

BOOK REVIEW

Title: Surviving the Intrigues

Author: Barth N. Ekwueme

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Reviewer: Prof. Francis U. Angrey

“In any human society, where people must, of necessity, interact there are bound to be intrigues. But this should not deter one from pushing ahead with what one believes in”.

Unimna Angrey

After reading the book I have been called upon to review on the occasion of the celebration of the 60th birthday anniversary of Prof. Barth N. Ekwueme, Professor of mineralogy and petrology, I told myself that wherever we find ourselves, we are surrounded by intrigues. Some people may allow themselves to be defeated and to be swallowed up by such intrigues. There are others still who would struggle to swim against the current and, thus, succeed in wading through such intrigues.

This is even true when you find yourself in the academia where it is believed many academics who find themselves in there, are eccentric and hard to deal with at times. In such an academic milieu, every member thinks that he knows better than the other person. In such a situation, there are bound to be intrigues which, inevitably, lead to conflicts. If we were all to write a book such as this one, I am convinced that our shelves would be filled with different accounts of intrigues we have all been facing in the course of doing our work.

Barth Ekwueme's book opens our eyes to realities in our environment which, ordinarily, we gloss over even though they are here with us. To me, he should be praised for his courage and for his down-to-earth approach to put down in a book issues that we only grumble about but do nothing about; what even surprises me about the book is

that the author takes time to give us dates and time when events in the life of the protagonist, Nwoye take place. This shows that he pays attention to the smallest details, to the minutest happening.

Although written in the 3rd person singular, the book is an autobiography which, read *en filigrane*, shows that the author is narrating his personal experiences at different tranches of his life. Using the 3rd person narrative is just adopting the technique of “distanciation” which allows the writer to camouflage his thoughts and ideas behind his main character. By so doing, he follows the style of such African novelists as Ferdinand Oyono (*Houseboy*) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane (*Ambiguous adventure*). In Ekwueme’s book, Nwoye is none other than the author himself whose middle name is, of course, what his protagonist bears.

Apart from hiding his personage, Nwoye, to tell his own story, we see that the main actors in the story who occupy the writer’s mind, are only known to those who maybe familiar with the environment in which they deploy themselves. The names are given to us in a way that we can only guess and speculate about who such actors are. This style is needed to be used if the writer himself is to be objective, if objectivity there is.

The book, *Surviving the intrigues*, is itself intriguing in the way the story is presented to us. There is this kind of crude truth that is, at times, told about issues and persons which is at times jolting in the book, which we can even call a novel. The book is made up of seven chapters, each of which discusses intrigues the protagonist faces at different levels as he struggles to find his feet in various positions of authority in which he finds himself.

In chapter one, titled “Intrigues in ivory towers”, the author shows the resentment his colleagues had against Nwoye in the department just after his return to it upon defending his Ph.D at UNN. According to him, only few of such colleagues welcomed him back while students were very happy and enthusiastic to see him back. There were intrigues everywhere but these reached a crescendo when he was appointed Head of Department. The same persons who did not want him did all they could to make him fail and be thrown out of office. In spite of all this, the author records Nwoye’s successes in areas as field trip, programmes, conferences and such other things that called for his attention while his acting headship lasted. To him, the greatest intrigue

was the one that had to do with his promotion to professor, which was unnecessarily delayed even when he was amply qualified for same. Those persons thought him too young to be so promoted.

Chapter 2, “Intrigues in cultural associations”, takes us to activities of some cultural associations such as the Nsukka Family Union, the Igbo Association and the Ikenga group at the University of Calabar to which he was a member that played a significant role in their growth. The only group that welcomed him and appreciated Nwoye was the Nsukka group at Ado-Ekiti where he had gone to on sabbatical. While he enjoyed accolades and goodwill at Ado-Ekiti, he had all types of intrigues woven around him in the Calabar Igbo groups. To him, all this was down to jealousy, envy, covetousness and callousness.

In chapter 3, “Intrigues in religion”, the author highlights Nwoye’s activities in the church. He shows him as one who likes taking up responsibilities in the church, especially where building the house of God is concerned. He shows us his role in the building of St. Paul’s parish, Unical and his many contributions to the progress made both in church buildings and in priests’ houses in Orba-Nsukka, his hometown. As the title implies, not everyone was content with what Nwoye did. There must be intrigues to put spanners in the works. This did not, however, deter him from showing his zeal, commitment and determination to do what he thought best to achieve his goals.

“Intrigues in appointments”, the fourth chapter, harps mainly on sabbatical appointments enjoyed by Nwoye and the intrigues thereof. While his stay at both Ado Ekiti and Anyigba seemed to have been smooth for him, his going to the Ministry of Mines, where he earned no salary except allowances, was somewhat a waste of time. As an active man and an active mind, he felt nothing was happening there and as such, was not a place meant for him. As the people there were most times idle, they spent their time sleeping and gossiping in their various offices. This, by itself, created intrigues which made Nwoye sad. His sabbatical at the University of Port Harcourt was no different as he met a head of department who was very unfriendly to him.

To my mind, the mother of all intrigues staring Nwoye in the face is, perhaps, the one found in chapter 5 titled “Intrigues in elections”. At the opening of this chapter, the writer gives an overview of elections conducted in Nigeria, nay in Africa, where such are viewed as a “do-or-die” affair by politicians. Here, the writer extrapolates to say that what

happens during elections in the larger Nigerian society is what goes on in our campuses in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors, in the election of Deans of Faculty, in the appointment of HODs, etc...which are usually volatile. In their desperation, many aspirants and contenders to these offices employ all types of underhand tactics to undo their opponents. Calumny, backbiting, blackmail, lies, malice, hatred are some of the ingredients used in this “pot pourri” of intrigues that the system throws up.

Nwoye had his own fair share of these intrigues when he indicated his interest to run for the position of Dean, Faculty of Science, University of Calabar, Calabar. Even when he was duly nominated to take part in the deanship election, intrigues flew in from all corners to make sure that he did not win it. The writer feels that ethnic considerations and not competence were used to deny him the much coveted seat. Nwoye did not, however, allow this setback to deter him from doing what he should do. During this period of intrigues, he invested his time, energy and knowledge in the production of his global journal series which, today, have gone places as they are today flagship journals in and out of our university. His not being dean somewhat jeopardized his chances of becoming the VC of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The last two chapters of the book lead us into Nwoye’s adventures into business and into his relationship with his family members, especially in matters of funerals. Rising from adversities wrought and spurned on the university system in Nigeria and hardships emanating therefrom, Nwoye took to writing and publishing to make the proverbial two ends meet. From the writer’s account, Nwoye raked in so much money that he was relatively comfortable in a system where most colleagues were barely surviving the hard times. Nwoye’s business acumen was an asset to him as he made a success of his stint as Ag. Director of Unicalcons, all the intrigues regardless.

Chapter 7 concludes the book with some intrigues identified by the writer in funerals where Nwoye was a major actor. Here, Nwoye remembers all those who died, how their funerals were organized and, most importantly, the intrigues found therein. In all of this, Nwoye acquitted himself well and did the needful to make a success of otherwise thorny situations.

By way of conclusion

The writer did not tell us the part Nwoye plays in the bringing about of the web of intrigues that seems to catch his protagonist except he is telling us that Nwoye is blameless and, therefore, an unfortunate victim at the hands of his “predators”. However, we leave that to the author to decide. This apart, the book is a must read for those of us who hold offices or who aspire to holding offices some day. It teaches us that whatever intrigues we face in the course of doing what we are convinced is right, we should never give up. Success must surely come our way if we endure and persevere.

As a scientist, the writer gives us his account with a great measure of accuracy. His writing is fluid and easy to read as he manipulates the English language well. His pen never ceases to flow like that of another scientist, Jonah Chukwuemeka Agunwamba, a Professor of water Resources and Environmental Engineering at the Department of Civil Engineering, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, who has published such fictions as *Faces of deceit*, *Give them a chance*, *I married an Osu*, *The poacher's daughter*, which have been hailed by some literary critics as great works. Ekwueme and, indeed, Agunwamba have shown that between the rock field, the laboratory and creative writing, there is a very thin line, hence I recommend *Surviving the intrigues* to all of us. Thank you.