

THE TRUTHFULNESS OF A CUNNING FEATHER IN *THE MAGIC CALABASH* BY NANA GREY-JOHNSON

Abib SÈNE

Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies
Cheikh Anta Diop University- Senegal
senabb2@yahoo.fr

Abstract: Set up in a political and economic troublesome context, *The Magic Calabash* is a one-way mirror by which Nana Grey Johnson observes the Gambian society. He gives the itemization of any unknown or invisible reality that shows adhesiveness in the political and economic landscape of the Gambian Republic. In this paper, we target to paint the economic meltdown that puts the ordinary citizens in an after-effect situation and denudes the Gambians into sheer desperation. A long with that despondency, goes a feeling of self-lost and self-destruction which is deftly clogged by a beacon of hope incarnated by a newly born generation. It targets, as well, to highlight the inhumanity experienced by the Gambian people who are indeed dived into a far fetching dream that cannot but be disillusioning. It underpins a whole population self-deconstruction and self-renouncement, portraying the political system as a metro-political device that sucks mere citizens who, indeed, redefine their relationship with their existence as human beings.

Key-words: politic, ill-governance, gobbling, citizen, hopelessness, misery.

Résumé: Écrit dans un contexte de troubles économiques, *The Magic Calabash* de Nana Grey Johnson, dans la précision du détail, met en surface les réalités connues et inconnues qui caractérisent la vie politique et économique de la société gambienne. Dans cet article, nous faisons la peinture des fondements de cette crise qui a plongé le citoyen lambda dans une situation de désespoir de cause. A ce désespoir, s'ajoute un sentiment d'autodestruction que seule une balise d'espoir incarnée par une nouvelle génération pourra habilement endiguer. L'article vise également à mettre en évidence l'inhumanité vécue par le peuple gambien qui, en effet, est confiné dans un rêve d'un futur improbable. De plus, l'article sous-tend et démontre le renoncement de toute une population assujettie par un système politique dont le dispositif hautement métropolitique asservit et déshumanise le citoyen ordinaire.

Mots-clés: politique, mauvaise gouvernance, *kuus-kuus*, citoyen, désespoir, misère.

Introduction

Led and dominated by a one-major ruling political party, the Republic of The Gambia stepped down in a weak economic context that made life difficult for the Gambians in the early 1990s. In suchlike context, Nana Grey-Johnson, through *The Magic Calabash*, writes out, in the minutest detail, the social, political and economic crises that befell on his country. He sinks his pen into the customary and traditional beliefs and realities to shape out the day-to-day heartfelt concerns among his fellow-citizens. Through a canny style, Johnson strongly criticizes the bad governance of the Gambian state during the long reign of the *People's Progressive Party*. Having regard to such a fact, we take a deep interest in analyzing the umbilical cords that links the temporal and the spiritual powers in a society in which the handful ruling minority close the doors of opportunity to the great majority of the population. The latter, who kneel down under the pressure of a hectic existence, agog life for death and death for life. Thereupon, it will be adequate to base our analysis on the theory of "accumulation by dispossession". According to its definition given by Jean Batou, *the dialectic of dispossession and accumulation is a topical point that gives ground to primitive and modern capitalism*. (Batou 2015 p.21).

In *The Magic Calabash*, Nana Grey Johnson resorts to the capitalist stand of the *People's Progressive Party* in the meanwhile of Jawara's incumbency to knuckle down to the paltry consequences that stem from the former's ruling system. How and why the demonized world is paralleled to the world of humans? How despair has led mere citizens to extreme solutions they resort to to bail themselves out? In a context of dictatorship and total destitution, how is the future of the Gambians described and illustrated in *The Magic Calabash*?

Then, it will be particularly appropriate to challenge the political and economic realities, as they are described in the aforementioned novel, in looking further into the issue of the dialectical crossing of righting the wrong and wronging the right in context of non-possessory right and wealth accumulation. It will, as well, be interesting to unmask the side of falsehood of the gangrening yoke of a fantasizing political power-system.

1. The World Politics and the Demons' Milieu: a Telling Parallel

Theorized by David Harvey and Jean Batou, the notion of "accumulation by dispossession and by encroachment" highlights the centration of wealth by a group of individuals or by a specific community to the detriment of the vast majority. That situation can bring about desperate reactions among the have-nots who, indeed, may venture into awkward bids to emerge from poverty and insolvency. Such reactions can be observed in *The Magic Calabash* in which poor and decision-makers vie for accumulation by possession and dispossession. A game of centralizing and decentralizing plays out to surface and ironize a parallel between humans and non-humans.

The New Town inhabitants' hassled lives are the tree that hide the bigger picture of social realities. Erubami, a former government messenger, and her wife are the set examples for many Gambians whose existences grow dark in the midst of a hopeless environment. Not being able to reject with entire word the way of life that imposes upon them, they stop nursing expectations to their highest pitch. Indeed, in a country where citizens interval the metes and bound of their very beings by daily tips-off, life cannot but be hunched by a pointless and demeaning paranoia. New Town is pinned to the ground of despair. Erubami, his wife and suchlike citizens writhe in pain to make ends meet:

Nothing is normal nowadays [...] people walk in the middle of the road and cannot hear the car horns. Schoolboys are going mad. They take drugs and smoke Jamba. [...] Only the poor have lost their jobs. While everything remains the same at the top, they tell us about the government programs that will make us happy again. But programs don't put food on our table.

(Nana Grey-Johnson 2004, p.4)

These words from Erubami, magnify a labyrinthine collective world in which the Gambian poor social classes are enmeshed and waived like guttersnipes by a totalitarian regime that condemns the masses into an open-mouthed discrimination: "only the poor have lost their jobs while everything remains the same at the top" (p.4). Nana Grey-Johnson describes than the Gambian Republic as a country where misgoverning, social and juridical segregation outstrip the have-nots of their *raison- d'être*. The latter make belch of hate and bitterness for being nagged about and hashed into a life or death issue. And Erubami to state:

The government is a club and people like us don't belong to it [...] no electricity for us to listen the radio, but they can send money to England and America. And when things go wrong they take away our jobs" (p.5).

A naked existence that crunches on the ground of a defective hope gives basis to pulling and pushing reasons that rush Erubami into the world of bogeymen. He risks his being, both for the best and for the worst, in engaging a life and death combat against the *kuus-kuus* in the purpose to snatch away one of the latter's magic hats. Indeed, in the Gambian society, the belief in *kuus-kuus* is rather irrational and popular. Said to be nocturnal creatures, goblins or *kuus-kuus* are neither gods nor human beings. Short and little beyond measure, they are bequeathed with mystical powers. On their big heads are "stuck" hats that set and fix their deified endowments. Erubami's victory over the malicious creature puts him on the right edge of a must-come fulfilment. He then walks out of the night, defeating the symbols of peculiarity and maliciousness. The doors of the world of "retrenchment, no jobs, no money, no food" (p.31) are crack-opened to let flourish a light of hope and prosperity.

Ghosts and goblins are indeed described as being “mysterious things” (p.31) that ceil New Town with a cloud of mischievousness and unablensess. Their presence in the country is a furthering point on the parallel regime which is, in fact, headed by men and women who, like specters, play havoc and instill a hellish sort of life among the Gambian citizens. The author informs in this ways:

Groups of people sat on the benches nearby talking about their problems: the retrenchment, no jobs, no money and they had a new topic: mysterious demons were a coming out at night and causing troubles. They were accidents, fires, even deaths. No one could explain what was going on but everyone was afraid (p.31).

A parallel of existence and a symmetry of actions are designed out to show up the closeness and likeness between a ghostly imposed nocturnal life and a worked out political rule that demeans and limits the Gambians’ freedom and blooming. Enameled with a superficial democratic functioning, Jawara’s regime finds its expressions in an organized malfeasance through which Gambians are dispossessed of their capital of goodwill and convenience. Abdoulaye Saine states: “The Gambia under Jawara bears the image of a plateau occasionally shaken by volcanic eruptions” (Abdoulaye S. 2008 p.98). Left to their own, the inhabitants of Banjul and New Town make do with their beliefs and faiths in God to expect life to grant them with a better future. In her Sunday prayers, Granma Lou voices out:

Dear God, listen to the prayers of your people [...] conquer Satan and his army who walk among us and try to destroy us. Protect this community, Muslim as well as Christian, from the evil happening and dark times that we are facing. Master Jesus, bring New Town back into the light (p.31).

Johnson centers then a critical viewpoint on an economic system that moulds up class exploitation and a political agenda that engages “antagonistic class structure (Bekman J. and Adeoti G. 1962).

Under strong bad governance, The Gambia collapse into a grey zone of malevolent spirit and other evils beings. The country is hunted both by visible and invisible forces that put the lambda citizen in an uncomfortable in-betweenness. Indeed, the political sketched out confederation between Senegal and the Republic of The Gambia in the mid-1980s strongly divided, in both sides, political actors of both countries. Launched by President Abdou Diouf (Senegal) and President Dawda Jawara (The Gambia) in 1981 (Encyclopédie Universalis, 2016), the confederation will be glorified by some Confederationists, but desacralized by separationists who indeed blew out the hope of building a Senegambia state in 1989. Saine illustrates: “the two presidents agreed to form the Confederation of Senegambia, [...] Baptized

“marriage of confusion”, the Confederation survived eight years before its collapse in 1989” (Abdoulaye S. 2008 p.98).

In highlighting the rising philosophy of a political union between Diouf and Jawara, Grey-Johnson finds it well-suited to hint up the irresoluteness that winds down many a Gambian person. He pinpoints the topic in a by-election and lets the one of the candidates’ voice of rings as follows:

Worst of all, are we Gambians or are we Senegalese? The Senegalese have taken over our country and they call it confederation. I say ‘yes’ to African unity because we are all Africans, but ‘no’ to this Confederation. Gambia is not ready for confederation (pp.39-40).

The philosophy of *one for all and all for one* is skewed and mortally wounded. Therefore, the wizards of disunion nonplus the key-influent individual and introduce discrepancy among the Gambian people. A political chaos glosses then over to jibe with a social destitution which hits lengthwise the whole country “The Gambia during Jawara’s rule experienced one of the lowest living standards on the continent, being ranked 166 out of 173 countries, according to the UNDP Human Development Index”. (Abdoulaye S. 2008).

Enclosed in a cage of point-blank misery, the populations, who mooch off the government’s aid and permanent assistant, mouth off their grievances in a high-ringing voice. They goof off the street of New Town and cannot any longer stomach the travails they experience: “We have no work, no rice on our dinner plates, no money in our pockets, no electricity in our houses and no petrol even to drive our taxis, but we still sit on benches and chew our ratt sticks” (p.41).

New Town is in troubles. And its persecutors are *kuus-kuus* and political actors. The ones being the whiff of the others in terms of nuisance and ill-fate. Officials play false with the Gambians and gnome play hell with the latter. Life becomes nightmarish in the city and to bail oneself out by hook or by crook appears to be a must-be stance. Therefore, Nana Grey Johnson wedges apart the hiding mask of the Gambian authorities and lays naked the grasping grips that stiffen life and blooming in New Town and Banjul.

2. Out of a Decoy: a Beacon of Hope

In a context of a second-best daily existence, the Gambian officials lose themselves in political rocking and electoral concerns. At a time when the inhabitants of New Town yearn for food and drink, job and fulfilment, political decision-makers center their ins and outs on a trail campaign of a by-election. To make the most of this moaning social reality, Erubami bests his destiny and quotidian life with a stolen imp’s property. The magic calabash-like hat is well stocked and kept out of anybody else’s reach. It supplies Erubami, as it magic properties allow to, with uncountable bank notes and thereon staples

Modupeh's husband and family-members with a strong purchasing power and a priceless living standard. The former government messenger makes his pile and backs himself off a fake life.

The rebellious act is a concrete attempt to unlock the "chain of being" that batters the have-nots in the bottommost of nakedness and distraughtment. His struggle against the gremlin, Boy Forth, is a symbolic fight against the depowering political regime in the Republic of The Gambia and against the enslaving conditions grounded on a basis of bad governance. His objective is to dispossess the spirit of their supernatural power so as to detain the command to accumulate wealth. The dialectic of bourgeoisie and peasantry, compradors and masses looms large to express the heights and depths of a society siphoned by his leaders. The latter, hands in gloves with Breton Woods Institutions, embark their people on a course of structural adjustment policies, which, indeed, bring putdownable consequences among the Gambian middle and low social classes. A national report "reveilles financial and capacity constraints that militate against further progress".¹ Standing on their last leg, the populations of Banjul wake up of their slumbering delirium to cross the bordering line of the byway life of hellions to doff the dime times in which they are condemned.

Erubami thorns apart the dark side of his troublesome life and jostles for the best. From an eked out life, he blooms into abundance and prosperity. Crappy existence is stowed in cupboard of bygone days and life moves into a phase of solidarity and commonness. Modupeh's husband, indeed, moves from a bar-goer to a noble donator, who is nimble-handed when it is about to assist or yank out relatives and close friends.

After the candidate finished his speech, Erubami invited his old friend into his bedroom. Fakaba Ceesay was shocked when Erubami put three bundles of paper money in his hand. 'Eru this is me than two thousand dalasi (p.71).

To crown their connubial life with a wedding bunch, Eru and Modupeh, in Sunday best, beat the drum of their dream to make it happen. They express unity in a common gain. Their elan is furthered by distant and close relatives who do not skimp on resources to loom high above any festive expectation:

It was not possible to have a small party after a wedding in New Town. Twelve guests had been invited to the church, but by one o' clock in the afternoon, Granny Lucy's house and backyard were full of people. [...]. A group of singers sang about Granny Lucy's grandfather who they had never known (p.56).

¹ Republic of The Gambia National Report 2012.

The rocking and celebratory wedding proves enough the egregious opulence the public messenger puts on his shoulder for well-exposed images. Eru plays it rough and gets it might. His dismissal of the public service is smothered into a parallel success that raises and ranks him in the sheer class of the privileged-few in New Town. The goblin's hat stands as a positive value that humanizes the cracks of the prosperity gap between the rulers and the ruled. Politicians rob off the lambda native, and the latter spoils the evil spirit to survive. In so being, roles are subverted in a nation degraded and hashed by an economic and financial retrenchment. The hopeless solution to rob gnomes of their mystical and money-making powers is a highlighting x-ray that digs out the unvoiced and unsurfaced economic troubles that unwind throughout The Gambian Republic.

However, Erubami's victory over a dim fashion of life will be ephemeral. The *kuus-kuus* claims back his magic calabash and threatens the mugger's house and at large the whole community in New Town. Forth backlashes and arrogates *himself* with the duty-bound to wreak havoc in the whole country for the sake of *his* magic hat.

Ill-intentioned, Forth, the *kuus-kuus*, casts spells on the economic backbone of New Town. The crucible and financial waypoint of the nation is inflamed. The city is in fire. Flames unfurl everywhere and bear a holistic dimension through which is expressed a message of decadence. A connection is therein established between the consuming fire and the gregarious instinct of the citizen who, undeniably, suffers from the pathology an illicit income. The symbol of fire helps then to read the modal axe of the human being's inner quest and destructive nature. The conflagration smartens as a causal action that indicates a judgeliike investment of an angry detonator. The brownie makes the fire incarnates an aspectual nature that goes yardarm to yardarm with the political regime which, actually, hold back the inhabitants of New Town in a circle of a hellish existence.

Money was for the farmers but now it is used for new cars and big houses for the managers. And the same thing had happened with other government projects for the poor people: 'boreholes that need repairs, village gardens without water, town halls that aren't built. Where did the money go for these projects? Not into the pockets of poor people! (p.40).

The image of fire and the symbolism of the social and financial oppression come into resonance through the might of the law to rush Banjul and New Town into the bottom trawling of a disabled destiny. Evilness spreads out in the city and Erubami's family is not spared. His wife and his unborn children are victimized by Boy Forth and other pixies. Modupeh's husband's wrong deed gets the gnome play god with the surrounding and offsprings of their ill-doer. The personalized act is collectivized in its punitive consequences:

You took what was not yours. You took the curse into your neighborhood and into your house. The curse brings death! [...] the curs that has been causing all the problem in New Town [...] if he doesn't take it back, more people will die (pp.91-98).

Banjul is strengthened. New Town is up and down. Erubami is required to hand back the magic hat. The latter is not akin to cut off his revenue stream. He is aware of the danger and the risk he and his family members run, but he does not want to walk back to poverty and destitution. Eru then hoaxes the fiend a second time and runs amuck with the magic hat he is supposed to restore to *his* owner. In so being, Grey-Johnson puts light on the idea of self-destruction that appropriates the hopeless citizen in days of economic meltdown under Jawara's regime. Erubami revolutionary act is a much telling answer to Shakespeare's thorny existentialist interrogation: "to be or not to be" (Shakespeare 2011, p.61). The inhabitants of Banjul grab and take to eke out a living. They have no room for manoeuvre to breathe a word to a decent life. Men and women get hands akimbo and farewell a dead and gone life of farnient. In such a context, Modupeh's husband takes his cross to head toward a supreme sacrifice. Experiences on social transformations are achieved out of common sense. He, thereupon, challenges again his naysayers and defies the ornery spirits that purposefully threatens life in New Town. Erubami, willfully addresses to Boy Fort and its likes in the following:

You have so many hats. Your father has one, your mother has one, why can't I keep this one?" this hat keeps me from eating grass. The money shows my boss and my friends that I am still a man. Do you understand? [...] if you want it you'll have to fight for it. This hat is mine. I want to live like the bosses. I want a good house and a good school for my son (p.95).

The die is cast! Desperation stands as a roadblock and turns the civvie into a diehard actor that truncates good for evil. "I've got a gun under my shirt [...]. I will shoot them if they touch my hat" (p.96). The magic calabash then majestically and indifferently magnifies the magma-life in The Gambia, but indirectly points an accusing finger to the political regime, which, sledgehammers make his populations wring hands in bemusement and submissiveness.

This love and hate relation at best between human beings and kobolds is zoomed to the top. Indeed, having fought at length against strange creatures, Erubami appears to be a groundbreaking example of a self-determined man who collects the pieces of a dislocated kismet. His struggle to liberate himself from the claws of destitution finally heeds a voice that entangles with doubt and renouncement. Nonetheless, Modupeh's husband, under a strong pressure from his cousin, Quashie, gives out and steps back to hand over the magic hat

to *his* owner. A choice is done! Another social reality blows up to wind again throughout Banjul and New Town. The spirit of self-determination and self-sacrifice wanes away from the lambda dweller and de-obstacles the road to alienation and deprivation. A stressful situation and a social discomfort invade again Eru's household and, beyond them, the Gambian populations.

However, by dint of perspective and a positive afar vision, Nana shows up a promising and hopeful up-coming with the birth of twins in Erubami's family. Modupeh's gives birth to a triplet and, by the way, unbind the fate of a whole community. The symbol of the trinity is convened to speak the language of safety and liberation. Indeed the older generation can rely on the newly born one to heal their twelve Egyptian wounds. *The beautiful ones are born* in Banjul and a new page is hopefully to be opened for the sake of a fresh vista engrossed with a mopped of a dead and gone past.

Conclusion

In closing, the recourse to the world of djins and goblins is a literary device that gives Johnson the margin to draw a closed circle between the ruler, the ruled and the malevolent spirits. Nana Grey-Johnson raises the theme of self-destruction conveyed by a gloomy stark nakedness. On the road to a fairer and a more egalitarian society, the mere citizen is left behind. Being at sixes and seven, the inhabitants of New Town and Banjul turn their daily pathway into an everyday risk-taking. They open the box of tricks to lug themselves out of the grinding poverty. In parallel, Johnson opens the doors of hope in giving hints about a newly born generation that can be expected to keep a close eye on the philosophy of "the country before the self", much to the well-being of the Gambian people." Through *The Magic Calabash* Grey Johnson marks the flaws of the regime based on dispossession and impoverishment of the masses. In so doing, he demarks the corruptive identity of a system that debases the subjugated into self-denegation. The magic calabash excitingly lays naked a three-pronged concatenation of violence, demagoguery and ill-governance. Banjul is then corned in a terrible paranoia of coercion. And the ordinary denizen puts on the receiving side of maltreatment. Written in an all-particular context of the harshest and abest Jawara's regime, *The Magic Calabash* inks out the derivative policies that put forward decision-makers' power-glorification at the expense of the needy majority, who flounder to fulfil a dream of selfness. The political duress is then stressed out and the intermixture of disgust and deceitfulness underlined, in minutest details, to arouse concerns and foster a favorable page-turning in the rule of law and good governance in the Gambian Republic.

Bibliographic references

ABDOULAYE, S. "La Gambie" In *Gouvernance du secteur de la sécurité en Afrique de l'ouest : les défis à relever*, Genève, Centre pour le contrôle démocratique des forces armées, juin 2008.

- AllGambian.net, "News: AI- Brooklyn Group Deplores Human Rights Abuses in the Gambia", <http://www.allgambian.net> (mai 2006).
- Amnesty International, June 2014, Index: AFR 27/006/2014.
- BATOU, Jean. (2015), "Accumulation by Dispossession and Anti-Capitalist Struggles: A Long Historical Perspective" in *Science & Society*.
- BEKMAN, J. and Adeoti, G. (1962). "Intellectual and African Development: Pretention and Resistance" In *African politics*: Zed Books: London.
- COOPER, A. (2005). "Letter of Protest: The Gambia: CPJ Outraged by Conduct of Probe into Editor's Murder," In *Committee to Protect Journalists*, <http://www.cpj.org/protests/05ltrs/Gambia16june05pl.html>.
- Foreign Policy and The Fund for Peace, "Foreign Policy Failed State", Index July/August 2005 ; May/June 2006, ForeignPolicy.com, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com>.
- JOHNSON, Nana Grey. (2004), *The Magic Calabash*, Banjul, DBC Printers.
- United Nations. (2012), *Republic of The Gambia National Report*.
- Shakespeare, William. (2011), *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene1, London: Collins Classics.
- The Civil Society Associations of the Gambia and the Coalition for Change Gambia. (2014), *The Gambia: Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review 20th Session of the UPR Working Group*.