



***The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* as a Model against the Neo-Colonialism of
Betrayal by African Leaders: A Literary, Linguistic and Dialogic
Analysis**

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Abstract

John Maxwell, a motivational speaker and inspirational writer, avers that Everything rises and falls on leadership (). Corroborating this, George Ehusani states that “a land devoid of visionary leaders and a nation without integrity can hardly experience stability and peace... leaders with vision inspire citizens and mobilize them for nation building” (1). Lamenting the sad and sorry state of the Nigerian nation, Achebe states very categorically that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership” (1).

Introduction

This essay looks at, and avers that, the hero of the play the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiongo’o and Micere Githae Mugo is a model for leadership in Africa yet, unfortunately, sharply contrastive of what is obtainable across the African continent. Since everything rises and falls on leadership as George Ehusani avers, it would seem, therefore, that Africa’s free fall and its inability to rise; its inability to transcend underdevelopment, can be ascribed to the failure of leadership.

History shows that countries like Malaysia, Singapore, India, Brazil and some others not mentioned here, were at about the same level of development with most African countries as at the 1960s. That is not the case today. Most or all of these countries appear to be centuries ahead of Africa today. Not a few have argued that these countries owe their progress to the sterling and exemplary leadership of some of their leaders. Leaders like George Washington of America, Mahatma Gandhi of India, Winston Churchill of Britain, Charles De Gaulle of Fran, Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore, Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Chairman Mao Tse Tung of China and Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum of Dubai,, belong to that class of outstanding leaders and true heroes who had the vision, charisma and integrity required to inspire and mobilize the citizenry towards nation building.

These are leaders who, arguably, had crystal motives, wisdom, effective communication skills, foresight, sense of purpose and commitment, and a spirit of selflessness not selfishness, all of which are qualities required to catalyze the national and patriotic spirit in their people and to galvanize them toward self-actualization.

Whereas some scholars and commentators on public and current affairs and issues of governance assert that progress rather depends on the followership or citizenry, this paper promotes the position that everything rises and falls on leadership and the effective use of language resources. Our forebears had from time immemorial alluded to this when they stated in an African proverb that when decay sets in on a fish it starts from the head.

History has shown that where leaders and public figures lead by example and not by precepts, by typifying and exemplifying sterling qualities of leadership, they rub off on the larger society and awaken in the citizens a nationalistic feeling. Conversely, where leadership is a manifestation of master/servant relationship, rather than servant leader; where leadership is devoid of altruistic intentions; where leadership manifests roguery, looting, election rigging, political brigandage and sundry forms of malfeasance; where leadership is expressed in borrowed language, filled with deceptions and ambiguities, the majority of the citizenry become compromised and the band wagon effect sets in.

In Nigeria for example, Chinua Achebe states that:

On the morning after Murtala Mohammed seized power in July 1975 public servants in Lagos were found “on seat” at seven thirty in the morning. Even the “go slow” traffic that had defeated every solution and defied every regime vanished overnight from the streets! Why? The new ruler’s reputation....was sufficient to transform in the course of only one night the style and habit of Nigeria’s unruly, capital (I).

This is proof of the role and impact of leadership on society. The one thing that the followership can do is to cast away complacency; cast away fear and rise up to the challenge of holding the leadership accountable for their stewardship. This way, the fellowshipping can induce the leadership to produce good leadership the way a baby forces milk from its mother’s breast.

Leadership: The African Experience

For almost six decades, a period during which most African countries have been so-called independent states, Africa seems to have been cursed with the curse of bad leadership. Of strong men Africa has had more than her fair share, but of leaders, nay good leaders, we can count with the fingers on one hand and still have many fingers left. Arguably though, we can count Julius Nyerere, Jerry Rawlings and Nelson Mandela. Beyond these, search me for others. On the other hand, of strong men, masters, rogues and gangsters, we have many. Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seko, Jean Bokasa, Macias Nguema, Obiang Nguema, Oma Bongo, Ahamdu Ahidjo, Paul Biya, Sani Abacha, Robert Mugabe, Yayah Jameh, Joseph Kabila, Yoweri Museveni, Idris Derby, Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, Mohammed iv of Morocco, etc. A comprehensive list will be too long and unnecessary here. Let us embark on a cursory examination of just one of them in order to see what Africa has had as leaders.

Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga was a Military dictator and President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which he renamed Zaire, from 1965- 1997, a period of thirty two (32) years. He was an authoritarian megalomaniac with an unquenchable and insatiable craving for power, wealth and luxury. He established a one party state, concentrating all powers in his own hands. He became the object of an obscene cult of personality. While his country suffered from uncontrolled inflation, massive debt and shameful currency devaluation, Mobutu embarked on a mindless personal aggrandizement. He plundered his nation's wealth through economic exploitation and corruption to the extent that Acemoghe et al to name his regime a "Kleptocracy" (19). He is said to have stolen between 4 and 15 billion US dollars and would fly in a Concord to Paris for shopping. Indeed, he was notorious for nepotism, corruption, embezzlement and violation of human rights. This is the archetypal African leader.

Situating the Problem

Quite some attention has been given to *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* by scholars. However, almost all essays and analyses of this play which I have read see the work as a response to colonialist writings about the Mau-Mau movement. Such colonialist writings are seen as depicting Dedan Kimathi, the leader of the Mau-Mau movement as a vicious and mentally disturbed person. They conclude therefore, that the aim of the playwrights, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O and Micere Mugo, is to correct this skewed image of Dedan Kimathi. This would place the work in the same category as Ola Rotimi's *Ovonranwen Nogbaisi*. Many scholars and researchers also see Rotimi's play as an effort directed at giving the right image of Oba Ovonranwen, the Benin

Monarch, as against the misrepresentations of colonialist or Eurocentric writings.

Another group of scholars and researchers aver that *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism. This seems true but there is a bigger picture which relates to the leadership problem in Africa. This paper posits that Dedan Kimathi is a model for African leadership by his awareness and rejection of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism while exalting African cultural identity through language. The traitors who betray the struggle, the people and their language are neck-deep suffering from the effects of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Unfortunately, for Africa, these neo-colonial bourgeoisies who make up the African elites have formed the core of the leadership.

Herein resides the relevance of this paper as its focus is a contemporary issue, one with monumental consequences for an entire continent. From independence to the present time, the quest for development in Africa has been marred by a monumental failure of leadership. Effective leadership has remained elusive, very elusive. The African elite that has produced the core of the leadership has shown a lack of understanding of the basic requirement of leadership.

Obasanjo (153) states that the present level of development on the continent is a reflection of the failure of leadership; leadership that personalizes the common wealth giving rise to abject poverty, inadequate health facilities, housing problems, etc, etc. On the surface, this seems trite but on deeper analysis it is not. We shall soon understand that the personalization of the common wealth is inspired by the love for exhibitionism. Exhibitionism is a reflection of the effects of years of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Put differently, and in the words of Eze, Africa requires a “leadership that is free, intelligent, brave, patriotic, people oriented, (and) destination bound” (1).

African elites and the leaders that emerge there from must recognize the slave and colonial social hereditary factors that have brutalized their psyche. It seems apparent that the socio-psychology of African leaders is squarely responsible for their failure. Obafemi Awolowo puts it this way:

But whether we like it or not the truth is Africans of today are creatures of unusual hereditary and environment. For in all the wide world, no continent, no people have been subjected to brutalization and dehumanization for so long and for such a

terrible scale as Africa and her people had been (38).

Obafemi Awolowo adds that Africans must bear in mind the peculiar nature of the inhuman and degrading experiences meted out to our ancestors for centuries through slavery and colonization and the genetic and socio-environmental effects of those experiences on (us) their descendants (38). With regard to leadership, the result is an inferiority complex which makes our leaders prone to exhibitionism and an obscene aping of the white man. This is why, according to Adeolu Ademoyo, our leaders are prone to a number of antics, rationalizations and projections, and to many public postures which are not defensible on objective rational grounds (14). Franz Fanon says “but the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes ineffaceable wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people” (200).

In African a man becomes President of his country and thus has an opportunity to build world class hospitals, for instance. However, rather than build world class hospitals and health care facilities, he would prefer to run abroad for medical checkup and treatment. In Nigeria, for instance, we see this in our Presidents, their wives and children; in state governors, ministers and various government officials. Their wives even go abroad to be delivered of babies. These acts of exhibitionism also manifest in their use of the English Language to lie, deceive and cheat on their followers. They quickly forked-tongue and hide under “ambiguity” or “quoted out of contexts”. This is exhibitionism arising from slave and colonial mentality. Until they are able to recognize and firmly reject this mentality, like Dedan Kimathi does, Africa will continue to languish in the back waters of underdevelopment.

This example from the Nigerian health sector is valid for almost all other spheres. It is valid for education, for economy, for culture, etc. Development and progress become a near impossibility under such exhibitionist circumstances.

Dedan Kimathi: A Model for African Leadership.

In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* the playwrights use the historical Dedan Kimathi to create a model for leadership in Africa. They use the historical figure to attack and criticize the African elite class which produces the African leadership, concluding that they have betrayed the people. In Kimathi, the playwrights “see certain characteristics which are crucial to any creative political fighter against the present-day (neo) colonialism” (32). Brain Crow points out that Dedan Kimathi is an expression of radical left wing

nationalism, vociferous in its denunciation of neo-colonialism and the bourgeoisie's collusion in it (25).

The playwrights do not set out to recreate a realistic portrayal of Kimathi's trial. As a result, the play does not present a tightly woven dramatic narrative. Instead, we have an episodic plot consisting of disparate but thematically related episodes.

Dedan Kimathi faces four trials, all of which take place in his cell. These are interspersed with scenes in the court room as well as scenes from Kenya's history and Kimathi's interaction with the Mau Mau fighters. All of these are important in understanding Kimathi as a model for African leadership. The leader who will ensure progress and development for Africa will have to reject neo-colonialism and be aware of and purge himself of the slave and colonial mentality which induce inferiority complex and lead to exhibitionism.

There are two groups of African characters in play. One group is a group of ideologically charged characters whose words and actions provide a model for African leadership. This group is typified by Dedan Kimathi but includes the woman, the boy and the girl and the guerilla fighters. As typified by Kimathi, these people are acutely aware of the evils of slavery and colonialism and so they stoutly reject these. The second group of African characters are those blacks who for reasons of their personal interest have taken side with the white man and are working for him and with him to oppress fellow blacks. These are the traitors who betray their people-Wambararia is in this group.

Sadly for Africa, most of her leaders, thrown up by the elite class, belong to his group rather than to the patriotic group where Kimathi belongs. The key word for Kimathi's group is patriotism fuelled by a complete awareness of the twin evil of slavery and colonialism and the inferiority complex it foists on them. Wambararia's group of black characters is content to live within the ambience of slavery and colonialism, developing an inferiority complex which fuels an attitude of exhibitionism. So the key word for this group is exhibitionism.

The stage direction of the opening scene of the play, which is a courtroom scene reads thus:

Courtroom: A white Judge presides. Near him is seated a fat important-looking African clerk...(Dedan Kimathi:3)

What, if one may ask, makes a man under slavery and colonial domination, looks fat and feels important? For this court clerk, as for the rest of them, the

answer is selfishness, greed, self-centeredness and egocentricity. In the world of the play, this court clerk is a member of the African elite just like African leaders of today. Like the court clerk, African leaders of today are egocentric. Like the court clerk, these are the leaders who betray their people.

Some scholars and researchers have argued that this act of collaboration with the oppressor is not necessarily an act of betrayal. They argue further, that, it is a way of deflecting and appropriating power to buttress one's own position. This is really the point because in the same stage direction we are told that:

“Kimathi: chained, is in the dock.
Guarding him, Waitina, a European
District cum police officer and two African
KAR soldiers, heavily armed (Dedan
Kimathi:3).

The point which does not seem very apparent to many here is this – with the guns and the assured protection of the oppressor, these two acquire some power to lord it over and control the people.

The above has been the plight of Africa. We have seen leaders whose inferiority complex and exhibitionist tendency is gargantuan and who are sustained in power against the wishes of their people, by force of arms and support and protection by the West.

On page 5 of the play we read an exchange between a rich-looking black chief and a white hungry-looking slave trader. Several strong black men and a few women are given away for a long, posh piece of cloth and a heap of trinkets (Dedan Kimathi:5). We also read: a labour force of blacks, toiling on a plantation under the supervision of a cruel, ruthless fellow black overseer. A white master comes around and inspects the work (Dedan Kimathi: 5).

The black chief and the cruel and ruthless supervisor are representatives of the kinds of leaders that Africa has produced. Leaders who are unable to reject the slave and colonial mentality. Leaders who as a result of this suffer from an inferiority complex which drives them to become traitors and betrayers of their own people as a means of proving their own importance.

An analysis of African leaders, past and present, reveals selfish, mediocre, opportunistic and small minded people masquerading as leaders. Selfless leadership remains a mirage. These are the Wambararias and others of the play. Of these people, Kimathi says:

Kiamathi: You lie! Which people?
Loyalists?...Traitors! Simpletons!... all
slaves you have deceived in the past.
Henderson:... Your brother Wambararia?
Kimathi: why tire my ears with names of
traitors? Kimathi: He sold out for his
stomach (*Dedan Kimathi: 32-33*).

This is the case in Africa. Leaders are traitors who betray their people for personal gains so that they would reside in palacial mansions, fly private jets, go abroad for medical care, send their children to the bests abroad – all of which amount to exhibitionism. Even Shaw Henderson, a colonialist and oppressor, admits:

Henderson: It was the same with all the
others. China, Gath, Hungu, Gaceru. And
even Wambararia, your own brother! All
our collaborates....(*Dedan Kimathi: 34*).

Indeed, this class of leaders collaborates with external forces and betray their own people. They confuse their ignorance with what is required to run a nation. They are armateurs who seek ideas from their erstwhile colonial masters, looking up to institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. They make their countries constituents of the world neo-colonialist system, a thing which is a binding restraint on development. They lack the capacity to chart a progressive course for national development because with the inferiority complex induced by the slave and colonial mentality which they have failed to reject, they lack the consciousness of development. Like Wambararia and company, they kow tow to neo-colonial lines of action and increase the vulnerability of their people to external manipulation.

The play, for the avoidance of doubt, has a handful of these black characters who represent the decadent class of leaders thrown up by the African elite group. The Banker, the Priest and the Politicians belong here. Listen to the Banker:

Toilers there will always be even in
America, England, France... There are
servants and masters.... Sellers of labour
and buyers of labour. Master and servant
(*Dedan Kimathi:40*).

This character is not like those who are ignorant of what they do. With full knowledge, he has no qualms keeping his people as servants and second class citizens of the world. The Politician, like many African leaders, imagines that development and industrialization would be given rather than attained. Hear him:

Politician:... in state house. In London...
we shall be given our independence
(*Dedan Kimathi*: 46).

These are all agents of neo-colonization. These are the kinds of leaders Africa does not need. Africa needs patriotic, selfless and self-sacrificing leaders modeled after Dedan Kimathi. Leaders who are conscious of the need to reject slave and colonial mentality and the inferiority complex which they induce. Dedan Kimathi is that African leader who is acutely aware of the impact of slavery and colonialism on the African psyche. He is patriotic and selfless. For the first time that he speaks in the play, he says:

Kimathi: by what right dear you, a colonial
judge, sit in judgment over me?
Judge!.....Kimathi, I may remind you that
we are in a court of law.
Kimathi: an imperialist court of law
(*Dedan Kimathi*: 25)

This is a total and firm rejection of the slave and colonial mentality which induce inferiority complex. He dreams big dreams for his people. In spite of all the juicy offers made to him as a person, for his personal benefit and glorification, he retorts:

Kimathi: Kimathi Wa Wachiuri well never
betray the people's liberation struggle
never!

He is selfless. He is self sacrificing and ready to give his life for the good of the people and so he says:

To end slavery, exploitation
Kimathi will never sell Kenya
(*Dedan Kimathi*: 35 – 36).

All through the play, over and over again, on occasions too numerous to go indicating one after the other, Kimathi shows total and firm abhorrence of the slave and colonial mentality. But we cannot overlook this:

Kimathi:... We must kill the lie that black people never invented anything. Lay forever to rest that inferiority complex implanted in our minds by centuries of oppression (*Dedan Kimathi*: 68) .

This is the point that this paper makes, that centuries of slavery and colonialism have infused the African with an inferiority complex which gives rise to exhibitionism. Unless the elite class recognizes this, like Dedan Kimathi does, and purges itself of it through the use of the language of rejection, we will not have leaders with a consciousness which supports development. Greed, selfishness, unwillingness to create self-reliant nations feed exhibitionism. On the hand, listen to Kimathi:

Kimathi:... We must continue to make more guns... every camp...should have its own factory....Start clothing factories...we have excellent materials. Put more effort in education. We must know our history (*Dedan Kimathi*: 67).

In reality, and contrary to this vision, we have leaders who will, rather than build world class hospitals, go abroad for medical care; rather build world class schools, send their children abroad for world class education; rather than encourage the growing and production of high quality food, import rice, fish and chicken from abroad. All these are exhibitionist tendencies arising from an inferiority complex which propels them to strive, by these acts, to show that they are more important than the rest of the citizenry and indeed, at par with their erstwhile colonial masters. This is simply, neo-colonialism.

Language as an Instrument of Rejection, Emancipation and Development in the Play

Literature, oral or written, is usually composed and transmitted via language. This means language plays a vital role in conveying meaning and so the appreciation of a literary work cannot be divorced from the appreciation of the language used. It is for this reason that this section devoted to an examination of some of the features of language use in the play becomes necessary.

The playwrights apply elements of the Kikuyu language by drawing from the rich store of proverbs. For instance:

Kimathi: There must be horses and riders... well, let me be Ballam's ass then...(*Dedan Kiamthi*: 34).

This is a Kikuyu proverb which carries the message of rejection. The proverb originates from a Kikuyu folktale about an ass which refused to let its rider to mount it. Through this proverb, Kimathi rejects slavery and colonialism together with the mentality and damage which they inflict on the African psyche and the inferiority complex arising there from.

Brunvand asserts that "the proverbs must be... not merely a traditional word but have some... oral vitality" (5). The oral vitality of this tale lies in its implicature, which is a relatively fixed form, explaining through folklore, the concept of refusal. There is a link, a representational one, between the tale and the text. The horse represents African leaders and people who ought to reject imperialism, neo-colonialism, slave and colonial mentality and inferiority complex. It is because of the oral vitality that we find in this proverb that proverbs are known as the wisdom of many but the wit of one. Each time a proverb is used, it injects this kind of vitality into know the text.

Another feature of language in the play is symbolism. According to Murray symbolism is:

the act of expressing emotions not by describing them directly... but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are by creating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols (57).

The dustbin evokes thoughts of impoverishment; the gun evokes an awareness of oppression and suppression; words like banker, prophet and politician symbolize exploitation and neo-colonialism, all of which must be rejected and eradicated.

The play is replete with imagery. Literature is form. Therefore, ideas and meaning are communicated aesthetically and artistically through figures of speech which create mental pictures in the reader. The play is replete with images of slavery, imperialism and humiliation. Sometimes, visible physical objects are mentioned and used. The incessant use of the words: slave, slavery, oppression, imperialist, etc, etc and the scene of trial and torture, create mental pictures that present the plight of the oppressed vividly. The

guerrilla camp in Nyandarua forest creates the picture of a struggle to eradicate all of these.

Dialogical resources in the play include songs, dialogue and spectacle. There are biblical allusions, flashbacks and reminiscences. The use of flashbacks and reminiscence disrupt linear plot development in the play. Therefore, rather than a chronological plot sequencing, we have the use of the *in finis res* technique whereby the plot commences from the end and comes to the beginning. Indeed, the plot is episodic as loose events are connected by theme.

In creating the dialogue in the play, the playwrights observe the rules of conversation. One of such rules is the rule of turn-taking. One of the exchanges between Kimathi and Henderson aptly captures this:

Henderson: Hey, Dedan . Field marshal.
Guilty visitation?

Kimathi: Who are you?

Henderson: Bwana Shaw Henderson!

All your people know me. I'm a friend.

Kimathi: Shaw Henderson! Friend and
Killer of Africans, ugh!

Henderson: The trouble with you, Dedan,
is that you are too suspicious. Look, I
come peacefully, I'm not *armed*.

Kimathi: No not with a *fire am*. *Only with
words*. Speeches. Sweet promises. Save
your breath. (*Dedan Kimathi: 32*).

Henderson, uses the attention catcher 'Hey' to bring Kimathi out of his trance and to initiate the conversation. This first utterance in the conversation is known as the 'proffer' while Kimathi's response is the 'satisfy'. Kimathi is very familiar with Henderson, his tormentor. The question would have been unnecessary if Kimathi was in a conscious state.

The interrogative sentences in the conversation make for a smooth flow of the conversation with each interlocutor knowing when to take a turn and when to yield the floor. The use of the interjection 'ugh' by Kimathi is not a back channeling. It is, rather, a mark of derision and mockery which expresses his doubt in the sincerity of Henderson's use of the word 'friend' when he (Henderson) is actually a murderer.

There is also the use of code switching and code mixing. These involve the blending of codes in utterances. Traugott and Pratt aver that code switching

means back and forth from one language to another (374). It is the alternation of codes at the super-sentential level of discourse. On the other hand code mixing occurs within a sentence or clause. So while code switching is inter-sentential, code mixing is intra-sentential. Both phenomena allow the writer to manifest creatively in vocabulary for imaginative and aesthetic effects. For example.

Jonnie: ... Shall we have a bite?
Woman: Don't eat it. Bwana.
Master. Afande a hundred time
(*Dedan Kimath* 11).

An analysis of this discourse shows an interplay of English and Kikuyu codes as shown below:

<i>Don't eat it</i>	<i>Bwana</i>	<i>Master</i>	<i>Afande</i>
English	Kikuyu	English	Kikuyu

There is the borrowing of local lexical items from Kikuyu to fill missing gaps. This mode portrays the speech pattern of non-native users of English as well as recreate the socio-linguistic environment of the Kikuyu.

There is an interesting and extensive use of code switching and code mixing between pages 6 and 9, too lengthy perhaps, to be captured here. Look at:

Waitana: Line up those Mau villagers two
by two
Second Soldier: Tayari Bwana!
Waitana: March them to the screening
ground...
Second Soldier: Ndio Bwana
(*Dedan Kimathi* 6-7)

In the discourse above, complete different language codes are used in the different utterances. The switching of codes occurs between sentences. An obvious implication of this is that the participants are conscious of their behaviour and intend to use the phenomenon for modification and enhancement of communication.

The playwrights effectively recreate the socio-cultural experiences of the characters by effectively manipulating the features of language to reflect the linguistic and socio-cultural milieu.

Conclusion

The play is, indeed, a work of creativity and artistry. Though it recalls history, it does not recount history as there is no attempt to remain faithful to the historical events which form the background of the play.

Consider, for instance, the names of some characters like: Settler, Banker, Boy and some others. Settler, though he appears only in one scene, cannot be forgotten. What he does and says in that one appearance are memorable and understanding him means understanding the overall concern and thematic development of the play. He is, truly, representative of all the settlers.

Boy is really a child, the things he says about other and how he says them show his age and psychological state.

Kimathi's lengthy speech on pages 66-70 is actually the premise of the play. Somewhere in that speech. He makes the statement which summarizes the African leadership problem:

...we must kill the lie...lay forever to rest
that inferiority complex implanted in our
minds by centuries of oppression...
(*Dedan Kimathi*: 68).

Until the African elites who form the core of African leaders reject neo-colonialism and purge themselves of that inferiority complex foisted on them by years of slavery and colonialism, that crop of leaders who will move Africa forward will remain elusive.

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