

The Glorification of Academic Imperialism in an African Citadel of Learning: A Textual
Analysis of Lekan Are's *The Challenge of The Barons*

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Abstract

The Berlin Conference of 1884/85 which culminated in the scramble for and partitioning of African continent into various states by some European nations, brought negative implications to the psyche of Africans. The partitioning was seen as a ploy devised by western countries to seize advantages by using military forces to cow the Africans, thus carrying away their naturally endowed potential to stage indigenous economic development. This paper therefore, takes a critical look at the various ways by which academic excellence was jettisoned, rubbished to romantic academic mediocrity in order to pave the way for sustaining the illegitimate academic emptiness of the Baron tagged as “experts” in a citadel of learning in an African country. The academic wizardry of the protagonist in the text reveals the bold challenge against the Barons in order to remove academic excellence from the shackles of colonialism.

Keywords: Ploy, Implications, Scramble, Endowed, Potentials.

1. Introduction

In the fictional country of Kato a successful and much-loved academic, Dr Jungu comes face to face with the reality of academic colonialism in the guise of American economic aid to the poor African country. At the citadel of leaning, academic mediocrity is placed far and above academic integrity/competence of resource scholars. Highly qualified Africans are passed over in favour of experts from the donor country while students do not receive the qualitative education they wanted and needed. The major arm of paper is to demonstrate the placement of academic mediocrity over an far above academic competence. According to Alexander Muzenda [1] in his article titled ‘Lecturers’ Competence and Students’ Academic Performance’ published in *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, posits that ‘lecturer

competence is regarded as a multidimensional construct teaching which encompasses numerous interconnected elements towards transformation of knowledge to learners'. Further still, he believes that different elements of lecturer competence include lecturer's subject knowledge, teaching skills, lecturer attitude and lecturer attendance. From the above, one can affirm that the academic competence of a lecturer will surely radiate over the positive performances of students.

Roland Stringer et al [2] in an article titled 'Academic Self Perception and his Relationship to Academic Performance' published in *Canadian Journal of Education*, say that 'the process of self-affirmation suggests that individuals intentionally choose actions that demonstrate to them that their perceptions of themselves are accurate. Sir Arthur Doyle [3] in *Word and Text- A Journal on Literary Studies and Linguistics III* defines Mediocrity as 'knowing nothing higher than itself'. Also, in the same journal, Joseph Joubert sees Mediocrity as 'Excellent to the eyes of mediocre people'. From Wikipedia [4], The mediocrity principle is seen as the philosophical notion that 'If an item is drawn at random from one of several sets or categories, it's likelier to come from the most numerous category than from anyone of the less numerous categories'.

According to the Author, Dr. Jungu's efforts to correct the policy and restore academic dignity brought him into nerve stretching confrontations with the less qualified American Dean of his faculty who controlled the University President - an African stooge chosen for ethnic balancing.

In the late 1870s, the continent of Africa became the cynosure of all eyes to the British imperialists seeking for trade and colonies to acquire. Some African Countries were occupied by France such as Tunisia, Egypt by Britain. In other to avoid clash of interest of occupation of

these countries, Germany decided to organise The Berlin Conference of 1884/5 under Otto Von Bismarck. At the conference, European powers jostled for supremacy over the hinterland of Africa. It should be noted that the ruling powers never considered the welfare and desires of the African people positively. The effects of invading Africa can still be felt till date with the various ethnic groups divided, separated and alienated from ancient roots.

2. Colonialism and Education

Walter Rodney [5] in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* affirms that using a comparative standard, Africa today is underdeveloped in relation to Western Europe and a few other parts of the world, and that the present position has been arrived at, not by the separation evolution of Africa on the one hand and Europe on the other, but because of exploitation.

As it is well known, Africa has had prolonged and extensive contact with Europe, and one has to bear in mind that contact between different societies changes their respective rate of development.

J.E. Casely-Hayford (1922) An African (Gold Coast) Nationalist as reported by Rodney[5] believes that Africa has developed judging by the civilisation of that period.

“Before even the British came into relations with our people, we were a developed people, having our own institutions, having our own ideas of government”

Colonialism and Education are seen as tools in the hands of the white imperialists which were used to cow the African nations. There is a statement credited to FRELIMO (Mozambique Liberation Front) Department of Education and Culture 1968 as reported by Rodney thus:

“In colonial society, education is such that it serves the colonialist.....

In a regime of slavery, education was but one institution for forming slaves”.

It should be noted according to Rodney that for the first three decades of colonialism, hardly anything was done that could remotely be termed a service to the African people. Colonialism in its most traditional sense involves the gaining of control over particular geographical areas and is usually associated with the exploitation of various areas in the world by European powers.

3. Academic Imperialism

Education is seen as the knowledge acquired from birth till death. It is seen as process of facilitating learning, ethos, values that are transferred to a particular group of people. According to Nwanosike et al [6] in an article entitled “Colonialism and Education” published in the proceedings of the 2011 International Conference on Teaching, Learning and Change say that “Colonialism has destroyed and crippled African and the weapon used for the mass destruction is education under the guise of Christianity.” The colonizers never meant well for Africa, and that is why the continent was oppressed, suppressed and disregarded.

4. Textual Analysis

a. Academic Imperialism: This is essentially a form of imperialism in which there is an unequal relation between academics, where one group dominates and the other is dominated or ignored. This is the conservative behaviour of the white imperialists over the people/countries they

governed or colonized during the period of imperialism. In the post colonial era, academic imperialism has transformed into a more indirect form of control, based on western monopoly that generates academy dependency.

The concept of academic imperialism vividly radiates throughout the book under review *Challenge of the Barons* by Lekan Are[7]. The much dependency of colonised nations on grants and loans from donor nations often lead to marginalisation and direct dictates on affairs and programmes of such dependent nations. In the prose, academic excellence was jettisoned to embrace academic mediocrity all in the name of grants. The American experts recruited in Serti University were less qualified in comparison with the African lecturers who were well baked and academically sound. These set of lecturers were denied their rights at the citadel of learning, while the expatriates were given prominence in a foreign land.

5. Breaking the Jinx -Jungu as a Metaphor

The coming of Dr. Jungu to Serti University in the Democratic Republic of Kato Dramatically charged the faces of things in the institution. By the time Dr Jungu was leaving Ibadan in Nigeria for Serti University, he was full of high hopes for a greater elevation in another institution and in a foreign country. The academic brick wall he faced nearly sent him back home, but he was courageous enough to weather the storm and be full of determination to change the decayed system of administration in the university.

In the university, academic imperialism is the order of the day. Highly qualified African scholars are pushovers in favour of “experts” from a donor country. Students were poorly taught, academic standards were disregarded with students being half prepared, and thus giving room for neo-colonialism of Africans. The unqualified were fixed in high positions in the university and remain being unable to perform.

The first meeting Dr Jungu had with Professor Nada, the Dean was not pleasant. Dr Jungu had thought he would be made the department head, but to his chagrin, the Dean told him point blank that he had invited an old Professor, some sixty years old, from America to head the department (P39). He said further that this will prevent unnecessary friction among Africans (39). Most of the departments' heads were not given free hand to operate, and they seek advice, permission from the Dean before carrying out legitimate assignments. Professor Nada, is highly revered in the institution. A greater percentage of staff cringed, looking for favour from him.

Professor Nada, the dean described as a man of dubious character with a perverted sense of justice and someone who rejoiced in applying a double standard to whites and blacks (43) A man that has no time for administration, rather than sit in his air-conditioned office. The degrading way the Africans were treated in the institution gives room for concern in a situation where Africans would be asked to go out to enable the dean attend to a white man. Mr Amodu, a junior staff remarked in a feeble voice thus:

That's what Africans suffer here isn't it a share that you had to be asked to go out for that white boy? (45) – an insult.

He continued by saying:

“These white boys are lords in this place, Sir. They run us around and treat everyone like a dog. They don't even respect my grey hairs- a symbol of old age” (45).

Some of the indigenous even spy for them and gossip to them to gain access to the important sources of patronage.

With Professor Nada as a stubbing block in the way of Dr Jungu, it soon became obvious to everyone that he would have to fight for everything in Kato to succeed. His plan was to stay in Serti for five years. He felt this would be a positive way to contribute his share to the development of a relatively African university. Words soon got around amongst the students about Dr. Jungu's effectiveness as a lecturer. It was not long before they detected that he was also a fair examiner. He made sure that all scripts were returned to their owners after grading them. A student has this to say about him:

I am not of the best in this class

I am not ashamed of this but I am satisfied with my performance and at my steady improvement since you started to lecture us.

Before your arrival, many male students suffered at the hands of weak male lecturers....., we even had so-called experts who read from textbooks word for word to us and got paid the salary of their African counterparts.....

But our intelligence sources have strongly pointed at sabotage from the so-called experts against your noble ideals and not the least, your very existence at Serti. Be very careful, Sir: (62).

The politics of intrigue in the University is well rooted. The 'experts' decided that to succeed at Serti, their policy of rewarding the faithful, seducing the doubtful and entrapping the powerful opponents of their authority who must be ruthlessly pursued. They had identified Dr Jungu Onaola as the number-one enemy of progress who is a man who is likely to remove the cobwebs from the eyes of his fellow Africans. He had to be crushed.

The various proposals presented before Professor Nada that could lead to the growth and development of the institution, and particularly his faculty, were either turned down or thrown

into the dustbin. Nada saw in Dr Jungu, sound intelligence and a man that can compete with him favourably and expose his mediocrity. He prefers to employ unqualified experts and place them far and above him so that he will be sidelined from their heinous activities at Serti University.

The face-off between Professor Nada and Dr. Jungu came to the notice of the President of the University in person of Mr. Oranolola. He was able to douse the tension listening to both sides at different times before bringing them face to face. He assured Dr. Jungu to feel free to come to him with his problems at will. Dr. Jungu is seen as a thorn in the flesh of Professor Nada who refused to realise that there is need for change in the administration of the university. This paper would be incomplete without mentioning a prominent character in person of Pa Amodu. He is a messenger in the university and has been a good adviser to Dr. Jungu. He has made Dr. Jungu's stay in Serti a reality. He lamented the nefarious activities of the Kato people who see nothing wrong in what the experts are doing because they feed on the crumbs from their tables. He has this to say:

Our brothers toil to please the experts; but they are seen as mere tools for perpetuating their authority. The experts expect our brothers to make peace with mediocrity and be used as a front to sabotage the efforts of the faculty. This is the crime of which I accuse my disloyal African brothers. I would have expected them to prefer poverty with honour to being down-trodden in guided affluence and servitude" (152)

Other concrete examples of discrimination abound in the text. A typical example is the academic and administrative incompetence of Dr. Nada at overhauling the Agriculture Department of the university speaks volume. Also, the hatred he has for Dr. Jungu whom he sees as inflexible,

unnecessarily strict and academically sound knows no bound. He prevented him from becoming the dean of his faculty, Dr. Jungu has this to say

I want Dr. Nada to realize that he must put an end to his antics, otherwise, I will hit back and very hard too. It is shameful that people like Dr. Nada fail to address themselves to the task of finding solutions to the many agricultural problems confronting this young developing nation; rather, he and his followers waste their energy on intrigues and living in falsehood.
(110)

6. Conclusion

The sudden industrialisation revolution in Europe which necessitated the need for manpower coupled with the struggle for colonies in Africa at the Berlin conference of 1884/85 brought untold hardship on Africans and reshaped all the facets of African economies. No wonder Walter Rodney had this to say in his book:

“The only path to true human development and liberation for the majority of the people of his country was through the transformation of their lives in a struggle to replace and reshape the neo-colonialist government that dominated their society and proscribed their existence”.

However, Forbes Burham, the President of Guyana, had made it clear on many occasions that, in this struggle for the minds and hearts of the people, he knew no limits in the determination to “exterminate the forces of opposition”.

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