



Research Paper

• A Historical Perspective On Cameroon Anglophone Writing: A Study of John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Black Caps And Red Feathers*

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ABSTRACT

Based on the idea that literature emanates from historical events as new historicists propound, and the response from John Nkemngong Nkengasong in an online interview with this researcher where he says "It has been said over and over that a writer does not write in a vacuum." (1), this paper examines how Cameroon history has been a bedrock for the writings of Anglophones, especially Nkengasong's plays, among which is *Black Caps and Red Feathers* (2010), used as a catalyst for its argument. The purpose of this study is to underline that post-colonial leaders in particular, have to endeavour to lead their subjects in a democratic manner in order to leave a worthy legacy to their successors. This is why the paper locates its discourse within the New Historicist framework, which is the focal point, as propounded by Louis Althusser (1918-1990), Mikail Bakhtin (1895-1975), Clifford James Geertz (1926-2006), James Louis Montrose (1904) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984). This study reveals that the playwright was greatly influenced by the socio-political, economic and cultural history of Cameroon and that revolutions are inevitable when dictatorship and bad governance form the history of a state. Through library research and interviews with two authors, this paper contributes to knowledge by elucidating that history is the basis for literature using *Black Caps and Red Feathers*.

KEYWORDS: *Historical perspective, revolution, political, dictatorship, revolution, nationalism*

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I. INTRODUCTION

A Google source states that "The study of Literature lends us an understanding of our history, our society and sometimes ourselves. ...Literature also gives us glimpses of much earlier ages. ...The study of literature through our history, enhances our understanding of our modern world." Influenced by the history and diverse nature of their country, most Cameroonian Anglophone writers, including Nkengasong, have always advocated the consolidation of national unity by admonishing the powers that be about the impending danger that would result from existing dictatorship, bad governance, marginalization, corruption and nepotism in their works. However, these visionary writers' submissions seem to have fallen on deaf ears, thus; this paper seeks to reiterate some valid suggestions by intellectuals in order to stir the ruling class to live up to expectation. Historicists of Romantic Literature hold that the main goal of a political reader of a literary text is to discover the political camouflages and dominances in order to expose its implied factual concealed subject matter, which is historical and political conflict. History in this paper does not only refer to particular facts and events which provide a background to the literature of an age because a literary work is etched in a context and it always interacts and interchanges with related institutions, beliefs, cultural systems, practices that climax to form history. These key findings, which validate this paper, lead us to other major parts of this work including: Historical Background to the chosen text, discussion on the New Historicist Framework, Perceptive analysis of the Play, the Conclusion and Works Cited.

Historical Background to the Text

Literature is not written in a vacuum as aforesaid; thus, the historical background of the playwright consequently influences his writings. This background knowledge provides the latitude necessary for authentic textual analysis of the play under investigation. As far as the background study is concerned, the socio-political, cultural and economic perspectives will be examined. Consequently, new historicism will be appropriated in this

analysis because the playwright is concerned with the events of his time just like Anthony Akerman, a white South African dramatist, who writes to underscore his disgust for the apartheid system of government, which led him into exile for seventeen years. After his return in 1992, he wrote plays to discover and recover fresh stories for a post-apartheid South Africa.

According to a Cameroonian historian called Bate George Enow in *Effective Modern History for Colleges*, from 1884 to 1916, Cameroon was under the German protectorate (140). The Portuguese had visited the coast of Cameroon before the German arrival. After the defeat of the Germans in Cameroon, the country was partitioned by the League of Nations and ruled by France and Britain. France had two thirds while Britain had one third of the territory. From 1946 to independence, Cameroon was a trusteeship territory under the United Nations Organization. The quest for independence and reunification with British Cameroons led to the formation of political parties such as “Union des Population du Cameroun”. On the 1st of January 1960, French Cameroon had its independence and was called “La Republic”. In October 1960, the British trust territory was separated from Nigeria on the latter’s attainment of independence. This was in preparation for a United Nations supervised plebiscite on 11th February, 1961 where Southern Cameroon voted in favour of reunification with East Cameroon against integration with the Federal Republic of Nigeria (idem).

Amadou Ahidjo ruled Cameroon from independence and reunification to 1982 when he passed on the baton of command to Paul Biya. When the latter came to power he instituted a multiparty system of governance. This liberated writers to question the political institutions of their country. As a result, writers such as Alobwed’Epie and Bate Besong wrote about societal problems. Buma Kor in *Cameroon Anglophone Writing* states that President Biya’s New Deal Government gave rise to Anglophone writing. He intimates thus; “When the first republic of Amadou Ahidjo gave way to the New Deal Government of Paul Biya. This is the period in which emerged typical Anglophone writing with the consciousness and terms of reference we connote today as “Anglophone” (62). This assertion holds that Paul Biya’s coming to power permitted Anglophone Cameroonian writers to start off because there was freedom of expression as opposed to what existed in the Ahidjo regime. It was therefore within the backdrop of this freedom that writers such as Bole Butake and John Nkemngong Nkengasong were inspired.

Nationalist sentiments began to be expressed shortly after the partition of Cameroon but the exact date cannot be traced. Nationalism, according to Bate George Enow, is a strong devotion or loyalty to one’s own nation (141). Following this definition, Bole Butake could be read as a nationalist for he strongly advocates national unity through marriage and denounces social malpractices such as prejudice, corruption, nepotism and tribalism in *Betrothal without Libation* (2005). Nkengasong equally displays his nationalistic character by lambasting and lampooning corrupt, irresponsible, self-centred political and traditional leaders in his works such as *Ancestral Earth* (2010), *Black Caps and Red Feathers* (2010) and *The Call of Blood* (2010). His satiric tone, no doubt, smacks of a nationalist who wants to re-establish a certain degree of order in a morally debauched Cameroonian society. Nkengasong is so brave in the manner in which he handles burning political, social and cultural issues of our millennium probably because he is committed to his nation, Cameroon.

Bate George Enow continues that before the colonial era, there was no nation or country called Cameroon. People continued to belong to ethnic groups and states even after Cameroon was carved out by the Germans. Cameroon was not a nation perse for a nation, according to this historian, is a large community of people usually speaking a single language and having a political character or aspiration (142). The historian adds that although the territory was partitioned and administered separately for more than forty years, the people never ceased to think of themselves as one and to associate as brothers.

Furthermore, no Cameroonian was considered a stranger by the indigenous people of the other sector after the partition and no Southern or Northern Cameroonian considered himself a Nigerian despite forty-four years of close political administration with Nigeria. The name Cameroon became a symbol of the unity of the territory while Cameroonian stood for the foundation of the unity of existence of its inhabitants and were the basis of Cameroon nationalism, according to the historian.

Within the past historical perspective of Cameroon writers, Bole Butake in the “Forward” to *Betrothal without Libation* affirms:

Right from the outset in my first steps in creativity, I was already very concerned about Cameroon as a nation, rather than a conglomeration of tribal states with individuals who were ready to get at each other’s throat just because they were from another cultural background. (5)

Cameroon is a land of diversity. In this regard, historians call it “Africa in miniature”. These differences can be a source of conflict such as that which led to a civil war or genocide between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994 thus; there is a need for national unity in diversity. Writers are well placed to encourage this value through their works. Conscious of this fact, especially the existence of numerous tribes over two hundred and forty of them in Cameroon, Bole Butake vehemently advocates national unity in his play titled *Betrothal without Libation* (2005). He does this by lambasting tribalism and encouraging inter-tribal marriages. In an interview with the playwright, Bole Butake disclosed to this researcher that he discovered that

the Bayangi people are an open-minded people while the Kom people are too tradition bound. This is why he chose to write about these two tribes even though he belongs to none. Butake actually mirrored their differences and consequences of tribal inclinations thereby discouraging tribalism and advocating national unity through the institution of marriage. Kisito Mbuwir also has a suggestion that can help manage the chaotic cultural diversity in Cameroon in contemporary times. In a published article titled "From Cultural Differences in Africa to Cultural Divides: The Search for an African Ethics of Managing Cultural Diversity", Mbuwir argues that the African perspective to managing diversity as experienced from Nso outlook could greatly help in harnessing cultural diversity. He concludes his paper with these words: "...it is not only possible but also legitimate to build mechanism of managing diversity in Africa on grassroot resources that have the co-values of diversity, such as tolerance, liberalism, and the 'live and let live' virtues of an eco-bio-communitarian ethics" (11).

In the 1960s playwrights such as Oyono Mbia and Musinga in *Mr No Balance* wrote about corruption. In 1980, Bole Butake discouraged corrupt practices in very strong terms in his play titled *The Rape of Michel* (1984). This mal-practice comes up again as an important theme in *Betrothal without Libation* in 2005. This means that corruption is inherent in the Cameroonian society. To back up this assertion, Fointam and his pal, Sama reveal that one can be posted wherever he wants and be appointed to any post of responsibility in Cameroon if he/she has somebody in an influential position (24). This means that need and merit have no place, a phenomenon to castigate. It goes without saying that Bole Butake is a nationalist and protest dramatist for he concludes his "Forward" with a very powerful message to all Cameroonians thus:

It is my sincere hope that this play will remind the hawks and vampires of the native and settler syndrome that a lot of water has gone under the bridge of unification; and that we should start taking stock of the 'achievements' of national integration and national unity which we make so much noise about once every year. Let Fointam Ngong and Elissa Eyong and their families be our examples for nations are not built by words but by the positive acts of men and women. (6)

This visionary revolutionary playwright is therefore challenging fellow countrymen to stop talking unity or the sing song of "one and indivisible Cameroon" but take necessary actions that would lead to a united Cameroon for actions speak louder than words. Cameroon would not have been in a socio-political crisis if this call was heeded to. John Nkemngong Nkengasong also unveils similar historical and prophetic avant-garde concerns in his works particularly *Black Caps and Red Feathers* (2010) as will be seen in a critical analysis of the play, below.

II. NEW HISTORICIST FRAMEWORK

The appellation "New Historicism" was accepted in the early 1980s after its proponents' opposition to formalism which they related to New Criticism and critical deconstruction. New historicists advocate that a literary text should be examined not only from the historical perspective but also from its cultural background, its meaning, its effects, its later critical interpretations and evaluations. It should be noted that the work chosen for this article can be read from the said divergent points of view. However, this view is distinct from earlier assertions by scholars who hold that a work of art should be studied against the backdrop of a social and intellectual history in order to classify it as an independent entity. They also view literature as a reflection of the worldview that characterizes a period. Therefore, the new historic theory is a befitting tool for this research because it is rooted in history.

Contrary to formalism which focuses principally on the literariness of a text, new historicists posit that a literary text should be studied wholly from different perspectives. For instance, social practices and discourses, which make up the culture of a particular time and place and with which the literary text interacts both as a product and a producer of cultural values and norms. This means that literature should contribute to the development of society both socially and culturally and also be influenced by the afore-mentioned aspects. History influences literature while literature contributes to history. Material historicists seek not only to point out the social and political that include class, race and gender constructs in a text but advocate a change of these ideologies. In Anthony Akerman's plays titled *A Man out of the Country* and *Dark Outsider*, we find a critique of the apartheid system and racism. *Old Boys* by the same playwright is a critique of the flaws of a boarding school as well as colonialism. It therefore suggests amelioration or a change in this social milieu. Nkengasong's plays expose socio-political shortcomings and gender issues too. The work under study could thereby be conveniently read from the material historicist's perception.

What makes this theory different from the former scholars' claim is principally the outcome of ideas and practices of literary interpretation that have been inculcated from contemporary post-structuralists such as Louis Althusser (1918-1990), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) and Louis Montrose (1904). Louis Althusser is a revisionist Marxist thinker. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, this thinker declares that:

Ideology manifests itself in different ways in the discourse of each of the semi-autonomous institutions of an era, including literature, and also that ideology operates covertly to form and position the users of

language as the “subjects” in a discourse, in a way that in fact “subjects” them- that is, subordinates them- to the interest of the ruling classes. (191)

In some plays such as Rick Salutin’s *1837: The Farmers’ Revolt* (1974), Nkengasong’s *Black Caps and Red Feathers* and *Ancestral Earth* (2010), we feel the negative impact of the colonial master through his respective representatives such as Lady Backwash and the leaders namely: Traourou and King Akeumbin. These characters use language to subjugate their subordinates and subjects respectively.

According to Michel Foucault, the ideas of an era instead of reflecting previous entities and rules reflect concepts, oppositions, and hierarchies of which it speaks. Foucault continues that these elements are both products and propagators of power or social forces. Furthermore, he says that as a result, the particular discursive formations of an era determine what is at the time accounted “knowledge” and “truth” as well as criminal, insane, or sexually deviant. All these vividly characterize history and almost of these ideologies are present in Nkengasong’s *Black Caps and Red Feathers* which will be read subsequently in this study.

Clifford Geertz, on his part, affirms that a culture is made up of distinguished sets of signifying systems and “thick descriptions” that is, the close reading and analogy of particular social products. What is more is to recover the meanings it has for the people involved in it. In other words, read the text thoroughly, analyze it and bring out the intended message. It also aims at recovering a network of conventions, codes and modes of thinking with which a particular item is implicated which relate the item to the meanings. Clifford Geertz’s ideas are both cultural and anthropological. The chosen play and *Ancestral Earth*, include both cultural and anthropological aspects. The title of Nkengasong’s play, *Ancestral Earth*, together with characters such as King Akeumbin, the traditional priest, princes and the offering of sacrifices draw attention to an African custom hence a portrayal of man and his culture.

Louis Montrose defines new historicism as “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history”. This means that history interacts with literature and like literature, is a text that needs to be interpreted and not simply a set of fixed objective facts. On the other hand any text can be called a discourse or representation, that is, the verbal formations -ideologies or cultural norms of a particular period in history. The chosen text is no exception. Several historicists attest that these cultural and ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination which characterize a given society.

However, there is considerable diversity among new historicists in spite of the fact that they agree sometimes. Basically, all of them are opposed to the ideas they describe as “central ideological constructs in traditional literary criticism”. Many historicists view the 17th and 18th centuries as the early era of capitalism and the formative period of most of such constructs. An example of the opposed constructs or mainstream criticisms according to new historicists is the regard of a literary text as an autonomous body of fixed meanings that correlate to form an organic whole in which all conflicts are resolved artistically. Contrary to this construct is the claim that:

Many literary texts consist of a diversity of dissonant voices, and these voices express not only the orthodox, but also the subordinated and subversive forces of the era in which the text was produced. Furthermore, what may seem to be the artistic resolution of a literary plot, yielding pleasure to the reader, is in fact deceptive, for it is an effect that serves to cover over the unresolved conflicts of power, class, gender, and diverse social groupings that make up the tensions that underlie the surface meaning of a literary text. (192)

This ideology clearly mirrors the key element of this study which is historical perspective and revolution too. *Black Caps and Red Feathers* is actually an allegory of the two political regimes that have ruled Cameroon so far. In this play, Nkengasong, is a nationalist fighting for liberation from both Western and African oppressors of any kind at all times.

Not only is literature historic and aesthetic, but it also involves the economic, social and political situations specific to an era. Literature is not also narrowed down to timeless criteria of artistic value. It is simply one out of many kinds of texts such as religious, philosophical, legal and scientific. All these texts are formed and structured by the particular conditions of a time and place. The literary text therefore neither enjoys a unique status nor special privilege. It is a text like the others which change or differ with time and place. For instance, different peoples and regions of the Commonwealth (West Africa, East Africa, South Africa, The Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) have different colonial experiences and so describe the colonial experience in different ways in their literary works. All these corroborate history.

In an article titled “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” in *The New Historicism*, edited by H. Aram Veeger in 1989, we learn that a literary work is written in a context. That it constantly interacts and interchanges with related institutions, beliefs, cultural systems, practices that culminate to form what is called history. This implies that history does not refer to specific facts and events which provide a background to the literature of an era or which literature can be said to simply reflect. Moreover, history as it is said in Marxist criticism does not refer to the “material” conditions that, in a unilateral way, determine the particularities of a literary text. To new historicists therefore, literature does not necessarily emanate from historical facts but contributes to history

making through interactions and exchanges of a network of institutions, beliefs, cultural power relations, practices and products.

New historicists however exhibit divergent opinions on the extent to which a writer, despite being the subject who is created and positioned by the use of power and ideology within the discourse of a particular epoch, may retain some scope for individual initiative and agency. These historicists who ascribe a degree of liberty and initiative to an individual writer, do so in order to keep open the possibility that an author can intervene so as to introduce radical changes in the social power structure of which that individual's subjectivity and function are themselves a product. This group of new historicists therefore, differs in their aforementioned description from traditional criticism which gives a degree of freedom and initiative to an author in order to account for the latter's literary invention and distinctive artistry. New historicism is in this manner, a divergent historical revolution in itself.

Readers are also subjects who are constructed and placed by the conditions and ideological formations of their era just like the authors who produce the texts. Every claim that resembles Matthew Arnold's opinion, which holds that a work of art should be seen "as in itself it really is", is among the illusions of a humanistic idealism. This simply means that it is not true to life or lacks verisimilitude. The readers will tend to naturalize the text if their ideas conform to those of the writer. For instance, the author's ideas about corruption, bad governance and betrayal in Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, *Ancestral Earth* and *The Call of Blood* respectively, can urge someone who detests these vices to naturalize the texts. Naturalizing the text means that the reader will interpret its culture specific and time-bound representations as though they were the features of universal and permanent human nature and experience. On the contrary, the reader might tend to appropriate the text. This suggests that he/she might interpret in order to make it resemble their own cultural possession, if the reader's ideology is different from the author's.

In addition, new historicists recognize the fact that they are subjective in their approach because they have been molded and taught by the events and discourses specific to their epoch. Consequently, most of their critical writings construct, rather than consider ready-made, the textual meanings they describe and the literary and cultural history they narrate. This means that what they narrate is not copied from previous works but their making and ideas. The new historicists appropriate past texts covertly by insinuation or pointing out weaknesses to suit their purposes. For example, these critics insist that the course of history between the past and present is not consistent but demonstrates discontinuities, breaks, and ruptures. This approach therefore enables them to distance and estrange a text written in the past and hence, sharpen their ability to identify its differences from their current conceptual assumptions. These are certainly manifestations of history and revolution.

Some new historicists present the readings of texts written in the past in their preferred metaphor which is "negotiations" between past and present. This highlights the forces and configurations of power particularly issues concerning class, gender, race, and ethnicity. It should be noted that these issues exist in the new historicist's culture today and serve to shape their ideologies and interpretation. Anthony Akerman's *A Man out of the Country*, *Dark Outsider* just like Rick Salutin's *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* and *Les Canadiens*, are plays that point out class, racial and gender issues.

In the 1970s and early 1980s the ideologies, themes and procedures of new historicist criticism took shape especially in writings by English Renaissance scholars. These scholars focused on a number of literary issues. First, they paid attention to the literary forms such as the pastoral and masque and above all, drama. Then they stressed the role in shaping a text of social and economic conditions such as literary patronage, censorship, and the control of access printing. They also focused on analyzing texts as discursive "sites" which enacted and reproduced the interests and power of the Tudor monarchy but were alert to detect within such texts the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Students of the English Romantic period came up with parallel ideologies of the intertextuality of literature and history. They also added similar views that the representations in literary texts are not reflectors of reality but concretized forms of ideology almost at the same time. *Black Caps and Red Feathers* is an apt description of the oppressed and marginalized and representative characters. The character, Traourou, is an example of bad leadership and what have you.

Historicists of Romantic literature can be distinguished from most Renaissance historicists. The former always call their critical endeavours a political reading of a literary text. In these readings, they emphasize quasi-Freudian mechanisms such as suppression, displacement, and substitution as seen in Nkengasong's play under study. Through this the historicists of romantic literature assert a writer's political ideology without the latter's knowledge. Historicists of this extraction also assert inevitable disguises; completely observe silence and the circumstances and contradictions of contemporary history. The writer continues that:

The primary aim of a political reader of a literary text is to undo these ideological disguises and suppressions in order to uncover its subtext of historical and political conflicts and oppressions which are the text's true, although covert or unmentioned, subject matter. (194)

The importance of new historicism as a tool in this research is evident because the concealed historical, political conflicts and oppressions embedded in the chosen play are uncovered subsequently. The investigator thus obviously assumes the role of a political reader.

The concepts and practices of new historicism spread rapidly to all periods of literary study. They were equally increasingly represented, described and debated in conferences, books and periodical essays in the 1980s. New historicist procedures also have parallels in the critics of African-American, Caribbean, Canadian and other ethnic literatures. These literatures stress the role of culture-formations dominated by white Europeans in suppressing, marginalizing or distorting the achievements of non-white and non-European peoples. The selected play, which is from Africa, clearly illustrates this view as seen below. In the 1990s deconstruction, which was the reigning mode of avant-garde critical theory and practice, was replaced by different forms of new historicism and related types of criticism that emphasize the embeddedness of literature in historical circumstances. This was a radical move of course geared towards a change in history.

Steven Greenblatt was the first proponent to come up with the appellation “new historicism” in 1982 in his work titled *Introduction to a Special Issue of Genre* (Vol. 15). He called his critical work “Cultural Poetics” because he wanted to show his concern with literature and the arts as integral with other social practices that in their complex interactions make up the general culture. Greenblatt projects himself as the leading proponent of this theory in his article entitled “Invisible Bullets in *Shakespearean Negotiations*” (1988). He usually opens a commentary on a work of literature either with an unexpected historical anecdote, a luminous interpretive detail in an insignificant literary text or in a non-literary text. In the above-mentioned article, Greenblatt begins by reading a selection from Thomas Harriot’s *ABriefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588) as a representative discourse of the English colonizers of America. This discourse, without its author’s consciousness, confirms “the Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud,” which nonetheless draws its audience irresistibly toward the celebration of that power. This historicist also holds that Harriot tested the English power structure that he attests by recording in his report the counter voices of the Native Americans who were appropriated and oppressed by that power. This concept can be read in the aforementioned plays by Rick Salutin.

Furthermore, Greenblatt reveals that princely power is based on predation, calculation, deceit and hypocrisy. This emanates from his reading of the dialogues between Prospero, the imperialist appropriator and Caliban, the expropriated native of his island, in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1975). He raises similar parallel modes of power-discourse and counter discourses from Shakespeare’s *King Henry IV* and *V*. These plays fail to scruple and record the dissonant and subversive voices of Falstaff and various other representations of Elizabethan subcultures. The audience in Shakespeare’s plays ironically accepts and even glorifies the power structure to which it is subordinated because the counter-establishment discourses in the plays are so managed as to trick the said audience. Greenblatt however highlights a central ideology of new historicist critics of Renaissance Literature by applying a conceptual pattern and the subversive-containment dialectic to the plays. This is what he says to that effect in *Introduction to a Special Issue of Genre* (Vol. 15): “The thesis is that, in order to sustain its power, any durable political and cultural order not only to some degree allows, but actively fosters “subversive” elements and forces, yet in such a way as more effectively to “contain” such challenges to the existing order” (195-196). Greenblatt is thus revolting against this pretentious hegemonic attitude.

Michel Foucault had raised a similar concern when he established that under a dominating regimen of truth, every attempt to oppose the powers that be cannot succeed thus have to comply with it. Contrarily, cultural materialists, a group of new historicists, consider this view of the general victory of repression over the forces of rebellion as pessimistic and quietist. These historicists insist on the capacity of rebellious ideas and practices, including those brought out in their own critical works, to effect drastic changes. Cultural materialists identify with a revolution hence they form an integral part of history making. The dramatist chosen for this study fits in this category, no doubt.

Raymond Williams, a British neo-Marxist critic, is the inventor of the term “cultural materialism”. Other British scholars, especially those who are concerned with literature of the Renaissance, have adopted the term to indicate the influence of Marxism on their mode of new historicism. They retain a version of Marx’s view of cultural phenomena as a superstructure which in the final analysis, is determined by material or the economic base. They emphasize that:

Whatever the ‘textuality’ of history, a culture and its literary products are always to an important degree conditioned by the material forces and relations of production in their historical era. They are particularly interested in the political significance, and especially the subversive aspects and effects, of a literary text, not only in its own time, but also in latter versions that have been revised for the theater and the cinema. (196)

These critics, such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, in *Foreward to Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985), stress that their criticism is oriented toward political intervention in their own era. Their effort can be regarded as commitment geared at transforming a social order which exploits

people on grounds of race, gender and class. American exponents of new literary history, who are political activists, suggest similar ideologies. In fact, a number of them attest that if new historicists limit themselves to the analogy of examples of class dominance and exploitation in literary texts, but stop short of commitment to change the present social order, it will imply that they have been co-opted into complicity with the formalist criticism that they set out to displace. As already said severally, this theory is both historical and revolutionary thus greatly gives insight to the chosen topic and is of great assistance in the reading of the play under study below.

III. HISTORICAL PERCEPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

It should be recalled that this article is entitled "A Historical Perspective on Cameroon Anglophone Writing: A Study of John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*". This section therefore concentrates on the study of historical events and manifestations in the selected work. To begin with, Mary Jane Miller and John Nkemngong Nkengasong confirm an assertion made under the New Historicist Theory discussed above. Writers of this theory hold that literature emanates from the society and also informs society. Miller in "Two Versions of Rick Salutin's *Les Canadiens*" (1980), confirms this when she states that the play uses characters and events immediately familiar to its audience. Furthermore, she reveals that the political and social facts as professed and re-enacted in both versions of the play can be verified by the experience of the spectator. In like manner, when we asked Nkengasong the question: "Are you conscious of the fact that your play under study and other works depict the history of our dear fatherland? This is how he responded to the question in an online interview:

It has been said over and over that the writer does not write in a vacuum. He lives in a society with a history, a culture and a politics. Depending on the worldview he wants to present, he combines both reality and the imagination to create a fictional work by drawing from those three sources. If it depicts the history of fatherland, it is not the writer to say but the critic because in most of my works the characters and sometimes the loci are fictional. So, it is the critic to interpret the work according to his or her own valued judgement. (1)

This researcher therefore attempts to interpret or analyze Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers* from a historical perspective in this article. However, it is borne in mind that this is a fictional work and not a historical account in isolation.

John Nkemngong Nkengasong's plays, especially that chosen for this survey, are also suitable sources of African history typified by his indigenous Cameroon. However, his tone or approach as a committed post-colonial literary critic and writer is satirical. This claim will be justified as the work develops. In *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, for instance, the playwright restates the neocolonial history of Africa in general and Cameroon in particular through his subject matter and characters.

A Voice demands a crumb of bread from the lead character called Creature. The latter tries to evade this demand and get away but does not succeed. The Voice further makes several revelations to Creature. First it reveals its identity as Traourou, who died and was buried abroad. The Voice, which represents Traourou's ghost, adds that he was deceived by the "Alps," the Europeans supposedly, into believing that he was about to die. He then gave up his post and everything to a son he nurtured. The "Alps" also exploited him, he further reveals, and his country's rich resources. They made him think he was a friend but to his greatest dismay, they rejected him when he needed them most. The Voice actually laments the loss of his "cap" that is, his position as the head of state. His corpse regrettably lies in a foreign land, not even in the Alps for they equally rejected his corpse (32-33). Deception of African political leaders by whites thus dates back in history before, during and also after the colonial era. Additionally, in recent times, African girls have also been deceived with easy access to other continents and attractive pay packages for house-keeping jobs or white-collar jobs among others. Unfortunately, they only discover when it is too late that these attractive offers are nothing but a farce.

Nevertheless, the Voice admits his penchant for power which led to his doom. He promises a violent mystical revolution in his home country if his cadaver is not exhumed, brought home and given a befitting honourable funeral. The Voice ironically claims that his corpse deserves a great funeral for all the inhumanity he showed them (

35-36). This is dramatic irony. Normally, the dead body of such a brute should not have any decent burial. The Voice justifies his claim by saying that there is always something good in a devil. Vaulting ambition is the cause of Traourou's downfall. This same theme caused the fall of Edmund in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), and Dr Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1631). Their ambitions are varied but all lead to their downfall. Edmund, an illegitimate son, wants his legitimate brother, Edgar's inheritance by all cost thus, he becomes a villain. Macbeth wants to be king of Scotland, thus he becomes a cruel murderer and ends up being murdered too. Faustus on his part sells his soul to the devil for twenty-four years in exchange for magical powers which will render him exceptional and the most powerful. Traourou is a dictator who clings to power for three decades. All these obsessions lead to doom.

We are accordingly cautioned by the authors never to be over zealous like the aforementioned characters. Remember that to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

After a thorough reading of *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, one can declare that the author is talking about the two heads of state that have ruled Cameroon since independence. The story is similar to what actually took place in Cameroon historically. He must be out to warn present and future Cameroonian leaders to beware of a good number of things, for instance: Western deception and exploitation, the repercussions suffered by African dictators in particular and dictators in general, the ruthlessness of power mongers and the doom that awaits them. All these vices serve as a serious warning to any leader or prospective leader to beware that power is short-lived. They should use their offices to sow seeds of unity and development for the common good of the people. Selfish rulers will obviously end up in self-destruction and devastation of the society by extension. This is a serious call for revolution on the leaders because historical facts attest doom for any callous dictator.

The Voice reveals the untold suffering that the citizens are facing in silence. He says there is “acute famine” and “ravenous misery” (36). There is dryness everywhere ranging from the barns, wells to life in the clan. The dry image painted by the author here through the Voice is sure indication that the leaders and the Western people have milked the land dry of its natural resources. As a consequence, the citizens are suffering a lot from famine and poverty. This situation has to be checked so that the clan will continue to exist. It is common knowledge that the West has continued to use post-colonial leaders to exploit the resources that nature has provided to the colonized and their colonies. These natural resources range from minerals, forests, fertile soils, cash crops to manpower endowed with different skills. This claim is historically verifiable in any former colony.

In continuation, the Voice suggests that it is better to kill people instantly as Traourou did rather than torture them slowly to a painful death by starving. “[...] Now tell me, which is kinder evil? Cutting men’s necks at once or starving them to death?” (36) He says when Traourou cut necks there was sighing, meaning that there was relief contrary to current continuous untold suffering. Traourou probably killed only trouble makers, reason why a sigh of relief followed. This is to say that it is preferable to die instantly than having a long period of agony before death. It is obviously an intended satire on the ruling government to rectify its method of governance.

Furthermore, lawless cabinet members, described in this work as terrible leaders, should be sacked and replaced by men of integrity. The president himself is not spared in this sarcastic revolutionary description by the Voice as seen below:

[...] My bastard brother has run mad, suffering from chronic indecision. The place is filled with robbers, butchers, lepers, maniacs, traitors [...] who have taken advantage of his idiocy to wreck the clan. The idiot calls himself a democrat in order to defend his foolishness, a seed too large for him to swallow. I never could try it, even with all my wisdom. What does power gain in being democratic? (36)

These words are not only tough factual revolutionary revelations but an indirect call for a positive change if the country has to emerge, progress and develop. None of these virtues can materialize if the leader of a country is not level-headed and smart enough to decipher when his closest collaborators are not living up to expectation. If he is surrounded by white-collar thieves, murderers, maniacs, traitors, you name them, he must cause a revolution in these ranks for the country to develop. What is highlighted in the quotation above is a visible part of Cameroon history which is seeking for immediate remedy.

The Voice, which represents Traourou’s ghost, confesses that he was a dictator. “A tyrant rules with the barrel of the gun, and that was me.” (36) He thinks his successor’s choice of trying to embrace democracy, a mockery and asserts that power has nothing to gain in being democratic. To Traourou therefore, the best way to consolidate power is to be a dictator. Many a world leader, especially in Africa, are actually tyrants even if they pretend to be democratic. Democracy in Africa, so far, is window dressing to a larger extent. Many leaders want to stay in power for life. It is common knowledge that in recent times, many African leaders have either changed or attempted to change the constitutions of their respective countries in order to stay in power. Some have made fake promises to hand over power to the younger generation but shamelessly changed their previously applauded decision by wishing to contest in the same election. When they are forced to leave, they want their children to replace them. These selfish leaders also amass wealth to the detriment of their subjects and do every other evil thing unimaginable but carefree about their citizens. This cannot be democracy at all.

The Voice further informs the reader that there are only two systems of governance namely: tyranny and democracy. He stresses that a dictator rules by oppression while a democrat “must be an intelligent man who is capable of weaving events expertly to convince and outwit an always critical community” (36). While admitting that he was a tyrant, the Voice concludes that a line of action which his successor does not possess is needed in both systems. He is therefore saying that leaders should look before they leap because the present leader embraced democracy without carefully examining what it entails. This is the Voice’s remarks:

But my lunatic brother ran into democracy with over-zealousness, without objectives. And because of his incompetence, all tribes of rogues who work with him in the palace have seized the opportunity to ruin the clan and enrich

themselves, threatening to murder him in bits if he attempted to resign. (36-37)

Through these words the character of the current leader is painted by his predecessor who claims to know him so well. The latter is over-zealous, short-sighted, incompetent and not brave enough to face challenges or criticisms, hence; he meditates resignation, a form of escapism. His collaborators however do not allow him to step down. Since they are partners in crime, they fear that they may either have to face trial, serve jail terms, be exiled or forced to reimburse what they embezzled as it is the case in many contemporary societies including ours.

In addition, the Voice continues to protest against what is happening in the society today as a result of the heartlessness of bad leaders. The human predicament is painted by the Voice as follows:

Now there is no order and the clan is lifeless. You can only hear the breathing of choking men, of gagging children, of strangulating mothers. There is a terrible plague in the clan. My bastard brother has auctioned the clan for fine red Alpine wine. That's why he croaks like an overfed toad. (37)

The diction used here by the Voice signifies that the people are in bondage. "Choking men, gagging children, strangulating mothers, terrible plague, auctioned" all portray that the citizens cannot express themselves despite their suffering. The society is totally in ruins and no one can say anything about it. This is a subtle call for change because this is not what obtains in a true democracy. There should be freedom of speech and human dignity respected. Traourou's voice warns the current leader to watch out for Western deception which has victimized him. It should be noted that this phenomenon is historical. If he does not change this mentality and his way of doing things especially his relation with the West, he will end up even worse than his predecessor as earlier predicted. The ghost, after his bitter experience abroad, also advises the leader using the words "You are better here" (idem) suggesting that life back home is best not in a foreign country. Traourou died abroad but his ghost is not at peace because he is buried in a strange land. That is why he wants his corpse to be brought home so he could rest in peace. With this fictional situation that depicts Cameroon history, we conclude the study of history in *Black Caps and Red Feathers* and move on to the conclusion.

IV. CONCLUSION

Demonstrably, literature emanates either from colonial, political, cultural, religious or economic history. Thus, literary works are not simply fictional but written against a historical backdrop, as new historicists suggest. The past informs the present which projects the future. Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers* illustrates this in addition to other concerns such as exposing the negative consequences of a dictatorial regime. Post-colonial African leaders have much to learn from this play. First, they should collaborate with intellectuals and writers, who are visionaries and kindhearted. There is need to correct the flaws of Traourou who was deceived by the West into believing that he was an ally. Eventually, he was abandoned after being exploited. His blown up love for power made him a ruthless dictator who ended up in a fiasco. Leaders should be democratic instead. That is, involve the people in decision making and have the people's interest at heart so that they can lead with love and care and leave a worthy legacy on their exit from power. After a perusal of Nkengasong's *Black Caps and Red Feathers*, one can confidently conclude that the Cameroon Anglophone writer, like his or her other peers, is greatly influenced by the socio-political and cultural history of his or her epoch.

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