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Colonial Theme and Collective Action in *The Dragon's Funeral* and *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*

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Abstract: This paper is an exploration of the institutionalizing of colonialism and conquest across parts of Africa and its ultimate collapse and disintegration through confrontation and collective action of groups. In Nwabueze's (2005) *The Dragon's Funeral* and in Thiong'o & Mugo's (1990) *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, colonialism is captured as an evil that leaves bruises and oppression on colonies and in the colonized. We see that colonialism dwells much on deception and treachery and offers no room for cultural revival and growth. It tends to destroy the fabric of peace and socialization leaving the abused and exploited with a damaged psyche of victimization and terror. The paper argues that colonialism is a monster which does more harm than good especially to the colonized. In the plays, not only do the natives wake up from slumber but we watch aesthetically as women and youth adopt collective action as a strategy to dismantle, deconstruct and refute oppressive dominant powers. By engaging in collective activism, they attempt to redeem their political, economic and cultural spaces and carve out a niche for themselves.

Keywords: Colonialism, Collective Action, Imperialism.

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INTRODUCTION

One may reasonably argue that in Kenya and in Nigeria, as in all other colonies of Africa, colonialism was at its best a mixed blessing, and at its worst a necessary evil. However, generally, for most Europeans, the colonial enterprise was the greatest blessing bestowed on the colonized. Hence, as Collins (1975) put it,

There was a cherished conviction shared by every Englishman ..., from the highest to the lowest... the conviction in every man that he belongs to a race which God has destined to govern and subdue (16).

The above myopic hindsight was what formed the basis for what Ngugi & Mugo (1990) describe in the Preface to their play as "the British Forces of Occupation" and "the American indirect occupation of South Africa, since "American immense wealth was gained through the improvement and misery of millions."

Writing on colonialism in Africa, the Guyanese and political activist, Rodney (2012) states that:

The decisiveness of the short period of colonialism and its negative consequences for Africans spring mainly from the fact that Africa lost power. Power is the ultimate determinant in human society, being basic to the relations within any group and between groups... colonialism was not merely a system

of exploitation, but one whose essential purpose was to repatriate the profits to the so-called 'mother country'... it meant the development of Europe as part of the same dialectical process in which Africa was underdeveloped (149,224).

Available literary works espousing the colonial theme in African literature seem to portray the familiar tragic picture of the exploited and dehumanized natives, surrounded by deception and treachery, the devastating and destabilizing influence of colonialism not only on the colonized but also in the colonizers, and the violation of human rights and social values, which eventually culminated in confrontation, conflicts and the disintegration of colonialism. To both Forster (1924); & Orwell (1967) British colonial venture is depicted as "at best an intrusion and at worse a violation".

Acholonu describes it as "the hellish tropical sun, which debilitates as it crushes and maddens its victim" while the Marxists view colonialism as a form of capitalism enforcing exploitation and social change. Marx thought that working within the global capitalist system, colonialism is an "instrument of wholesale destruction, dependency and systematic exploitation producing distorted economies, socio-physical disconnection, massive poverty and neocolonial dependency" (Wikipedia, n.d.).

During the colonial period in Kenya and Nigeria, there were concerted efforts through a collective action to nipping the monster in the bud.

Collective action can be defined as a conscious effort by a group against oppression from other groups or government, with the aim of influencing a given authority or policy, or possessing power.

Encouraging the use of collective action, a woman activist, Achola Pala, speaking at a United Nations General Assembly, said: "When we are isolated, we are weak. How can there be noise from a single hand? But if we form a group and clap, a loud noise is made".

The above comment runs support to that made by Ifeka-Moller (1993) that, taxation of women reminded women that the new circumstances gave them an identity which placed them in the male system, depriving them of some female advantage while putting them at a disadvantage compared to men, among other issues.

However, female militancy in one of the plays of discourse forced the British colonial administration to change its taxation policy while exposing the weak façade and criminal ideology of the imperialists.

The Dragon's Funeral

In the play, *The Dragon's Funeral*, by Nwabueze (2005), there is a sustained and vigorous voice of feminist protest, mainly against socio-political and economic issues. The central discourse of the play is the evil effect of colonialism and patriarchy on women and society. The literary strategy employed in *The Dragon's Funeral* operates to exclude and undermine institutional forms of subjugation, exploitation and oppression. Here, the playwright buttresses women oppression as rooted in their traditionally defined role in the kitchen and on the farm. The play explores a society where women are denied power, and are incapable of influencing the entire process as men perpetuate themselves in power and authority. As epic realism, it captures the remote and immediate causes of historic women's war in Igbo land of 1929 against the British colonial administration which was wrongfully labeled 'Aba Women's Riot'

It is the close of market as we see Ekwedike the griot taking the women through a reenactment of the women's war led by their leader, Adaugo Nwanyereuwa. The women's reminisce are activities meant to satirize and reflect on the colonial masters' conquest and system of administrative rule. Hearing that there is a policy in place to tax the female group by the white government the women decide not to fold their hands and watch. They stage a confrontation with the officials and their black collaborating slaves. In their protest on stage they do not spare their husbands

let alone the colonial school teacher, Mark Emeruwa, who must count the trees and crops in the farm and home to work out their tax percentage.

The men's dilly-dally over the taxation policy appears to be the alibi for the revolt, though Chief Idike expresses some grouse at the new law, questioning the prerogative on women. As the women could not be controlled, weak warrant chiefs like Okeugo, Idike, Adaka and Dr Hunter of the Aba General Hospital are humiliated, disgraced and cowed. Chief Okeugo who was to face incarceration in prison by the colonial administration for his "alleged complicity" also has his staff of office defiled and decapitated by the women. It is not surprising though as the lily-livered district colonial officer, Captain Hill, retracts the obnoxious decree. Not only does the white master proscribe his exploitative law but he hides in the room – afraid of being lynched by the protesting women.

Life for these women in the play is cheerless. They are oppressed alongside their husbands and they lack prospects for a good life. As far as productive economy and industry goes, they can only have a percentage of what they produce. By colonial law being put in place, they must offer themselves and their agricultural products to be counted, without which they cannot have freedom, or enjoy what they produce without getting into trouble with British colonial authorities. The play projects the senseless way the appointed warrant chiefs deliberated on the new policy of taxation which include women. According to Okeugo:

... Since we were made chiefs under the warrant of the Colonial Administration, we've never been asked to count people, or to disclose the strength of their yarm yield, or the number of palm trees on their land... (46, 47).

As the men ruminate on the way out, Idike urges two possibilities of action: "... let us carry out his words with our own. He that will eat the kernel must crack the nut".

British Imperialism works out an elaborate scheme of deception and treachery. The administration of Queen Elizabeth's Mr Cook and Captain Hill enlist, through forceful subterfuge and position, the support of black chiefs and warrant officers. Their strategy is deliberate. The taxation will assist government in rendering services to the colonised. This, however, is a cover for their plan to steal the people's wealth. The warrant staff begins to act out orders, and this would prepare the ground for a swell of confrontations.

Commissioner Cook and Captain Hill epitomise the colonialist, who ruthlessly and selfishly exploits the resources of Africa. Even their black native allies do not know these officers real intentions. Their arrogance and lack of respect of the custom and

tradition of the people is exposed. This behaviour of counting the people and taxing their agricultural products flies in the face of the mores of the people. The impression is given that their action is not a result of their ignorance of the custom. They do this because British Imperialism does not respect the colonised.

The disenchantment created by the new law especially to the women exposes the evils of colonialism and particularly the oppressive and exploitative nature of the British colonial rule in various parts of Africa. The Commissioner, Mr Cook, a whiteman, is at the root of the disorder. He does all within his power using Warrant Chiefs to see to it that the taxation economy does not fail. Weakened by the colonial administration and its foot masters, the chiefs relegate their ethical duties to the land. This is why in the collective action the women pursued against colonialism, Adaugo outlines the objective thus:

... Our aim is to fight injustice, to fight for our rights, to fight for our children. As women we have to do what we feel is right, even if men try to stop us (24).

According to Van Zomeren *et al.* (2008) collective action through perceived injustice focuses on a subjective state of unjust disadvantage which is in an attempt to rectify the state of unfair deprivation. It is this relative deprivation law which the women are ready to destabilize.

That the women have to take laws into their hands depict that the men are there as chanters of the claimed civilization the colonial powers had brought the colonies. Clearly, their speeches lack moral sanctions and weight and suggest culpability. For in the statement of Commissioner Cook;

... I'm sure you are happy at the way we have brought civilization and rule of law to your ancient and primitive societies ... we have stopped cannibalism ... barren women are no longer sacrificed to the shrine ... and ancestral worship is fact giving way to the sophistication of Christianity (38-39).

Cook's assertion is similar to the one made by Henderson in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*:

I know you are a poet, an orator, a politician. No society can be without laws to protect property ... I mean protect our lives ... Civilisation ... Investment ... Christianity (26).

It is not surprising when Cook gets support from one of the black slaves serving him. According to Nduka, a black servant in the house of white master Cook: "we're happy you are bringing us civilization, Sir". The arrogance of the European invasion in downplaying the blacks is nonetheless confirmed when

Commissioner Cook reprimands Nduka before the visiting chiefs:

Keep quiet! The meeting is going to be more monologue than dialogue. In fact, it is wrong to refer to it as a meeting. A colonial administration having a meeting with local chiefs? ... Tell them that their importance was loaned them by the Administration. Tell them to preserve them until they are with the natives (35, 38).

The arrogance of the colonial master is one that is fraught with prejudice, hostility and fear; a chilling reminder of the heartlessness and exploitative nature of colonialists. To control their subjects, the administration employed the tactics of divide and rule while usurping the customary rights and will of the black natives. It is observed that the women will not allow themselves to be cowed by their husbands who were the representatives of the authoritarian and oppressive rule in the land. We see Idodie, one of the women firing at her husband, Dike.

I am not throwing words at you. I just want you to understand that the meeting has nothing to do with seeking equality with men. It is concerned with empowering women to take care of their own affairs in a world that is not prepared to protect them (51-52).

Ikolie and Koko in Clark's *The Wives Revolt* who fumes at the husband Okoro seem to share similar vision and virtues. As stated by Koko in Clark's: "The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminatory, being directed against women because of our stand. We will not accept it". And in the aspiration of collective struggle against patriarchy seen in the character, Nona, in Irene Salami's *More than Dancing*. She fuses: "... we have allowed ourselves to be used for too long. Now is our time of decision, we either act now or remain political footstools forever".

The women in *The Dragon's Funeral* thus are forced to mobilize themselves for action as this becomes a strategy for their survival. They embark on a radical dismantling of colonial systems and of patriarchal social structures in the society. The women, who set out on a mission to forcing captain Hill to retract his words, use a whole lot of tactics to combat male taledguided domination by the reversal of roles. Shouting orders to the gullible and loathing Nduka, Adaugo demands from him to:

... Tell the District Officer to come out here. Tell him that women want him to come out of the house which he built from our resources and labour Go back and tell the District Officer to declare in writing that women will never be taxed, that the counting of people and farm products should stop immediately. Tell him to write down that forced labour should stop, and that women should be consulted

before any decision affecting them is concluded. Let him write them down so we can preserve it as an agreement between the government and us (76-77).

Nduka emerges with a white sheet of paper which he raises it high for the women to see. It is a proclamatory agreement and truce with the women. We therefore can confirm the women's capacity to rubbishing European imperialism by collective act of negating the rule of conquest, oppression and exploitation. This is because the women in *The Dragon's Funeral* are all symbols of this system. If they had not protested their freedom of ownership of farm goods and productive economy would be denied. Under this law they are to obtain permit of ownership and production of economic resources and human numeric. This prompts the women to challenge the order, questioning patriarchy and isolation from leadership decision. Thus, they are able to bring further to mockery and judgment that statement credited to the white Judge who indicts Chief Okegu thus:

... You constituted yourself as the immediate cause of the articulation of the so-called women revolution in a country where women are accorded mere secondary position in all aspects of life (p.11).

The immediate significance of the confrontation of District Officer by the women is that it enables the female characters to participate in leadership matters, deciding for themselves and choosing not to be led by the nose. Thus women can now own productive economy by right and by preference. The collective struggle also entitles them to exercising authority and power and to have some marginal dignity in the society. It is ironical that it requires struggle in the manner it occurs for women to survive and to have a voice in their community.

The women's struggle is ruled by one great passion: it is the steadfast commitment to guarantee and safeguard the economy and cultural integrity of their community. The women under the leadership of Adaugo Nwanyereuwa, and another, Idodie are under no illusion about their sacred duty and sterling responsibilities as women and as mothers. By voice of collective reason, their consciousness of their duty to the land drives their conduct. The passionately care about their welfare, control and rights and place their security and safety over and above patriarchal aesthetics. The Whiteman's taxation law is seen as an ill omen, and though the women prefer peace to war, being fully aware of its dire consequences, they remain iconic supreme mothers by boldly defending their cultural values when Cook and Hill tinker to dishonour them. They negotiate the boundary and compel the officials to give in.

The focus of the play is colonialist exploitation and struggle by women. The playwright, however, also exposes the complicity of the blacks in their own exploitation. Some of the men, including warrant chiefs, consumed with greed, lend their full support to Cook and Hill in their exploitation of their own resources. Most of them like Idike and Nduka are self-seeking and greedy, Idike more so than Nduka. Without their anticipated connivance, the colonial administration's plan would not have been tinkered into probable action, much less become a distraction to the women. The men gone already with compliance, women stand between disaster and salvation.

The final impression in the play is that contact between Africa and Western imperialism, though disastrous, can be salvaged by groups like the women in the play. The women's role is not only crucial in safeguarding the present; it also secures the future of the land. Unlike their gullible and chicken-heated male counterparts, the women are brave and courageous. They are able to detect and frustrate the shady deal of the white usurpers, Cook and Hill, representatives of Her Royal Majesty, to mortgage the future of the land by heartlessly coveting the people's economic resources under the guise of administering colonial control and leadership.

The Trial of Dedan Kimathi

Colonialist exploitation is an important theme in the play. At the centre of this exploitation is a white usurper, appropriately named Henderson.

Ngugi wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is a Kenyan revolutionary play centered on the evils of colonialism and the action of the youth and woman to liberate Kimathi as well as the oppressed natives of the country from the colonial administration. In the prologue, Dedan Kimathi is in the dock and being prosecuted by a white colonial soldier, Henderson who, presides as the judge. Kimathi has been warned to defend himself against a charge for possession of a firearm which is against Special Emergency Regulations of the imperial penal code. The play begins with a singing crowd of peasants recalling 'bereaved relations', 'exhausted slaves' and Kenyans working on a plantation under the *suspension of a cruel, ruthless fellow black master*. This is often inspected by a white master with a revolting *procession of defiant blacks, chanting imperialist songs* through progressive monologic actions. It is followed by the cruel and loathful screening of arrested blacks by the masters who want to find out those working for Kimathi as well as their hideout. Woman is confronted by Johnnie a white soldier who intimidates her under the hold of gun. She is questioned in clear sexually rapacious eyes as to the genuineness of her person. Her basket of fruits is mercilessly ransacked by Johnnie who starts peeling and eating her few bananas. Images of oppression and economic dispossession are herein suggested.

Boy and Girl enter after carrying a load for the white master at the airport. Girl had run away with their pay and boy is in pursuit of her. Woman scolds boy for fighting his sister – one of those things that excites the colonialists. She offers him the money and enlists their assistance in the action to free Kimathi from jail. Kimathi passes through the first, second and third trials during which Henderson sends black religious men, bankers, politicians and businessmen to discourage Kimathi from his chosen line of action. Kimathi wants the total freedom and liberation of his native people from the claws of colonialism. As some of the members of the Peoples Freedom Army-Kimathi's Liberation Movement, betray the cause of the Defense Council to the usurpers, woman and others stick to the cause.

After three trials, Kimathi remains adamant and resolute. This leads to the fourth trial in which Kimathi insults Henderson and his group: "Traders with people's lives..." and says "I will fight to the bitter end". Henderson threatens hanging Kimathi and he queries British justice if it is by hanging that would bring justice to his people. Henderson calls Kimathi "crazy madman" and threatens him "You play it rough, so you'll get it rough". Kimathi is not moved: "Spare your threats..." and Henderson threatens to shoot Kimathi again. Kimathi mocks him: "the second last chance"; "let us face each other... coward". Henderson orders Kimathi to be taken to the torture chamber for "electric treatment". He refuses to sign letter, tears it and throws into Henderson's face, and is manhandled and can hardly walk. He is broken in body but not in spirit. Henderson then needs to know the where about of other Mao Mao fighters and Kimathi refuses to disclose. Kimathi's accusation of Gathotha of treachery pays off as Ist soldier hesitates to obey Henderson's order and accuses 2nd soldier: "Are you a human being? What are you doing this for". According to Kimathi, while *speaking in pain*:

... For four hundred years the oppressor
Has exploited and tortured our people
For four hundred years we have risen
And fought against oppression,
Against humiliation,
Against enslavement of body
Mind and soul
... Our people will never surrender (p.58).

And as he insists along with Woman, Boy and Girl, their collective actions will route out the ignoble colonial pus.

Kimathi in his Fourth Trial is tiraded by Henderson who promises to have him jailed for not agreeing to plead guilty in the colonial court. During the final court session, the combined efforts of Boy and Girl, including woman, unlike the other black collaborators of the insidious disease, free Kimathi who has been sentenced and thus, displacing imperialism.

Reacting to the prosecution orders of Judge Henderson, Kimathi coughs:

But our people will never surrender
Internal and external foes
Will be demolished
And Kenya shall be free (p.83).

It is imperative to point out that following Kimathi's above statement, there are two types of colonialists: the whites and their black collaborators. This is also seen in *The Dragon's Funeral* where black slave workers and the imperialists try to foist on the people an oppressive and demonic capitalist economy. Kimathi had previously noted that:

In the court of Imperialism
There has never and will never be
Justice for the people
Under Imperialism
Justice is created
Through a revolutionary struggle (p.82).

This news comes as a surprise to the oppressive regime and causes a great commotion in court as Africans applaud. Colonialism smacks of invasion of the rights of man to a full determination of his political, economic, religious and cultural assertions in life. In both plays, a white judge presides over Kimathi and Okeugo. Colonialism and all it comes along with does not surprise us when during the cruel screening of the blacks, an opportunistic white police colonialist, Waitina pushes Kwenda *roughly*, hauling after him: "black bastard". This racial tension and hatred to the point of usurpation is emblematic of the scheming venom Iago pours out in Shakespeare's *Othello* where he assures weak Roderigo about his hatred of Othello thus: "old black ram".

As we are told that Johnnie, "with the tip of his gun, he attempts to lift her skirt as if to see her legs", images of exploitation and dehumanization suffuse of Woman almost being violated. According to Nodari Simoniya, "colonialism was a specific historical form of relations of exploitation". The extent of impoverishment and the cultivation of stark hatred in the blacks manifest in the First Soldier, showing *anger* and *cynicism* as he says:

Where are the terrorist who were supposed to be all over Nyeri? We've been patrolling all night without as much as catching sight of a single one of them. Simply harassing innocent villagers. The way Mzungu makes us thirst to kill one another (p.12).

Colonialism deploys propaganda and inciting lies to hoodwink the colonized. Colonialism, scholars have argued overtime, is constructed to denote: "say what you don't mean". If not how can innocent villagers become the objects of colonial speculation and tension. In Kenyan imperialist administration, the

people we are told shared foods with dogs and maggots from the dustbin. According to Woman: "Yes. We are only ants trodden upon by heavy, merciless elephants". When we encounter Boy and Girl, it is the same story of colonial usurpation and vanquishment. As Boy and Woman discuss, the former reveals: "Father was driven away from Mbari land in Nyeri by one of his relatives who worked as a court interpreter". But transforming into the mood of a change agent, he declares, "But I will never forget the day Kimathi's men burnt down his home guard post. That post used to be the people's grave! Boy continues:

Aaa. Nairobi. I have fought with dogs and cats in the rubbish bins, for food. And I also remember this bakery. It belonged to an Indian. Periodically, he would throw away the rough bread. We all ran for it. This put is mine. This pipa is mine. Dogs, cats, girls, boys, all. But we also learnt how to live and we became men and women before our time (p.19).

The bid to extricate themselves from the system that turned them into beggars in their own land begins as woman admonishes:

The day you understand why your father died: the day you ask yourself whether it was right for him to die so; the day you ask yourself: "what can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstances?" (p.19).

It is because of the killings and harassments and intimidations of their people that Boy decides to fight against colonialism. According to him: "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. I must be there to hear it". We are told that in the court blacks and whites sit on separate sides. Though Boy and Girl were initially portrayed as good-for-nothing, they demonstrate traits of intelligence on the discovery of gun inside the bread given to Boy by Woman. Boy threatens to report to the police but Girl counsels against it as it could lead to his death.

Boy and Girl are very brave because not many children at their ages will handle a gun. Their bravery is further demonstrated when they seize the initiative in the courtroom Scene (p.79-85) by breaking the loaf of bread and taking the gun with which they are able to gain control. Boy and Girl eventually become good influence on each other as Girl persuades Boy who had suggested throwing the gun into a latrine or into the bush to free Kimathi. Their courageous nature as well as their collective action to recoup their political and cultural spaces from the invaders is highlighted, as they are the immediate cause of the pandemonium that breaks out in order to free Kimathi after the sentence.

CONCLUSION

The paper has succeeded at exposing the dynamics of colonialism and their discontent nature across and breath and width of Africa. Colonialism is

imagined to be a disaster that leaves the colony and the colonised with trauma and pain. In *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, and in, *The Dragon's Funeral* no doubt, Ngugi/Mugo and Nwabueze have been able to convey the "colonial presence as at best an intrusion and at worse a violation". This view is reiterated by indigenous African writers like Ebrahim Hussein, Athol Fugard, Okot P'Bikek, Femi Osofisan, Soyinka and Nkosi Lewis in their works. The totality of the impact of colonial encounter in these works is disruptive, non-progressive, exploitative, and inhuman. The study was also able to point out the solution to decades of colonial conquest of abuse, economic rape and slavery and other forms of oppression. The collective actions that came up as surmount measures, offered the colonies no doubt much of the awareness as to the entrenching of their fundamental rights to decide and to lead themselves.

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