

# On Becoming a Guinea Fowl: a creative response

Wales-based Cameroonian writer, poet, playwright, and human rights activist [Eric Ngalle Charles](#) was commissioned to create a response to Zambian-Welsh director Rungano Nyoni's new film.

Additional context written by Toki Allison, Made in Wales Project Manager, from a conversation between Eric and Chief Executive of [Bawso](#) and Rungano Nyoni's mother, Mutale Merrill.

This is not a review.

\*\*\*

As I watched *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*, the question of *Omaja, Ojojahneli Ma'ameh, bounced around my head*.<sup>1</sup> It cut across the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." And challenges us to discuss the responsibilities that come with it. The death of an uncle opens up all kinds of questions. In African spirituality, the dead do not die; they return to the forest. This is true, but it also depends on the age and hierarchy of the dead. Matriarchs and patriarchs do not die; Kings and Queens do not die. They return to the forest. In the case of Uncle Fred, whom we meet in questionable circumstances, we are left wondering if there's a killer in our midst. The need to cover him as a last respect for the dead is crucial. Are we also covering his sins?

As the film unfolds, we find out that he was a molester and predator. His nieces were not safe around him, but the dynamics of family settings and his atrocities were kept quiet by mafia-styled secrecy. This is quite common.

---

<sup>1</sup> You have returned, but what did you bring us?

Dead and the aunties come crawling, their faces masking different agendas.

I enjoyed the *Liengu La Mwanja*, *Mami Wata* and Irenosen Okojie's *Curandera* effect, the mystical ability to be in many places simultaneously.<sup>2</sup>

The role of the widow. The question of riches and rags. This spoke directly to me, diolch yn fawr iawn, Rungano Nyoni. When my father died, his family started a chain of events which saw me removed from his will, disowned and chased out of the family compound. It is one of the reasons I left Cameroon to swim in the murky rivers of exile. Our son, brother, and uncle are dead. Now, let us come for his property. Powerful scenes that cut deep again into our family dynamics. The aunties played their roles with aplomb.

Grief, like a perennial river, stops and flows again. At the airport, the mother is not lamenting the death of her brother, but his death drags her through a corridor of darkness. She wails and drops to the floor; Rungano Nyoni, the brilliant writer she is, does not tell us that Shula, the protagonist, too, was one of the uncle's victims.

As a speaker of Bakweri, one of the Bantu languages, I enjoyed the simplicity of some words. *Nyama*.<sup>3</sup> *Wanna Wa Mi* cuts through the film, amplifying hope from hopelessness.<sup>4</sup>

Uncle Fred and his three fallen heroes. Though Nsansa, one of the characters, is elaborating on us the rape of a child, Rungano uses humour to deadly effect. In a state of permanent drunkenness, a mask disguising the pain that Uncle Fred inflicted

---

<sup>2</sup> Goddesses and healers.

<sup>3</sup> Meat

<sup>4</sup> Our Children

on her, Nsansa drops truths like a time bomb. It takes a village to raise a child. This has consequences, sometimes deadly.

There are those uncles and aunties who only visit families when the drums and dirges of death are being played. They come for the extra portions of *Nyama*, Rice, and Okra. If asked if they wanted a drink, some would ask for a large bottle of Guinness.

The stories of Shula, Nsansa, Bupe, and Uncle Fred, the role of the widow, and the wealthy and low-income family dynamics are a testament to the writer *and director Rungano*. She has weaved the magic of the African oral tradition along with Bantu mystics. Watching the film felt like I was holding my umbilical cord, guided by the flashing lights of fireflies. The neighbourhoods looked familiar; the half-finished houses were a welcome sight. The giant billboard with the Ministry of Deliverance quotes the book of Ecclesiasticus and neo-colonial waves, and this film has it all. As a writer in the diaspora, my bird was the *Sankofa*, but when I left Chapter Arts Centre yesterday, I walked and made sounds like a Guinea Fowl, squawking and stretching my neck. Rungano Nyoni took me back to the landscape I once called home.

\*\*\*

Following Eric's response, I arranged a chat between Rungano's mother and women's advocate and activist Mutale Merrill, and Eric, to talk about the themes of the film, and for Mutale to add some further context from her unique perspective as a woman of Zambian heritage living in Wales, and obviously, as Rungano's mother.

Mutale spoke about the deep themes of sexual violence against women running through *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*. It is a dark work, not without humour, but exploring how women respond to violence and the dynamics that are created in a family, when secrets are held.

Mutale told us some key tenets of Zambian culture. Women take the role of showing emotion — they scream and cry in grief, they crawl. Men are emotionless, they must belie no feeling. In *On Becoming a Guinea Fowl*, the uncles reinforce this hierarchical structure, and their power is customary.

In Zambia, historically it is expected that at any time someone may be asked to recount the story of how a person has died. This is not just a discussion on the day of the funeral, but an important piece of family history that must be revised, respected, and retold on command. Everyone's capacity to carry on the story is essential, therefore Shula is forced by her aunties to join the funeral.

The law is clear in Zambia: property should be split three ways — between the parents, wife, and children. But who is privileged enough to know the law? Uncle Fred's widow's family are poor and unaware of their legal rights. Tradition prevails.

But what about the relevance of the guinea fowl? So symbolic and relevant it's in the title. Mutale tells us that guinea fowl are seen to be the protectors of the homestead — they screech and they defend. They represent the vocal women of the community, they guard.

Mutale also spoke of her own work with Bawso. Bawso provides support to black minority ethnic communities and individuals in Wales affected by abuse, violence and exploitation. Mutale has spent years supporting women in Wales who are survivors of sexual abuse. Her daughter Rungano would attend meetings from a young age and bear witness to this community of women.

Rungano's film explores power dynamics, family secrets that long to be shared, the undercurrent and damage caused by permissible sexual violence. These are universal experiences and themes, spanning cultures and identities. Though there are idiosyncrasies specific to Zambian culture, most of the themes can be seen across international communities, including Wales.

Where we can see a parallel is in strong female roles. The Welsh 'mam' takes that matriarchal role of power, connecting the family, playing the emotional lynchpin. It's not dissimilar.

*On Becoming a Guinea Fowl* looks at trust in female connections, at building strength through sharing trauma, at forging together and standing strong. Nsansa's mask of drunkenness is a tell about her experience and brings out her vulnerability. Bepe's fluid transitions between such varied states of being (broken and hospitalised to buoyant and life of the party) is a tell of the constant adaptation required to respond to her community's shifting story.

Mutale believes the film will be received differently in Africa, where perspectives will be informed and more of the symbolism relevant and familiar. Where there has been so much death due to HIV/AIDS, where everyone must roll with the punches continuously, where the dead die but come back. Death is not over quickly and moved on from, like here in Wales. It is embedded in the fabric of life, it is everyday, common, revised, familiar.

Rungano's latest film has the power to connect Welsh and African audiences, to galvanise people in a shared humanity. Her portrayal of Shula and her family is tender and intimate, and a reminder of solidarity in community.

If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual abuse and you'd like support, please call Bawso's helpline. 24 hours a day. 7 days a week. 0800 731 8147. Or email [referrals@bawso.org.uk](mailto:referrals@bawso.org.uk)

*On Becoming a Guinea Fowl is coming to cinemas across the UK from the 6th December 2024, distributed by [Picturehouse](#).*

***This article was commissioned by Film Hub Wales as part of its Made in Wales project, which celebrates films with Welsh connections, thanks to funding from Creative Wales and the National Lottery via the BFI.***

### **About the contributors**

#### **Eric Ngalle Charles**

*Eric Ngalle Charles is a Cameroonian writer, poet, playwright, and human rights activist based in Wales. A PhD researcher at King's College London, he was awarded a Creative Wales Award Fellowship in 2017 for his work on migration, trauma, and memory. Parthian Books published his autobiography I, Eric Ngalle: One Man's Journey Crossing Continents from Africa to Europe (2019). He recounts his journey to Europe, spending several years in Russia and elsewhere seeking refuge. He was selected as one of Jackie Kay's best British BAME writers with a unique theatrical voice. He sits on boards at Aberystwyth Arts Centre and edited Hiraeth Erzolirzoli: A Wales-Cameroon Anthology (2018). The 3 Molas (2020) is an anthology about Cameroon and Wales. His poetry Collection Homelands Seren Books (2022) was published in April.*

#### **Mutale Merrill**

*In addition to being a mother and grandmother Mutale has held senior leadership positions for over thirty years in the public and third sectors, in the field of social care, health, housing and international development. She is concerned with improving and transforming the lives of individuals by working in and through government and*

*organisations. She was the founding Chief Executive of Bawso, a leading third sector service provider for Black Asian Minority Ethnic women and children facing all other forms of abuse and violence. Her other senior management roles have included being the first Chair of the Care Council for Wales, the first Vice Chair of Cardiff and the Vale University Health Board, and the first Independent Chair of the Board of Community Health Councils in Wales. Mutale is currently on the Welsh Government Board as a Non-Executive Director.*

*She holds a post graduate degree in Business Administration (MBA) and has been very fortunate to receive a number of awards over the years which illustrate the regard in which her work is held.*

### **About Bawso**

*Established in 1995 Bawso is the lead organisation in Wales providing practical and emotional support to Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) and migrant victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, human trafficking, Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage. Their vision is of a future when all people in Wales are free from abuse, violence and exploitation. To achieve this vision, they have been working tirelessly for twenty-nine years and to end all forms of Violence Against Women. They have supported more than a quarter of a million people.*