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# The African political leaders in the post-colonial novel with special reference to *a wreath for Udomo* and *a man of the people*

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## ABSTRACT

One feature that characterized the political history of most African countries is the evolution from colonialism through the rise of nationalist movements to independence and the fall of the first generation nationalists. Headed by the emerging African elite most of whom had just obtained western education in either Europe or America, these nationalist movements began to advocate “self-rule now”. They do so with the promise that the development of African nations will be faster under native rulers. Given the opportunity to rule their nations, however, things begin to change for the worse against the high expectations of the masses. Greed, avarice, nepotism and corruption have taken over, and have eaten deep into both social and economic lives of the people. This study, which is based on the realist approach to literary criticism, seeks to examine the image of the African political administrators in two post-colonial novels – Peter Abraham’s *A Wreath for Udomo* and Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. The purpose is to find out if, in literature, African countries have fared better economically under native rule than under colonial rule.

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## Introduction

One reason why many African countries started agitating for the end of colonial rule was that many Africans have had enough western education and arguably enough experience to enable them rule their own countries. It was generally felt that the ‘civilizing mission’ of the colonial powers must stop for the African to demonstrate that he has learnt enough from his ‘masters’ and is ready to take his destiny into his own hands. Consequently, nationalist movements were being formed all over the continent, most of which metamorphosed into political parties headed by Africans.

In the Gold Coast (now Ghana), for example, a new political movement – the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) was formed, and in 1947, Kwame Nkrumah, after a varied education in America and Britain arrived at the invitation of its members to become its secretary. According to Amamoo, 1958, the leaders received rapturous welcome wherever they went and it seemed at long last that a stable organization had arisen to fight for self-government (p.8)

Amamoo (1958) further states that the first political party, the Convention People’s Party (CPP) was formed with the masses constituting its support base. These supporters were described as:

The under-paid, and the under-fed, the poor and the needy, the labourers and the petty cocoa farmers, the “dismissed” and the unemployed; the dejected and the frustrated; in short, all those men and women who, for diverse reasons, strongly resented British rule (p.33).

As characteristic of the nationalists, they relied on their power of oratory to lure the highly expectant citizens into believing that a black rule is a panacea to solving the problems of their individual countries.

Nkrumah and his CPP during their (electioneering) campaigns promised jobs for the masses, adequate housing and

improved amenities and conditions. The promise given, coupled with the ardent nationalism which they had aroused, had carried them into the Assembly without any serious opposition. The people were now anxious to see the results. They felt that they had played their part, and expected the leaders to do the rest (Amamoo, 1958:56)

The white colonialists accepted the African ‘maturity’ to rule over their own people or were forced to accept the fact. Based on this, countries such as Ghana and Guinea took the lead in securing power by declaring independence in 1957 and 1958 respectively.

## Research questions

But would the new administrators be able to meet the varied expectations of their citizens? And what happens when their expectations are not met? These are some of the questions I intend to explore in this paper.

## Rationale

My choice of Peter Abraham’s *A Wreath for Udomo* and Achebe’s *A Man of the People* is significant. Published in 1955 and 1966 respectively, one novel is set in a period just before and the other just after independence of many African states. As such, ten years are a long period enough for us to be able to relate the performance of the new administrators to the ideals sung by the various nationalist movements and draw conclusions.

Secondly, the geographical distance between the two authors (Peter Abraham is a South African while Achebe is a West African from Nigeria) is so great that the treatment of a common subject in their works is a proof that such a subject cuts across the continent.

## Methodology

The study entails close readings of two primary texts – Achebe’s *A Man of the People* and Peter Abraham’s *A Wreath*

for *Udomo*. Being a study based on the theory of realism, the researcher found it necessary to frequently relate what happens in the primary texts to historical events in contemporary Africa. My choice of the realist approach is significant because since we are concerned with human society, this theory is able to give a representation of ordinary life without idealization.

### Theoretical Construct

The discussion of the two works is based on realist criticism. Realism as a literary theory has been defined as “the truthful treatment of material.”

It is within this framework that the study wishes to expose the level of corruption and administrative ineptitude that characterize almost all post-colonial African states under native African rulers.

### Literature Perspectives on Corruption

Corruption, according to Transparency International, is “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”. The definition distinguishes between two types of corruption: “according to the rule” corruption, and “against the rule” corruption. Transparency International explains the former as facilitation payments, where a bribe is paid to receive preferential treatment for something that the bribe receiver is required to do by law while the latter refers to a bribe paid to receive services the bribe receiver is prohibited from providing.

### The nature and characteristics of corruption

One form of corruption that is pervasive in Africa is political corruption. Political corruption takes place at the highest level of political authority. It is the illegal, unethical, and unauthorized exploitation of one’s political or official position for personal gain or advantage. Political corruption is usually associated with the acceptance of bribe; but it is more than that. For graft, fraud, nepotism, kickbacks, favoritisms, and misappropriation of public funds are all political corruption when they are committed by public officials exploiting their official positions for their own advantage. For instance, in Nigeria, which is noted to be one of the most corrupt countries in Africa, political corruption is so pervasive that the then President, Umaru Yar Adua, was reported as having publicly admitted that controlling corruption is key to ending poverty in his country.

Corruption has become the major obstacle to economic, social, and political development in Africa. In fact it can be argued that it is the single most inhibiting factor to development in Africa today.

What makes corruption so endemic and uncontrollable is the fact that it is mostly perpetuated by the elite and powerful political figures. These political stalwarts use their offices to frustrate all legal means to get exposed.

This frustration was expressed by Nigeria’s Economic and Financial Crime Commission’s (EFCC) as follows:

You cannot fight corruption (in Nigeria) and go by the rule of law. Everywhere you look it’s them. The elite, they have the courts, they have everything. If you go by the rule of law, you won’t achieve anything. (EFCC Report, p.7)

Human Rights Watch has long argued that the most important measure of Nigeria’s anti corruption record is its success or failure in prosecuting corrupt nationally prominent political figures. Corruption by high-level officials such as state governors who control vast financial resources directly impedes the provision of adequate health and education to Nigerians by diverting the resources that might otherwise flow to basic services. In a broader sense, high-level corruption in Nigeria is

so widespread and so central to the day-to-day workings of government that it undermines the effectiveness of public institutions at all levels, from the national police to local government primary education authorities. (*Human Rights Watch*, August 2010:16).

### Reflection of African politicians

Having thus looked broadly at the nature of corruption, the subsequent section of this paper examines the extent of corruption of African political leaders as reflected in the two texts under review.

When *A Wreath for Udomo* opens, the reader sees Udomo in Hampstead as a scholar. He is then drafted into the nationalist movement that has already been started by Mhendi, Mabi, Adebhoy and Lanwood. Back at Panafrica, Udomo stepped up the fight with active support from the women headed by Selina, the prosperous trader, and becomes Prime Minister of Panafrica. Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* has a more dramatic beginning. At the opening of the novel, Nanga had abandoned his teaching career and has become a member of parliament and Minister for Culture of his country. This man at the centre of the novel is M. P., Minister of Culture and, according to King (1980), a representative figure of the West African politics before and after independence (p.76). Chief Nanga enters politics in the early 1950s but comes to prominence in 1960 when the intellectuals were purged from the ruling political party.

The Prime Minister whips up hatred against all people he calls “university people and highly educated professionals men”, and claiming that “an expensive university education ...only alienates the African from his rich and ancient culture.” (ibid. p.76). King (1980) also observes that Chief Nanga, who never attended a university, led the Prime minister’s supporters, snarled shamelessly for the meaty prize (of being in government), and is now Minister of Culture, and a rich man living in an expensive government-rented apartment of seven bedrooms and bathrooms.

In their respective roles, chief Nanga and Udomo symbolize to their people a dream fulfilled, a total liberation, an opportunity for the African to rule and determine his own destiny. Unfortunately, the people soon realize to their disappointment that those they have helped to be elected are more cynical than they had known them. Just before their elections, the administrators-to-be usually seek to please their people by pretending to be humble and able to solve all the problems of the land. It is this kind of pretence that leads Udomo to refuse to accept money from Selina, his financial ‘backbone’ even though he needs it:

Selina: ‘Keep them’.

Udomo: ‘No..., take the money’.

Selina: ‘No need for anger. I’ll take it’. p.161.

On the surface, one would think Udomo is sincere in refusing the money but this is merely a campaign strategy. If he continues to accept money during the period of campaign, his credibility would wane and people would hardly take him seriously. But for Nanga who is already in government, his strategy is to spend lavishly on people who would in turn vote him again into power.

This he does against his wish but how can he ensure victory in the next election without showing to the electorate that he is generous? Listen to him as he speaks pidgin English:

'You call this spend? You never see something, my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway'. p.15.

This is in reaction to Odili's observation that the Minister is a spendthrift. No doubt, if he feels he is only throwing the money away, why does he continue to give out lavishly? The only explanation is that he is merely pretending to like what he is doing in return for their votes. At this stage they are hardly seen quarrelling with anybody lest they ruin their chances.

And when they are voted into office and come face to face with the reality, they begin to mess up things. Realism thus comes to replace the idealistic visions that characterize the nationalist struggle. Udomo in his helplessness confesses that 'winning a country is one thing, and running it another:

We face problems here. We have to have the men to replace these English men. Running departments isn't the same as making speeches ... Running a country can be more difficult than winning it. (Abraham, 1965:200 – 201).

To Nanga, on the other hand, people should not talk of 'how politics *should* (emphasis mine) be played but how it *is* played!' Both are cunning statements to cover their failures as leaders.

Agovi (1988) aptly describes the situation as one finds it in *A Man of the People* in the following words:

"An insidious corruption has permeated the whole society holding it to ransom and subjecting it to a kind of depraved tyranny and anarchy." (p.151).

The type of corruption includes promiscuity and the inability to distinguish between the right and the wrong. While Udomo flirts freely with Lois and Nancy, Nanga's mistresses stand uncountable. In the words of Odili, 'Chief Nanga has five stories to every one of mine.' Also common to both Udomo and Chief Nanga is the fact that they go in for married women as well. While Chief Nanga seduces Elsie, Odili's girl friend whom he (Odili) had brought home for the night, Udomo went for JoFurse knowing very well that she has been 'liberal' to one of his co-fighters. He helps her to have an abortion and in the process killed her.

This then is the moral level of the leaders that have arisen out of Africa. This moral corruption is intricately bound to material corruption glaringly seen in the person of Chief Nanga. So intense is the pursuit for money in Chief Nanga that the evil has spilled over from the Minister into the society as a whole and has affected institutions like marriage. Everything now has a monetary value and 'What money will do in this land wears a hat'. Edina is seen as a commodity to be sold in marriage to the highest bidder and her father is determined to extract as much money as possible from his in-law, Chief Nanga, who incidentally 'does not lack what to bring.' The direct effect of this corruption is reflected in Joppa's (1982) observation:

L' Afrique, ayant traversé le stade de la lutte pour l'indépendance, est arrivée malheureusement a un stade ou elle voit ses populations devenir de plus en plus pauvres et ses gouvernements de plus en plus riches... p.248

'Africa, having come out of the fight for independence, has unfortunately come to a stage where she sees her citizens becoming poorer and poorer while her rulers get richer and richer...' (Translation mine.)

One would not be far from the truth to say here that the rulers have time for material corruption because they are grossly ignorant of the demands of the office they hold. Udomo has spent a considerable time out of Panafrica and returns only to become Prime Minister over a country he has long lost touch with. Confused about his own role in the party, he confesses:

'I'm just a figurehead. Adebhoy and Selina built the part. They have the real power.' (p.197). By this he seems to say that the ideas of the party are not clear to him and that he is just a victim of an unsolicited confidence reposed in him by Ade and Selina. Chief Nanga's case is even more funny and incredible. It beats one's imagination how a Minister for Culture should display gross ignorance about affairs connected with the ministry he heads.

He was once invited to launch a book, and to the dismay of the reader, the Minister does not know the name of the president of the Writers' Association and has never heard of the name of the country's 'most famous' novel. He thinks the title 'The song of the Black Bird' is that of a song: 'So your society includes musicians as well?'

To cover up his ignorance, Chief Nanga ignores decorum and exercises a misdirected aggression on Jalio, his host, for the simple reason that he (the host) is not dressed to the Minister's taste:

'Let me tell you,' said Chief Nanga in a softened but firm tone. "If you want me to attend any of your functions, you must wear a proper dress. Either you wear a suit... or if you don't want it (the suit), you can wear our national costume." (Achebe, 1966:62)

This misplaced outburst by 'the man of the people' did not take even a naïve character like Odili too long a time to get embarrassed:

It was getting quite embarrassing for me especially when Chief Nanga mentioned a suit and turned to knock approvingly in my direction; for much as I dislike Jalio's pretentiously bizarre habit, still I did not care to be set p as a model of correct dressing

This kind of aggression that extends even to brutality against opponents is a feature of the new African administrators. So we see Udomo becoming very hostile towards those who helped him to attain the present status.

Udomo: 'Leave me alone... Get out of my way' Lanwood: Mike, you don't have to be rude to me, you know. All you have to do is to tell me to go... I am a man, not a dog.' (p. 256)

This protest from Lanwood notwithstanding, Udomo pushes him out of his way and the old man falls 'into the settee'. As if this were not enough, Udomo brutalizes Mhendii by handing him over to the enemy forces of Pluralia to be killed. Udomo does not want to save Mhendi and lose foreign aid (p. 292). And when Mabi complains to Udomo for selling Mhendi to his enemies, he dismisses Mabi with the claim that he has to deal with realities, not with fancy ideas.

As usual, Chief Nanga's method is more forceful. He manhandles Odili, his main opponent in the imminent elections and hires thugs to burn down his car after failing to bribe Odili out of the country with cash and a scholarship. It is Odili who narrates his own experience:

He pulled the microphone away smartly, set it down, walked up to me and slapped my face. Immediately hands seized my arms... He slapped me again and again. Edna rushed forward crying and tried to get between us but he pushed her aside so violently that she landed on her buttocks on the wooden platform. The roar of the crowd was now like a thick forest all around. By this time, blows were falling as fast as rain on my head and body until something heavier than the rest seemed to split my skull. (Achebe, 1966:140)

At this, the citizens feel totally disappointed as their aspirations have not been met. Selina in *A Wreath for Udomo*

does not hide her feelings when she tells Udomo in the face: 'You have betrayed us'; and her reasons:

'There are more white people in our land now than there were when the British ruled.... Indeed, they control all the big industrialization and construction projects. In these areas white give orders and blacks do the work.' (p. 299).

In Nanga's society, however, the people themselves have become so cynical with the slogan 'You chop, meself I chop, palaver finish' that Nanga's corruption is tolerated. Even then a few people like Odili and Max dare challenge him. Udomo, on the other hand is not so fortunate as to get away with it as he is assassinated for future leaders to learn a lesson from it.

In revealing the nature of the African rulers to us, the authors use various techniques to bring out the message.

The first to mention is the plot of the various stories. The stories normally begin with the preparation for the take-over. This is clear in *A Wreath For Udomo* where we see the formation of the nationalist movement in far away Hampstead by Lanwood and his colleagues. At this stage, we see the rulers in the context of their past. This past is constantly brought back to the reader through the flashback technique. It is under this flashback method that we know Chief Nanga to be a former school teacher.

The story moves from there to the time of the rulers find themselves in office. This is where the spotlight is really on them as they mess up things, and get power-drunk. It is normally the climax after which we see the citizens becoming impatient leading to an angry mob either overthrowing them or even assassinating them. Both Udomo's and Nanga's storyline follow this movement. But do we need to blame them much? The way the plots in both novels are woven seems to suggest that these inconsistencies are integral part and manifestations of a society in transition. This might explain why Nanga's world/society tolerates him.

Imagery and symbolism are also used extensively; notable among them is the 'woman' image. In the two novels, we see most of the male characters, even those we have sympathy for, exchanging mistresses at will. Odili flirts between Elsie and Edna while Nanga seduces Elsie with Odili also managing to wrench Edna from Chief Nanga. Similarly, in *A Wreath for Udomo* there are sex scandals involving Lanwood, Mabi and especially Udomo, actively supported by Selina the benefactor who is an expert at providing girls.

One remarkable thing is that Udomo indulges in this even before he becomes Prime Minister, while Nanga does it even in his capacity as Minister for Culture. The implication is that this practice has been with us and will continue at least for some time.

Again, 'The imagery of "hound" and "hungry hyena" suggests Nanga's qualities of unbridled crudity, craftiness and stealth.' (Agovi, 1988). Throughout the novel, there recur images of wild animals – 'bull', 'incensed leopard', 'tiger' – which emphasise these qualities. According to Agovi (1988), Nanga is seen as a person who is unprincipled in his ambitions, and the urge for material acquisition compares him to those wild animals. He is 'hungry' for the prospects which a ministerial seat in Parliament would offer, and his heart is set on a share of the national cake' (p.191).

Concerning the use of language, *A Man of the People* employs biting satire. The author makes us share in the laughter but behind the laughter is a satirical criticism. What is significant

here is that the laughter in the text normally occurs when Nanga makes an insincere statement or when speaks/acts in ignorance.

'... I use to regret ever leaving the teaching field. Although I am a Minister today, I can swear to God that I am not as happy as when I was a teacher.' (p.9)

And the narrator's comment was: that '... at this point everybody just collapsed with laughter...' because it was a 'risky joke'... at the time teachers all over the country were in an ugly, rebellious mood. (p.9)

The element of satire is rather not conspicuous in *A Wreath for Udomo* where the language is more dialogical to show that in that work, there is a warmer interaction among the characters.

### Conclusion

Going by the foregone discussion one would note that the problems are still very much with us today. Rulers like Nanga hardly use their influence, power and personal quality of force for the benefit of their benefit and the integrity and sense of responsibility which their offices demand are offset by their ruthlessness, greed and self-interest.

In many parts of Africa today, gaining access to political power has become a "do-and-die affair". Political leaders soon become corrupt and incite violence most often to cover up inefficiency in governance. Currently as materials for this paper are being collected, there are reports of pockets of violence characterizing the biometrical registration of voters in Ghana. As realistic novels, therefore, *A Wreath for Udomo* and *A Man of the People* present stories that objectively reflect the political environment in most parts of Africa.

No doubt, the citizenry get disappointed and, like Nanga's society, are only managing to tolerate the new leaders lest these leaders are also assassinated like Udomo.

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