

The Politics of Dead Bodies in John Ruganda's *The Floods*

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Abstract

Violence is a characteristic of most totalitarian states. It is more often deployed as a strategy to either deal with real or imagined enemies of the state or as a way of ruling the populace. While forms of violence range from physical, verbal to psychological, there is an extended dimension that deals with the brutality of dead bodies. This article seeks to examine the paradoxes and the symbolic meanings attached to the differential disposal of dead bodies of common men on the one hand and of distinguished persons on the other in John Ruganda's play *The Floods*. Through the dehumanization of dead bodies of common men killed by the agents of the state and the glorification of the death of distinguished persons, the totalitarian state is represented as having a strong hold over both living and dead bodies.

Key words: Biopower, violence, dead bodies, totalitarian state, power

Introduction

The contextual setting of *The Floods* is Uganda, in the 1970s, the period of the brutal and dictatorial leadership of Idi Amin. The play which was published in 1988, almost a decade after Idi Amin's brutal regime, is an imaginative representation of Amin's tyrannical regime in Uganda. Activities in the play span the period in which Amin ruled Uganda ruthlessly. The play further mirrors how the Ugandan state through its agents (the media and military men) used its power abusively. Of particular interest in this study is insensitivity of the state and the massive killings that characterized Amin's regime and how bodies of common men were improperly disposed of by either being dumped in the lake or left in the forests to rot as compared with the magnificent send-off accorded the Queen Mothers' death and funeral given that she was an esteemed person in the society.

The Floods is divided into three parts called 'waves'. The 'floods' symbolise the blood let out from the mass killings committed by the state. Floods imply an overflow or spillage of something. The metaphorical sense alluded to in the play is that the amount of blood that was shed was enormous. The playwright's metaphorical allusion of Idi Amin's rule to moments of floods conveniently captures the level and height of violence and bloodshed that was witnessed at that time. Waves refer to a swell or a ridge on a large body of water. The waves also denote a rising trend involving large numbers of people. In the literal sense, waves in a large mass of water rise and fall when there is lack of calmness. Waves denote a sense of disturbance. The waves are figuratively used in the play to represent the lack of peace and harmony in the country. In the play, waves represent different forms of violence at different levels ranging from physical, structural to psychological violence.

The Floods has four major characters who through the use of the play-within-a-play strategy enact various scenes. Most of the activities in the plays are realised through role-play, where characters assume different roles at different times. The play begins with an announcement on the radio that there will be floods which will ravage the island. All the islanders are asked to flee the island using a rescue boat that would ferry them to safety at the other side of the lake. Bwogo, who is the protagonist in the play, uses his position as the person in charge of relocating the people to dupe the inhabitants of the island. Also in this first wave, the Headman, who is in charge of the island and the rescue operation, plays the role of an abusive leader. We also meet Kyeyune, a former fisherman and a survivor of the violent regime, who dismisses the allegations made about the impending floods and warns that the rescue boat is actually fated to sink.

In the second wave, we meet Bwogo, a powerful man who participated in Amin's violent regime and Nankya who is also a survivor of this violence. In this wave, Kyeyune and Nankya narrate their experiences of violence committed against them and others, by the state. Kyeyune, through flashbacks, recounts how while he was fishing in the lake ended up fishing out the body of 'the Major General' who was murdered and dumped in the lake. The central focus of this wave is the violence of the state against the citizens, recounted through the characters' own experiences. The

second wave is marked by several instances of physical and verbal abuse where Bwogo uses his position to intimidate and abuse Nankya and Kyeyune.

In the final wave, Kyeyune provides an explanation to the cause and the reason for the violence meted out against the people. He attributes it to a myth where a sea goddess, *Nalubale* was violated and raped by a greedy man, Nyamgondoh which is in other words an explanation of how violence is conceptualised as a form of rape and violation of the populace. The killings and disappearance of the people, according to Kyeyune, is because of the goddess's anger and desire to revenge. The play comes to a close with the demonstration of justice through the arrest of Bwogo by the police.

The Politics of Dead of Bodies

Violence in *The Floods* takes the form of physical and sexual abuse and mass murders of innocent people. The inscription of violence ranges from blood marks on the walls and floors to the brimming of blood in the lake. Death and the dead bodies in the play are a significant representation of the extent of violence by the state. Although the deaths of the common men is highlighted in the play currency is also given to the unexpected death of a prominent person whose death and funeral arrangements are highly publicised, unlike the many deaths of the common people which the state tries to cover. It is the differential treatment of these two different deaths that forms the basis of this discussion.

It is imperative to note that in the play, the authoritarian leader's desire to subjugate and demonstrate power does not end at torturing and inflicting pain on a living body. The performance of state power is further demonstrated through the disparate ways in which the dead bodies are treated. The analysis of the (mis)treatment of dead bodies for instance, the proper disposal or lack of it highlights issues of control and offers an insight into power relations. Vanessa Harding (2000:171) notes that generally, in situations where the totalitarian state seek to perform power over the dead, those who in life occupied less influential positions tend to be treated indifferently while those who tended to have power are treated more carefully. Those who are favoured by the state are accorded decent burials and send offs. The different attitudes and behaviour towards the dead represent an important theme with regard to leadership and the perception of both the esteemed and the common man.

In his discussion of 'Necropolitics' Mbembe asserts that 'to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty' (Mbembe 2003:11) whereby, the right to kill is perceived as being a constitutive element of the state's power. In his presentation, the major question that Mbembe asks is; what does the implementation of the right to decide who lives and who does not tell us about the person who is put to death and the relationship between the dead and the murderer? Mbembe's major focus is on what he termed as the 'state of exception' whose central project is '...the destruction of human bodies and populations' (*Ibid*: 14). In Mbembe's article, the state's sovereignty has control over the people and is defiant of the value of human life. Following Mbembe's argument, the destructive power of the state is not only portrayed through how it treats the living but also the dead bodies. The inhumanity of the state in *The Floods* is captured in the way that the ordinary people are mercilessly killed and further dumped carelessly either in the forests or in the lake while treating the death of Mother Queen in an honourable manner. My reading of the improper disposal of the common men and the proper send off accorded the Mother Queen is one of the ways in which the state violates and betrays its citizens.

Katherine Verdery (1999) in *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* examines the various ways in which political upheavals are often accompanied by incidents involving the corpses of former leaders or rather heroes. In her discussion, Verdery's central question is; what exactly is particularly important about a corpse. Verdery posits that 'dead bodies have properties that make them particularly effective political symbols. They are thus excellent means of accumulating something essential' (Verdery 1999:26). Bodies are potent vehicles not only for political meaning but also aid in the understanding of how people relate at different levels in the society.³²

Although Verdery's discussion is based on the exhumation and reburial of the dead bodies of political leaders and national heroes, for purposes of this discussion, I am particularly interested in Verdery's postulation that the dead body has symbolic meanings. The major question to be asked is how do dead bodies offer themselves to the public for reading and what possible meanings can be read from these bodies. This discussion seeks to examine how Uganda presents issues of the misuse of power and further subjugation of the subject through the improper disposal

³² Bankston Carl III (1999) 'Lively corpses' at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_11_126/ai/55707744.

of the bodies of the common men while juxtaposing that, with how the body of a distinguished person is 'properly' sent off. Though we do not expect all bodies to be disposed in the same manner, the situation in *The Floods* forces one to read the contrast as being satirical of the state through the meanings derived from the differential treatment of the dead bodies. In his criticism of the state's 'biopower',³³ where the state is presented as having the authority to rule the body not only in life but also in death, Ruganda hopes to unfold the absurdity of power seen in the way the improperly disposed bodies return.

Before the tyrannical state can commit its ultimate show of power, the body of the subject is tortured, subjected to shooting and ultimately murdered by hanging, firing squad or hacked to death and then left to decompose or is carelessly dumped. After the killing, the bodies were then left to rot in the forests or dumped in the lake. One interesting thing that merits mention is how Ruganda presents the state at its most absurd level. The bodies of the people killed by the agents of the state are seen to be littered all over the place. This is also expressed through Kyeyune's encounter with a dead body while he was fishing. Kyeyune in a distressed mood notes that: '...the world around me is falling into pieces, corpses upon corpses along the streets, in the jungle, and in the lake, but no one takes heed of the squeals of terror in the homesteads being deserted' (*The Floods* Pg.50).

The use of the grotesquery and strange images of dead bodies depict a senseless and brutal world that is deeply tragic presented in all its grimness and despair. Martin Esslin notes that these images 'castigate, satirically, the absurdity of life' (Esslin 1964: 390) with an intention of making man aware of his precarious condition. The tragic scenes confront the audience with grotesquely heightened and distorted images of a world that has gone mad. In the play, the absurd images represent a world that is out of tune with reality. These images lead the reader to the recognition of the fundamental absurdity of the society under 'powerful' and destructive leaders.

The spectacle of the dead bodies of the common people littered all over the streets and in the lake is contrasted with the distinguished treatment of the body of the Queen Mother. In presenting the contradiction and unfair treatment of the common people in the nation state, it is revealed that the death of Queen Mother 'unleashed a motley of banal absurdities' (*The Floods* Pg.61). While the death of the masses should have caused an alarm due to the fact that they were mercilessly killed and in large numbers, the death of a single person receives more attention. This spectacular event that marks her death and funeral demanded the use of government resources to compensate and appease the family of the deceased. It is noted that the beneficiaries of the Mother Queen were seen booking emergency flights abroad to make arrangements to bury the queen.

Ruganda here uses ironic humour to satirise the power of the state considering how the common people are led into 'celebrating' the Queen's death while their own, who were secretly dumped, were not given such a treatment. They were instead left for the crocodiles in the lake and to rot out in the forests (*The Floods* Pg. 60). In joining the state to celebrate the prominent person's death, Ruganda further presents the common people as a group that has been zombified³⁴ by the state to the extent of being blind to their predicament. The special significance to the state, characterised the Queen's funeral is Ruganda's way of criticising the leaders who capitalise on the helplessness of the masses. Apart from criticising the state for its inhumanity and brutality, Ruganda also calls our attention to the way the common people have been zombified to the extent that they cannot see that the state is blinding them into believing that it is saddened by the death of its people. The death of the Queen Mother sent ripples of joy among the manual workers who were ironically excited about the unexpected holiday for a directive was given that there would be a four week mourning period (*The Floods* Pg. 60).

What the common men have become blinded to is the fact that the massive killing of the common people goes unmentioned. The state does not even care to mention the many deaths it has committed, let alone according them a decent burial. But in the case of the death of the Queen Mother, newspaper editors created spaces for full page advertisements of condolences (*The Floods* Pg. 61) due to her position or status in the society. Like is often the case with the death of prominent people in the nation state, the death of Queen Mother as recounted by Nankya, a witness of the state's atrocities, is a spectacular celebrative event. Mbembe (1992:4) asserts that the tyrannical rulers use rituals to bind the populace, even those who are not willing whereby in this case the whole nation goes into a celebrative moment in honour of the distinguished dead. In the play, Nankya notes that;

³³ Michel Foucault defines biopower as 'that domain of life over which power has taken control' (cited in Mbembe 2003:11).

³⁴ Mbembe in 'Provisional notes on the Postcolony' defines the post-colony as a place of madness where neither the dominated nor the rulers are sober implying that they have been blinded and made to look and behave like fools, Mbembe (1992:9)

Nankya: Condolences to the bereaved family. We are one with you in this hour of national catastrophe. Death hath untimely ripped the beloved one from our midst...there will be state mourning for four weeks, a military burial for the occasion and a statue erected in the city square...beneficiaries of the deceased booking emergency flights abroad... (*The Floods* Pg.60-1)

This dramatic event is best explained as the state's obsession with the exhibition of power with reference to popular political figures. Clifford Geertz's idea of the 'theater state' is relevant in the discussion of the state's involvement with excessive violence and the desire to show off, creating a 'spectacle' or a theatre of sorts. The concept of the theater state is informed by the post-colonial state's ability to dramatize its magnificence³⁵ through violence in this case. Geertz (1980) argues that the state 'puts on a drama that serves as a symbolic expression of what greatness is' (Geertz 1980:102). Although Geertz's discussion of Negara reveals a state that is governed by rituals rather than by force, the 'drama' that accompanies the celebrative events in Bali causing a big scene in the nation state is what we are likening to the state's absurdity in *The Floods*. The excessive violence presented through the exposure of dead bodies littered all over the streets with others dumped in the lake causing 'fouling of the air' is a dramatic experience worth noting. Contrarily, the exquisite treatment of the death of Queen Mother by the state presents a context in which the reading of the dead bodies portrays an absurd and selfish state that flourishes on oppressing the masses.

Going by the above extract, the common man is seen to contribute to his predicament. The common man is presented as having come to believe that he is less important whether he is alive or dead but when prominent people die, they need to be respected. This partly explains why the common people do not question the discriminatory treatment of the dead people/bodies based on their respective stations in life. The state though expects the common people not to question.

How then does the state commemorate the death of prominent people? Apart from according the dead a distinguished send off, Verdery argues that there is a relationship between spacio-temporal reconstruction and the politics of the dead body. Verdery (1999) maintains that: 'among the most common ways in which political regimes 'remember' is through marking spaces by placing particular statutes in particular places' (Verdery 1999:26). Verdery continues to argue that these 'provide contours to landscapes, socializing them and saturating them with specific political values' thus signifying space in specific ways (*Ibid*). The death of Queen Mother is valued by the state and must be commemorated in special ways like erecting a statue in her honour and even naming a street after her. In the play it is noted that: '...there will be state mourning for four weeks, a military burial for the occasion and a statute erected in the city square' (*The Floods* Pg. 60).

The grand moment that marks the death of Queen Mother is dedicated to the display of power and status. It speaks of a state that selfishly guards the interests of a few elite. Her funeral is set to be attended by many state guests, dignitaries and VIPs (*The Floods* Pg.60). To mark this event, government dignitaries use this opportunity to incriminate imaginary adversaries. It becomes a platform in which leaders ironically disclaim atrocities that they had a hand in. Leaders use this opportunity to paint an innocent face for themselves. Nankya notes that these leaders will be:

Nankya: Proclaiming their avowed brotherhood and castigating the prophets of doom...Counterfeiting Judas, disclaiming their atrocities of yester-years.
(*The Floods* Pg.61)

In presenting the hypocritical nature of leaders, a feature common to most leaders in independent African states, Ruganda brings to the fore the inefficiency, excesses, and the selfish interests that the leaders are driven by. The two contrasting treatments that the corpses of the common people and the Queen Mother receive is a commentary on the leader's desires to build names for themselves instead of improving the lives of the people.

Apart from using the dead bodies to speak about the senselessness and the absurdity of the human condition, Ruganda uses the horrific image to satirise the state. This is reflected in the manner in which the Major General who was murdered by the state 'refuses' to die. Ordinarily, leaders who chose to kill or murder intend to ultimately

³⁵ Mbembe (1992) argues that in order to demonstrate its powers, the leaders invent ways of staying in power. This includes elimination of enemies, disempowering them just to show its magnificence. (Mbembe 1992:9).

silence the individual. But ironically, the Major General, who was murdered by the state 'refuses to die'. The General's refusal to die is a symbol of protest against the murderous state for it is only in death that the body can revolt freely. By refusing to die, the dead challenges the state's power over life. Ruganda textually subverts the power of the state through the General's body which transcends this power to kill. The constant re-appearance of the Major General's dead body denotes his intent of challenging the powers of those who killed him. The reason for his return is to torment the agents of the state.

In a similar case Labou Tansi's *La vie et Demie* (1979) novel speaks of a Martial, who was brutally killed by the ruler, the Providential Guide for allegations of attempting to rival the ruler. The Martial refuses to die after being cut into pieces of meat by talking back to his murderer the ruler. Violence inflicted on the body leads to resistance and transformation. Labou Tansi uses the revolting body to comment on the absurdity of power drunk and inhuman leaders. Tansi notes in the preface of the novel that: 'I who am talking to you about the absurdity of the absurd, I who am inaugurating the absurdity of despair, where would you want me to be speaking from...at a time when man is determined to kill life more than ever? Labou Tansi (1979: vi).

Martin Esslin (1964: 337) asserts that in plays that are categorised as belonging to the 'theatre of the absurd', 'the human condition is presented as a concrete poetic image that is at the same time broadly comic and deeply tragic'. *The Floods* could be regarded as absurdist because of the presence of the horrific and the severely mutilated bodies that are presented in a comical nature to express the ugly reality. Of great importance is the fact that the absurd is 'designed to shock [the] audience into a full awareness of the horror of the human condition (Esslin 1965: 17). Esslin in the introduction to 'Absurd Drama' maintains that the absurd in general present a 'disillusioned, harsh and stark picture of the world' (Esslin 1964:22). Ruganda uses ironical humour and grotesque images in the narration of state related violence and absurdity. The figures of the dead bodies and the absurd have thus become common features for the explication of violence by the state. Such scenes seemingly explain the reality in a better way. Speaking of better ways of presenting reality, Dambuzo Marechera notes that 'writers search for new modes of expressing the grotesque irrationality of power, thus develop devices that conveniently capture the state for if one is living in an abnormal society, then only abnormal expressions can express that society' (Marechera qtd.in Veit Wild 2006: 89). Gikandi (1992: 380) notes that 'our new [global] situation demands narratives which face up to the task of representing the ambivalences of the post-colonial situation'. The resolution to use dead bodies makes a better presentation of the sorry state of affairs of Uganda under Amin's regime.

The spectacle of the dead body that Kyeyune fished out of the lake psychologically affects him. The image keeps returning to him signalling the 'return of the repressed'. Kyeyune even confesses that, 'that man still haunts me...I should have brought him to the land but I was afraid' (*The Floods* Pg. 10). The return of the dead body is a way in which the tortured and the murdered 'come back' to haunt those who participated in the killing of innocent people. In the theory of repression, it has been argued that traumatic events leave some sort of indelible fixation in the mind. Terr (1988:130) comments that 'traumatic events create lasting visual images ...burned in visual impressions'. The painful memories of violence are brought to the fore through nightmares, dreams or hallucinations.

Kyeyune experiences the return of the dead body notably because after fishing it out, the image has become part of his memory. Major General's target is Bwogo. The return of the tortured is signalled by a whistle, twisting and scratching of toes (*The Floods* Pg.55-6). These characteristics portend danger and death. Whenever a whistle heard, Kyeyune warns about the 'call of the beckon' (*Ibid*: 106) which means death.

Kyeyune: (*Some kind of whistling can be heard...*)

Kyeyune: Did you hear anything?

Nankya: Anything like what?

Kyeyune: The whistling, you did not hear anything?

Nankya: What of it?

Kyeyune: the itch, do your feet have an itch? (*She doesn't understand*) Then
we are doomed. On our way into the lake. Certain as death: the
whistle, the beckon... (*The Floods*_Pg.55-56)

The physical features of the Major General draw attention to his grotesque image. The major question to be asked is, of what use is the ugly image of the dead body in the play? Through the use of the absurd to represent the ugliness of the situation, Ruganda is expressing assent to the idea that 'black writers should deploy the grotesque to portray the undesirable, the corrupting and the destructive' (Ogude 1996: 82). It is through the ugly that a reading of the nature of violence and the atrocities that mark the period which Ruganda is pre-occupied with in the play is made more explicable.

In an authoritarian state, there is a desire of the subject to challenge the oppressive power and its inhumanity. Due to the existing nature of the relationship between the leader and the subject, revolt is often not possible without the fear of death. In this case, Ruganda uses the body of the Major General to challenge authority. In situations where violence is used as a tool for subversion and control, the dead bodies are bound to 'speak' messages of revolt. The body of the Major General is presented as laughing. The laughing dead body becomes revolutionist, something that is sometimes only possible in death because one cannot afford to revolt against a totalitarian regime and still live.

Kyeyune...almost immediately the man with three nails in his skull shot up
like an agitated dolphin and started singing '*I am the fisher of
men*'. He let out one menacing laughter then disappeared back
into the lake. (*The Floods* Pg.38)

The dead body has the powers and freedom to revolt. Mashishi (1999:46) notes that ugliness and laughter have a subversive potential. By laughing, the Major General is involved in challenging the repressive authority which hopes that the only way of silencing enemies is by killing, yet as is seen with the Major General, he is seen to be alive. This element of absurd drama often has an element of humour which works as an affirmative energy, a refusal to submit to disillusionment. This is seen in the way that the General is seen to be 'alive'.

The dead body is not only involved in presenting the reality but also in satirising the state and condemning violence. Ngugi (1972:58) specifies the object of satire to be 'a society's failings'. He points out that its function is to criticise the society when it departs from the norms. The aim of satire in his view is to correct and the means to achieve it is through painful and sometimes malicious laughter. Jonathan Ngate (1988) notes that a writer who uses satire attempts through laughter-not so much to tear down (through criticism) as to inspire a re-modelling. Tyranny is the enemy that satire seeks to attack.

Conclusion

In our discussion of the politics of dead bodies in the play, emphasis was paid to the differential (mis) treatment of dead bodies that belonged to the common men who were brutalised, killed and improperly disposed (dumped) by the state and contrasted with the expensive and magnificent glorification of the death and memory of the Queen Mother. The intentional killing of innocent people by the totalitarian is a signification of its power and its desire to silence real or imagined enemies. In the play dead bodies are not ultimately silenced for they occasionally return to haunt the repressive agents of the state. For Ruganda, this paradox aims at satirising the state while highlight weaknesses in the autocratic state's use of power for performing its authority.

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