



Review Paper

Corruption and Politics in Chukwuma Ibezute's *Cries of the Downtrodden*

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received th November 2016, revised th January 2017, accepted th February 2017

Abstract

This article contends that Nigeria has lost her pride among the committee of nations as a result of the nefarious activities of visionless and selfish politicians who plunder the rich human and natural resources of the country. The article investigates the causes of corruption among Nigerian politicians using the poetry of Chukwuma Ibezute. The experiences of the citizens of Nigeria in the post-colony have been a vicious cycle of series of exploitation by corrupt politicians in suits and military uniforms. The study employs post-colonial theory in the analysis of Ibezute's Cries of the Downtrodden. Consequently, the study advocates the need to sensitize the masses on the power they wield and stresses the fact that they are capable of removing corrupt leaders from office through the ballot.

Keywords:

Introduction

Poets in contemporary African societies have continued to kick against all forms of exploitation and victimization perpetuated by corrupt political rulers in their countries. Their concern, according to Emmanuel Obiechinna, is essentially with regards to values: "the values by which human behaviour is determined and more particularly, with the quality or ranking of these values and their adequacy or otherwise for ensuring human happiness and individual integration into society"¹. Poets like Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Hyginus Ekwuazi among others address these issues of values with particular interest in the betrayal, corruption, neo-colonialism and hopelessness that now characterize the African society. Okigbo was among the first African poets to address these issues in his sequel entitled *Path of Thunder*. Okigbo's *Path of Thunder*, for instance, depicts the various corrupt practices among the Nigerian politicians of the first republic with a hope that the issues would be addressed. Since after Okigbo's demise, the theme of exploitation, victimization, betrayal and corruption in African poetry have become even stronger. African poetry now seems to affirm that the ruling elites have derailed the dreams of African true independence and that corruption is now a major factor that has hindered the growth and development of African societies. In his book, *The Colonial Experience and African Literature* (2003) Chris Osofofore reiterates this point when he states that African poets are able to depict that the level of corruption among African societies is alarming by creating a situation where it is revealed that "what prevails in African states is a situation where everybody has learnt to "drive fast" in order to better their lives instead of waiting for the irregular and doomed

meager salary"². In one of his studies, Inge Amundsen argues that in Africa corruption has become "a disease, a cancer that eats into the cultural, political and economic fabric of society, and destroys the functioning of vital organs"³. These organs may include the various organs of government and systems that are responsible for societal growth and development. Writing about the level which corruption has degenerated in Africa, Amundsen further postulates that:

Corruption is understood as everything from the paying of bribes to civil servants in return for some favour and the theft of public purses, to a wide range of dubious economic and political practices in which politicians and bureaucrats enrich themselves and any abusive use of public power to a personal end. Besides, corruption is in itself a many-faceted phenomenon and the concept of corruption contains too many connotations to be analytically functional without a closer definition. The forms of corruption are diverse in terms of who are the actors, initiators and profiteers, how it is done, and to what extent it is practised. Also the causes and the consequences of corruption are complex and diverse, and have been sought in both individual ethics and civic cultures, in history and tradition, in the economic system, in the institutional arrangements, and in the political system³.

African poets are able to show in their works that corruption hinders the growth of any nation. Drawing inference from the positions of most African poets, Colin Nye says corruption is the "behaviour which deviates from the formal duties of a public role because of private-regarding (personal, close family, private clique) pecuniary or status gains; or violates rules against the exercise of certain types of private-regarding influence"⁴. What Colin Nye describes as "private-regarding" is

what accounts for Africa's underdevelopment and is the reason why in some African countries (such as Nigeria with over 160million people) only less than 10% control the wealth of the nation while the remaining 90% suffer in abject poverty. Mushtaq Khan describes this situation as behaviour that deviates from the formal "rules of conduct governing the actions of someone in a position of public authority because of private-regarding motives such as wealth, power, or status"⁵. Describing the corrupt situation of the African society in full, Amundsen opines further that:

Political corruption occurs at the top level of the state, and it has political repercussions. Political corruption not only leads to the misallocation of resources, but it also affects the manner in which decisions are made. Political corruption is the manipulation of the political institutions and the rules of procedure, and therefore it influences the institutions of government and the political system, and it frequently leads to institutional decay⁶.

Like all other poets before him, Chukwuma Ibezute has joined in the fight for the liberation of the people from the strong clap of corruption that has so eaten into the marrows of the African society. Through his adolescent collections of poems, Ibezute makes caricature of contractors who inflate figures when they bid for contracts and who when the contracts are awarded to them, end up abandoning projects and channel the funds into private use. He is also living up to the poet's responsibility by making it known to the people through his poetry that if there is an illegal increase in the prize of fuel, kerosene and food stuffs, through the activities of corrupt politicians, it is the downtrodden in the society that suffers. This is in justification of Alu's assertion that "a poet who writes poems which don't require any energy, any spiritual and mental exercise to understand is not a poet, is a writer of doggerels. At the same time a poet who writes such poems that cannot be understood except by himself and one or two others is not a poet. He is a juggler, a magician"⁷. However, using his collection of adolescent poems entitled *Cries of the Downtrodden*, Ibezute demonstrates more of this. In the collection, Ibezute brings to limelight the conditions of the less privileged people of the society. In order to depict this in full, Ibezute's *Cries of the Downtrodden* will be discussed under the following subheading.

Corruption, Politics and Ibezute's *Cries of the Downtrodden*

Ibezute's *Cries of the Downtrodden* contains some of the burdens of his generation. The collection reveals the harsh condition of living of the African people. Through most of the poems contain in the collection, Ibezute paints a picture that reveal that the African people of the generation are confronted with the challenges of exploitation, political corruption and oppression. Hence, pivotal to Ibezute's elucidation of the major thematic preoccupations in his poems is his agitation for the liberation of the downtrodden in the society. In addition to his

total rejection and condemnation of the activities of corrupt politicians in the country, he looks forward to the ethical re-birth of his country. Uzoma Nwachukwu asserts that Ibezute "denounces evils, such as greed, selfishness, gossip, power-drunkenness, and boot-licking"⁸. The poems invoke the feeling that all is not well with the less privileged of the African society. For instance, in "Songs of October" the persona ponders over Nigeria's independence and the activities of its corrupt and greedy politicians, who care less about the plight of the people they govern. In a few lines of the poem, Ibezute gives expression to his worries:

At forty-four years of age
The expectations and hopes are still dreams
But to the scramblers of the national cake
It has been an age of harvests
With focus on the inglorious fortune
Coupled with the reckless siphoning of the liquid gold;
The centre of the nation's unity⁹.

In the poem it is revealed that the Nigerian politicians are not interested in agriculture which is the highest employer of labour in Africa but are interested in the proceeds of its "harvest". As a matter of fact, the persona's description of politicians as corrupt people in the lines above is lucid. In the poem, the word "scramblers" is used to portray politician in a very negative manner. In addition, the phrase "national-cake" is used to capture sweet things of life which Nigerian politicians are only interested in at the neglect of the people.

In the first stanza of "Drums of Change", the persona depicts that politically elected leaders in Africa find it difficult to leave office whenever they complete their tenure, hence making it difficult for another credible leader to continue. The reason for these is to enrich themselves. The persona laments that by insisting on their continuous stay in office, they "Awaken the consciousness of schemers". Even when the people complain about their corrupt leadership they find ways "To justify their moves". Because of these the persona describes them in disdain thus: "A man of many parts among men / Humorous and crafty bunch of intelligence". Most of the lines in the poem go further to give us a mental picture of the attitude of Nigerian politicians who are very corrupt. Through the juxtaposition of the words "crafty" and "intelligence", it is revealed that in order to always have their ways the ruling elite display a certain level of intelligence that is not for the betterment of the people but for personal gain. This attitude is a shape contrast to traditional African leadership system. The poem also makes it known that this is because we Africans have imbibed western ideologies, such as capitalism, and individualism and the fact that the ruling elites seem to be soaked in it. Though everyone has his burden but the poem is concerned about the burden of the people.

In another poem entitled "The Voters Burden", the persona recounts the numerous empty promises made by corrupt politicians during campaigns. The poem reveals that those promises are all lies and that their interests are in only what they

are to gain when they assume office. The poem also affirms that both the old and new generations of African politicians, either in khaki or suit, are all the same. This claim is evident in the poem thus:

The burden of the voter
The politician and his double-arrow
His million promises to repair and rebuild
Delving into the art like a mighty sparrow
With promise life in abundance
For all citizens⁹.

The poem goes further to encourage the “exploited downtrodden” to be careful when corrupt politicians make their empty promises during elections. Their failure to do so would lead to them “crying wolf” in the future.

In another poem “Who the Cap Fit” the persona brings to limelight the harsh living conditions of the African people. He states that African cities are exclusively reserved for the corrupt political ruling class who has enriched themselves with the public funds while the downtrodden remain at the rural areas or sometimes the suburban because of the exorbitant rents in urban areas like Abuja and Lagos that cannot be afforded by any genuine civil servant or business man. This is demonstrated through the metaphor of “dance” and “cap”. Ironically, the poor that dwell in the city are those who do menial jobs for the rich and most time they live under the roof of the rich like slaves. In the “Rapist of Society,” the persona presents us with the inevitability of death. According to the poem, death awaits rulers and subjects alike. The persona represents this inevitability of death as an act of victory for the downtrodden. The poem reveals that no matter what the corrupt politician thinks of himself, one day he will eventually die. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona makes his position on this very clear, thus: “The champion of ills upon ills / In pursuit of wealth and fame / Only to one day pass / Like the flowing river”. The persona posits that life is “like a walking shadow” and not even a corrupt politician with all the stole wealth of the nation can save himself from the “cold hands” of death when it comes. The poem also depicts that despite the fact that all would one day die, African rulers still make the plight of the common man a pitiable one in the society. In the title poem “Cry of the Downtrodden”, we are made to realize that the African population is downtrodden and are impoverished and helpless:

As the masses complained
Of the rising cost of living
And of deceitful dishonest men
At the helm of affairs
Came another hand nut to crack
That of murder here and there
In the face of modernity and civilization
As the government agencies grope in the dark⁹.

In the poem the nefarious activities of politicians in Africa are condemned. The poem describes the politicians with names that are derogatory as a result of their insensitive attitude to the

plight of the people they govern. It exposes different recent events that show how the activities of the politicians have contributed to the under-development of Africa. It stresses the fact that it is unfortunate that the wealth of the nation is only enjoyed by privileged corrupt few politicians while the rest of the citizens are subjected to all forms of hardship. In “Some Beggars” we notice a form of violence meted out on the masses by this privileged corrupt few politicians. In the poem, it is stated that the citizens have been reduced to beggars in their country and are treated in a dehumanizing manner by the corrupt politicians. This is even evident in the following lines:

Weeping wailing of the paupers
Nakedness, joblessness and hunger
Crying to leaders and rulers
Who kicked of the ladder
With which they climbed to the top
They’re begging for alms⁹.

It is indeed ironic for the citizens of an African country blessed with rich human and natural resources to beg for alms in their own country. The persona brings to the fore the decayed prevalent in the society and not without decrying about the caliber of rulers we have in Africa. For instance, in “Decaying Society” he lambasts government’s control of the media. To him, “Where government owned media”, the society should really mourn. In “Judgment Day” the persona cries out and urges the corrupt rulers to desist from further manipulation of the poor. This is evident in the lines thus: “Voices of the weeping downtrodden / Grumbling their exploitation / By leaders and other established men”. However, the poem’s concern goes a long way to show the poet’s relevance to the social and political situation in his home country. This is in consonance with what Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubiuke say the work of a writer should do: “A writer does have a minimum professional responsibility to make his work relevant [...] to his society and its concerns. He may do this by treating the burning issues of the day [...] or [...] by treating themes germane to his community’s fundamental and long range interest [...]”¹⁰. This has, as a matter of fact, justified Ibezute’s work as relevant. As Hegel G.W. also rightly observed: “Every work belongs to its age”¹¹. Ibezute’s poetry is not only relevant, it shows his commitment to the plight of the people of this age.

Conclusion

As has been widely documented, Africa has been the most ruthlessly exploited, brutalized and humiliated in modern history. It started with slavery and colonialism- when Africans were carted away into slavery to help in building European and American cities and to work on their plantations. Africans found themselves treated as third class citizens in parts of their own continent and this still happen till the present day. At this time, Europeans looted away not only her mineral resources but also her cultural resources. The result of this explains African’s prostrate condition today. African poets are now reacting to this challenge. Using poems, Ibezute brings to limelight the

conditions of the African people. He has also made caricature of the corrupt African rulers and their allies at various part of the government who instead of working so hard to make sure Africa comes to its fit again, are doing everything in their power to kill it.

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