

POLITICAL CORRUPTION AND THE LEADERSHIP FAILURE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE*

Kouakou Bernard BAMENE

Docteur

Université Alassane Ouattara

bamenekouakou1972@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is written from a postcolonial theoretical perspective. It examines political corruption and leadership failure in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*. It argues that the novel portrays postcolonial politics as a realm characterised by greed, patronage, electoral fraud, and moral hypocrisy for personal gain. Using satire and irony, Achebe reveals the breakdown of public trust and the fragility of political institutions in a newly independent Nigeria. Ultimately, the novel suggests that independence without ethical leadership and accountable governance leads to social disillusionment rather than genuine national progress.

Keywords: Governance - moral hypocrisy -Leadership -Political corruption- Politics- Postcolonial.

La corruption politique et l'échec du leadership dans A man of the people de Chinua Achebe

Résumé

Cette étude adopte une perspective théorique postcoloniale. Elle examine la corruption politique et les défaillances du leadership dans le roman « Un homme du peuple » de Chinua Achebe. Il soutient que le roman dépeint la politique postcoloniale comme un domaine caractérisé par la cupidité, le clientélisme, la fraude électorale et l'hypocrisie morale à des fins personnelles. Recourant à la satire et à l'ironie, Achebe révèle la rupture de la confiance publique et la fragilité des institutions politiques dans un Nigéria nouvellement indépendant. En définitive, le roman suggère qu'une indépendance sans leadership éthique ni gouvernance responsable conduit à la désillusion sociale plutôt qu'à un véritable progrès national.

Mots clés : Corruption politique -Gouvernance – hypocrisie morale – Leadership – Politique – Post colonialisme

La corrupción política y el fracaso del liderazgo en A man of the people, de Chinua Achebe

Resumen

Este estudio se inscribe en una perspectiva teórica poscolonial. Examina la corrupción política y el fracaso del liderazgo en *A Man of the People*, de Chinua Achebe. Sostiene que la novela presenta la política poscolonial como un ámbito caracterizado por la codicia, el clientelismo, el fraude electoral y la hipocresía moral orientada al beneficio personal. Mediante el uso de la sátira y la ironía, Achebe pone de manifiesto la pérdida de confianza pública y la fragilidad de las instituciones políticas en una Nigeria recién independizada. En última instancia, la novela sugiere que la independencia, sin un liderazgo ético y una gobernanza responsable y sometida a mecanismos de rendición de cuentas, conduce a la desilusión social en lugar de propiciar un verdadero progreso nacional.

Palabras clave: Gobernanza – hipocresía moral – liderazgo – corrupción política – política – poscolonialismo.

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* is widely regarded as one of the most insightful political novels in African literature. It powerfully illustrates the moral decay that can follow political independence when power is seized by selfish and irresponsible leaders. The novel shows how corruption, greed and the abuse of power can destroy freedom, progress and national development. The educational knowledge that is supposed to inform leaders' decisions is disregarded. Consequently, appointments are based on people's relationships with one another. 'Who you know' is the most important factor in the new society.

Through satire, irony, and realistic characterisation, Achebe criticises a political class that speaks on behalf of the people while acting primarily for personal gain. In this way, the novel becomes a serious reflection on the leadership crisis in newly independent African states, as well as being a story about politics. The issue of political corruption lies at the heart of the novel's meaning. Achebe shows that corruption is not just dishonest acts by individual politicians, but a system that shapes governance. Leaders such as Chief Nanga embody the arrogance, hypocrisy, and self-interest that define the ruling elite. He presents himself as a man of the people, friendly, generous and close to ordinary citizens, yet beneath this public image is a politician who exploits power for money, prestige and influence. Faced with this reality, one cannot help but ask: why, after gaining independence, do African leaders abandon their countries' dreams to pursue other interests? The result is a state in which institutions are weak, public confidence is damaged, and the hopes invested in independence begin to crumble. This theme of corruption has already been explored by other authors and even by the same writer in other works. In *No Longer at Ease*, by Chinua Achebe, three childhood friends, Sam, the dictatorial president; Christ Oriko, the Commissioner for Information; and Ikem Osodi, editor of the state-run newspaper, see their friendship shattered under the pressure of power and corruption.

This regime collapses in *Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe, which centres on a Western-educated Nigerian civil servant who is torn between colonial modernity, family obligations and corruption. The novel traces Obi's fall from idealism into compromise, using his bribery trial as the narrative framework. In *Intellectuals, Politicians*

and the Public in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, intellectuals, politicians and the public form a corrupt political system in which each group contributes to the failure of post-colonial democracy. *The Beautiful Ones Are Yet to Be Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah, is often read as a satirical and existential critique of the post-independence Ghanaian state under Nkrumah, focusing on how revolutionary promises turn sour into elite corruption and everyday moral decay. Bill Browder also discussed the issue of corruption in *a true story of high finance*. The book combines finances political corruption and personal risks showing how Browder moves from profit seeking, investor to anti- kremlin activist. At Last, *the Petals of Blood*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o examines how colonial exploitation persists through neo-colonialism, political corruption and the betrayal of anti-colonial ideals.

Drawing on postcolonial theory, this article aims to demonstrate how corruption undermines the effective operation of state institutions, resulting in leadership failure in post-independence African countries. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, the colonial situation produces subjects and cultures that are unstable and marked by contradiction this article comprises three sections. The first section is entitled 'Political Corruption. It comprises two sub-sections: 'Corruption as the Foundation of Politics' and 'Socio-Political Consequences'. The second section is entitled "Chief Nanga as a Symbol of Failed Leadership". This section also comprises two subheadings: "Performance and false proximity" and "Corruption and personal enrichment". The third section is entitled "The Betrayal of Public Trust". It comprises two subheadings: "Failure of Democratic Ideals" and "Loss of Public Confidence".

1- Political Corruption

In her book *Thieves of the State*, Sarah Chayes writes that "the worse a regime's visible corruption is, the worse the atmosphere of resentment and anger becomes among its people" (S. Chayes, 2015, p. 25). Chayes presents corruption as being embedded in the structure of governance, whereby officials exploit their positions of power for personal gain instead of serving the public.

In *A Man of the People*, political corruption is depicted as the defining issue of the postcolonial state: leaders exploit their positions for personal gain, elections are rigged, and the divide between rulers and ordinary citizens grows ever wider. Chief Nanga embodies this corruption particularly well through bribery, patronage, personal

enrichment, and the abuse of political influence. This section is composed of two subheadings: 'Corruption as the foundation of politics' and 'Socio-political consequences of political corruption'

1-1. Corruption as the foundation of politics

Chief Nanga, a former teacher of Odili's who has made a name for himself. I want you to come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service. We should leave everything to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there; our people must press for their fair share of the national cake. The hackneyed phrase national cake was getting to some of us for the first time and so it was greeted with applause (Achebe, 1989, p.8).

private sector, disapproves of his former student. Chief Nanga cannot understand why Odili is suffering when he could have joined him in the civil service and shared in the national wealth. However, Odili is reluctant to do so because he is well aware of politicians' ways. The behaviour of the country's corrupt officials, as exemplified by Nanga, is evident in these remarks.

Politicians openly display their political views. All about plundering the country's wealth among a select group of friends. Merit and the intrinsic value of qualifications or intellectual background are given little consideration. The idea that corruption is the foundation of politics is a strong critical thesis. It suggests that, in some systems, political power is organised less around public service and more around private gain, patronage and control of resources. In this sense, corruption is not merely a by-product of politics; it can become the very logic through which politics operates. Political corruption refers to the misuse of public authority by decision-makers for private gain. Ayi Kwei Armah depicts the same situation in Ghana. In his novel, he describes post-independence Ghana as a place where corruption and bribery were ubiquitous. According to Lutfi Hamadi, (2014, p.14). Edward Said's central idea in *orientalism* is that dominant powers produce false image of the other to justify control. In political terms, that matters because corruption is not only about bribery or embezzlement.

Inherited from the colonial era, these practices are causing chaos in formerly colonised countries that have gained independence. Rather than seeking to improve their people's miserable living conditions, new leaders exploit them by stealing the resources made available. When this becomes systemic, elections, appointments, contracts and even policy choices may be influenced by bribery, favouritism, vote manipulation and state

capture. This is why scholars distinguish between isolated acts of corruption and corruption that is embedded in the political system itself.

In *A Man of the People*, corruption is not just a moral flaw; it is the driving force of political life. Achebe presents politics as a realm in which power is acquired through patronage, bribery, personal loyalty, and self-enrichment rather than public service. Chief Nanga embodies this system. A former teacher turned minister, he uses his position for personal gain, distributes favours, and turns public office into private property. The novel shows that political success depends less on competence than on access to networks of influence and the ability to reward supporters. Achebe suggests that corruption is embedded in the postcolonial state itself, rather than being limited to a few bad individuals. Homi Bhabha also takes this view. To paraphrase Bhabha, political corruption is not a simple moral failure, but a symptom of colonial power, mimicry and ambivalence within the postcolonial state.

For Bhabha, the misbehaviour of African leaders is due to the colonial past. Elections are rigged, institutions are weak, and the ruling class exploits the state for personal gain. This makes corruption the foundation of politics, determining how power is gained, maintained and distributed. Although Odili's narration exposes the system, he is also drawn into it. Achebe uses this to argue that a corrupt political order can normalise unethical behaviour and make resilience difficult. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe portrays corruption as the foundation of politics, showing that post-independence power depends on patronage, manipulation and self-interest rather than democratic responsibility

1-2. Socio- Political consequences of political corruption

In *A Man of the People*, political corruption causes significant social and political damage. It destroys public trust, weakens institutions, and transforms the state from a public service organisation into a tool for private gain. Corruption also creates inequality, moral decay and popular frustration, which can eventually lead to instability and the breakdown of civil order.

Corruption erodes the trust between citizens and leaders, making people cynical and politically apathetic. It exacerbates poverty and inequality by diverting public resources away from education, healthcare, and other services. Furthermore, it encourages moral decline in society, as dishonesty and selfishness become normalised in

public life. Corruption also weakens social cohesion by creating resentment between the ruling elite and ordinary people. Achebe presents corruption as a systemic issue, not just an individual failing. Politicians misuse their power to enrich themselves while ignoring the needs of the people. The result is a society marked by disillusionment, social fracture, and a collapse in confidence in the leadership following independence. Corruption undermines democracy because offices are used for private enrichment rather than public service. It damages the legitimacy of the state and its institutions, making the government appear predatory rather than protective. These unhealthy behaviours on the part of African leaders were inherited from the colonisers. Indeed, in their blind desire to imitate the people who once ruled their countries, African leaders indiscriminately copy their lifestyles, thereby undermining their own countries' economies. The following extract from the novel illustrates this point:

We have been living in a world which is not our own. We have been living in a world which has been made for us by the white man. We have been living in a world which has been made for us by the white man, and we have been living in a world which is not ur own. (C. Achebe, 1989, p.37).

This quote illustrates the influence of past legacies on people's daily lives and on society itself. It also hinders accountable leadership, as power is maintained through patronage, manipulation, and abuse. This can provoke resistance and political crises, as seen in Achebe's novel, where public anger against the ruling elite grows. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe shows that political corruption destroys both the moral fabric of society and the legitimacy of the postcolonial state. In theory, Chief Nanga's closeness to the people, to the extent that he is known as 'the man of the people', should enable him to understand their problems and help them more effectively. However, he disregards this closeness and uses it for his own gain

2 - Chief Nanga as a Symbol of Failed Leadership

Chief Nanga's public persona is deliberately constructed to mask a pattern of self-enrichment, moral bankruptcy and political cynicism. Styled as a man of the people, he is charismatic and accessible, and embodies Achebe's critique of failed leadership in newly independent African states. From his skilful rhetorical performances to his systematic abuse of office, Nanga embodies the discrepancy between nationalist rhetoric and the reality of corrupt governance, which Achebe criticises in the novel. Instead of serving the

common good, Nanga weaponised image-making to consolidate personal power, thereby illustrating how leaders who claim to represent the people can most effectively betray them.

Nanga's private life, his womanising, extravagant domestic comforts, and acceptance of bribes reveals the moral failings that undermined his public role. His sexual relationships, which were often consummated through the abuse of his position or patronage, mirrored the political exploitation that would define his tenure. Financially, Nanga participated in the siphoning of public resources. Favours, contracts and patronage networks enrich him and his cronies at the expense of the public good. Achebe uses these concrete behaviours to argue that failed leadership is not merely rhetorical, but is institutionalised through informal economies of corruption. The post-independence society, which embodies the aspirations of the entire population, has had all its hopes snatched away.

2-1. Performance and False Proximity

The new post-independence society was full of hope, but has found itself led by a group of leaders who are greedy and incompetent. The coming quote highlights the limitations of the new African leaders who now control the fate of their countries:

The new Prime Minister was a man of the people. He had been in the bush and had never been to school. But he had a great following among the people, and he was very popular with the masses. He was a man who knew how to talk to the people, and how to get them to do what he wanted. (C. Achebe, 1989, p.15)

Chief Nanga's appeal lies in his theatrical closeness. He cultivates informality, jokes with ordinary voters, and presents himself as a leader who understands the needs of the people. However, this performance of intimacy is strategic rather than genuine, obscuring a transactional relationship with constituents, whereby their loyalty is purchased or manipulated. Achebe thus demonstrates how charisma and a populist style can substitute for ethical leadership, resulting in leaders who are visible and talkative, yet not accountable. The concept of false proximity is central to the novel's satire. Nanga appears physically and socially close to the people. He speaks their language, visits communities, and behaves like an elder figure they know well. It is at this point that the irony of the novel becomes apparent. This closeness is merely superficial, as he remains distant in terms of power, privilege and ethics. The people are near him in image, but not in real

political agency. This false proximity is particularly evident in the way Nanga exploits personal relationships to secure loyalty. He exploits friendship for influence, hospitality for manipulation, and intimacy for control. The result is a politics of exploitation that is disguised as kinship. Achebe's point is that proximity can become a trap when it replaces accountability.

2.2. Corruption, personal enrichment and moral decay

When politics is seen as a game of chance or when laws are passed to benefit a small group in power, it loses all meaning. The passage mentions:

Politics in our country is a game of chance. It is a game in which the rules are made by the people in power to suit themselves. The people who are in power are the ones who made the laws, and they make the laws and they make the laws, and they make the laws to suit themselves. (C. Achebe, 1989, p. 44).

The novel repeatedly links Nanga's public duties to his private accumulation of wealth. He diverts public resources, accepts bribes, and lives in conspicuous luxury, all while the nation's institutions weaken. Nanga's construction of lavish buildings and acceptance of illicit gifts demonstrate that his political decisions are driven by personal gain rather than public welfare. By portraying corruption as a defining feature of the minister, Achebe criticises leaders who view their position as an entrepreneurial opportunity rather than a moral responsibility. Nanga's pursuit of Odili's girlfriend and his casual sexual coercion are not peripheral incidents, but rather symptomatic of a broader ethical collapse. His private immorality mirrors his public misconduct. Achebe uses these episodes to demonstrate that a leader's disrespect for others, treating citizens and women as instruments, is connected to his disregard for civil norms. Thus, Nanga's sexual behaviour functions symbolically: personal degradation registers as political failure.

Nanga repeatedly manipulates party mechanisms and patronage to neutralise genuine political challenges, offering inducements to opponents and using state resources to strengthen his faction. His willingness to corrupt electoral and party processes reveals a leader who undermines democratic procedures while claiming to uphold them. Achebe thereby exposes how institutions are hollowed out under leaders who prioritise the survival of their clique over the common good.

3: The Betrayal of Public Trust

Chief Nanga embodies the betrayal of public trust, presenting a public image as a man of the people while secretly harbouring greed, engaging in patronage and practising political manipulation. The novel portrays corruption as a direct violation of the duty that leaders owe to the citizens they are meant to serve. Although Chief Nanga wins popularity through charm, gifts, and informal favours, these gestures are not genuine public service; rather, they are tools for maintaining power and personal enrichment. Achebe demonstrates that this type of leadership transforms politics into a private enterprise, where state office is exploited for personal gain rather than for the greater good. As Ogbeche said, "Bribery and corruption have eaten deeply into the fabric of our society (Ogbeche, 2005, p. 20). This means that public institutions and officials have been compromised, creating hardship for ordinary people.

Betrayal of public trust can be observed at two levels: The failure of democratic ideals and the loss of public confidence.

3.1. Failure of Democratic Ideals

In *A Man of the People*, Chinua Achebe's critique of post-independence politics is centred on the betrayal of trust. Although Chief Nanga presents himself as a man of the people, he exploits his position in public office for personal gain, thereby betraying the citizens he claims to serve. This betrayal extends beyond merely stealing money. It also involves abusing public confidence, manipulating supporters and using charm and generosity to hide corruption. Achebe demonstrates that leaders of this kind damage not only the economy, but also the moral relationship between rulers and the ruled. Odili's respect for Nanga is shattered when he realises that the minister's popularity is based on self-interest and deceit.

Nanga's conduct suggests that political promises are empty, and that those in power may exploit the people while serving their own interests. This is why the novel treats betrayal as both political and ethical. Betrayal of trust refers to the author's exposure of the false image of postcolonial leadership, and to the disappointment of citizens who expected integrity after independence. Corruption is presented as a breach of the social contract between leaders and the governed. The novel suggests that independence did

not automatically bring justice or responsible leadership. In both *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*, bribery, moral compromise, and institutional decay are presented as everyday realities that trap Obi Okonkwo and expose the failures of postcolonial Nigeria. Elections, political alliances and public promises are manipulated so democratic language hides private greed. This gap between ideal and reality is one of the clearest form of betrayal.

3.2. Loss of Public confidence

This portrays corruption as both moral decay and historical tragedy. The two novels in question deal with corruption and its repercussions on newly independent African societies. Although their leaders are natives of their respective countries, they turn out to be vultures who neglect their countries' development.

The narrator's disillusionment is evident throughout *A Man of the People*. Political corruption has so thoroughly undermined society that the people's long-held hopes for independence have given way to disillusionment. "I had always thought that the people were the ones who made the country. But now I see that the people are the ones who are made by the country. The country is made by the people in power, and the people in power are the ones who made the country" (C. Achebe, 1989, p.136)

In this quotation, African leaders, through their misdeeds, have plunged the country into chaos, and all hope seems to be fading.

When leaders betray their duties, people become cynical and politically powerless. Achebe demonstrates that, when institutions repeatedly fail, citizens stop believing that the government can act fairly or honestly. This erosion of trust lies at the heart of the novel's critique of postcolonial politics. Chief Nanga and his associates present themselves as men of the people, but their actions reveal self-interest and abuse of power. As scandals, favouritism and political fraud accumulate, the public becomes disillusioned and cynical. Achebe also illustrates how institutions such as the press and parliament can distort accountability rather than protect it. A striking effect of this is that the crowd quickly and emotionally turns against politicians once the truth surfaces, having initially supported them. This suggests that public confidence in the novel is unstable because it is based on

propaganda, not genuine democratic trust. Achebe's satire incorporates the people's disappointment into the broader tragedy of failed postcolonial leadership.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* is widely regarded as one of the most powerful literary critiques of political corruption and leadership failure in postcolonial Africa. Through the character of Chief Nanga and the broader political context of the novel, Achebe reveals a ruling class that is not motivated by service, justice or accountability, but by greed, self-interest and the ruthless pursuit of power. The novel shows that, rather than being a platform for national development, political office has become a means of personal enrichment and social domination. In this sense, Achebe's work is not only a critique of a particular historical moment in Nigeria, but also a timeless commentary on the dangers of corrupt leadership in any society.

One of the most important lessons of the novel is that corruption is never an isolated moral weakness; it is a systemic issue that infects every level of public life. Chief Nanga's rise to power, his manipulation of public resources and exploitation of ordinary citizens, and his use of patronage reflect a political culture in which integrity has little value. Rather than protecting the welfare of the people, leaders use the state for their own benefit. Achebe demonstrates that such leaders flourish in environments where institutions are weak, the rule of law is disregarded, and citizens are conditioned to accept abuse as the norm.

This corruption breeds frustration, distrust, and political instability, trapping the nation in a cycle of failed governance. The novel also reveals the deep connection between leadership failure and moral emptiness, as well as the collapse of public responsibility. Nanga is presented as a man of the people only in name. In reality, he is a populist figure who exploits the poor to preserve his own comfort and power. His charm, generosity, and public confidence merely mask corruption and opportunism. Achebe thereby warns readers that appearances should never be confused with leadership. Odili's role in the novel further strengthens this critique. Although he initially appears to be a moral alternative to the corrupt political elite, his actions reveal his true colours. However, his own actions reveal the complexity of political engagement in a corrupt environment.

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