

## Advocation and Implementation of the Aesthetics of Democracy in Oral Cultures: a Study in Bediako Asare's *Rebel*

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to show how the Ghanaian novelist Bediako Asare uses allegory to deconstruct the Machiavellian political culture of the state backed up by religion and incarnated by the forces of oppression. In its agenda it thwarts the promoters of progressive ideals and thereby seizes the future of the people in reducing them to mere paupers. In this predicament, all the villagers of the fictional Pachanga in Bediako Asare's *Rebel* are constantly threatened with fear, anguish, and hunger due to outworn ideas, and accept unquestionably their lot because Mze Matata, the authoritarian charismatic leader uses legends and myths, inhuman torture and death sentence to threaten dissenters and renegades.

The narrative provides a valuable basis for understanding the allegorical characters and ideas of his fictional work which combines moral, religious, historical and political allegory about an oral culture used as a microcosmic or symbolic society of the macrocosmic one in quest of good governance as well as survival, development and a meaningful role of causality and rationality. It also helps build an understanding of how oral cultures have evolved and how people have been impacted by conflicts throughout history. Thus, the novelist visualizes his allegorical narrative from past history to future prophecy: democracy.

**Keywords:** allegory, democracy, deconstruct, political culture, progressive, governance

### 1. INTRODUCTION

M.H. Abrams posits that (1981: 4-5) “an allegory is a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived both to make coherent sense on the “literal” or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events”. Interestingly, in addition to this definition, he distinguishes two main types of allegory: First, “historical and political allegory, in which the characters and actions that are signified literally in turn signify, or “allegorize”, historical personages and events”. Then, “the allegories of ideas, in which the literal characters represent abstract concepts and the plot serves to communicate a doctrine or thesis” (4-5). The main interest in the ongoing issue, i.e., “allegory of ideas” is the personification of abstract entities such as virtues, vices, states of mind, and types of character; in more explicit allegories, such reference is specified by the character’s name. Both types of allegory interpolate Bediako Asare’s novel, *Rebel* (1969). It reads like a rhetorical device which extends a metaphor through the entire narrative in such a way that objects, persons, and actions in his text are equated with meanings outside the text just like the following classical allegories viz. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) in classical English literature. While Bunyan’s text is a moral and religious allegory, Orwell’s reads like an allegory of dictatorial regimes. Bediako Asare’s *Rebel*, on the other hand, deals with the victory of modern civilization over a barbarous one; in other words, development and progress over backwardness or barbarism. All these novels are similar in purpose, i.e. in terms of plot-thematic postulations and display obvious layers of allegory as far as human nature and life are concerned. Bediako Asare’s allegorical novel, in fact, establishes without much difficulty what counts as source as well as target. For instance, it is a text just like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, which may be taken as an explicit model for thinking about a more abstract, implicit target related to totalitarian regimes and politics; but in this context, it is reinforced by religious superstitions. Thus, *Rebel* allegorizes both the doctrines of dictatorship interwoven with religious ones alongside primitive society and the separation of powers which was first experienced in ancient

Greece which came into a widespread use in present day society. It was considered as the only way to progress and development. It must be recalled that under this dissemination, the State or the community is divided into distinct branches, each with separate and independent powers and areas of responsibility.

Given the main purpose of literary allegory is to tell a story which has characters, a setting, as well as other types of symbols with both literal and figurative meanings, it should be emphasized that the difference between an allegory and a symbol is that the former is a complete and narrative just like *Rebel* which conveys abstract ideas to get a point across and the latter the representation of an idea or concept having a different meaning throughout a literary work. In Bediako Asare's fictional work, both are blended. Thus power abuse nurtured by religious superstitions, in other words totalitarian dispensation is the prominent thematic material tilted by the novelist. Throughout the novel, the author refers to his characters and places with altered names to lick allegory into shape.

In the light of the above mentioned theoretical pronouncements by H.M. Abrams upon which the framework of this paper hinges, I am going to examine the nature of his allegorical process and point out the abstract entities inherent herein.

## **2. POWER VESTED: DISTRAINS UPON DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESS**

Bediako Asare's use of allegory hints at the penetration of Europeans in Africa to bring "light" and the "blessings of modern civilization". To achieve this, he depicts the cruelty inherent in a primitive society; a society not yet rescued by the forces of modern scientific discoveries. In this context, unfortunately however, these discoveries are brought by an African to his fellow citizens living in bondage. Asare's allegorical novel conceals a lot of hidden meanings. Indeed, the socio-political and economic contradictions hampering progress and development are pluri significant. When deconstructed these are carefully ordered and signify correlated concepts and ideas. *Rebel* is set in a post-colonial era. He uses the concept of a leadership corrupt by religion on an isolated fictional island called Pachanga as a way of pointing out the flaws of mankind which works also as a stumbling block to progress. The novelist wants to know whether goodness and evil are inborn characteristics or if they are learned behaviours. He explores these quandaries while using allegory and symbolism to elevate the tale beyond the simple plot of an adventure story of Shabani, a government surveyor, roaming in a jungle. The novel presents several strata of allegory including government, intellect, power, and religion. All these devices, throughout the novel, add layers of depth to his work since literary characters turn out to be both real and symbolic. Bediako's allegory reveals his total intention or worldview and subsequently acts as part of the subtext that gives the reader information regarding his own vision of not only how the fictional world, Pachanga, exists, but also how it might exist.

The central concern of *Rebel* is the conflict between two antagonistic impulses inherent in all human beings: the instinct to live by rules, act peacefully, follow moral commands, and value the well-being of the group against the instinct which tends to gratify only one's immediate desires, act violently to secure absolute supremacy over others, and enforce one's evil will in the name of superstitious religious beliefs. This conflict is expressed in a number of ways: impending modern civilization epitomized by characters like Shabani, Ngurumo, and his wife Setu on the one hand pitted against characters like Mzee Matata the dictator, Fundi his lanky supporter and would-be successor, Zamani, Abedi and Salifu who are depicted as the incarnation of savagery and barbarism on the other; or better still in binaries like order/chaos, reason/impulse, law/anarchy, or the broader heading of good/evil. Throughout the novel, Bediako associates the instinct of modern civilization with good and the instinct of savagery with evil. The conflict between the two instincts; one symbolized by Ngurumo and the other by Mzee Matata, is the driving force of the novel, explored in the process of characterization where certain figures and ideas are pitted against one another in the manner of the polarities of day and night or death and life and in regards to moral fiber. Clearly, the author depicts certain formal features which are essential in the allegorical process: oppositional relationships.

Bediako Asare's novel is a writing in which each character, object or event is a symbol representing a particular quality or vice. This technique has enabled him to convey many of his ideas and themes. Almost all the names of his characters sound Ghanaian though the novel is set in East Africa. The conflict between civilization and savagery finds its expression in the conflict between the novel's two

main characters: Ngurumo, the protagonist, who represents the new order and new leadership; and Mzee Matata, the antagonist, who stands for a savage dictator and lust for power. As the novel progresses, Asare shows how different people apprehend the influences of the instincts of civilization and savagery to different degrees. Ngurumo, for instance, has no savage feelings and seems barely capable of understanding the rules of modern civilization and progress given to him by Shabani, i.e. modernity in a nutshell.

Generally, however, the novelist implies that the instinct of savagery is far more primal and fundamental to the human psyche than the instinct of modern civilization. He sees moral behaviour, in many cases, as something that civilization forces upon the individual rather than a natural expression of human individuality. When left to their own desires, Asare implies, people naturally tend to revert to cruelty, savagery, and barbarism. This idea of innate human flaw is central to *Rebel*, and finds expression in several important symbols, most notably in the behaviour of thugs like Zamani, Mzee, and Fundi. Among all the characters, only Ngurumo seems to reflect anything like a natural innate goodness. This is conspicuous in his act of defying, even at the risk of his life, Mzee in saying that the land they are tilling is exhausted and only the land of the East can pull them out of their present predicament. It is often believed that power corrupts; but when absolute power is achieved it unconditionally leads to perversion. The oracle vests Mzee Matata with absolute power. He craves for more, and is ready to go any length to get more of it by plotting against and killing his opponents. One of his victims is Ngurumo. Although Ngurumo suggests a lasting solution to the crisis which shakes the foundations of their dying society built on remote ideals as well as impotent institutions and ideals, Mzee Matata is adamant.

Bediako Asare's critique is constructed on the premise that in African worldview, i.e., life and thought, the religious is not distinguished from the nonreligious. In other words, the sacred from the secular or the spiritual from the material. In his fictional locale, he delineates all the characteristics of a vying collective community and shows with dexterity that all the undertakings therein—whether it be cultivating, sowing, harvesting, eating or travelling, traditional religion and its practices are seriously at work. So to be born in Bediako Asare's fictional Pachanga, is to be born in a society and culture that is intensely and pervasively religious and therefore controlled by irrationality, beliefs and myths. In this kind of society, guardians require that every member has but to take part in the religious beliefs and rituals in vogue therein. To stand aloof from all this just like Ngurumo is synonymous with isolating oneself from the composite whole as a group and consequently, denies blatantly the sense of communal membership and security. Here the narrator points out the interruption of the spiritually and commonly shared experiences of the people.

The people [of Pachanga] had sworn, at the risk of their lives, not to divulge the secrets but always to obey faithfully the rules of the cult and the creed. They believed the gods controlled the destiny of the living and held power of life and death. They were also told to pay regular tribute to the fetish priest and offer sacrifices of living creatures to the gods at least once in twelve moons. Danger in any situation could be averted by invoking the gods. The punishment for major offences was death; pardon could only be granted through propitiation to the gods (3-4).

To a greater extent, the traditional chief is never to decide or act without seeking first of all the advice of the gods and ancestors through the oracle and finally from his most loyal councilors. In this case, it is obvious that “the chief is thus bound by law and custom to rule”<sup>1</sup> and is “regarded with awe and revered by all”(3). So the priest according to the narrator “enjoyed tremendous prestige because it is believed that he could set in motion the powers of the gods that could maim, destroy or make life abundant by a mere choice of incarnation”(3). The exaggerated powers of the gods make the people totally submissive to the whims and caprice of Mzee Matata, the priest and ruler of Pachanga. This accounts for the powerful bond that exists between the chief and his people.

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<sup>1</sup> Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values. An Introduction*, Philadelphia/Legon-Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996, p. 114.

According to Lord Acton's pronouncement<sup>2</sup> "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". This shows that ever since the beginning of mankind, individuals in the superstructure have vied for total control and domination of the substructure. In *Rebel*, Bediako Asare focuses on Mzee Matata's desire for political and economic power at all costs and with the power of tradition and customs at the expense of the very people he is supposed to lead and serve. The novelist, however, emphasizes that it is not only on these grounds that the connection between power and corruption can exist in a given society but can also arise in any kind of relationship wherever or whenever the question of leadership emerges.

When the narrative climaxes, it then dawns on the reader the extent to which a leader can get caught up in wielding power and supremacy negatively. The mere influence of absolute power can have many different effects on individuals, society, and the way of life lived therein. As had been discussed by Lord Acton, characters like Mzee Matata and Fundi in their quest for power uses treachery, murder and deceit to control the masses. Most often when given in moderation as in democratic regimes<sup>3</sup>, power is easily controlled; but as articulated in this novel, when given in excess, i.e. with divine connotations, power becomes a corrupter and to some extent corrupts the person in power as well as his menials. In the light of this, it could be inferred that the power given to Mzee Matata, the fetish priest and ruler, is believed to be divine and this enables him to wield it at the expense of his own people. The power that corrupts Mzee is blind trust, confidence and total submission of his own people thanks to superstitions. He uses these parameters to manipulate and control the whole society for his own benefit although it is a well-known fact that at the beginning, he took an oath before his councilors, and promised that he will rule in accordance with the laws, customs, and institutions prevailing in his society. Considered as the ability to manipulate and control whatever one desires, doing whatever one pleases without any regard to the authority, one is bound tends in the process to corrupt everybody. The power that corrupts Mzee Matata, plays an extensive role throughout the novel and is dealt with with dexterity by the novelist.

In Asare's narrative, as indicated earlier, Ngurumo and Mzee are polar opposites in the sense that they are two distinct characters whose leadership qualities contrast so much that they become pitted against each other. To the priest, Ngurumo threatens his power and he considers him as a dissenter or renegade to be controlled and dealt with in hostile ways. In the African worldview, it is difficult for the priest ruler to understand Ngurumo's behaviour for such a behaviour is not only a way to break look from the web of customs which gives him the power to rule but he also loses much of the meaning of life. As for Ngurumo he thinks that the priest is too selfish and treacherous to use superstitions and dishonesty to enslave the whole community and, by and large, its progress and development while the people starve on a land on which they have "worked to death" (91) without fruitful results. While Ngurumo thinks of how to improve the people's miserable existence, the priest is busy looking for ways and means to keep them in bondage.

Earlier in the novel, the narrator underlines Ngurumo's concern about the future of his people while Mzee Matata and Fundi constitute in the words of Ngurumo "the stumbling block to progress and prosperity" (147). While Ngurumo symbolizes "good and progress" in the novel Mzee and Fundi, stands for "evil and regression". Their leadership views are also very different: whereas Ngurumo backed up by Shabani is intimately associated with democratic values, hence progress and development, Mzee and Fundi stand for dictatorship and regression or better still the status quo. The worlds in which these antagonistic leaders live and think contrasts sharply. Shabani, a stranger and Ngurumo stand for "modern discoveries and civilization" and what is good for mankind. Under Mzee's leadership the society becomes evil, backward and savage and provides ground for him to

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<sup>2</sup>John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton (1834-1902) known as Sir John Dalberg-Acton, and usually referred to simply as Lord Acton, was an English historian and grandson of the Neapolitan admiral. In nineteenth century England, Lord Acton observed that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Acton made his pronouncement following Roman Catholic Pope Pius IX's promulgation of the doctrine of papal infallibility in the 1870s.

<sup>3</sup> The normal division of branches is into an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary.

capitalize on it. This kind of self-enclosed community endowed with a coherent body of customs and ideas constitute an integral unity with each member having a definite function in relation to the whole social system.

The power that the gods vest upon Mzee Matata, and which will be later passed on to Fundi according to traditional religious values, makes both of them treacherous. Fundi is corrupted by the power that Mzee promises to offer him after his death. His corruption comes from his mentor's trust in him. He is all out to support Mzee Matata to enable him to have full control over the people and all the meager resources available. To come to this end, both Fundi and Mzee Matata decided that they would do anything to hold tight to that power. The quest for political power corrupts them in the process. When absolute power is attained, the move paves the way to treachery and deceit. Imbued with totalitarianism, Fundi and Mzee are all out to destroy their own community by seizing through the medium of the gods the scanty resources for the survival of the community. While the priest is presented as a "fat-skinned middle aged man" (3), i.e., well-fed at the expense of the people he is supposed to rule, and to deliver the other people who are presented as sufferers with bony bodies as a result of their being self-disciplined in the tradition and customs which vested upon Mzee more power. In oral cultures, knowledge is power. So it is imperative that the most important knowledge be maintained and preserved by a few select custodians who have proven their worth and invest power on the priest. There is no doubt that, elders who have passed the highest levels of initiation hold the deepest levels of knowledge.

Meanwhile Ngurumo, after the suspicious death of Beshara and Omari as a result of an offence to the priest, thinks that the most dangerous enemy is not the evil without, but the evil within the community itself. The way Mzee Matata terrorizes villagers is manifold: he is known for his love for blood thirst, for organizing tribal dances around big fires and the spitting of "fire balls" on dissenters' houses at night as sign of the gods' anger. These tactics is meant to consolidate his power and suggests that he was actually a form of the devil himself. This type of terrorism constitutes a warning to dissenters and as well leads the people astray or away from the road leading to development, emancipation, survival and progress. A case in point is when Ngurumo tells the people to move to the "Land of the East" (84). Even though Mzee Matata was dead, Fundi who was normally supposed to be the priest's successor declared that: "Pachanga is sacred to our people. This is the land given to us by the gods of our ancestors. If we desert it we will die" (129), and then reiterates that "the land is hallowed to them by the gods" (85). On the new land, Ngurumo's "crops are rich and bounteous (119). On seeing the crops growing on the land, Shabani tells them that it is "useless working on the land that has become barren for it will yield no more no matter what they sacrifice to the gods" (94).

The plot of *Rebel* dramatizes the tale of the relationship between a tyrant fetish priest and his community of Pachanga, an imaginary island off the African coast of Tanzania, a remote village which is still unknown to the rest of the island due to "the absence of any road joining it to other towns" (101), and the inhabitants, some 700 inhabitants(125) "who are but a small part of the big race inhabiting the island" (10) still live a traditional and primitive way of life making human sacrifices to their gods for their blessings. The village is presented by the novelist as untouched by modern technological devices and innovations. The existence of its inhabitants is far from idyllic for the people are much committed to the group's ideals and goals and act thereby in ways to fulfill the group's set purpose rather than the individual's. Ruled by Mzee Matata, arch proponent of dictatorship, terrorism and fear the imaginary village of Pachanga, a desert landscape, owes its existence to the bravery of exploited and dubbed farmers who are victims of ignorance, superstition and backward ideas and beliefs. The land they cultivate is overworked and the stream in which they have been fishing since their settlement in that area is being rapidly depleted, and the villagers face extinction due to starvation. It is a small village where the inhabitants starve under the strains of the priest and Fundi, his lanky supporter, are both hostile to any innovative idea.

The continuous cultivation of this wasteland suggests the idea of economic and spiritual poverty and loss due to "ignorance, superstition and outworn ideas and beliefs" (104-105). The novel begins when the fetish priest kills several people, including Omari, Beshara and his family for refusing to hand him the food left for them. While the people are dying of hunger the priest continues to pillage and exploit the meager resource available for the villagers, leaving behind the constant fear of who will be his

next victim. In the fold, it dawns on Ngurumo that the land they cultivate for food is worn out and the river in which they fish is empty and can no longer produce fish. Unless something is done, the whole race will be exterminated and extinguished. Ngurumo and his beloved wife Seitu decide to go to the East where “the undulating rich land” (97) spreads and where the whole population “will have more than enough to eat” (94). In Ngurumo’s patriotic resolve, he decides to defy the priest by persuading them to move with him to the new land where they could produce better crops. But the Mzee says that the gods forbid it and warns Ngurumo against breeding dissenters, renegades and outcasts in the society.

Thereupon, Mzee Matata argues that Pachanga is suffering only because Pachangans have displeased the gods by refusing to abide by their will and demands. He regards Ngurumo and his bid to relocate the villagers to a fertile valley on the other side of the jungle as dangerous move that could pave the way to revolution and rebellion and thereby he considers him as a serious threat to his authority. To be free and henceforth lord it over the people he attempts just like in many dictatorial regimes to have him killed for sedition during a hunting expedition by one of his thugs. When the move fails thanks to his popularity, Ngurumo realizes how dangerous it is for him to remain in the village. He goes into exile to live a new life. Ngurumo’s disappearance is a matter of concern to the priest and his collaborators for they interpret it as being not only a defiance but also as a challenge to the priest’s authority in this period of crisis, especially as the people starve and fear that Ngurumo might organize a rebellion to jeopardise or destroy his authority. He plots to do away with rival so as to well exploit and subdue his own people and impose his will on them until all of the people die of hunger. To take revenge, he gathers the entire village and explains to them that the gods of Pachanga are angry because they have abandoned one of the ancient and important practices of their ancestors, that of human sacrifice to the gods. And since Ngurumo and his wife are sinners they have to be sacrificed to the gods.

Later, that night the priest sends a thugs led by Fundi to capture Ngurumo and his wife Seitu to be sacrificed as holocausts to appease the gods and spare the village from decadence and eventual decimation. After a series of sacrifices and warnings to other dissenters Mzee makes a move to stab Seitu's belly as a sacrifice to the gods in front of her husband who was tied with ropes. Fortunately, a sudden loud report was heard and with the knife in his hand the priest falls dead to the ground in his blood. Instead of the innocent woman he unexpectedly become the holocaust for the survival of the village of Pachanga. Ngurumo’s wife Seitu was spared from the hands of a bloodthirsty dictator by an unknown who was later identified as, Shabani, a government surveyor who happened to be around by chance. Everybody was spellbound. Suddenly, a strange man with strange objects appears on the scene and orders the release of Ngurumo. Shabani startles the gathering with what they call a “magic stick” (his rifle) which killed even the powerful fetish priest from such a long distance.

On that fateful day, had it not been the timely intervention of Shabani, the couple would have died ignominiously in front of all the villagers and this would have been a serious warning to dissenters. The death of the Mzee left the whole village dumbfounded for he was believed to be immortal and his mysterious death portended something ominous to the villagers. Getting nearer the frightened and astonished crowd who were waiting for a spectacle, Shabani presented himself as coming from a town called Walata beyond the mountains to a village which is not even on the map of the country and touching the corpse of the priest with his boot he claims: “A fetish priest, eh” ... one who offers human sacrifice. It is my bet that he’s the last one to keep pursue such heathen practices. He deserves to die” (87).

The death of the priest came as a shock. He was thought immortal! The narrator tells us that although Shabani has hidden powers no one in Pachanga guessed they existed, he was not a “god” as most of the people thought for having killed a fetish priest, something they never thought could have happened one day. The fact of the matter remains that he was a man who knew much more about modern discoveries than the Pachangans. Furthermore, the narrator shows through the eventual death of Shabani that he was not immortal. For Zamani who trapped Shabani to death, “no one can defy the gods of Pachanga and go free” (146).

Thereafter, the surveyor befriends Ngurumo whom he considers as one with good initiatives. Shabani begins to inculcate in him the seeds of democracy and good governance and thereby prepares him for a new leadership role for the villagers but he has to contend with Fundi another conservative, who

according to tradition, inherits the role of the fetish priest from Mzee Matata. Ngurumo seeks the support of the powerful stranger but he is adamant and insistent that the choice of the leader be made democratically and relying "on the good sense of the people" (105) and that either Ngurumo or Fundi be elected according to norms unfamiliar in that kind of society where religion combines with power to control the society. In the society featured by the novelist, the priest is, as was mentioned earlier, at the same time the ruler and priest of the society just like in many primitive societies before the advent of participative democracy<sup>4</sup>. During the political campaign Ngurumo was presented as a candidate of the future with innovative ideas whilst his opponent as a conservative who unconditionally upholds orthodox traditional norms. The new electoral commission represented by Shabani presents both candidates and explains to the electorate the new dawn heralding in their lives:

*"Remember that if you choose Fundi you'll remain here, living as you've always done in poverty and hunger. But if you choose Ngurumo, you'll live a new life of prosperity on the new land" (119).*

Ultimately, Ngurumo wins the election held under the supervision of Shabani and takes a group of men to the valley to see and appreciate the new land with the glamorous crops which grow on it. Upon their return, they discover that Fundi has attempted a coup d'état in which Shabani is killed by a python in a trap set for him by Zamani, one of Fundi's loyalists. Ngurumo's wife Seitu is abducted. The kidnapper is only ready to release her if Ngurumo renounces "to leadership of the people" (141). In other words, he has to exchange his authority and power with his wife's freedom. For the love of both his wife and child, he was on the verge to yield to Fundi's desire when Ngurumo's friends and supporters reminded him that "if Fundi becomes the next fetish priest and ruler, he will kill" (143) all of them. Thereafter, Ngurumo leads a group of eleven men with Jongo, his lieutenant, to an expedition to rescue Seitu Ngurumo's wife. Just as "the ruthless and unscrupulous Zamani" (109) is about to kill Seitu, they arrived on the time and killed her on the spot. They then return to the village to challenge Fundi to a fight to death and settle once and for all the quest for leadership.

Realizing that it is difficult to forget about the gods Ngurumo gathers the people and tells them that the gods are going to single out between him and Fundi who will definitely govern the people. The battle was a fierce one; but Ngurumo won and thereby killed Fundi. Thereafter, he leads the people to the new village which his cabinet named "Nyansa" and plans to send an expedition across the mountains to the modern world which Shabani described to him before his unfortunate death.

### **3. THE AESTHETICS OF DEMOCRACY IN ORAL CULTURES : SEPARATION OF POWERS**

Literature targeted to create awareness among of the masses is always informed by the features of socialist realism as opposed to critical realism. Most often, it emphasizes and advocates the use of violence in revolutionary struggle. Economic and human exploitation in Asare's novel is effectively achieved by applying all other elements of the superstructure such as religion, myths and terrorism to control the life of the villagers of Pachanga. The author depicts the case of a religious sect and allegiance to it as diverting the alienation of the peasants from the revolutionary struggle in which they could engage and eventually liberate themselves.

The novelist contends that when religion travels hand in hand with power, society is totally controlled for the leader and these decisions are those of the "god" and cannot be questioned. Thus, the power derived from this god is divine and enables the social and political apparatus to manipulate the oppressed class as Nzee Matata did. Mzee appealed to the primitive side in the village and had all the villagers forget about all the attributes of modern civilization which await them. Any innovative idea is attacked and the promoter killed. The *Rebel* dramatizes the Machiavellian political culture which oppresses individuals like Ngurumo, Beshara and Omari and this reaches its peak when the eye of the Mzee ominously sets his heart on the inhabitants of the whole village. The secret agents of the priest

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<sup>4</sup>Referring to the American Revolution of 1776, Lincoln examined the founding principles of the United States in the context of the Civil War, and used the ceremony at Gettysburg as an opportunity not only to consecrate the grounds of a cemetery, but also to exhort the listeners to ensure the survival of America's representative democracy, that the "government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth which has become today the principle of democracy.

are geared up to detect the workings and operations of the minds of the people. In this case it is clear why the villagers are constantly threatened by fear. The torture of dissenters as a means of terrorism worsens off the psychological mayhem of the people of Pachanga and underscores grimly the psychological dilemma inherent in mankind in these kinds of primitive regimes as to the survival of the society.

When Ngurumo gives the manifesto pointing out to the people of Pachanga the force of oppression which subjugates them as one of the reasons for their starvation, he gradually prepares them for their disalienation, i.e. from an acritical to critical consciousness. The priest becomes afraid such social mobilization might lead to a positive and radical action against him. He then explains that both Ngurumo and his wife have been "excommunicated" (78) as a consequence "the gods have decreed that they must die" (80) and offered as a sacrifice to the gods. Beshara's family wife and children - were decimated further to their disobedience to the orders of the oracle and the sentence was carried out by Fundi who secretly poisoned the food they were to eat. The death of his descendants and many others who suffer under the strains of the priest indicates that he has put restraint upon the future of the society for the children must take over tomorrow. The struggle for the survival of the children is also the struggle for the survival of their future. It is often believed that the quantity and the quality of that survival is the yardstick of the development of any society. So when the Mzee enslaves the children it means that he enslaves their parents as well. Bediako Asare points out that when you enslave any of these children and/or the parents, you are distaining both the survival and the development of the whole people of Pachanga, its present as well as its future - for survival and development are an "integrated whole" and "survival" is the pre-condition to any development and the latter is the basis of Pachanga's continued survival.

When Mzee is introduced in the opening pages of the novel, clear signs of evil and lust for absolute power are discernible. The narrator describes him "as a fat-skinned" middle aged well-fed man" who plays the task of an "intermediary between the living and the gods". This delineates the extent of the absolute power he possesses and wields thanks to "the exaggerated powers of the gods" (1). In addition, the soothsayer of the village is the only person who can interpret omens good as well as bad ones to the priest. Owing to the importance of his office, he is revered with awe by all. This signifies the devil in person capitalizing on the people's unconditional allegiance to him. The people had sworn at the risk of their lives not to divulge secrets but always to abide by the rules of their cults and defend the creed to death. Mzee Matata is the leader as well as the breeder of anarchy on the island of Pachanga. The image of the gods as controllers of the destiny of the living and holders of the power of life and death associated with that of the Priest makes the "people submissive to the whims and caprice of Mzee Matata". The people unconditionally pay regular tribute to the priest and offer sacrifices of living creatures to the gods once in twelve moons. In primitive societies the simple allegiance to all this or upholding these norms draws down compensation. He who beholds this will benefit from the munificence of the gods. Refusal to keep to these norms brings about death or calamities. A case in point is the decimation of the families of Beshara and Omari as a follow up to an offence to the gods and their go-between, the priest. The former refuses to hand over the maize the fetish priest demands in settlement of his due as an offering to the gods. Beshara has nothing to offer since his wife is sick and his children literally starving.

For the Nzee, the move is defiance and he is never contradicted. As a consequence, he spoke the language of power: "Bring me the maize or your wife and children will die" (4). As soon as the family of Beshara had their meal they fell ill right away and were "lashed by an agony which caused them to writhe on the ground, whimpering, moaning and screaming" (4). When the people attempted to assist them, Mzee objected and said that, "the gods have decreed that Beshara and his family must die. Anyone who should so much as touch them may die also" (5). Only Ngurumo knew the secret and pondered a lot over it. Omari also died because he had offended the gods: when Mzee was seriously interceding with the gods he made a silly noise which made the priest angry. Consequently, he decreed that he must die. And actually Omari died. But this is the priest's own doing. In his absence, Mzee and his followers had secretly put under his bed a spitting cobra which bit him. He emerges as the figure who hoards all the resources to achieve a goal and all out for an absolute rule by a person without the necessity of the consent of the governed; he uses terror to impose his will on his subjects and his prospective successor, Fundi, is a living indication that all men have evil inside, and that these



hidden flaws surface when one is left alone to one's own standards. When power is obtained it corrupts, when absolute power is achieved then it tends to pervert. The oracle gives Mzee power and the latter craves for more and thrives hectically to get more and stay in power by plotting against his opponents: Beshara, Omari and Ngurumo. One of his opponents, the protagonist of the novel, is busy looking for better alternatives that can save the society. But Ngurumo's suggestion of relocation to the "Land of the East" appears to shake the foundations of their archaic society. This infuriates the priest who threatens thereafter that whoever goes to that land shall perish.

Ngurumo always thinks about how to rescue the people and knows that the main reason for the disorder on the island is Mzee and Fundi. They are savages who managed to get the villagers accept one of the fallen nature of mankind which is due to their refusal to uphold orthodox religious norms. Ngurumo becomes the "scapegoat" who escaped a murder plotted by the priest during a hunting expedition where Abedi was prepared to kill him.

For Ngurumo the "Land of the East was a great land - a land of riches and vitality. People would grow strong on it and regain the confidence and joy he knew his people had lost." (43). In Pachanga, people began to face the most serious crisis of their existence. The shortage of food has now become chronic and as a consequence they were suffering from real hunger. All the males had turned to daily hunting so as to supplement the scanty diet and looked vainly for fish in the rivers than before. Although these activities beguiled hunger to some extent, they were by no means a permanent solution:

But to the people of Pachanga, the world literally ended at the horizon within the confines of the mountains. They lived in their own enclosed, isolated world, observing customs and usages, methods of farming and social arrangements which were outmoded (43).

Looking at the land the people cultivate, Shabani remarks that, "It is useless working hard on a land that has become barren. It'll yield no more, no matter what you sacrifice to your gods" (94) and thereby he gave Ngurumo useful insights into several technical innovations to improve the land.

In Pachanga, social amenities grow scanty as those who control the material resources feed on the efforts of the sufferers. Favours done to the people by the priest by way of solution to their problems boil down to nothing for they exploit the masses claiming that they are carrying out the will of the gods. Hunger as well as sickness in this context predicates the precarious signature of alienation on the body and soul of the villagers who live under the strains of dictatorship with the compliance of the traditional law enforcement and secret agents. Mzee Matata had formed his own army of savages led by Fundi and Abedi to suppress, to imprison, poison or to kill any reactionary force in the society. Abedi acted as his secret agent, Salifu as wisdom by identifying himself with the priest, and Zamani, as a ruthless and scrupulous woman. Ngurumo on the other hand symbolized the good in men. He was honest and innocent until he realizes that any mortal that defies the priest dies. He cared more about the well-being of the people than about himself. Fudi's hopes are dashed. Ngurumo though elected to the majority voters after a difficult political campaign, was afraid of being overthrown and killed by his opponent and his supporters owing to the different plots including abortive murder, the murder of Shabani, and the abduction of Seitou, his own wife to force him renounce leadership, he manages to escape and overcome and the fact that the people will refuse to follow him to the promise land. On this Shabani told him that "it was not easy to break away from old beliefs and ideas" (121). "But I admit that the hardest thing for most people is to discard outworn beliefs and ideas" (122). Fundi, a "clever and cunning" character convinces the people during the political campaign not to go to the polls to elect a new leader as advocated by the electoral code. He is adamant, sticks to the beliefs of his people, their religion, customs and traditions:

"You've shown friendliness to a man who killed your fetish priest and ruler. You have listened to one who has told you to select your new leader; and you know it is the gods who decide who's to be your guide and ruler" (113).

In the novel, almost more than half of the people are hostile to innovations. Although Ngurumo advocates relocation where they could get arable land, the people and the priest felt object they could not worship their gods in the new environment which was later called Nyansa. In this setting, knowledge is static and nobody can question authority. This was a powerful obstacle to innovations and since the people were tied to skills peculiar to their local communities, geographical mobility was

hindered by mountains. The narrator points out that the village is “completely cut off from the rest of the world on an island off the coast of Africa by its remoteness and the absence of any road joining it to other towns” (101.)

To prevent Ngurumo from becoming supreme, according to democratic principles instilled by Shabani, which he “vaguely understood” (154), he promises to rule for fifty moons and alternate. After the term of his rule, he will “present himself for their approval or disapproval at the end of his term of office” (154-155). In order to protect the minority from the dictates of the majority, he will not rule alone but appoints his loyalists such as Ali, Jongo, Juma, Moshi, and Pilipili to “sit with [him] and talk over [your] problems. They will help to decide what’s best for us to do” (131) “I don’t mean to rule alone as did Mzee Matata. I shall choose a number of you to help me to rule and advise me. I need wisdom and experience of others” (130). Thus he induces the branches he has formed to cooperate and enforce good governance relying on a separation of powers<sup>5</sup> and look for ways and means to balance each of the different bodies. This will be achieved through a system of “checks and balances” enabling it to be based on regulation that empowers one branch to limit another. In democratic systems of governance, a continuum exists between the different stakeholders: “one man may look after farming and its problems and another may take care of the sanitation of the village and so on” (107). According to Shabani, democracy “is not a weapon of any kind. It means that you share the rule of your people with other men whom you yourself choose (106).

Asare’s novel preaches good governance when one of the characters explains to Ngurumo the attributes and benefits of democracy as a precondition to progress in a society where some people have power more than others. This contrasts much the ones in which each individual is not only equal in the social structure but also acts as a reflection of the author’s views on how to liberate countries from dictatorial regimes and fight for the instauration of democratic values at whatever means at his disposal. Bediako Asare seems to advocate in his work the best possible future for Africa is the separation of religion from the State and of stakeholders originating in part from the absolute power given to local rulers and priests in olden days which has almost decimated people with progressive ideas. No religious interference with the functions of the state and no state interference with the functions of religion: this guarantees absolute freedom of the individual from the domination of traditional religious authority in sociopolitical and even economic affairs. Although this will be the beginning of sociopolitical and economic disintegration as seen in the novel, it will contribute to progress and development with the blessings of good governance. Such a view is clarified by Ngugi wa Thiong’o when he theorizes the problematic of development (and survival) as an “integrated whole” with crucial elements which are physical, survival, economic survival, political survival, cultural survival, and psychological (or identity) survival<sup>6</sup>.

The whole novel is concerned with the issue of extinction, survival and development. The term development used in this essay refers to an improvement in the lives of a given people. This includes both economic and social. For a group of people to develop socially and economically, freedom and justice are necessary. Such a prospect of improvement has been stagnating because of the enslavement of the people by a fetish priest and ruler.

#### **4. THE NOVELIST’S NARRATIVE INTEREST**

Bediako Asare’s novel, *The Rebel*, epitomizes the Machiavellian political culture. It is characterized by oppression and menaces individuals with progressive ideals. This reaches its peak when the eye of the powerful and almighty ruling fetish priest, Mzee Matata, an incarnation of evil, is hovering like a vulture on the people and their daily activities on the island Pachanga. Characters like Ngurumo, Shabani, Beshara and Omari are cases in point. His secret agents and thugs, namely Abedi, Zamani, a woman, Salifu and Fundi, are geared up to give reports on dissenters. Salifu, just like any character in totalitarian regime, is much more interested in pleasure and finds it fit to identify himself with the

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<sup>5</sup> Referring to the American Revolution of 1776, Lincoln examined the founding principles of the United States in the context of the Civil War, and used the ceremony at Gettysburg as an opportunity not only to consecrate the grounds of a cemetery, but also to exhort the listeners to ensure the survival of America’s representative democracy, that the “government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Moving the Center: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, London: James Curry, 1993, p.76.

man in power if he were to enjoy them. In this case it is therefore crystal clear why the villagers are constantly threatened by fear, anguish, ennui, and hunger due to outworn ideas. In this kind of social structure, torture and killing of dissenters worsen off the psychological destruction of people with progressive ideas. The survival and future of the society is enslaved as people starve and die.

When Ngurumo, the visionary character in the novel gives the manifesto which enables the people of Pachanga to perceive the forces of oppression subjugating them due to outworn and irrational forces and the reasons for their starvation and gradually preparing them for their own disalienation from an acritical to critical consciousness, the leader-priest becomes angry and even afraid that such social mobilization will lead to a positive and radical action against him and precise that “the gods have decreed that they must die”(80), i.e. be sacrificed to the gods for an abundant crops. He therefore makes a kind of “sedition bill” claiming that the gods are offended and so he has to keep Ngurumo and his wife Seitu gagged until, fortunately, an uncanny coup d'état delivers them from a cruel death.

Bediako Asare contrived his allegorical narrative from past history to future prophecy. “The African concept of justice is based upon the fact that the world belongs to the Deity; that the social orders are his ordinance, and that he is far above all divisions into races, ethnic groups, clan differences, or political partnerships<sup>7</sup>” (164).The people of Pachanga are governed by Mzee Matata, a fetishpriest who resents any innovation running foul of his beliefs and which are likely to harm or undermine his authority. Probing in the underlying meaning of Asare's message on governance, it turns out that change in primitive societies is very often viewed with fear. The tenants of society are not ready to uphold the requirements of upheavals unless the change favours them. In this fictional work, despite all the lucid explanations of representative government given to Ngurumo by Shabani, the advocate of progress and good governance<sup>8</sup>, the former is afraid of change for if he is elected by the people through a new form of leadership in a choice that is not familiar to the people, he will be overthrown and be eventually killed by his political opponents. The status quos are afraid of change in all its forms. Change, no matter where it comes from, is dreaded because it affects all aspects of social spheres and alters a lot preconceived social structures and stratum as well as ideas.

Shabani, who was on an expedition, was trying to fulfill one of human needs and mankind's search of food and to understand his own life. But his character also represents any man who is in search of a sense of purpose in life, liberty and freedom. Although he literally saves Ngurumo's and his wife Seitu's living from the hands of the cruel conservative fetish priest, Mze Matata, the power-drunk and corrupt ruler of Pachanga, Shabani serves as a guide for Pachanga on the difficult journey through the mystical inferno of dictatorship to freedom and justice. In addition, Shabani can be seen as reason and human wisdom whom Ngurumo, the visionary, has been looking for in life: his people have been dying of hunger due to “ignorance, superstition, outworn ideas and beliefs” (104).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In this fictional work the author features the common representation of the duped and gullible masses gulled by flattery, verbosity, oracles, gods and the vicissitudes of tyranny; the agitators bid against one another with promises of abundant food and material comforts; the “classes” are represented by the poor peasants and the priest and his counselors. *Rebel* may be read and valued as a realistic depiction of social life in pre-colonial Africa and the breakdown of its social and political homogeneity in contact with foreign ideas and innovations. Power abuse against the backdrop of religion is the prominent theme informing the novel. The novelist uses this to preach some kind of a moral lesson as well as political point of views. The moral learnt through this allegory is that the road to freedom is not at all easy; but is full of torn and obstacles. But this does not stop the protagonist of the novel from achieving glory. A citizen has to be willing to pay any price to achieve freedom and

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<sup>7</sup>Boladji Idowu E, *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1973, p.164.

<sup>8</sup> In democratic systems of governance, a continuum exists between the different branches and aims at preventing one branch from becoming supreme and to protect the “opulent minority” from the majority and forces them to cooperate. Governance systems that employ a separation of powers need a way to balance each of the branches. Typically, this was accomplished through a system of “checks and balances”, the origin of which, like separation of powers itself, is specifically credited to Montesquieu. Checks and balances allow for a system based on regulation that allows one branch to limit another, such as the power of Congress to alter the composition and jurisdiction of the federal courts.

salvation. All the characters featured in the novel are multidimensional: on the one hand good characters who stand for virtues and on the other the bad ones representing vices. This allegorical novel has enabled Bediako Asare to put forward his moral and political point of view. The opening of the novel describes a world of contention between virtue and vice that might appear familiar to allegories. The novel contains a certain number of conflictual instances: the desire to oppress as well as that of liberation. Asare's world is about desire and blockage though what is desired is inflected by social determinants like poverty, hunger and ignorance and the blockage has less to do with internal struggles than with social and material obstacles. But far beyond this, the social and the intellectual interest of the narrative is that religion should be separated from politics because some taboos guiding the conduct of Mze Matata, the priest and his mannerisms are irrational and unproductive when we view them in the light of modern society. Bediako Asare visualized his allegorical narrative from past vista to future prophecy. Finally, this analysis brings out the novelist conviction that for any society to aspire to freedom, justice and progress, religion and superstitious beliefs should be separated from state policy.

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