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The Insensitive Attitude of African Leaders: A Post-Colonial Reading of Bole Butake's *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* (1990)

Modern Africa's poverty and political instability have furnished backgrounds for the lamentation dramas of her younger dramatists. The economic exploitation of Africa by Europe and neo-colonialist politics of the new (economic) world order, themes of actual historical significance in African studies, have preoccupied the new dramatists of Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, as much as the issue of black man's betrayal of motherland has affected her bards. Images of Africa's self-inflicted reversals are thence presented with emotive poignancy and expressive clarity in the new dramas that have emerged from the region of Cameroon.

These new brands of mournful drama are expressed in voices not alien to their surrounding, despite several occurrences of modern styles. Of interest in this article are the dramatic threnodies which style of rendition is drawn from spheres of human endeavour. It could be the loss sustained from betrayal of trust, disappointment in relationships, denial and deprivation of rights and the sense of atrophy experienced from inured visions. This article therefore seeks to defend the view that *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* (1990), from an ideological view point, is Bole Butake's sarcastic attack on African leaders who, according to Tah Asongwed, regard themselves to have been *Born To Rule*.

The play is set in a traditional Cameroonian village, and the predominance of ritual elements together with a reliance on proverbs as an overriding linguistic feature, add up to conjure an effect of primordality. As a site for the questioning of power, the play positions villagers against their greedy, corrupt and totalitarian chief. His word is law. Palm-wine and drunkenness are worshipped. But when he decides to confer a title on one who does not deserve it, he paradoxically initiates the course of his own downfall. It will take a ritual ceremony, the poetic invocations of the gods and ancestors, to mobilise the revolutionary forces that will bring this about. Shey Ngong, the chief-priest, sets the process in motion with the following prayer:

Shey Ngong: Oh Nyombom! Creator and guardian of the land [...] grant me strength and wisdom to weather the surging storm. The Fon has lost vision... (89)

Shadrach A. Ambanasom makes a fact crystal clear in an article entitled "Cameroonian and Kenyan Writers in Politics: An Analysis of the Works of

Six Playwrights” when he opines that the Fon is an “epitome of pleasure and hedonism, surrounded by stooges, bootlickers and flatterers” (6). According to Ambanasom, all he does is to “dispense favours to fawners, promoting some to higher nobility but tortures and brutalises dissenters” (6).

Bole Butake is thence caught presenting a society (Ewawa) that is pregnant with despair, gloom, hopelessness, melancholy, despondency, discouragement, bitterness, desperation and shock orchestrated by the so-called “leaders for life.” What is more annoying at this juncture is the fact these same leaders happen to be in power thanks to the endorsement of the working class and suffering masses (the have-nots).

When the masses in Cameroon, represented by characters in the play like Shey Ngong, Nsangong and Kwengong, fought and liberated themselves from British and French colonial rule, sent the imperialists away and finally gained independence, they thought that, with their own brothers (African leaders, represented by the Fon) in command, things were to change. Ironically, these leaders became even more murderous and ruthless than the imperialists. There is therefore no need for us to overlabour ourselves on the *raison d'être* why Kiguunda in *I Will Marry When I Want* by the Ngugis posits that “I ran away from cold land only to find myself in frost land!” (1982: 19)

Bole Butake, via these down trodden masses, is simply expressing his feelings through a language of successively ire, anger, passion, fury, exasperation, trepidation, cynicism, bitterness, sarcasm, ridicule, derision, irony, grief, distress, misery, woe and anguish. If we say that literature is a window through which we see the world and ourselves, then we must give credit to this prolific Cameroonian writer who has burned the midnight candle to see into it by portraying to his readers and genuine intellectuals dictatorial leadership in Cameroon and most African countries.

In *Home Coming* (1972), Ngugi Wa Thiong’o throws more light on this when he says that “[l]iterature does not grow or develop in a vacuum. It is given impetus, shape and direction and even area of concern by the social, political and economic forces of a particular society” (19). Chinua Achebe supports this idea in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, when he asserts:

Any African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like the absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.
(16)

Many of Africa's new generation playwrights reflect the quality of an age that is being swept in a woolly reverie of failures. They have therefore become lamenters or dirge singers by extension. They lament the atrophy of national aspirations as envisioned by her founding fathers only a few decades ago. To this group belong such writers as Bole Butake, John Nkemngong Nkengasong, Bate Besong, Victor Epie Ngome, Mathew Takwi, Emmanuel Fru Doh, Bernard Fonlon, Shadrach A. Ambanasom, Linus T. Asong, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ayi Kwei Armah.

Most of these writers, especially Cameroonian writers, lament the betrayal by the political leaders or the dilapidated state of our nation Cameroon. Their anger over the corruption that afflicts the nation is unmistakable. It is this form of threnody ushered in by these writers that has come to be known as the new drama or third generation drama.

Butake dramatises totalitarian power in the post-colony in order to ridicule it. Again, he uses palm-wine, an important element in the ritual process, to achieve his purpose. Palm-wine is used in several occasions in the play, most significantly to celebrate the event which sets in motion the major conflict: the conferment of a title to a worthless person in the village. The constant reference to palm-wine serves to draw the parallel between a totalitarian ruler drunk with power and a drunkard drunk with wine. This image of the leader is laughable because it is constructed in melodramatic proportions, as exemplified in Shey Ngong's comments:

Your Fon (chief) is the Pig who knows only the hunger of its own stomach. (91)

.....
When people overfeed like pigs and soak themselves in palm-wine, they take pleasure in desecrating the gods. (93)

By ridiculing oppressive leaders Butake hopes to raise popular awareness and popular revolt against such leaders. He employs folk elements the way Femi Osofisan does. In this play, he subverts the ideology of the ritual form. He hijacks the purpose of ritual, to legitimise the hegemonic *status quo* in traditional societies. In the light of contemporary events, which Butake dramatises, the ritual becomes an empowering element for the masses. Thus, Shey Ngong who is well positioned to combine religion and politics constructs both the ritual and the revolutionary process. Through poetic invocations he summons the gods and the ancestors who in a ritual event incarnate the form of the Kibaranko in the body of Tapper, and the form of the Earth Goddess in the body of Kwengong. Thus empowered, the Kibaranko

causes havoc at the Fon's palace and Earth-goddess inspires and organises the women's uprising that deposes the Fon. His fall ushers in a democratic dispensation, as Kwengong states:

The people will rule through a council of elders led by Shey ... The day he takes a wrong decision, that same day the people shall meet ... and put another at the head of the council. (113)

Thus, Butake's drama about oppression and abuse of political power is a tool for consciousness-raising whose agenda is to condemn irresponsible leadership in contemporary Cameroon. This creates possibilities for popular social change and the establishment of democracy.

Bole Butake's *And Palm-Wine Will Flow* (1990) was written against the backdrop of rapacious and inhumane oppressors of the seemingly silent and marginalised masses of the fictionalised communities of the North-West Region of the Republic of Cameroon, Africa. This play treats among other issues the themes of corruption, tyranny, nepotism and the rampant abuse of power. These themes are not new in African literature, but Butake's approach shifts the traditional responsibility of the fight for political liberation, which has hitherto been the preserve of the men to women. The silent suffering masses come to rely solely on the women who take the leading responsibility for their liberation. This sudden and unexpected resurgence of females on the political field and their overwhelming success is intriguing and new to an audience that has for a very long time minimized and denigrated women to secondary and subsidiary roles.

One question which comes up several times in this play is: "where are the men?" The men have been exiled, incarcerated, or totally emasculated. In *And Palm-Wine Will Flow*, the Kibaranko is stripped of its judicial powers, unmasked, and sent into exile. The males regain their posture only after the female leader, Kwengong, calls a general assembly and declares a revolution against the Fon. She declares: "He cannot be Fon. The women have decided. No more Fons in the land!" She continues by saying that only "the people will decide who the Fon will be and for how long. And the affairs of the land shall be decided by all the people in the market" (111). She, in effect, declares the overthrow of the dictatorship and the institution of a genuine democracy.

Butake positions Shey Ngong and the women as characters whose impatience with national slogans that fly in the face of glaring contradictions is hardly disguised. According to Butake, political sloganeering, when juxta-

posed with the serial betrayals by their own leaders, becomes meaningless. Ethnic and racial divides no longer hold in a nation where the individual has, perhaps, never been more traumatised by any other generation than his. The masses react to these times with a poignant feeling of disillusionment and a near-disregard for the corporate entity called Cameroon. The hallmark of this brand of drama, as opposed to those of earlier generations, is the militancy of spirit often conveyed with threnody of voice and mood.

Throughout his play, utake tends to suggest that, in reality, omen are born with extra-ordinary powers which have simply been submerged, if not totally stifled, by the male-oriented and chauvinistic society, a society that has conspired to put omen in a subordinate or secondary position. utake's play, therefore, serves as an eye opener to the people who have usually assigned the business of political liberation only to men. In fact, the omen reveal the truth subsumed in the saying that "[w]hat a man can do, a oman can do even better," and also that omen can succeed where men have failed. And looking at the history of failed governments and revolutions in the continent of Africa, utake may be sending out a coded message to the natives to give omen a chance in the struggle for liberation from dictatorship, corruption, tyranny, and nepotism that have come to be the mainstay of African governments. utake's projection of the oman as liberator parallels gugi's in East Africa: both of them attempt to uplift the females from their traditional domains of household chores and sex objects to a higher plane of political activism and change.

Butake has no qualms portraying his heroines in feminine terms and characteristics: they are first and foremost women, young and old, married or unmarried, faithful to the institution of marriage and child-rearing and all other responsibilities attached to their gender. Unlike with most African feminist writers, Butake does not argue for the women, nor does he let his heroines argue for their emancipation, but he portrays them the way they are: intelligent, politically conscious, militant, capable of taking charge of both the family and the larger unit—the community or the State.

In a nutshell, Butake is trying to say that we have to concede the necessity of economic hardships, ceaseless power struggles, election rigging, squander mania, ethnic irredentism and mindless exploitation of local resources that lend enormous impact to the sensitivity of modern laments, especially in the African society where art is both functional and entertaining. This article has examined that violence is a necessary tool in instituting social justice, equity and fair play in politics. It has examined how, in Bole Butake's *And Palm-Wine Will Flow*, the playwright recommends violence as an

instrument of justice and peace in an oppressive system. The article posits that Butake stresses the relevance of violence as a veritable weapon in the fight against institutionalised injustice, dictatorship and cultural imperialism which are some of his major thematic preoccupations. He wants a society where neither the oppressors or the oppressed are crucified. This is exactly where the moral concept of violence resides. This article therefore posits that what happened to the Fon is the same fate that awaits some of our leaders who have turned the throne into a monarchy and who go along oppressing the very persons who channelled their way to power.

Afonji Walter
