appears in a writer's work it is necessarily linked to motherhood, then there is clearly a problem of limitation with the writer's vision. Such gendered representation indicates that the writer cannot conceive of women beyond their roles as sexual or reproductive beings. By portraying East as a stereotype – a stereotype of African womanhood – Butake enforces a gender ideology that equates womanhood with motherhood and thereby limits the range of women's political expression.

On the whole, Butake's idea of the nation in *Dance of the vampires* is masculinist in conception and marked by exclusionary practices in which women's power is defined by the sexual and the domestic. The analysis above supports this view, as it has demonstrated that Butake conceives of the performance of power as a masculine project that often takes on grotesque dimensions in which tyranny becomes the most vivid theatrical ornament on the postcolonial stage.

Conclusion

Butake is no doubt one of the most prolific Anglophone Cameroonian playwrights whose works stand out as critiques of the excesses to which regimes of domination resort for their sustenance. His imagination of the nation is however problematic as it is premised on a utopian vision. In *Dance of the vampires*, the nationalist intervention of the military in state politics results in the ousting of a dictatorship and the possibility of the establishment of a democratic dispensation is hinted at. This is an easy solution that creates a false sense of hope as it ignores the fact that tyranny, violence and aggression are themselves modalities that define military regimes of power.

Another defect in Butake's narration of the nation is that the nation is conceived principally as a site of political contestation. The characters are confined to the good or bad dichotomy, which polarises their different ideologies of power. By foregrounding polarities, Butake imposes a limitation on the text in terms of spatial sites of meanings – what Bhabha calls the 'in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated' (1990:4). The text thus becomes a narrative of the nation that propagates a set ideology rather than provoking debate on and inquiry into possible and existing systems of power.

The analysis above has demonstrated that Butake's employment of the gothic grotesque in his representation of tyrannical leadership exposes the evils of hegemonic power, making room for the introduction of a pluralist power



structure comprising military efficacy and civilian democracy. Whether this is a realisable vision is indeed questionable, but to cement his utopian project, Butake constructs Psaul Roi as a gothic villain and Nformi as a hero who instigates political justice for the masses. The masses themselves are projected as both victims of power and executors of power, creating an ambivalence that is central to Butake's depiction of power relations within nationalist politics.

For the most part, Butake's narration of the nation functions as a parody of established notions of power. The play confirms the notion that power relations are complex and exists at a multiplicity of levels, such that the weak change places with the powerful under the most incongruous of circumstances. As shown in this article, this is an ideology that has been engaged with by Foucault, Mbembe and Bayart in different contexts. *Dance of the vampires* also posits the notion that power is a cult that is sustained by grotesque displays of domination. Within this discourse of the nation, women's bodies are depicted as gendered bodies that function as sites for the consolidation of male power. Women are represented mainly as national symbols that establish male hegemonic power as normative (Boehmer 1991:9). For feminist scholars, such hegemony within nationalist discourses needs to be unveiled and questioned.

On the whole, this article has illustrated the ways in which Butake adopts the grotesque, particularly the grotesque in systems of domination as enunciated by Mbembe, to re-write Cameroon's political history, and has ultimately argued that, whilst Butake's construction of tyranny as a grotesque manifestation of power for the most part validates Mbembe's formulations about postcolonial African leadership, his representation of power remains grounded within a utopian mode that leaves little room for a more critical engagement with the dynamics of power.

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