

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hope and Despair in Post-independence African Leadership: A Reading of Achebe's *A Man of the People*.

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Abstract

Due to combination of factors such as educational crisis, institutional corruption and political instability, Africa experiences leadership challenges, and it still lags far behind in the community of nations. As a result, the current paper explores the crisis of leadership in Nigeria, by extension in Africa, through Achebe's satirical novel: *A Man of the People*. During the movements for independence, the hope of Africans was not only to enjoy real freedom that they were once deprived of; but also, to achieve social justice and socio economic and political development. Africans, completely, entrust their future development in the hands of their political leaders. Unfortunately, Africans' hope turns into despair as the new elites fail to address the structural challenges of liberation promises and socio-economic prosperity. In other words, in post-independence Africa, Africans witness only the continuation of exploitation, marginalization, injustice, corruption.... Thus, leaders become egocentric by prioritizing self-interest and nepotism over public comfort. Using a post-colonial theory, as a framework in reading *A Man of the People*, the paper seeks to redress that political stability and social justice are sine qua non for the development of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general.

Keywords: Hope, Despair, Post-Independence, Leadership, Disillusionment.

1. Introduction

Africans, through their motivation towards the movements for independence, dream that independence brings freedom, enjoyment, justice, and development. In fact, "leadership implies the ability to pilot and navigate the society into desired circumstances and conditions of living. It requires the ability to be knowledgeable, innovative, explorative, flexible, accommodating, altruistic and skillful" (Bature and Joseph 480). As a result, Africans accompany their leaders to get independence just because they desire a common freedom and satisfaction. Then, as stipulated by Dadja-tiou, "the attainment of independence by most of African countries in the sixties aroused in the mind of most Africans a feeling of happiness and hope. Most Africans thought that their conditions

were going to shift from poverty to prosperity since the destiny of the continent is now in the hands of their own brothers who promised a better future for the continent" (289). Africans aspire for a better future as they see their fellow Africans now become heads of states. They think everything would go as desired, but their hope turns into despair.

In fact, when the so-called African nationalists replace former colonizers, they reject all the expectations and needs of the people. They only consider the power as a chance to enrich themselves and their kinsmen. Aladegbola and Jaiyeola quoted in Sebola assess that "the public service[s] in Africa have become 'a big business' other than 'a big service to public. Accumulation of wealth has become a good character of an African politician and a public official.

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Competition on the looting of public resources determines the success of an individual politician and a public official in the society" (7).

In Africa, after independence, getting a position in socio political institutions becomes an opportunity to do business with the public fund. Thus, the implementation of corruption enables officials to become heroes in their families and societies; as reflected through Chief Nanga, in *A Man of the People*. Indeed, Awortu and Michael witness that "African leaders in the early years of independence inherited the colonial state and all the administrative structures that were anti-people. They took over the leadership of their independent states and continued in the act of exploitation, corruption, greed, ethnic sentiments, nepotism, exploitation, selfish service, class struggle among others" (29).

After independence, new leaders continue only to exploit and corrupt their own brothers. This can help establish a similarity between white colonizers and new leaders in Africa. Also, Dadja-tiou attests it as,

Independence become meaningless and useless because the expectations of the poor populations remained unsatisfied. This situation brings disillusionment and despair. All the promises made by African leaders before independence have been unfulfilled. They betrayed the poor populations who fought together with them in order to obtain independence. (293).

It is then clear to Dadja-tiou that independence is worthless when the needs and expectations of the poor populations are put aside. The aim of this paper is to prove how the hope of Africans become despair after achieving independence. By applying post-colonial theory and through the reading of Achebe's *A Man of the People*, the paper focuses on the hope of Africans before independence, and then their despair after independence. It also seeks to point out some recommendations that would enable Africans to take steps forwards in the community of nations.

2. An Overview on the Post-Colonial Theory

Post-colonial theory relates to the literature of colonized countries that are now sovereign and independent. It refers to the commitment and fulfillment of the colonized people to get independence. Then, Oliveira attests that:

Post-colonial theory is a theory or a critical approach that deals with literature produced in

countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. It may also deal with the literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that take colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. The theory is based around concepts of otherness and resistance. (50)

For Oliveira, post-colonial theory is a tool to better explore and understand the realities of colonized countries from colonial to post-independence period. It is a theory used by post-colonial writers to shape events about colonized countries.

Accordingly, Miralles states that "postcolonial criticism usually involves the analysis of literary texts produced in countries and cultures that have come under the control of European colonial powers at some point in their history. Alternatively, it can refer to the analysis of texts written about colonized places by writers hailing from the colonizing culture" (16). So, it is a theory that helps analyze some literary writings and understand social, cultural, religious, political, and economic realities of former colonies. Indeed, post-colonial theory can be the suitable critical approach to explore and present the hope and despair of Africans during post-independence period.

3. Hope of Africans Before Independence

In the course of history, many countries, the world over, fought armed revolutions or long wars to obtain their independence. This includes among other countries: the United States of America and Vietnam. Africans also fought together for their common liberty and independence. Movements have been heading by Africans, particularly nationalists to combat slavery and colonialism to achieve common independence for African countries. For instance, it is proved by *The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development* that "the concept of Pan-Africanism has played a crucial role in shaping leadership in Africa. Early pan-Africanist like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey influenced African leaders to unite against colonialism and embrace a vision of African unity and solidarity" (4). Then, during the movements, Africans expected freedom in political, social, and economic organization.

In fact, Okune and Timothy agree that "it is often the case that when people are under oppression, they usually dream about an ideal situation that may or may not materialize someday. They hope for and sing about a glowing future time when freedom shall be realized" (45). Accordingly, the oppressed and

exploited people dream always for change, liberty and development.

Moreover, *The African Centre For Leadership, Strategy & Development* assesses that the hope of Africans is to adopt "...leadership policies aimed at consolidating national unity and establishing sovereign governance structures. These policies were primarily influenced by the need to replace colonial administrations with indigenous leadership, build national identity, and overcome ethnic divisions" (6).

The above quotation seemingly seeks to implement laws that would enable Africans to establish peace, unity, and identity. Bature and Joseph rightly attest that: "the primary responsibility of leadership in any society is the creation of favorable conditions for investors and the people to engage to development" (486).

As Africans nourish the hope to be sovereign politically, socially, and economically; they entrust their future development in the hands of their leaders. For instance, Dadja-tiou assures that "... many Africans nations have had in mind that black people promising to improve the living conditions of their fellow citizens" (290). As a result, they strongly praise their leaders for the achievement of their dream; that is to be free and independent.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe translates such ideal leader that Africa is looking for, though ironically, when he writes from the onset of *A Man of the People* that: "no one can deny that Chief the Honorable M.A Nanga, M.P was the most approachable politician in the country. Whether you asked in the city or in his home village, Anata, they would tell you he was a man of the people" (1). We understand, from the above quotation, that the common expectation of Africans is to have leaders who align with their expectations. However, after independence is gained their hope turned into despair as the newly elected leaders work hard to achieve their personal goals rather than achieving the spirit of giving back; that is to work for the sake of the community that elected them.

4. Despair of Africans after Independence

The dream of Africans turns into despair after the years of independence. Africans realize only the continuation of exploitation, injustice, political instability even when their fellow Africans replace the white colonizers. Then, as underlined by Okune and Timothy, "some African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Christopher Okibgo, Gabriel Okara, etc, have been able to capture

the themes of political corruption, civil strife, despair, and disillusionment in post-independence Africa in their works" (46). African post-colonial writers feel a duty to denounce different bad practices of new African leaders after the years of independence. They contemplate and shape the real images of common people's despair and deception through the irresponsibility of the leaders.

Achebe, in *A Man of the People*, depicts the reality of African leadership after independence, which is still existing up to date. In fact, Dwivedi assures that "Achebe's *A Man of the People* reflects his distaste for post-independence Nigeria [Africa] as a place where leaders who had fought for independence become traitors after attaining power, and sacrificed their country in exchange for middle-class comfort" (3).

In the novel, Achebe proves the reality about leadership in Africa after independence where leaders sideline the populations. They only use their followers as objects to achieve their personal or political objectives. Indeed, it is said that "He [Chief Nanga] had two good reasons for wanting the road tarred – next elections and the arrival of his buses" (Achebe 43). This refers to Nanga's neglect of his people. He only does good things when it is time for election. Thus, "that row of ten houses belongs to the Minister of Construction [Nanga].... They are let to different embassies at three thousand a year each" (Achebe 54).

When people entrust their hope in the hands of their leaders, leaders seize the chance to become millionaires with big cars and houses. That is why Max (Odili's friend) is surprised by realizing members of the government become directly millionaires during five years in office (Achebe 123). Similarly, Bature and Joseph, uphold that "post-independence African states are enmeshed in conflicts of varying magnitude, endemic economic and political corruption, weak state institutions, policy summersaults, ethno-religious loyalty, nepotism, illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, disease, poor healthcare services and low life expectancy" (474).

What is more, in post-independence Africa, corruption has reached its high level to the extent that even the community has joined the game. It is then true that water takes the form of its container. In *A Man of the People*, Odili hears people from Urua expecting one who can amass public fund and bring to them. They rationalize: "our son should go and bring our share.... The village of Anata has already eaten, now they must

make way for us to reach the plate" (125). Dadja-tiou rationalizes that "unfortunately, after only few years 'office tenure these post-colonial leaders who took over power from their former white colonial masters started developing many vices such as corruption, mismanagement, nepotism, cronyism, embezzlement of public funds, bribery, and tax harassment, to mention but a few" (290).

During the election time, the local representatives and the whole population in the village are convinced and corrupted to stay always behind Chief Nanga, by interest, to win the position. People always expect to have leaders who can share them properties. Odili raises the same issue when he utters:

The people themselves, as we have seen, had become even more cynical than their leaders and were apathetic into the bargain. 'Let them eat', was the people's opinion. 'After all, when white men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?' Of course not. And where is the all-powerful white man today? He came, he ate and he went. But we are still around (144).

It can be learnt through the above assertion that Africans continue to be jeopardized despite the independence they achieved. While some individuals hope for a change of regime; others desperately keep hope in a military coup that according to them would change the situation into better. But an African proverb rightly goes on that: "do not count the victims before the war ends"

It is quite unfortunate that African leaders including the military regimes neglect the needs and promises of their populations. They only consider the power as an opportunity to amass money for personal aggrandizement. In other words, those who carry the hope of Africans, betray them and consider their political offices as a chance to enrich themselves.

Moreover, the poor and powerless populations face an absolute despair when they realize that only the class of elite and middle-class are prioritized in managing different necessary affairs of the nation. These two classes are characterized with corruption, nepotism, embezzlement, abuse, harassment. Indeed, Achebe affirms that "a common saying in the country after independence was that it didn't matter what you knew but who you knew" (Achebe 17). Justice is neglected in the new independent African countries as what matters is who one knows rather than what one knows.

Mbah assures that "from Nigeria to Niger, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Equatorial Guinea, the story is the same: corrupt and incompetent leadership. The present crops of leaders are dragging the continent further into a pit of conflict, poverty, and insecurity; living African economy at the mercy of the west, America and the Bretton woods Aids" (151). Even the military intervention did not bring them hope.

Militaries overthrow political regimes to bring positive change, but after, they become as corrupt as politicians. In fact, Armah asserts that "new people, new style, old dance" (157). It stands for the continuation of exploitation, injustice, and other forms of corruption. For instance, Nwosu and Asiegbu witness that "in Nigeria the political leaders whether military or civilian since independence were people of selfish interests- they were less concerned with the interest of the state" (141). Both military and civilian leaders deceive their populations.

Africans very often use to rely on the military intervention as a solution to the political or democratic instability. They think when there is a coup, justice and real independence would be established, but finally they realized no change. That is even after the Coup d'Etat, Africans continue to cope with leadership challenges. For instance, Tarhamba et al. assure that "the army restores only temporary order as the situations that lead to the intervention are still unresolved despite the military coups" (25). Military officers overthrow the political regime to settle the affairs of the nation, but they do it periodically.

Mbah confirms that "from the military heads of state to civilian presidents, Nigeria has recycled men who has[sic] held the country hostage doe[sic] decades living in its wake a ruined economy and failed political institutions" (149). The statement above means that people lose hope with both civilian leaders and military regimes after independence. Therefore, post-independent leadership does not satisfy people in Africa. As a result, Africans should examine the leadership system, and believe in their abilities to make their hope become a reality.

Through the novel *A Man of the People*, Achebe's overall message is clear. It calls on his readers to understand the reality of African leadership after independence. Achebe brings to surface the failure of democracy in African countries as leaders are not for the people. They consider politics and leadership as their business centers for amassing money. In fact, it is to ensure how corruption and violence impoverish

African continent. Finally, Achebe's message is simply that the problem of Africa is neither colonialism nor lack of mineral resources, but human resources that would translate into good leaders.

5. Recommendation

As it is understood that leadership is the main problem of African continent, African leaders need to restore their leadership and rebuild their nations. Leaders and populations need to have common words in decision-making to achieve common development of the nation. To enjoy real independence and sovereignty in Africa, practices like corruption, nepotism, embezzlement, oppression, ... should be combatted. Leaders need also to prioritize the interest of people. However, Africans should start relying on themselves in order to find solutions to their problems. People should not always rely on the government's assistance; they need to create advantages to let their dream become reality.

6. Conclusion

After independence was achieved, Africans' hope to enjoy liberty and justice but their hope switches into despair and disillusionment. Today, the powerless populations continue to cope with this deception, even with the military regime. Indeed, African leaders consider leadership and politic as business centers to earn money, and then sideline those who accompany them to reach the position. As a result, Africa becomes a reference of famine, violence, poverty, political instability, corruption, ...etc. Achebe's *A Man of the People* is a good example to understand the expectations and deceptions of Africans after independence. Therefore, both leaders and populations have to organize themselves and cooperate together for the common change and development of their countries.

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