

MISLEADERSHIP IN AFRICA: BETWEEN DISILLUSIONMENT AND HOPE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVE

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Abstract

*Bad leadership is one of the main topics that arouses literary creations by African writers. As this issue is still at stake in today's society, this study raises the problem of « misleadership » in postcolonial African writing. It mainly attempts to show the leadership crisis as the centre of all the predicaments such as disappointment, revolt against the « untamed pests », and makes some proposals unveiling a glimmer of hope for the present and future generations in Africa. To achieve that objective, the study focuses on the postcolonial theory and the novel entitled *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) by the Malawian writer Tiyambe Zeleza. Basing on both the postcolonial approach and this narrative, the study reveals the possible revitalization and realization of the dreams and aspirations of Independence despite all the leadership and political hindrances in Africa.*

Key words: *leadership, misleadership, disillusionment, crisis, postcolonial*

Résumé

*Le mauvais leadership est l'un des thèmes principaux qui suscite les créations littéraires des écrivains africains. Étant toujours d'actualité, cette étude traite de ce problème de la « mauvaise gouvernance » que révèle l'écriture africaine postcoloniale. Elle tente particulièrement de montrer que la crise du leadership est le centre de toutes les difficultés conduisant à la désillusion et à la révolte des peuples contre les « parasites indomptés » et fait également quelques propositions dévoilant une lueur d'espoir pour les générations actuelles et futures en Afrique. Pour atteindre cet objectif, l'étude se base sur la théorie postcoloniale et sur l'œuvre intitulée *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) de l'écrivain Malawite Tiyambe Zeleza. En se basant à la fois sur l'approche postcoloniale et ce récit, l'étude révèle la possibilité de revitaliser et de réaliser les rêves et les aspirations de l'indépendance malgré tous les obstacles liés au mauvais leadership et à la mauvaise politique en Afrique.*

Mots clés : *leadership, mauvaise gouvernance, désillusion, crise, postcolonial.*

Introduction

African narrative embodies many generations of writers, from the colonial to the post-colonial era. Each generation has had his mission to fulfill or carry out. In spite of the role deserved to each generation, a main topic has always been the core of their writing; that is to say the issue of leadership. In fact, as a current issue, bad leadership is one of the main topics that sparks literary creations by African writers. That is why this study raises the problem of « misleadership » in postcolonial African writing. It mainly attempts to show the leadership crisis as the centre of all the predicaments such as disappointment, revolt against the « untamed pests », and makes some proposals unveiling a glimmer of hope for the present and future generations in Africa.

The achievement of that objective leads us to the postcolonial theory, mainly to the notion of “postcolony” developed by A. Mbembe (2000). Indeed, according to this scholar, the “postcolony” refers to the historical trajectory, meaning, that of the societies which recently emerged from the experience of colonization, and all the predicaments and violence they have been going through (A. Mbembe, 2000, p.102). It designates the present-day African countries. In this sense, Mbembe thinks that the blame about the disastrous malpractices in African nations should be primarily leveled on African’s leadership, rather than always turning the spotlight on the colonial system and the colonizer. It is in this context that we find it interesting to fulfil this study though A. Mbembe’s view of the postcolony.

The fulfilment of this analysis also allows us to have an overview on some of the previous studies about the topic of leadership in the present-day African societies. In this sense, Z. Mbandlwa (2020) writes about the “challenges of African Leadership after Independence”. In his article, he reveals a pessimistic view of African’s leadership. “There is a deep leadership crisis in Africa that cannot be solved overnight...” (Z. Mbandlwa, 2020, p.72). Like Mbandlwa, F. Sheriff (2010) also asserts that one of the mains problems in the “21st century Africa is the lack of visionary leadership (and that) leadership without a vision is actually not leadership but rulership” (F. Sheriff, 2010, p.6). Like Mbandlwa and Sheriff, many other scholars and critics such as V. Ogbeide (2014), M. T. Macheke (2014), E. U. Asadu (2015), L. Green-Simms (2013), still think

that *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), as entitled by A. K. Armah.

Therefore, the present study will not contend their respective points of view. However, it will reveal a glimmer of hope for African's people who are still suffering from that neo-colonial system in this 21st century. In so doing, it will first draw a tableau about the malpractices of the “untamed pests”, which lead to the disillusionment of the people. Then, it will reveal the language of this disappointment, and finally, it will make some proposals that might brake or curb this situation as narrated in *Smouldering Charcoal* (1992) by T. Zeleza.

1. Malpractices of the “Untamed Pests” and disillusionment in the 21st century

Former colonial societies, mainly African countries have been suffering from their own misleadership from Independence to date. M. Zamokuhle (2020, p.75) asserts in the same way that “most of the problems of Africa are self-generated by African leaders”. Indeed, though former colonized people have suffered from the colonial system, their own sons that have been succeeding in power since their freedom can be qualified as some “Untamed Pests” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.1). This metaphor refers to bad African leaders and their mischievous systems. It connotes the oppressive and repressive machinery settled by the leaders to control all the actions and movements of the people into their country. As described in the narrative, these “untamed pests” include ministers, women, youth leaguers, editors, university lecturers and even housemen, prostitutes and prisoners, who spy on all the actions that tend to be revolutionary into their country. Through his “untamed pests, the party (or the Great Leader) had eyes and ears everywhere.” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.41).

A para (textual) reading also reveals us some of the malpractices of the untamed pests in former colonized countries. The “paratext” (G. Genette, 1997, p.14) as the threshold of a book, meaning, the elements such as the titles, the subtitles, the intertitles, the warnings, the forewords, is of a paramount important in the understanding of a book or literary work. The intertitles of Zeleza's novel reveal the dictatorship system that postcolonial African societies are going through. The first part is entitled “Untamed Pests” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.1); the second one

is entitled “Night Storms” (p.59), and the last one is entitled “Smouldering Charcoal” (p.117). This paratext, meaning the three intertitles sum up the system in which people are living. They simply reveal a dictatorship system, in which there is no freedom of speech and thought; and where people are afflicted. The untamed pests reflect the machinery of this dictatorship; the night storms are the misdeeds of the machinery, and the smouldering charcoal is the oppressive system itself. In this sense, the plot unveils some textual evidences of oppression, repression, incarceration and murder.

Chola, the journalist of the *Daily Despatch* is forced by the Party’s Youth Militia to buy a new Party membership card: “Chola was in many ways lucky that he had not yet suffered a worse fate. Others were beaten to death, their houses burnt, or women raped and children barred from school, if they did not possess the almighty card.” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.18). The use of the adjective “almighty” to qualify the simple party membership card shows the sorrowful fate of any person who does not possess it.

Also, the strike of the bakery workers to demand better wages and conditions of life is repressed like the boycott planned by the students’ union because of the illegal dismissal of Catherine from the university. As stated by the narrator, “the Students’ Union threatened a general boycott unless she (Catherine) was reinstated, (but) the boycott lasted for only a day. It was broken by the riot squad” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.162).

The narrative also reveals some cases of incarceration and murder. There were “Hundreds of political detainees” (p.167) who were incarcerated without trial. Among them, Chola the journalist was arrested because he told the Editor he was going to resign from his job, and Ndatero the university lecturer and playwright was arrested because he wrote a play entitled “*The Great Famine*” (p.85). Dambo, a “been-to”, and a friend to Chola tried to join the Party in order to change it inside and give it a more human picture. Unfortunately, in spite of everything he did, nothing had changed. Finally, when he decided to quit the Party, he was murdered by the pests. As the narrator clearly states it, “the anonymous caller had told him (Chola) that Dambo’s body could be found in Nkhona River. Chola threw himself on the sofa, his mind a blank” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.34). Chola himself faces a disastrous fate as a detainee into the prison. He is finally murdered like his friend Dambo.

“That morning (...) The other strikers were brought to the cell and they were horrified by what they saw. Chola’s body was dangling from the roof”. (p.158).

Political corruption, social injustice and class stratification are also some of the misdeeds of postcolonial leaders. In fact, corruption is one of the main causes of social injustice and stratification in Africa. It is the root of underdevelopment of the continent and the former colonized countries:

Corruption is worse than prostitution. (...). The world over, corruption is increasingly being seen as a threat to human existence to the extent that some commentators have called for it to be recognized as a “crime against humanity”. Indeed, corruption has been identified as the main obstacle to the realization of good governance, sustainable development ... (P. Lumumba, 2014, p.22).

Corruption is thus, manifested at diverse levels, and can be identified as one of the main causes of disappointment in African societies. The narrative in *Smouldering Charcoal* highlights a society that is manipulated by political leaders who want to be in power for life. For example, the national gazette “*Daily Despatch*” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.17) is managed by a corrupted Editor whose role is to spy on its journalists such as Chola:

Between you and me, the Editor pointed his pipe at Chola and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, you are a good journalist. But you sometimes get carried away. Don’t let your emotions enter into it. Report the facts, that’s all. That is cardinal rule number one if you want to be successful in this business, which I am sure you will be. (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.20)

The Editor is trying to persuade Chola not to post any information, which could bother the dignity or the fame of the “Great Leader”. He only had to show a good picture of the “Leader” every day in every publication; this is why, “the papers were churned out day after day full of pictures of the Leader and bold headlines calling the nation’s attention to his latest activities, sayings coughs and all, coupled with repetitive reports of the latest development achievements.” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.21).

Those who refuse such a kind of corruption become the foe to the leaders. It is what brings out the social stratification between those

leaders and the people in all the fields of activities. In the narrative for instance, while the majority of the populations are suffering from famine, poverty, and could rightly, be referred to those Frantz Fanon called “*The Wretched of the Earth*” (1963), the “tiny gods, upper class and aristocracy” have more dinners than appetite. This upper and corrupted class include the all-powerful party Leader himself and some of his “Untamed Pests” such as the ministers, the members of the parliament and chair persons and also retired diplomats, cabinet ministers, Party leaders, company directors (and some) been-tos. They are in one word those the narrator qualified as “the big shots and VIPs (whose children) displayed a combination of arrogance and frivolity; naivety nurtured in the whirlpool of gaudy wealth and power” (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.56).

As revealed in this narrative, African people of the 21st century are still experiencing this social stratification, where only the children of those on power have the right to prestigious schools, universities and high Education in the developed countries. The children of the peasants, and other middle social classes do not, sometimes, have access to high Education in their own and native countries. That is why the sign of disillusionment is still at stake in African’s societies of this 21st century. M. Zamokuhle (2020, p.75) asserts in the same perspective that “the common problem that is facing almost all countries in Africa is the deficiency in governance, corruption, and dictatorship”. This disillusionment of people is what brings out some narratives such as the one by T. Zeleza. It even affects the language of writing of all the disappointed writers. The narrative language in Zeleza’s narrative is evidence of this disillusionment.

2. The linguistic features of Disillusionment

One of the most important rules of the classical narrative is its cardinal principle of linguistic unity (V. Jouve, 1997, p.78-79). However, the disillusioned writers nowadays transgress this conception of the linguistic unity. Zeleza’s narrative is evidence of this linguistic crisis or disintegration. *Smouldering Charcoal* reveals a linguistic hybridity with the melting of both English as the main language of the narrative and Zeleza’s mother tongue, and other languages. The following lexicon justifies the above assertion:

“Allah” (Zezeza, 1992, p.7) which is the Arabic (Muslim) name of God; “Baba”(p.7) commonly used to call father in African languages; “khonde” which designates the veranda; “nsima” (p.9) which is a hard porridge made of any flour, usually maize flour; “matola” (p.14) a minibus; “Lobala” (p.54) which is the payment of bridegroom makes to the bride’s family; “ufa” (p.105) the flour; “askari” the police/soldier; “boma” government/district headquarters (p.65); “kachasu” (p.73) a locally-brewed gin; “anduna” (p.86) ministers/councilors etc.

This linguistic crisis shows the fact that “the postcolonial novel is located at the junction between a language system unified in the service of an imperial ideology and the break-up of this hegemony into multiplicity of –urban, rural, nationalist, regional – linguistic consciousness” (J. Bolland, 1996, p.2).

This fact also goes hand in hand with the narrative desemantization, which is according to P. Zima, the “semantic indifference” (P. Zima, 2000, p.145); meaning the semantic crisis of noble words that contradict the reality. As revealed in the narrative, the Leader of Zezeza’s fictive country is called “The Great Leader” (Zezeza, 1992, p.17).

Indeed, if according to F. Sheriff (2010, p.5), “leadership simply means service, (and that) a leader is actually a servant, a selfless servant who is preoccupied with the tasks assigned to him and delivers as expected or positively as unexpected”, the “Great Leader” in Zezeza’s narrative is quite the opposite of the word “Leader” and its qualifying adjective “Great”. In lieu of serving the people, that leader serves himself, his family, close friends and relatives. By so doing, the phrase “Great Leader” is really desemantized, as it no more reflects the reality of “Great Leaders” we have known in African history such as Nelson Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Patrice Lumumba, Thomas Sankara etc. These leaders are those who can be considered as “Great Leaders” because of their particular selfless services and grave sacrifices to their people in terms of ensuring freedom and early development for their countries. Their great deeds engraved their names in the history of the African continent. Contrary to such kinds of African figures, the “Great Leader” in the narrative, like many leaders of this 21st century are merely some “managers or supervisors” (F. Sheriff, 2010, p.5) who lack

vision and think only about their own self-interest. This latter group of leaders are, in one word, some “African rulers (who) have dreams but not visions and (...) soon tire out and get stuck or reach a *cul de sac* when their dreams have been accomplished” (*ibid*, p.7). They only protect their titles instead of serving their people and run the states as their own and personal state or affair. As asserted by F. Sheriff (2010, p.8), “in Africa, titles have driven our men-politicians, soldiers, and even area boys crazy. Hence, big sounding titles like ‘President, General, Chief Doctor, Honorable Minister, Senator, Governor, Alhaji Chief Dr., Rev. Colonel, Prophet Architect’, etc have tended to make us lose a sense of our calling and responsibility for mundane title contest and irrelevances.”

As a summary, we can assert that all these phenomena of crisis related to the narration, language and writing in Zeleza’s novel are the consequence of the disillusionment. In other words, bad leadership and disillusionment in Africa are the basis of all the crises of narration, language and writing operated in African literature. These ruptures of tone and the harshness of feelings are due to the malaise of the first years of independence up to now in Africa. However, even if some scholars such as M. Zamokuhle opines that “poor leadership in Africa has a slim chance of changing because even the youngsters who are the future of Africa see the lifestyle of elders as a good style. (And that) leadership and followership in Africa show that Africa is still going to suffer for at least the next 100 years” (M. Zamokuhle, 2020, p.72); we can contend that there is still a glimmer of hope for the fulfilment of African’s dreams in a near future.

3.The Revolution politics of liberation and the power rotation system

The revolution politics of liberation and the power rotation system can be perceived as some means for a peaceful and hopeful society building in the 21st century Africa. In fact, M. Zamokuhle asserts that “people that grew up with no moral values cannot change when they are in leadership positions” (M. Zamokuhle, 2020, p.71). Therefore, the change in such a society led by leaders of no moral value first goes through a revolution politics of liberation. As described in Zeleza’s narrative, the “Movement for National Transformation” (Zeleza, 1992, p.148) is a movement of resistance against the bad leadership. It was a

revolution movement that organized an “extraordinary congress to map out future strategy and elect new leadership (during which), a program of action was adopted” (Zeleza, 1992, p.178). Such a kind of resistance movement appears to be important in a social context of disappointment and dictatorship in this 21st century. V. Ogbeide defends in this sense that “in the face of the dictatorial challenge in the continent, Zeleza’s Movement for National Transformation is certainly welcome” (V. Ogbeide, 2014, p.7). As revealed by the narrator, this revolution politics of liberation intended to “bring together all the oppressed people and classes (...) to wage a common struggle against poverty, exploitation and oppression.” (Zeleza, 1992, p.148).

So, in today’s society, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa where terrorism is unprecedentedly growing because of misleadership, we can notice these kinds of revolution movements through military Coups. The main goal of these military uprisings is to bring peace to the people, as they have been deceived in many ways by civilian leaders who were on power, doing nothing concrete to end up with this crisis. We are not saying this to support the putschists on power, but to elucidate the origin of these movements, which are for a positive national transformation. These movements are simply like “charcoal on fire” (*idem*), meaning an idea of revolution and hope through the union of all the social classes for the wellbeing of the coming generations. As clearly stated in the following words: “The Movement held hope.” (Zeleza, 1992, p.173).

Besides this revolution politics of liberation, the leadership system in Africa needs to be redefined through the strengthening of its democracy. The main issue is the way or the kind of democracy that people in Africa must adopt to enhance sustainable peace, security, stability and development. Some scholars such as A. Tchagnaou (2022) tried to conduct a study on this problematic. His “power rotation theory” is an interesting finding in the resolution of this ambiguous problem. By definition, the “power rotation system” is, according to the scholar, the innovation of the semi-direct democracy that includes the direct and representative democracy. This theory involves the management of public affairs by all the educated citizens. It is based on the fundamental principles of the strict separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, the limitation of the political terms, and the rational rotation of powers (A. Tchagnaou, 2022, p.97). In fact, this theory that had existed in the precolonial Africa had been a real regulator of the leadership

system in the continent. It was upset with the intrusion of exterior forces of western colonization (*Ibid.*, p.98). It is, in one word, a democratic and inclusive African leadership system of the precolonial era. How does it work? How can it stop this cycle of infernal violence and deaths before and after what is termed as “democratic elections” in Africa?

Indeed, the western democratic system has shown its limits on the African continent at all levels. If not, how can we qualify democratic elections that end with dozens, hundreds or thousands of deaths in Africa, mostly in the sub-Saharan African countries? Through this perspective, the rotation of power, as an African tool of leadership and management that excludes “elections”, is welcome. In this system, each country should choose its own criteria according to its social, historical, cultural and linguistic environment. For example, people can focus on the religions, the States, the races, the ethnic groups, the regions (north, south, west, east and centre), provinces, cantons etc. to choose the leaders. Focusing on the criteria of regions, for instance, the leader of the executive power can be from the north, then the one of the legislative powers from the south, the other for the judicial power from the centre, the vice presidency from the west and the primacy from the east. By doing this, the number of years must varies from four to five years in order to facilitate the rotation. In Cameroon for example, the rotation of power should focus on the criteria of regions, meaning between the Anglophone and Francophone regions (*Ibid.*, p.99).

As we can notice, this leadership system can be more inclusive than the one that has been bereaving the African continent since the Independence. As profits, the power rotation system will allow the African countries to:

Save human lives and money, avoid the perpetuation of heads of state in power, allow equal chance to every citizen to be in power, build stable and prosperous countries, create powerful and sustainable institutions, avoid corruption and foreign interference in internal political affairs, strengthen social cohesion, promote peaceful alternation of power, have republican armies and avoid military coups.

In one word, even if these proposals do not work in today’s African countries, we are convinced that the African elite is a force of proposal that will enable the continent to break the deadlock and make of Africa a reference at the international level. We believe like B. Okri that the African continent is an “abiku country. Like the spirit-child, it

keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong. (...). There will be peace. Then, people will forget. (...). Don't fear" (B. Okri, 1991, p.478). This assertion shows nothing else but a sense of optimism for a better Africa than it is today. In fact, African countries like the abiku (the spirit-child) are currently fighting to escape from the burden of suffering such as dictatorship, famine, poverty, nepotism, terrorism, foreign financial and political domination etc. for better living conditions. This attempt to escape from the burden of the present society is thus a hope to reach "Eden", meaning the world of full happiness, which is crowned with peace. Thus, as suggested by Zeleza, the achievement of these hopes of peace, happiness and development or, "to revitalize and realize these dreams and aspirations of Independence" (T. Zeleza, 1992, p.106), we must struggle "to break out the monstrous concentration camp that is independent Africa" (*idem*). Therefore, the postcolonial African narrative is a representation of F. Sarr concept of "Afrotopos" (F. Sarr, 2016, p.136), designating this future space of possibility that has not yet been realized, but of which nothing or no hurdle can prevent its fulfillment. We deeply believe that, Africa will no more be the periphery but one of the centres of this almost globalized world.

Conclusion

This study, through the postcolonial perspective is an assessment of African leadership in the 21st century. It unveils the misdeeds of African's leaders that still maintain these former colonized people in their status quo since the Independence. These misdeeds of African leaders are the main grounds behind the scourges plaguing the postcolony and leading to the disillusionment of the people in Africa. As revealed in Tiyaambe Zeleza's narrative, this crisis is mainly linked to the attitudes of the leaders such as the lack of real leadership skills, the celebration of the self-interest at the expense of the majority, narcissism, dictatorship, incarceration, murdering. These misleadership attitudes bring out the sense of disappointment of writers and people; a disappointment that affects almost all the domains of life such as the language of writing.

However, the narrator reconciles the reader with the text by a beautiful and happy end. In such a vision, the study epitomizes the

different features of a new socio-cultural and political environment that positions the African continent as the future “Eldorado” of the world despite the present predicaments and hurdles it is undergoing through. The analysis, thus, suggests the revolution politics of liberation and the power rotation system that could mitigate this leadership problem in Africa. By so doing, it considers Africa as the “abiku” country invented by Ben Okri; a country that is invested with strength, courage and hope for a more blissful life in the future.

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