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AMBIGUITIES OF POWER AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES IN ACHEBE'S ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH

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ABSTRACT

Nigerians have constantly lamented over the poor leadership style in the government of the day; and for many years, many have condemned the various regimes of government right from the inception of independence in 1960. Our leaders (past and present) have been constantly described as wolves in the sheep's garment who have failed the nation. It has now come to a point where most of the human elements of this nation have lost hope on the government of the day and have faced the situation in various forms: to some, it is violence, and to others it is a resignation to fate while many have decided to join the crew. Most experts have approached the issue wrongly by offering criticisms of the government without a reworking of the psyche of these leaders. This paper, therefore, argues that the solution to the national problem of bad leadership and underdevelopment lies with a re-evaluation of the true essence of power and leadership responsibilities; and an understanding of the fact that power and life are ephemeral. It draws references from Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and some relevant works of literature.

INTRODUCTION: RE-DEFINING POWER AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

In history, the nihilistic conception of man as an enigma, that is, a mysterious being, sometimes to the point of naivety has often given rise to the dominance of one group or state over another, of a few hedonists who derive their power from the successful manipulation of man's unstable personality-structure. Although the instability of the individual personality does not, by any measure, make the human essence confusing and enigmatic, the proverbial manipulation of man's inherent weakness sponge on these deficiencies, mystify their own competence for smartness and in the end, impose themselves on others with the spurious claim of the right to leadership because according to their own conceit, they know what the insignificant others are yet to understand.

These mysterious entities have not understood the true essence of power and leadership responsibilities. They have beastly confused power as a tool to wield control over a handful of others who are weak and feeble. These leaders, in their bid to satisfy their selfish bids become enigmatic and incongruous to the point of losing their own human essence. As Ogbeidi (10) notes, 'virtually all the leaders came to power with the sole purpose of enriching themselves and their cronies rather than offering selfless services to the nation and its people.' From Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and some other literary works, we shall draw inferences. In *Anthills of the Savannah* for example, the likes of Sam, the Head of the State of Kangan, and his cabinet typify leaders who are unable to understand their responsibilities as leaders. In this novel, Sam's idea of freedom is contradictory. He is out to perpetuate himself in power and not to free people.

Our present-day politicians, after being empowered through incredible elections and appointments, become pseudo-democrats. They confuse democracy for pseudo-democracy and at the end, see power as an invaluable tool for manipulating humanity. "They do some unthinkable things in a bid to secure their hold on power. They view power as their birth

right and most political office holders come to regard themselves as power personified" (Idorenyin, n.p.).

Thus, at a purely philosophical level, such is the origin of oppression: mankind's segregative classification of itself, by its most necrophiliac faction, and with a criterion based exclusively on intellectual terrorism, which factionalizes the monolith of humanity into the "sane substance" and "lunatic dregs" of life lodged in the gross inequalities which characterize society's material foundation. In this society where to know is to have those who know, use their knowledge as well as the wealth of what they know about the limitations of man in society to exacerbate the premises of oppressive and dictatorial reality, abuse or misconception of power becomes imminent. As Dike puts it, "Human beings tend to abuse powers (or anything) whenever they have excess (absolute) of it" (n.p.). In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe notes that: "... Power is like marrying across the Niger; you soon find yourself paddling by night" (45). People that cannot swim should not marry across the Niger for, to do so, would result in being forced to swim, or at least, paddle. In other words, a man who hates bad leadership may become worse than those he criticises if he finds himself in a pool of power drunkenness. Thus, Omololu rightly observes, "human nature associated with the exercise of power has the tendency to be abused if not checked (4)"

Hence, human weakness for power drunkenness has constantly led to a misunderstanding of the true essence of power. Sequel to this, Ted asserts that:

The constitution is not just a historical document... The status and responsibilities that the founders gave us (should) be applied every hour of every day. We do not have the right to ignore or dilute or wave them, because they are not ours to dispose of - they belong permanently to the people we temporarily serve. They are the nation's legacy, and we are the current trustees of that legacy. (20)

Power is, therefore, an instrument of managing the affairs of a populace temporarily. It is a temporary disposition to serve or lead a people towards greatness with an aim to alleviate or if possible, eliminate human woes. Power, like the life of its holder, is ephemeral and passes away like a brief candle.

AMBIGUITIES OF POWER AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES IN *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

All political aspirants come to make good things happen. They come with the constant message of change, irrespective of the direction. Everyone preaches sanctity. As Makinde puts it "Nigeria is a God-intoxicated society" (6). Yet, it is almost the most corrupt country on earth. Odumuyiwa's inaugural lecture titled "A Religious but Criminal Society - any Remedy?" captures the essence of the contradictions and absurdities in Nigeria. Makinde observes correctly when he says "indiscipline and lawlessness, greed and corruption - have displaced GOD and substituted MONEY as an object of worship in our society, to the extent that we are neither accountable to God nor humanity."

There is in most humans, the pathological weakness for power drunkenness and intoxication. Thus, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, this is said about His Excellency:

And all this is tied up in his mind with this failed referendum for life-president. The pain still rankles... After the failure of the referendum, he had complained bitterly... that I had not played my part... to ensure the success of the exercise (147).

The above excerpt is among the major issues that strained the relationship between His Excellency (Sam) and his other two friends, Ikem and Chris. They were good friends before now. At Lord Lugard College in the secondary school, they lived like brothers. When His

Excellency was invited to become the military head of the State of Kangan, he rallied round his old friends for advice and intellectual support. Chris was solely responsible for the nomination of half a dozen names that helped to form the executive cabinet.

In a short time however, the blinding greed and gluttony for power severed the legacy of their old friendship built over the years. Power turns friends into fiends in the jungle. It turns to a game of the survival of the fittest. "A do or die affair." It turns to a personal title rather than a disposition to serve the people who collectively legitimized the power they held. Hence, power becomes ambiguous as Sam, instead of entrenching good leadership, set about witch-hunting any possible threat to his obnoxious clinging to power. This same drama of mediocrity and glaring incompetence unfold daily in our Nigeria. According to Dike: "Nigeria is now convulsed by a new epidemic of political witch-hunting, as political oppositions are being clobbered."

Political leaders after rigging themselves into power, set about to witch-hunt any individual or group of persons who may not have played a supportive role during the time of their campaign. They mastermind and perpetuate all forms of political bigotry, blackmail and intrigues to those who refuse to pay homage to them.

In most cases, these diversionary running battle among the political lords and their perceived dissidents culminate to loss of lives and valuable properties. Violence looms large as the needs and plights of the masses that collectively legitimized their power is accorded a hypocritical attention. As shown in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, sound leadership in Nigeria has been consistently weakened by the inability of the leaders to clearly define the boundaries and responsibilities inherent in their power and personal interests. They often become blinded by petty envy, rivalry, gossip and baseless rumours. They go as far as denying some areas the dividends of democracy calling them "non-co-operators".

The Abazon province in *Anthills of the Savannah* is denied basic portable bore-hole water simply for saying no to His Excellency's obnoxious campaign for life-presidency. Sam, His Excellency took it personal and decides putting a stop to any developmental project going on in the province:

Because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not. (127)

The sun is a dreadful natural element to which Sam is being compared. Whoever offends him must be punished. So Abazon people have offended Sam, and must suffer lack of water.

DECEIT AS A TOOL OF BAD LEADERSHIP SYNDROME

Our politicians are full of deceit. They use a lot of intrigues. Intrigue which constitutes oppression's primary armoury, for example, is neither an enterprise for the naive nor a game for the lily-livered. It is, on the contrary, expert manipulation of man's inherent weaknesses, his negation of virtues and penchant for vices, his cowardly fear of freedom and pathological aversion to actions against the ubiquitous segments of oppression. The people of Kangan were afraid of oppression and dreaded freedom, so, they needed a man to rescue them from the decaying social system and that man came as Sam through a military *coup de' tat*.

Most bad leaders are pseudo-democrats. Pseudo-democrats are a dangerous type of politicians, not because they are unintelligent but because they employ their creative energy in the manipulation, invasion and conquest of other men for narcissistic considerations. They lose touch with human passions and sentimental love for others not because they are super-humans but because they lose their own humanity in the practical effort to dehumanize

others. For them, like Achebe's Sam, to be a man is to exercise naked power. The state apparatus to which they cling with passion and beautify with the bestial garlands of terrorism is their primary instrument for tenure-consolidation. As Ikem, one of the cabinet members puts it in the novel:

Those who mismanage our affairs would silence our criticism
by pretending they have facts not available to the rest of us. And I know it is
fatal to engage them on their own ground. (58).

Most of these leaders do not begin with bad intent. According to Shakespeare (2006) in his *Julius Caesar*:

... Lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. (Act 2:1, 22 - 27).

In the same vain, Sam in *Anthills of the Savannah*, like most Nigerian politicians come into power as the unanimous favourite among his peers to lead the nation in its recovery from political corruption and bastardisation of resources, a redeemer, healer and protector but who later metamorphoses into a monster:

Sam learnt the habit of saying *Kabisa* from old Ngongo. With a week, it spread
to members of the cabinet and down to the base cocktail set. From there, it
made its way more or less rapidly into the general community (53)

The cliché *Kabisa* creates the image of bad leadership. Everyone in the State of Kangan is ruled by command of that word. The head uses it on his cabinet to order them like his toys. The soldiers on the street use it to command and force respect from citizens like dogs.

Another basic side of deceit in bad leadership is misplaced priority. As in Sam's case, Prof. Okong commits blasphemy on Ikem because he wants to get undeserved favour from His Excellency (H.E). His words:

I don't want to be seen as a tribalist, but Mr. Ikem Osodi is causing all these
trouble because he is a typical Abazonian. I am sorry to be personal but, we
must face facts. (18)

Professor Okong makes the above statement purely out of petty jealousy, envy and insecurity. He seeks to warm his way into the heart of His Excellency to the detriment of an innocent man- Ikem Osodi. Professor Okong typifies the moral bankrupt leaders who misplace their leadership priorities and function solely on the bases of self-gratification. Leadership on such foundation may never render any useful selfless service beyond the boundaries of the skin. Achebe's resentment to the likes of Professor Okong is reflected in the following comment from His Excellency: "... No sense of loyalty, no esprit de corps, nothing! And he calls himself a university professor... Disgraceful." (24)

The sincere group of intellectuals like Chris and Ikem who should have done something to improve the falling leadership standard are busy antagonising one another. They fuse themselves in a triangle of confusion and countless argument in national and state assemblies. They are examples of intellectuals who though, have genuine aims to build the nation judging from their vast reservoir of education and knowledge, but lack common sense of administrative skills and tactics in complex political administration. They are too wise that they become foolish in their wisdom. They accuse government and themselves instead of uniting to sail the ship of administration towards one direction.

In a country like Nigeria where the real aim of power becomes ambiguous to the mind that holds it, abuse is imminent and inevitable. Abuse of power converts leadership into a

system of oppression and destruction. Achebe is bothered by the dynamic issue of leadership in neo-colonial Nigeria. Ours is a country where leaders are out to protect their positions, and not to protect their people. Hence, Sam's cabinet try to defend themselves even at the expense of their fellows. This bid to protect personal interest contradicts the original aim of leadership and its responsibilities.

ABSURDITY OF LIFE AND POWER

Life and power are transient, meaningless and futile. In the words of Shakespeare,
 Life is but a walking shadow; a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing (*Macbeth* Act 5:5, 22 - 28).

All that lives dies. So, it is imperative that our leaders do not consolidate power. Rather, they should use it to serve humanity remembering that there is nothing permanent in this life, except change.

According to Musa, "Ours is a primitive society" (10) where progress is millipeding. On another note, Aderounmu says that Nigeria as a country is a total failure (14). So, to redeem this nation from damnation, our leaders are reminded that this life is nothing but a procession to the grave where all ends. Ecclesiastics' chapter 1 verse 14 says: "I have seen all the works that are done under the sun: and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of the spirit." Shakespeare did not make mistakes in saying that:

...We are such stuff
 As dreams are made on; and our life
 Is rounded with a sleep (that is, death) (*The Tempest*, Act 4:1)

These are the words of Dryden:

All human things are subject to decay
 And, when Fate summons, monarchs must obey (1-2).

So, politicians and all Nigerians are advised to use their dispositions for the service of humanity because "the evil that men do lives after them while the good is oft interred with their bones" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3:2); and "real living occurs only when individuals have sound moral values, or at least consistently and seriously aspire to it (Philips, 2016:15)." Above all, the practice of corruption is not "found in a civil society but in a society where law and order have gone on holiday" (Idorenyin, 5)

CONCLUSION

The struggle against bad leadership is the struggle for the survival of mankind and the safety of earth's planet. Bad leadership is a result of the inability of the leaders to clearly understand their responsibilities as leaders. Leadership and power are the temporary disposition of leaders to lead a people through the pathways of social emancipation. It is not an avenue for personal aggrandizement. Power is temporary just as life itself is ephemeral and absurd; nothing lives forever. Therefore, our political leaders are reminded that the offices they occupy today were occupied by some other persons in the past. Those persons are remembered by their good works and often cursed, even in their graves, for their bad deeds.

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