

Politics of Tribalism and Nepotism in Nigeria: An Overview of Chinua Achebe's *The Trouble with Nigeria*

Abubakar Bappa, Ph.D.

Department of English and Literary Studies

Federal University of Kashere, Gombe state

abubakarbappa65@gmail.com

Abstract

The Nigerian political Climate is absolutely surrounded with crisis of existence in present democracy that looks like a crazy demon (demon-crazy). Leaders are selected not elected (going by the flawed processes involved) as envisaged by the international community. Credible people are not accepted into the political cult, only those from their region's or ethnic groups are allowed. They are just 'democratically' selected civilian dictators. Essentially, in all his writings Achebe seems to be saying that human beings are partly responsible for their success or failure. *The Trouble with Nigeria* focuses on the dangerous scourge which is deeply-rooted in the minds of Nigerians whereby both the rulers and the ruled are to blame as Politics of Nepotism and tribalism reign in the Nigerian Political scene. This paper analyses the polemics associated with these epidemics.

Keywords: Politics, Tribalism and Nepotism

Introduction

Chinua Achebe was born in Nigeria in 1930 he was raised in the village of Ogidi, and is a graduate of University College, Ibadan. His early career in Radio ended in 1966, at the beginning of the Nigerian civil war. Achebe joined the Biafran Ministry of Information and represented Biafra on various diplomatic and fund-raising missions.

'Beset by entrenched tribalism, nepotism and favoritism' can best be the caption to describe Nigeria. The pace at which these social phenomena are choking the life out of this country seems to be accelerating and there seems to be no brake. Nigeria while celebrating her 61st Independence anniversary was adjudged as a notoriously corrupt country that is the most terrorized and the poverty capital of the world (World Poverty Clock, 2018). Apparently, 86.9 Million Nigerians are living in poverty representing 50% of its estimated population 180 million and others estimated the population to 200 Million.

The Statistics above does not come as a surprise to many because Nigeria`s journey to nationhood has been stuttered, halted and eventually put on reverse mode by its political leadership over the years, as a result of endorsing democratically elected dictators.

Some scholars say that the book title “The Trouble with Nigeria” by Achebe should actually be “the Trouble with Africa”. This is because the issues discussed in the book are similar to what is happening across every African country. It is the same problem but in a different location.

As postulated earlier, the eminent African novelist and critic, captured the problems facing Nigeria which he aims to challenge the resignation of Nigerians and inspire them to reject old habits which inhibit Nigeria from becoming a modern and attractive country. In this famous book now reprinted, he professes that the only trouble with Nigeria is the failure of leadership, because with good leaders Nigeria could resolve its inherent problems such as tribalism, lack of patriotism, social injustice and the cult of mediocrity, indiscipline and corruption.

Achebe writes

The problem with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. [1]

Tribalism, nepotism, favoritism, indiscipline, corruption, and others were identified and discussed as the major problems facing or hindering the development of one of Africa`s most populous country. Using succinct examples Achebe explains why tribalism leads to inefficiency, most especially when tribal people are hired for a position instead of competent and efficient people. In this 21st century, we still have the same problem of tribalism. Employment is no longer on merit. We now say “do you have a God Father? Do you know anyone? Do you know someone that knows someone?” To some extent, all we need in Nigeria is a certificate whether it is merited or not as far as you have one and someone from your tribe is on seat then you will certainly get the position you need. This behavior is in almost all the sectors of the society pervading everywhere in Nigeria. Sometimes I think the educated Nigerians should know better but then it seems they`re the promoters of tribalism this is because they practice it even more.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TERMS

Tribalism is the state of being organized in, or advocating for, a tribe or tribes. Tribalism may also refer in popular cultural terms to a way of thinking or behaving in a way that people are more loyal to their tribes than to their country or any other social group. Consequently, “tribalists” have a disdain and often disrespect for the tribes they feel or think are inferior to their tribe. Such people therefore discourage association in any form, be it marriage, work or friendship with such inferior tribes. In most cases they have derogatory names for tribes they deem to be inferior.

Nepotism: is showing favoritism for relatives or friends due to established relationship rather than based on an objective evaluation of ability, suitability and qualification when it comes to, for instance, employment. Nepotism is a Latin word “Nepos” meaning “nephew” or “grandchild”.

For the purpose of this paper, the word tribalism can simply be seen as the exaltation of one’s tribe over others and nepotism can simply be said to mean “Putting square pegs in round holes”. These terms characterize the Nigerian socio-political and has pitched various peoples to “us” versus “them”. Nigeria has been sectionalized or divided along ethnic, religious and political lines. This rather than develop the country, has continued to divide the country to the point that the center can no longer hold.

Politics as defined by Harold Laswell, is “who get what, when and how” and David Easton defines politics as the “authoritative allocation of values for society”. Politics clearly states how resources of the society should be equitably distributed at every given time. Public office holders are holding those offices in trust and should utilize resources for the common good of humanity. But the politics of tribalism, nepotism and favoritism has made the elite to be the diners at the dinner table called Nigeria and the masses regarded as unnecessary beings.

Achebe captured this rascals behaviour and attitude of the political class in their approach towards power and allocation of state resources. This voracious appetite by political leaders to immerse wealth and hold on to power regardless of the citizens’ position is averse to nationhood and development of the country. The author describes the situation as follows:

One of the commonest manifestations of under-development is a

tendency among the ruling elite to live in a world of make-believe and unrealistic expectations. This is the cargo cult mentality that anthropologists sometimes speak about - a belief by backward people that someday, without any exertion whatsoever on their own part, a fairy ship will dock in their harbour laden with every goody they have always dreamed of possessing. [9]

Regrettably, the position postulated by Achebe still rears its ugly traits in Nigerian politics today. Political leaders during campaigns promise the electorate during every elections period to meet the needs of the people and unite the country to achieve growth and development. However, these promises can paradoxically be described as a barren woman in a labor room. These promises by Nigerian leaders are made just to get the votes of the electorate and to hold on to political power without necessarily having the interest of the citizens at heart. Little wonder Nigeria is drifting gradually to a failed state.

Government after government in Nigeria has promised to transform and change Nigeria by making it a tourist destination with a viable economy that attracts the world's best developers and investors with robust economic policies and programmes that are aimed at lifting the teeming population out of poverty, but they have failed to unite Nigerians to achieve economic growth and development. Allegations are that, the government at each given time is highly driven by tribal sentiments and nepotism; with the desire to favour particular people or region over others. This trend of events has further polarized the country which has led to separatist movements in the Eastern and Western part of Nigeria, which each movement claiming it wants to liberate its people.

This same trend of events brought about the Nigerian Civil War in 1967 to 1970 where the Biafran's (Igbos) fought the Nigerian government as a result of perceived injustices meted on the Igbo's. Tragically, lives were lost and properties worth billions of naira were destroyed. Since then, Nigeria seems not to have learnt the lessons from the past because the problems with Nigeria in the past are still the problem with Nigeria now. This leaves questions to discerning Nigeria's as to 'which way Nigeria?' as sung by the music icon, Sunny Okosun (1984)

Due to tribalism and nepotism, the concept of 'patriotism' amongst Nigerian leaders is questionable. The word 'Patriotism' etymologically is derived from Latin and can be characterized as being loyal to the sovereign. There are different perspectives towards the

description of patriotism on its content and its distinctive characteristics. For the purpose of this paper, patriotism can be seen as loving and appreciating your country. A patriotic citizen should see his status as a Nigerian citizen as a great honor and this honor comes with duties and responsibilities for the country. A patriotic citizen should think how his/her actions and inactions can affect the society. However, patriotism in the heart of Nigeria's political leaders is seen only in their cycle and not to the Nigerian state.

Achebe wrote:

Spurious patriotism is one of the hallmarks of Nigeria's privileged classes whose generally unearned positions of sudden power and wealth must seem unreal even to themselves. To lay the ghost of their insecurity they talk patriotically. [16]

Patriotism by the ruling class is shown intently only when they need the votes of the masses; they only lip-sing when they claim to be patriotic. Most leaders today in Nigeria and by extension Africa are dealers on an industrial scale who are trading their countries to the highest bidder and that's why Africa is bedridden with poverty, economic retrogression and backwardness in innovation, information and technology because they go 'cup in hand' begging for alms and handouts from the foreign powers at the detriment of their people and the economy. The politics of tribalism and nepotism in Nigeria has metamorphosed to the dreaded monster that has become a recurring vocabulary in almost all literatures in Africa and across the world which is corruption. Corruption has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria. It is a cankerworm that is growing and it seems it has built immune system against all measures to tackle it. Both the leaders and citizens are culpable when it comes to corruption.

Achebe presented graphic details of the amount of money that are siphoned from the system in the form of plain theft by politicians, inflated contract figures, salary payment to ghost-workers, and more. He demonstrates, comparatively, what it amounts to and what edifices could have been built with such resources. Corruption is the single greatest obstacle preventing Nigeria from achieving its enormous potentials. It drains billions of dollars annually from the economy, stifles development and weakens the social contract between government and the people in protection of lives and properties and providing essential goods and services for the betterment of the citizenry.

The former Nigerian President, Shehu Shagari said that corruption in Nigeria has not as yet 'reached alarming proportions', Achebe responded:

My frank and honest opinion is that anybody who can say that corruption in Nigeria has not yet become alarming is either a fool, a crook or else does not live in this country. [37]

If corruption in the 80s has reached the 'fatal stage' corruption today has reached 'menopause' because it seems like no amount of remedy is having an effect on it. The issue is scary because a lot of unaccounted funds go to different sectors in Nigeria with little or no form of improvement in the sectors. An apt example is the security sector; the situation is alarming. The activities of bandits, Boko Haram and kidnappers; religious crisis and so on has taken a different dimension today that no part of the country is safe.

Government has budgeted billions of naira and some security votes which are not made known to the general public to the security agencies to fight all forms of criminality in any guise but, these monies end up being looted.

Another sector that is shrouded in secrecy and astute corruption is the Petroleum Sector. Nigeria has become a mono-cultural economy which is dependent on oil. Oil drives the Nigerian economy and generates majority of government's revenue. One debatable topic in the oil and gas sector is the issue of 'fuel subsidy', government has not been able to come out clean to say who is benefiting from the subsidy and why Nigerians are buying fuel at high price when it's one of the world's oil producing states?

Electricity in Nigeria is another sad News. When developed nations are sending their scientists to the Moon, Nigeria is still grappling with providing electricity to its populace. It is said that 'Nigeria has the most expensive darkness in the world'; different governments have budgeted large sums of money to transform the electricity sector but to no avail. It seems that Nigerians need to elect a magician come 2027 to fix this country over night. But I tell you with certainty, even a magician cannot perform magic with corruption wearing shoulder pad in the electricity sector. As a result of monies expended with very little result to show for it, humorously; it can be said that darkness is more expensive than light in Nigeria.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Weekly Star of 15 May 1983 captured this on its front page under the title “The Nigerian Corruption: Keeping an average Nigerian from being corrupt is like keeping a goat from eating yam” Achebe says this is a bad way of putting it. He says a Nigerian does not need corruption. He says Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they are today makes corruption easy and profitable; they will cease to be corrupt when corruption is made difficult and inconvenient. This paper therefore is suggesting that democratic institutions in Nigeria should be strengthened and made to suffocate any attempt to be corrupt. Nigeria idolizes strong individuals and think that they can bring change against myriad of issues that divide us as a nation. Individuals cannot bring the desired change. Rather, strong and democratic viable institutions that defile time and administration must be set up. When the present administration came into power, many Nigerians believed and had hope that the administration can bring the desired change due to the disposition of Mr. President. Analyzing critically the administration today, one will come to the conclusion that an individual cannot do everything. Mr. President would have made significant progress if only there were strong democratic institutions that make stealing public money hard and difficult.

Achebe’s *The Trouble with Nigeria* portrays the happenings in Nigeria by highlighting bad leadership as the cause of much of the havoc and problems that the masses and the entire nation is facing. The challenges range from abject poverty, high rate in mortality, starvation and hunger, insecurity to drop in the educational sector and other issues that affect the generality of the public. Politicians in Nigeria and by extent Africa, have a mentality of getting richer and powerful. To maintain the life of affluence, they loot and syphon public funds into their personal accounts at the expense of their people to whom they claim to be leading or serving. Politics in Nigeria has been reduced to a 'family and friends' cooperative society that works and thrives only for the good of its members. The children of these politicians go to good private schools abroad while the public schools in Nigeria are allowed to go into coma. The educational sector in Nigeria is in progressive decline and the leaders seem not to care because their children are not in these schools. Tertiary institutions are characterized by constant strikes because of poor funding of schools and remuneration of staff. To redress this problem, politicians before they are elected must be people who are of proven character and are schooled in the art of governance.

The educational sector is always going on strike which makes the educational system to be lagging.

Little wonder as to the fact that those who have been at the corridors of power since the 1970s are still the ones directing the affairs of the country today. Nigeria is like a dice in their hands, they decide who gets what, how and when.

Achebe also explains the poor health facilities in the country where he talked about people dying in the hospital because of lack of hospital workers and facilities. Children and women died because of lack of food during the Biafran war. Children had poor food to eat thereby causing sickness to the children. There was mass starvation, kwashiorkor and mental illness which devastated the country at large. The wife of the former President, Aisha Buhari in 2017 said that the 'state hospital could not boast of a single syringe' on her visit to the hospital. Despite the huge sums of money disbursed to the health sector, little or nothing is visible on ground as primary health services cannot be accessed. Government hospitals are just like glorified mortuaries that records lost rather than lives saved. There is need for a total overhauling of the health sector in the country; professionals who are trained should be leaders and drive the process of change. Constantly, Nigeria is losing health practitioners as a result of unfavorable working conditions in the country which is resulting to brain-drain in the health sector and this does not tell well of a nation that wants to dine in the committee of nations who have tackled all forms of diseases that Nigeria is grappling with.

Criminality and Terrorism in Nigeria which has different nomenclature such as Boko Haram, kidnappers and bandits started like a struggle which gained the support of shallow minded people who hide under the guise of religion and 'it's our own' has enveloped the country like a wild fire. Today, both the rich and the 'poor' are not safe because of the activities of these criminals that have taken arms against the people and state of Nigeria. The kidnapping, banditry and many other attacks here and there are caused or sponsored by tribalistic and nepotistic rich men and women who care less about the Nigerian people. To be fair on the government, it has claimed to have released funds to fight the insurgency but a lot is left to be desired. There are allegations that these funds end up being placed on the table and shared or looted and there is the conspiracy theory of the military and political leaders colluding with the insurgents as purported by Gen. T.Y Danjuma (Rtd).

To fight insurgency to a stand-still in Nigeria, there must be commitment by the government if they want to crush all forms of criminality in Nigeria. These include equipping the military, fortifying the border engagement of both traditional and religious leaders and collaborating with neighboring countries are some of the ways of mitigating against criminalities in Nigeria. More importantly, this paper suggests that Boko Haram and other groups came about as an ideology. For Nigeria to win the battle, Federal Government should establish strong military base or to hire foreign military organizations like Wagner in Russia. The military base should be sided in North-East and North-western states like Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, Kaduna, Katsina and Sokoto State.

The Nigerian government can equally invest heavily in education so as bring a superior ideology that can counter the false ideology that has been sold to people. Therefore, education can serve as a veritable tool that can change these abnormalities in Nigeria.

The cost of living in Nigeria has reached its crescendo. The prices of essential goods and services that was reachable to the 'average' Nigeria has skyrocketed today thereby making living very difficult and hard to an 'average' citizen coupled with the rate of high unemployment and under-employment in the country. The political leaders keep saying that there is no money yet, they maintained their expensive lifestyle without cutting cost. In trying to look for solutions to boost the economy, government borrowing and collecting loans from other economies without a clear blueprint on how it intends to pay the loans on other counties. Recently, Uganda is facing the biggest national crisis as it has been forced to surrender its only international airport to China for falling to pay back the loan it had taken in 2015 (Punch Newspaper, 2021). Sadly, with this type of unfavorable treatise entered into by Nigeria with other nations, I hope that this scenario shouldn't happen to Nigeria. But, if we are not careful, the same thing or even worst may happen to our country Nigeria because I'm yet to see a workable blueprint of paying these debts.

To redeem the plight that Nigeria has found itself, government must show commitment to want to better the lives of its citizens. This paper therefore recommends that important substitution should be adopted by the government to address the issue of borrowing or loans. Import substitution is a strategy that seeks to develop industrial capacity by shielding domestic producers from the foreign competition. This idea makes the government to look inwardly and

start manufacturing or producing goods and services locally or domestically. There is an embargo

partial restriction of importation on such goods and services that are produced or manufactured domestically. Government gives the enabling environment and promotes such goods and services.

Boost agriculture, ban importation of food. This policy was practiced in China, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico and some Asian countries like India, china to Pakistan. Leaders like Gaddafi, Thomas Sankara Murtala Muhammad and Fidel Castro were eliminated because of their exemplary good governance.

CONCLUSION

Achebe's book, *The Trouble with Nigeria* is a masterpiece that every Nigerian leader should have as a companion that should guide and direct their affairs. The book has the power to redirect the mindset of leaders from being tribalistic and nepotistic in politics which only favors a few and not the general public. Evidently, the politics of tribalism, nepotism and favoritism has bred corruption, terrorism and backwardness to the Nigerian state. But reading Achebe's work will rekindle a patriotic spirit of wanting to serve humanity in different capacities as one may be opportune. In fact, his work can also serve as a manifesto or blueprint as to what a patriotic leader can do for his country but then, most of our politicians don't read such books.

There is an adage, 'leaders are readers'. Leaders who read, lead well; this will give the leader a comparative advantage of being knowledgeable in the act of governance or public service. A county that has basic social amenities for the common man, activities of criminalities such as kidnapping, stealing, banditry will be minimal or none existent. It takes a visionary leader with vision to provide leadership devoid of tribalism, favoritism and nepotism.

However, we all are leaders in our own little corner. Let's embed the lessons of this literature to our daily living by being patriotic citizens who seek the goodness of the country not just for our personal gains. We must shun social vices mentioned by Achebe in his literature such as corruption, stealing and glorifying one's tribe, family and friends over and above national interest. The vision of Nigeria by its nationalists can be attained only when devoid politics of tribalism and nepotism in Nigeria`s political system. A surest tomorrow is the one that we build.

All patriots must collaborate to make Nigeria work once again for all, a Nigeria for the rich and the poor and a Nigeria that works for the good of all humanity regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity or religion. That Nigeria can be attained.

REFERENCES

- Abati, R. (2016). Federal Character and its Discontents. PM News. Retrieved from <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2016/01/31/federal-character-and-its-discontents-by-reuben-abati/> on July 15, 2018
- Abdalla, H. F., Maghrabi, A. S. & Al-Dabbagh, T. H. (1994). Research note: Assessing the effect of nepotism on human resource managers. *International Journal of Manpower*, 15(1), p. 60-67. Achebe, C. (198). *The Trouble with Nigeria*.
- Ajayi, K. (2001). *Military Regimes and Nigerian Public Administration*. In F. Omotosho (ed) *Contemporary issues in Public Administration*. Lagos: Bolabay Publications.
- Amaeshi, K. (2017, June 19). Ethnic nepotism is corruption. *Premium Times*. Retrieved from <https://opinion.premiumtimesng.com/2017/06/19/ethnic-Nepotism-is-corruption-by-another-name-by-kenneth-amaeshi/> on July 14, 2018.
- Amundsen, I. (1997). *Political corruption: An introduction to the issues (Working Paper 99:7)*. Bergen, Norway: Chr. Michelsen Institute.
- Arashi, H., Bavik, A., & Ekiz, E. H. (2006). The effects of nepotism on human resource management: The case of three, four and five star hotels in Northern Cyprus. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 26, No: 7(8), p. 295–308.
- Arowolo, D. (2012). Ethics, motivation and performance in Nigeria's public service. *Public Policy and Administration Research* 2(5).
- Ayo, S.B. (1998). A review of the performance of Nigerian public bureaucracy. In D. Kolawole (ed) *Issues in Nigerian Government and politics*. Ibadan: Dekaal
- Bute, M. (2011). The effects of nepotism and favoritism on employee behaviours and human resources practices: A research on Turkish public banks. *TODADE's Review of Public Administration*, Volume 5(1). p. 185-208
- Chudinov, A. (2003). *Dictionary of foreign words incorporated into the Russian language*. Retrieved from <http://encdic.com/fwords/Favoritizm-37868.html> on July 27, 2018,15
- Churchill, G.A., Ford, N.M., & Walker, O.C. (1987). *Sales force management planning, implementation and control*. Second Edition. London: Irwin Inc.

Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (2010). Ethical dilemmas in the public service. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Available from www.capam.org

Dike, V. (2002). Anti-corruption league. Corruption in Nigeria: A new paradigm for effective control. Retrieved from http://anticorruptionleague.org/resources/Corruption_in_Nigeria_Control.pdf on July 15, 2018

Institute for Security Studies (2010, November 30). The dangers of nepotism and favouritism for the Police. Retrieved from <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-dangers-of-nepotism-and-favouritism-for-the-police> on August 4, 2018

The Punch Newspaper online, 2021, 88