

Colonialism as a Legacy behind the Political Turmoils in Africa: A Case of the Interventionist Role of the African Writer

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempted to establish the point that the autocratic and dictatorial tendencies of neo-colonial African political rulers have their antecedents in the colonial legacy of authoritarianism which the colonial officers in Africa exercised during the colonial era, in their quest to subjugate the colonized people. The paper identified those colonial legacies as: the Western image of the colonized, the brainwashing of the colonized people to make them look like grasshoppers in their own eyes, and the imposition of colonial authority on the people. The neo-colonial political rulers inherited these psychological traits as evil legacies from the ex-colonialists and proceeded to apply them with regards to their rulership methods, virtually showing no sympathy and esprit de corps with their own people. On the counterpane of this avidity for power is the African writer whose role is to identify sympathetically with the suffering of his people and to make the autocratic ruler to re-direct his focus or correct the misguided tendency and anti-democratic antics so that the governed may begin to reap the fruits of good governance. In trying to solve this problem, the writer has encountered serious problems. These problems include threats to his life and seduction with financial allurements; failure to accept which, the Machiavellian rulers will try to eliminate him. The paper is wrapped up with the envisaged contribution of this write-up to Africa development. There are recommendations on how the writer's role can be enhanced in the bid to make Africa better governed now and in the future, for the overall development of the continent.*

Keywords: *Authoritarianism, Dictatorial, Colonialism, Machiavellian, Legacies and Governance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The role of the African writer in promoting good governance and sound democratic principles for sustainable developmental growth in Africa is the idea conceived as a back-up for this paper, whose title is anchored on the identification of colonialism as a legacy behind the political turmoils in Africa. There are two reasons for this assumption. The first is that Africa's problem of democratic failure is endemic and begs for the pungent contribution of the African writer. The second is the need to highlight the ways and means whereby colonialism has defaulted Africa, thereby laying the evil foundation of bad governance in the colonized societies.

This paper therefore looks at or considers the issue of promoting stability, good governance and sound democratic principles in Africa through literary works. The paper identifies the major cause of political turmoils in Africa as colonialism which, although ended half a century ago in most parts of Africa, is still influencing the thinking of African dictators today.

The African writer has tried to expose these evil seeds of colonialism which have given rise to negative influences on Africans, so that Africans may begin to realize, reappraise and appreciate true independence; not the fluke that colonial rulers conceded to Africa as independence. This is from the perception of African writers that African people have the need to be mentally (or psychological) liberated as they are physically, from the domineering influences of the former colonizers who, although appear to have withdrawn from their ex-colonies, are still wielding a neo-colonialist horse-whip power over those ex-colonies which still remain subservient to them.

It was on this basis that the literary tradition known as the 'postcolonial literature (to which most known African writings belonged) cropped up to attack the negative influence of colonialism in Africa, and thereby help the continent regain its dignity and self-identity. This was expected to lead to Africa reverting to its cultural systems of governance and social order that had provided for the welfare of various ethnic origins and nationalities, or evolve another system of their choice that is different from the systems of the colonial powers that had become identified as instrument of brutalizing Africans in their homes.

In the final analysis, this paper highlights the role of literature in promoting the issues of independence, governance, social justice and self-determination, which can only be successfully enthroned in Africa when her leaders begin to lead by personal examples, which is the hallmark of true leadership.

What are the Colonial Legacies?

A legacy is simply defined here as something left or bequeathed to someone in a will, or handed down by a predecessor. The way colonialism came to Africa was by such crude processes that Africa's cultural and traditional life (our heritage) were attacked and condemned by colonizers as primitive and barbaric. The subsequent introduction of western education and culture (including religion) by brute-force went a great length in debasing the cultural lives of Africans before their own eyes.

One way by which the colonizers debased the image of the African people was through the false reports of European scholars and early European travelers or explorers in Africa. Nkrumah (1959:9) commented that:

The history of Africa as presented by European scholars had been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. ... such disparaging accounts had been given of African societies and cultures as to justify slavery, and slavery posed against these accounts seemed as positive deliverance of our ancestors...

The grand-plan of colonialism was the enslavement of the African continent; although the colonizers told the world that they were acting on 'divine plan to deliver a continent in darkness' (Nkrumah, 1959:21).

Having colonized the continent, the next step towards enslavement was brainwashing the people and setting them out against their kiths and kins in a divide and rule action, according to Satre:

...the Europeans undertook to manufacture native elite. They picked out promising adolescents; they branded them as with a redhot iron, with the principles of Western culture; they stuffed their mouths full with grand glutinous words that stuck to the teeth. After a short stay in the mother's country, they were sent home, whitewashed. These walking lies had nothing else to say to their brothers... They only echoed their masters voice... (Satre, 1967).

This brainwashing became clearly evident in the attitude of Africans that had been to the whiteman's country (the been-tos). They exhibited the superiority mentality of the 'been-tos' over other people; and this attitude is observed both in the physical Africans and the fictional ones in literary works.

European colonization of Africa was by forceful imposition of authority over various African states. Historically, one recalls such incidents as the Akasa Raid, the annexation of Lagos, the deposition of kings Kosoko, Nana of Itsekiri, Japa of Opobo, and the Gunboat politics where gunboats were used to brow-beat the various kingdoms in the Niger Delta region and force them to sign treaties of cession with colonial officers. These incidents showed that although the slave trade had ended in paper, it started off in a different guise through colonization. These brute-force annexations took place over a century ago; yet, the lessons taught our predecessors and contemporaries are still retained and transferred to the political arena in the militancy of political operations in Africa, which have no regard to the democracy and governance as we expect them to be operated.

How have these legacies contributed to Africa's misrule?

African political rulers are of two types. There are those who come to power by fair or foul democratic process, but who stay put in power. There is the other category of rulers who come to power through the barrel of a gun; in other words, by military coup. In both cases, the rulers come to power and decide to remain permanently by force. In this vein, Pilkinson recalled a statement credited to Idi Amin Dada of Uganda that: '*if the Whiteman will come from his country and dominate and enslave Africa by sheer force, why may I not rule my own people without the Whiteman's permission?*' (Pilkinson, 1994:31). It is clear from the above statement that African dictators must have borrowed a leaf from colonization in taking or seizing power in their countries. This is probably why Davidson feels that Africa's problems came from Africa's colonial background:

Africa's crises of society derive from many upsets and conflicts ... but the root of human failures and corruption is seen to arise from the social and political institutions within which the colonized Africans have lived and tried to survive. Primarily, this is a crisis of institutions... (Davidson, 1992:9).

It is probably from the realization of the imperialist's destruction of the continent that Achebe earlier made the point that:

European imperialism had defaulted Africa, a once stable and orderly society and enthroned confusion, anarchy and disorder (Achebe, 1995:51).

Even after conceding the so-called independence to Africa, it was discovered that the imperial powers only handed over fake power to ‘the good boys’ who would be trusted to carry out their biddings in a neo-colonialist trend. The issue of democratic rule in the post-colonial Africa was never intended to be established by the imperialists because it would not be in tandem with their conception of African independence, neither would it be to their credit or advantage to give total freedom to their ex-colonies. In every situation, the colonial rulers were still in control of the ex-colonies, as can be seen from the statement made by the first President of Gabon, Monsieur Bongo that: *Gabon is independent, but between Gabon and France, nothing had changed, everything goes on as before* (Fannon, 1967).

Imperialist interference in Africa’s political matters is the major contributor to the misrule in the continent. This is partly for the reason that the imperialists want to use the instability resulting from misrule in Africa to prove to the world the authenticity of their claim that Africans were not capable of ruling themselves, thus, providing the alibi for neo-colonialism and undue interference in Africa’s internal matters today.

Secondly, they want to prove beyond doubts that the African continent cannot operate democratic institutions like Western Europe, and to justify colonialism, even when it presently no longer holds sway.

It is on the basis of correcting Europe’s portrayal of Africa in the bad light or image as uncivilized, barbaric and inhuman; and to interrogate the political misrule and bad governance by African dictators that African writers have steeped their energies. Many African writers have clearly stated their roles in their societies in very clear terms. In the first place, a literary trend in the late nineteen-fifties and sixties, known as the ‘Negritude Movement’ by writers of the likes of the Diops, Leopold Senghor, Camara Laye, Oyono, Fannon, and other writers of French expression, and English novelists like Achebe, Ngugi to an extent, came up. The principal ideas in the Negritude were to:

- i. reject white culture;
- ii. have a fresh and sympathetic look at the African culture;
- iii. establish a cultural unity of the black people;
- iv. establish link with the Mother Africa; and
- v. assert the African humanity and dignity. (Soile, 1998:18).

It is probably in tune with the above declarations that, Achebe chastised African writers who tended to denigrate Africa or not be involved in the polemism about African struggle in their works, when he says:

... it is inconceivable to me that a serious-minded writer could stand aside from this debate or be indifferent to the argument which calls his full humanity into question. For me, at any rate, there is a clear duty to make a statement ... quite simply put, it is that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty; that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity... (from Egar 2002:24)

This is in response to the colonial attitude of devaluing the African past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo or even as a historical void. Fanon remarked that children, both black and white were taught to see history, culture and progress in Africa as beginning with the arrival of Europeans (Fanon 1967). It is partly against this attitude of the colonialist that African writers try to restore Africa’s humanity and dignity by debunking these fallacies about Africa peddled in Europe.

African writers have a full grasp of their role and vision concerning their societies. A few of their views will be investigated here. Achebe defines the writer in Africa as:

a human being with heightened sensitivity, he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations... the writer cannot therefore be unaware of monumental injustice which his people suffer... (Achebe, 1975:79).

In line with Achebe’s ascription of humanity and sensitivity to injustice to the African writer, Donald Carter believes that the African writer must also have sympathy with the suffering of his society:

The African novelist frequently does deal with conspicuous suffering ... His people are closer to the edge of experience. He must therefore exercise sympathy before he can exercise art... (Carter, 1974:138).

The writer cannot be separated from politics because he must intervene in all aspects of life of his community. This is why Mphahlele declares that ‘*the writer is the sensitive point of his society* (Mphahlele 1962).

Sekou Toure of Guinea stressed the revolutionary role of the African writer in these terms:

... there is no place outside the African revolution for the artist or for the intellectual who is himself concerned with and completely at one with his people in the great battle of Africa and of suffering humanity (Fannon, 1967).

In his own contribution, Ngugi Wa Thiong declared that major African writers see the writer as:
a warrior who should have an opinion on everything from geography, history, physics and chemistry to the fate of mankind...(Ngugi, 1993:17).

The opinion of Ken Saro – Wiwa (1999) is that:
Literature must serve the society by steeping itself in politics by intervention, and writers must not merely write to amuse or take a bemused critical look at the society. They must play an interventionist role.

To Ushie (2007):
... in the continent as a whole, writers have been in the forefront of cultural producers in the fight for the survival and well-being of the prey-Africa. They have fought consistently on the side of the oppressed, right from colonial days (P.27).

The view of Niyi Osundare, more or less, sums up the major opinions of writers:
... a writer in Africa is a person that people look up to, in whose work people are trying to see how they relate to their social, cultural and political problems (Osundare, 1999:21).

The above views sum up the opinions of African writers about the role the African writer is expected to play in the society. These show that the writer in Africa has an enormous contribution to make both in restoring confidence to his society about itself, and in ushering and sustaining good governance in his country so as to maintain peace and order. The society sees the writer as their opinion leader, expected to make its views and feelings known to both the society and the world at large. The writer is therefore mainly the teacher.

The Writers' Problems

Just as the writer in Africa is saddled with enormous responsibilities, so are his problems enormous. Of all these problems, this paper will zero-in on two. These are mainly low readership arising from a dwindling reading culture of the society, and indiscriminate arrest, detention and summary execution of writers.

Both multi-national and local publishers prefer publishing school texts owing to quick turn-over, to novels whose readership have dwindled over the years. This shift to the school texts has become an added advantage to bad rulers in Africa because there is less attack coming from African writers. On the second point, political rulers in Africa view the writers as enemies for exposing their bad rule. For this reason, they deal with African writers in various cruel manners to serve as deterrent to others. For example, the assassination of Dele Giwa, a Journalist on October 19th 1986 through a letter-bomb, and the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of the Ogoni co-activists are cases that cannot be blotted out from the political history of Nigeria too soon. There are other lingering cases across Africa. This unhealthy climate has made the writer unable to assume his posture fully as the teacher and the sensitive point of his society. It is for this purpose that Larson (2005) observed that:
African writers have ended up suffering more indignities, threats, humiliations and genuine terror than their counterparts in the rest of the non-western world...

The Importance of Literature in Good Governance

The inestimable role that writers can play in good governance in Africa can be delineated in the great works of writers like Achebe, Soyinka, Armah, Awoonor, Ngugi, Aluko and a host of others in Africa, whose works have tried to shine the light to the path of true leadership. Of Achebe's six epic novels, three specifically are rooted in politics and good governance, which are of central concern to this paper. *A Man of the People* (1965) centres on the corruption that mars a newly independent country symbolically represented as the Republic of Afrumacoland. This name makes the novel a representation of the African nations that are torn by human graft, avarice, corruption and misrule. As a result of these evils, the civil regime is overthrown by a military coup d'état, which is common feature of African continent today.

This novel exposes the link between art, objective deduction and prediction because barely two months after its publishing, Nigeria came under the first military coup, just as *A Man of the People* ended. This event led some critics to insinuate that Achebe pre-empted or anticipated the event. Another writer who, like Achebe, wrote against bad rule was the late poet, Christopher Okigbo. His poems – 'The Coming of the Elephants', 'Hurray for

the Elephant', 'Thunder Can Break', etc in his movement titled *The Paths of Thumber* were poems predicting the military coup, the counter-coup and the warning about the looming civil war, written between 1965 and 1966.

Another work of Achebe's that tries to call the Nigerian rulers to order is *The Trouble with Nigeria*, published in 1983. Achebe tries here to caution the nation against bad governance on the part of the leadership: ... *the trouble with Nigeria is, simply and squarely, a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land, or climate, or water, or air, or anything else. The Nigeria's problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership ...* (Achebe, 1983:76).

This chastisement of the trouble with Nigeria on its leadership is one of the most direct attacks on Nigeria's leadership by the writers. It calls on the conscience of the political rulers into play, just as Thomas More's comment in *A Man for all Seasons* by Robert Bolt, when he says: *When a statesman forsakes his private conscience for the sake of his public duties, he leads his nation by a short route to chaos* (Bolt, 1960:12). In these literary works, we see the writer as a teacher, instructing his county on the way forward through the demand for good governance, although the political leaders rarely hearken to the words of wisdom from the writers.

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is another tirade against misrule. This time he descends on military rule, which he does not see as a corrective regime or the elixir for civilian blunders. The main character in this book is a Sandhurst-trained officer who seizes power through a military coup, becomes a dictator and turns against his friends who try to oppose his autocratic regime. He kills them, but he is later toppled and killed in another coup, leaving the nation in an unstable state. Achebe, like other writers, knew that the pen is a mighty weapon against autocratic regimes. This was partly Soyinka's reason for saying that the writer *has the ability to deliver his society from the fatalities and horror that surround it*' (from Nwoga, 1978).

Expatriating on this comment, Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* which made its debut on the eve of Nigeria's independence as 'a festival of the tribes' was intended to curb the existing euphoria over the expected fruits of independence on October 1, 1960. Soyinka warned that corruption, graft and misrule, which marred the so-called great and glorious ancient kingdoms and empires of Ghana and Mali were still plaguing the present tribes. The evil-doers of the past were portrayed as the re-incarnated corrupt people of the present. When we know the historical antecedents of the present, we can then foretell the future. This way, Soyinka draws the ears of the nation as a warning against misrule in a new nation and, by extrapolation, warning the entire African continent against misrule and political turmoils.

Aluko on his part, is concerned about misrule and corruption in his novels *Kinsman and Foreman* (1963), *Chief the Honourable Minister* (1965) and *Wrong Ones in the Dock* (1984). *Kinsman and Foreman* portrays the conflict between two kinsmen: Titus Oti, the British trained engineer and administrator, and his kinsman, Simeon Oke, the corrupt foreman of the same department. Titus does not spare his kinsman for his corruption on the ground of family relationship. He exposes his corrupt relation who is later found corrupt, dismissed and exiled to Cameroun. Aluko is saying here that good governance implies attacking and exposing corruption and graft wherever they are found, and that these should not be condoned for any reason whatsoever. Ignoring these lessons has led the country (and Africa as a whole) to terrible crises of confidence and misrule. *Chief the Honourable Minister* is also a condemnation of corruption and misrule at the ministerial (i.e. cabinet office) level. Alade Moses finds it difficult to resist pressures from his god-fathers in politics which contributes to wide-scale corruption and misrule in Africa. Aluko's *Wrong Ones in the Dock* addresses judicial problems and corruption in the country's judiciary. These three novels look at corruption at the departmental, the cabinet and judicial levels. Even his novel, *His Worshipful Majesty* is also a critical look at the operation of the local government system under the preponderant influence of the westernized system, which brought it into a crucial battle with the vested traditional authority that feels that its autocratic powers are being eroded by the newly established local government authority.

These analyses of various works by African writers have shown that writers pens have never been blunted in the face of misrule. In 2004, Achebe rejected the national honours award from the federal government. His reason was that Nigeria's condition was too dangerous for silence: *Daily Trust*, May 19th and May 21, 2004; *New Nigerian*, May 19th, 2004 and *The Champion* May 18th, 2004 etc. Although many writers are afraid of sticking out their necks, there are still those who can boldly stand their ground in the condemnation of misrule in the continent.

The cases that have been analysed in this paper are preponderantly from Nigeria, they are, nevertheless, not peculiar to Nigeria because, criss-crossing African from the East to West and North to South, no country can

be said to have been spared of the presence of autocrats and dictators and their misrule and blunders. The popular revolution recently recorded in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Libya are pointers to the problems of bad governance in Africa, and the need for the African writer not to rest on his oars.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper is conceived to positively contribute to the promotion of good governance and democracy for sustainable developmental and economic growth in Africa, in its exposure of the crucial role the African writer has been playing in furtherance of democratic rule. It is this interventionist role in championing the awareness and sharpening the desires of the African people towards good rule and well-being of their people that have made them (the writers) targets for elimination by autocratic rulers. No matter the threats, African writers must not give in to fears of terrorism and elimination; else, the society will be destroyed by the activities of self-seeking dictators whose avidity for power is not curbed by any moral scruples or restraint, but are propelled by selfishness, graft and avarice, the same desires behind slave trade and its successor, colonialism.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends the following as a way of enhancing literary production of African works for the well-being, sustainable economic growth and good governance of African nations:

- i. that all those concerned with the pen must remember that for good governance to be enthroned in Africa, the pen must be shown to have its power upheld over the sword. Cowardice should not make writers to draw back from their challenging role in the society;
- ii. that writers should exercise zero tolerance to unreasonable loyalties to powers that be, on the ground of either brown envelopes or esprit de corps syndrome;
- iii. that the reading of African works should be encouraged in all academic institutions, both secondary and tertiary, so that the youth will be able to internalize the reading culture, patronize African writings and appreciate African literary works for the messages they convey;
- iv. finally, that local publishers should patronize African works and help to market them, rather than concentrate more on school texts.

If only political leaders can heed the opinions of African writers, Africa will begin to witness a sustainable developmental growth. progress and prosperity of any nation hinge on good governance and true leadership.

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