

AUTHORITY OF TRADITIONAL POWER IN SOME NIGERIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

African novelists in general—and Nigerian writers in particular—have long been preoccupied with the tensions between traditional structures and the imposition of modernity. Their early literary efforts often staged the survival of indigenous cultural forces in opposition to the encroachment of Western institutions and values. However, they soon came to the realization that neither the ancestral order nor the imported modern framework could definitively establish itself. The socio-historical amalgamation produced by colonization and postcolonial transition continued to give rise to profoundly conflictual situations, featuring protagonists as alienated and disoriented as those portrayed in earlier literary generations.

Subsequently, a third axis of power—that of political authority—emerged as a central thematic concern. Writers increasingly turned their attention to the post-independence state, interrogating its mechanisms of control and its claim to legitimacy. Yet this new locus of power was revealed to be equally illusory, mirroring the failures of both the traditional and modern paradigms. The pursuit of authentic autonomy, whether local, national, or transnational, is thus portrayed as contingent upon lengthy, painful processes of political and cultural redefinition—processes that remain fraught with contradictions and unresolved tensions.

The work uses Reader-Response as its theoretical framework. This approach helps the reader to interpret a literary text according to his experiences. The aim of the application of the Reader-Response Theory is to elicit learners' personal response to literary texts, as well their reactions when dealing with literary texts (Elena Spirovskab, 2019, p.24).

*Notwithstanding, the methodology used in this study is the qualitative one and it is used in two ways of having data. The first is the primary source which is *In the Chest of a Woman*. And the second one is the critical documents like books, journals, unpublished works, internet, and thesis. This work is limited to *Authority of Traditional Power in some Nigerian novels*. The work is restricted to the presentation of a traditional power that was*

increasingly discredited. This study recommends strengthening the authority of traditional power.

Keywords: authority, decapitation domination, power.

Résumé

Les romanciers africains en général et nigériens en particulier se sont évidemment préoccupés d'opposer, avant toute chose, la survie des forces traditionnelles à l'implantation des forces modernes ; mais, force-leur a été de reconnaître très vite que ni l'ordre ancien ni l'ordre nouveau n'étaient en mesure de s'imposer réellement et que l'amalgame socio-historique auquel avait été soumis le pays secrétait encore des situations tout aussi conflictuelles et des héros tout aussi désemparés que ceux de la génération précédente.

Et, très rapidement, c'est une troisième forme de pouvoir, celle de l'ordre politique, que les écrivains vont finalement privilégier, tout en montrant que ce nouvel espoir de domination est aussi fallacieux que les deux autres et que la recherche de l'autonomie locale, nationale (voire internationale) doit encore passer par de douloureux processus de décantation.

Ce travail s'appuie sur la théorie de la réception (Reader-Response Theory) comme cadre théorique. Cette approche permet au lecteur d'interpréter un texte littéraire en fonction de ses propres expériences. L'objectif de l'application de la théorie de la réception est de susciter une réponse personnelle de l'apprenant face aux textes littéraires, ainsi que d'analyser ses réactions lors de leur lecture (Elena Spirovska, 2019, p. 24).

*Par ailleurs, la méthodologie adoptée dans cette étude est de nature qualitative, et elle est mobilisée selon deux modalités de collecte des données. La première consiste en une source primaire : *In the Chest of a Woman*. La seconde repose sur des documents critiques tels que des ouvrages, des revues scientifiques, des travaux non publiés, des sources en ligne et des mémoires universitaires.*

Ce travail se limite à l'étude de l'autorité du pouvoir traditionnel dans certains romans nigériens. Il se concentre spécifiquement sur la manière dont ce pouvoir traditionnel est présenté comme étant de plus en plus discrédité. Ce travail recommande de renforcer l'autorité du pouvoir traditionnel.

Mots Clés : autorité, décapitation, domination, pouvoir.

Introduction

Village novels published since the 1960s take the problem where Achebe left it in *Arrow of God*, and continue to evaluate the deterioration of the old order by presenting a new series of portraits of notables.

We are struck first, when we analyze the many characters of chiefs who still populate this production by the abandonment of any heroic presentation. The protagonist of Aluko's novel, for example, *His Worshipful Majesty*, is no more than an irascible and inconsequent despot who makes his subjects live in an atmosphere of ubiquitous terror: a counselor who has put him down must bow to him: "The erring councillor cried for mercy where he grovelled in awe and humility on the bare concrete floor" (T. Aluko, pp44-45)

Another must lick the dusty soil and all those who dare to protest are either bastonned or imprisoned. But, despite the very advanced paranoid aspect of this character's description, Aluko's point is above all didactic and moral in the sense that, throughout the book, the novelist is attached, with a Polentig Jurisdiction, to denounce the usurpation of power which results from these feudal practices:

"There Alaiye was in every sense above the law» (T. Aluko, p.51).

"There was recognition of the principle that the King owned everything - the land and the fruits that came there from, the people that tilled the land, the chiefs that the King had appointed to rule over his people. They all belonged to the King" (T. Aluko, p.82).

The demonstration is in fact to confront this authoritarianism confined to a fairly warm liberalism (which tries to promote the

second important Character of the book who is a truthful lawyer) and to accuse anachronistic kings to a shameful suicide, by the English administration, in such a vicious context, that the notion of power is assimilated to that of obscurantism and the movement that animates the whole romantic theme of the book is no longer that of progress but that of regression since the King of *His Worshipful Majesty* Wishes to re-introduce pre-colonial coercion, or, to the rigor, remain to a status quo of social immobility: «So long as there are elders in the community, the community cannot go bad" (T. Aluko, p.153).

This very reactionary refusal of any progress is essentially based in Aluko's work on traditional religious structures. In *One Man, One Wife*, the novelist tries, with a lot of finesse, to discern the nature of his hero's power, and first of all, he takes on supernatural explanations: the chief of this village (who believes hear in the thunder the voice of the gods who are worse by the implantation of missionaries and who is convinced that the outbreak of Variola abated on the whites have forbidden the propitiatory human sacrifices) search for comfort in fetish and encounter in this a favourable echo among the most advanced:

"Teacher, you are black. I am black. Don't let us lie to each other. Even Christianity cannot explain certain mysterious things in this country. Even the White Man's magic cannot explain these things.
Teacher, there are ghosts".

Teacher's face registered a momentary set back .For he, too believed it in his heart of hearts. The White Man's magic becomes inadequate in matter of ghosts and witchcraft"
(T.Aluko, p.33).

But, like Achebe, Aluko can only achieve this existential

interlace with the ironic situations that remind, in more incisive, those that overwhelmed the hero of *Things Fall Apart*. For example, when the thunder, emanating from the terrible god Shango, falls on the squares and kills one of the villagers, designating it to the popular vindication:

"Yes, Shango, the god of lightning, had struck down an evildoer. Only a stranger in the land would not know that Shango struck down only burglars, traitors and other animals who might otherwise escape detection and punishment" (T. Aluko, p.119). The amazement is great when one realizes that the chosen victim is the good Joshua, the revered and courageous leader:

"The man they had all respected for his respectability, uprightness and fearfulness - Joshua - a criminal! Incredible! Astonishing! Lightning had exposed in the most sensational circumstances a criminal in the guise of a hero" (T. Aluko, p.120).

The fact that Joshua is, in addition, a Christian, exacerbates the complexity of the romantic situation and leads to a series of questions that the book leaves open: Is Joshua punished because he is actually criminal (which might be possible) or, simply, converted? And in this case, how has the Christian god not protected him and has he let the animistic deity operate without restriction? Must the man be enlisted under the banner of one god or several in order to face the existential mysteries? To this inexplicable death is added another no less enigmatic, that of the traditional priest, terraced, him, by smallpox. This second abandonment of the gods reveals, of course, the doubly iconoclastic intention of Aluko, who wants to denounce the fanaticism from all sides by showing its fragility: At the end of this terrible book, all powers go extinct: the traditional priest is thus dead, disavowed by his god, the evolved became crazy and

the leader of the village suicide not to die slave of the White Man.

This theme of the chief's suicide, in fact, runs on in this production and concludes in a meaningful way many of these ambiguous novels for example, *Many Thing you no Understand* and *Many Thing Begin for Change* by Adaora Ulasi are built on the same dualistic structures. On one hand, the traditional power is described with acrimonious sharpness (which brings the novelist to reveal and denounce, for example, the cruel practice of immolating twenty men to place their heads in the grave of the deceased leader); but, on the other, the supernatural aspect of this power is highlighted with a cloudy jubilation (which, this time, brings the author to focus on the magical activities of the old chief still able to cast a spell against his opponents, be it the brother of one of the sacrificed or the Assistant District Commissionner who wants to investigate these practices:

"So I put juju on ADO. If ADO cross water and go back for him own country, the juju go leave him. But if he go and come back again or if he stay for here, the thing go stay thick with him" (A. I. Ulasi P.124).

As in the other novels, the traditional power seems, for a moment, to triumph and the leader can, congratulate himself on getting rid of the geniours and having put the administration headquarters in a confusing way. But again, the lesson must be drawn from the conclusion to the strange irony that closes the narrative: despite his apparent victory over the administration and despite the honours he is given, the cunning old African comes to doubt the power that he arrives, in spite of everything, to exert and confuse himself that if he manages to deceive the white power, the hypocrisy is reciprocal: «Nobody know what white man think. They no tell anybody what be inside their mind. They just go for action. Ah, white man vex me" (A. I. Ulasi

P.158); and, in the car that drives him to the administrator's palace, he suddenly decides to commit suicide not to waste, in case the white power would have fooled him: "Whatever else he was, he was no coward when he had to deal with the tangible. it was when faced with the intangible that he appeared weak". (A. I. Ulasi P.90)

This new funeral prayer places the novel under its deep illumination which is not, despite appearances, that of physical force: in spite of the abuses that populate the plot in a crescendo of pure crime, the last word remains in the magical power that the chief uses shamelessly and in front of which the administration remains seemingly powerless.

Magic is not a new theme in this Nigerian novel production, but it is interesting to see the evolution of novelists in this traditional power structure. First, we must note a generalisation rather surprising if we consider that these books are situated longtime before the time; indeed, in the novels of Achebe, Tutuola or F. Nwapa, the use of magic was confined to the rural environment, one assists (with the widening of the romantic field) to a penetration in the urban environment which is interesting. The use of the charms and the witches has become almost systematic and affects all the layers of the population, be it the student who is going to undergo a test:

"If you were not properly fortified by the medicine man, you could be "pinned" by another boy during the examination period. As a result, you fill your answer books with utter rubbish unrelated to the questions asked" (C. Ike, P.39),

The administrators too curious:

"I no think say you yourself understand plenty things. And I no think say you go fit understand them if you live here for one

hundred year". He added as he turned to leave "you go no see broad daylight, Mr District Officer" ((A. I. Ulasi P.160), The official who is afraid to be transferred to another city:

"Before cock-crow, he was consulting old Sunmonu, the most famous professional diviner and juju man in Ibala and district. He listened to Simeon's story and his request that he should use his powers to stop the transfer" (T. Aluko, pp110-111)

Or even the Prime Minister: "the Prime Minister, a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of Great Britain, had gone the juju way when he fell ill" (T. Aluko P.157)

The theme of magic is, most of the time, used in the first degree and few are the examples where we see the novelists take a step back from their novels' matter. In all Aluko's work yet so caustic, one can only raise, for example, one notation questioning the plausibility and the opportunity of magic matters when the foreman, hero of *Kinsman and Foreman*, is offered by the witch that he consulted the possibility of becoming chief engineer, he reacts in a way for once very Cartesian who says a lot about the real opinion of the writer:

"Simeon was ambitious but he knew enough of Public Works Practice to know that government would not approve of a Road Foreman changing places with an Engineer. The juju might be asked to undertake the impossible and then fail" (T. Aluko : *Kinsman and Foreman*, p. 111.).

Likewise, one must wait for one of Munonye's novels to find in this work which bathes in magic some rare signs of reserve and skepticism which allow the hero very Christianized (and yet

continually confronted with the occult powers), to keep his spiritual integrity intact:

"Many things indeed happened in the secret world of charms, Joe reflected. Anyway, such forces had no effect on those who knew nothing about them. He himself knew nothing about charms. In spite of a many convincing manifestations of their reality he had always refused to have anything to do with charms whether for protection or for promotion" (J. Munonyne : *Obi*, p. 116).

It will be noted the ambiguity of this statement, which is supposed to illustrate a sentence but which, in fact, is truffled by terms favorable to the occult world. In fact, more than phenomena of rejection, these are true declarations of allegiance that are found in these ambiguous novels where the heroes (as lucid and rigorous as they are) flicker when confronted with the supernatural:

"Titus had begun to have a strange feeling, curiously enough, from the moment that the old man had said that Oluode was present with them and was watching the proceedings. The scene with so many women and a few men gathered under the dim light in that ghostly hour of the day was eerie, enough. Titus began to have the feeling that he was gradually coming under some strange influence that he could not explain. Something deep down in him was telling him in a thin voice that he should break away from it all he felt that he should run out of the airless room into the fresh atmosphere outside an atmosphere that was free of ancestral spirits. But he found himself completely powerless to carry out his desire. He saw himself unable to resist what-ever he was to do by his old great uncle... He saw himself drinking- drinking, drinking. Then for a long time after- wards, Titus Oti, Bachelor of Science (Engineering), graduate of the

University of London, remembered nothing" (T. Aluko :*Kinsman and Foreman*, p. 8.).

The intoxicating power of magic becomes both a means and an end, whether in the remote village of *Oil Man of Obange*:

"Both sides resorted to such secrets and deadly methods as poison, witchcraft and ambush and there was no week in which a death cry did not echo from one side to the other" (J. Munonye: *Oil Man of Obange*, p. 4.)

Or in the context more evolved of the small town of *Kinsman and Foreman* where mysterious interventions follow through: the engineer to whom one throws a spell becomes momentarily insane and has to be interned while one accuses his mother of being a witch and of killing her father. In a general manner, the characters feel constantly threatened by a charge of witchcraft that can suddenly fall down on them:

"For all I know, witchcraft is a fraternity. Strictly speaking, members employ their wicked art only in self-defence against their enemies. But the unfortunate thing is that they will declare war on "you on the slightest provocation" (O. Nzekwu: *Blade among the Boys*, p. 76.)

And cut down on all the powers and hopes, be it that of the advanced teacher of *One Man, one Wife* (who suddenly sees his social ascension broken net rise)

"For the ex-village Teacher and Catechist, the Public letter writer and notary remained a lunatic for the rest of his life" (T. Aluko: *One Mane, one Wife*, p185)

Or the English vice-governor, who is to be brought back into a mysterious delirium in England.

The occult practices are no longer, the exclusive proprietary of isolated individuals who seek to get rid of geniours but are often now concentrated in the hands of very powerful secret societies. Two novelists, in particular, have been committed to describing these new counter-powers: on calm mode and adapting a tone almost ethnological Udo Akpan, in *The Wooden Gong*, centered his plot around the figure of a leader who is at the head of a powerful brotherhood whose author underlines the undeniable secular power: "Secret societies were powerful instruments of government and social discipline" (U. Akpan : *The Wooden Gong*, p. 12.), While denouncing the atmosphere of terror they make: "A real source of terror to women and non-members and sometimes to the members themselves" (U. Akpan : *The Wooden Gong*, p. 2).

The book is built on the laborious study of the real power of the chief of this community of which some members (the youngest) dispute the retrograde methods of intimidation and blackmail while others refuse any proposal for a leniency. Mine from the inside, the cult will disintegrate when a group of Christians settle in the village and cause, by its incessant interventions, not only the intervention of the English administration but also the arrest of the chief as well as their own condemnation. The village will then sink in a generalized degradation typical of this unbearable spread between too many anti-nomic counter-powers:

"The village soon became a different place from what it used to be. Disillusionment set in. Discipline and coherence within it were broken... there was confusion and scepticism about everything, including the white man's "book" and religion. With most of its secrets generally known, the Mfina Society had lost its myth and power. Young man began to leave the village in despair for other places in search of paid employment. Social

loyalties and responsibilities were shaken to the roots" (U. Akpan: *The Wooden Gong*, p 103.).

But Akpan's words will remain confused until the end because it is difficult to detect the real intentions of this uncompromising brochure where the author's embarrassment is so obvious that it even affects its writing method and leads it to resort to formulas of a rare awkwardness which are all confessions of literary helplessness:

"In any case, I am not competent to speak for the societies or the ghosts (meaning the agents of the society who were believed not to be human but ghosts)" (U. Akpan *The Wooden Gong*, P 48.).

The second writer who dared to confront this taboo subject made it with much more skill in her two books, the novelist A.L. Ulasi has, in fact, fully integrated into her already almost police intrigues the mysterious acts of secret societies that quadril the country. The disappearance of the District Officer, which is the pivot of the narrative, led, in fact, to the authorities and journalists to cross-referent the criminal abuses of a secret society (which, obviously "liquidates" the geniours) and the disturbing mutism of a local notable at the end of the book, the reality breaks out: "If they can commit a senseless murder at the mine, there's nothing to stop them from Killing a District Officer" (A.L. Ulasi: *Many Thing Begin for Change*, p. 183.),

The role of the chief in this cascade of murders is highlighted and the book ends as a third order novel:

"I'll give him a story that will not only make his hair stand on end but will send the sale of his scandal sheets saoring to

unbearable heights" (A.L. Ulsi: *Many Thing Begin for Change*, p. 192.).

The evolution of this theme of magic (which therefore slips, little by little, from the sacred terror to the low-level sensationalism) is an interesting indicator of the changes that affect the traditional structures: the power of the chiefs has been singularly weakened and can even turn against them and, As a result, the main characters are no longer of intransigent and haughty exception beings (as was the case in Achebe) but are now anxious and cruel individuals:

"It is only the Kabiyesi who knows how difficult his task has grown over the years. Now, his people, especially the younger ones, ask too many question, argue each point and tend to be unafraid to put forward their own views and wishes. These are some of the changes in the village which have made the task of this Kabiyesi increasingly difficult. His authority is now less impregnable than in the good old days. It is only by tact, diplomacy and, sometimes, by a downright bold face that the authority of his office is still recognised. He knows that until he dies, he will be compelled to guard this authority as the remaining symbol of the civilisation into which he was born and the connecting thread with the civilization of the new world he would never understand or be fully part of (O. Ibukun *The Return*, p. 264-265.)

Less and less assured of being able to fulfill the role they have been given by the gods but it is now challenged by humans.

After having so cleverly undermined the presentation of a traditional power that was increasingly discredited, the novelists had no trouble confronting it with other emerging counter powers and, in particular, to show how the colonizing power

saw, too, its authority questioned in the test of force it engaged in the African territory.

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