AFRICA’S DIRGE: THE ILLUSION OF SOLUTIONS TO THE NATIONS?

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ABSTRACT

Over the centuries, the theatrical and pretentious activities of African Political leaders have culminated in the evolution of a thick skin of carelessness and indifference guided by fuzzy and visionless eyes that stare hopelessly into the future. It is certainly difficult now to determine what could start her to realize her precarious situation and act. Time and again African nations have proven unable to solve petty problems, thoughtless of managing weightier matters of the current century, while her keen and expectant citizens behold, distressed with disillusion and frustration. Employing a constructivist paradigm the study focuses on the works of artists whose works reference issues of the continent of Africa, as means to lambast satirize and chastise her to wake up. The work is organised on the basis of Stream–Write, a qualitative method of research through art that share qualities of prose, poetry and drama to benefits from the expressive qualities available in same, and to allow for the liberty needed in exploring the domain of the intuitive, creative and sometimes illogical writing impulse. From all historical indications I submit in conclusion that indeed Africa is gleefully willing and hopeful to embrace an end far worse than her most dreadfal past.

Indexing terms/Key Words
Africa; African renaissance; Stream-write; African civilisation; African experience.

Academic Discipline and Sub-Disciplines
African Art and Culture, African Studies

TYPE (METHOD/ APPROACH)
Literary Analysis: Stream-Write

INTRODUCTION

There are authors who bathe Africa’s history (especially those south of the Sahara) in bright light, they loudly tell of the glories of the people and how they cradled theosophical, theological and philosophical life of humanity (Darkwah, 2002: 319, 320; Vansina, 1987) They tell of how Africans blazed the trails in world civilization, masterminding ingenious arts and social institutions, that many other people elsewhere have had their national torches lit by (Picton, 1992; Durden, 1974; Kennedy, 1992). When we look at Africa today we do not see much hard working and responsible people. Or should all the irresponsibility, laxity, heartlessness and corruption (Armah,1968) be blamed on that past event of colonialism and slavery? Why does Africa delight in building a bleak future for herself with her own ‘powerful arms and large hands’ (Grolier, 1961: 247)? The self-abhorrence and identity nightmarish condition of the African is displayed in how school girls are forced to shave of their hair, (while foreign girls are left alone) only to later crave for Brazilian or Indian hair attachment at adulthood. Such an attitude should obviously emanate from a more complex negative mental attitude and self-identity.

Journeying through a long history of varied events the people are not without preconceptions and prejudices. Contemporary Africans seem to harbour certain different worldviews as regards their existence in relation to the western world. These views may appear in several variety forms and shades of the same hue. I venture these views in four categories as follows; some would go to great extents to explain why westerners owe Africans the responsibility of giving back in kind to make for the loss and exploitation meted out against them during the colonial era. Others nurse heated emotional attitude that seek the opportunity to antagonize or even revenge against westerners. Numerous internet fraudsters found on the continent today fall within this domain. Still there are those who have lost all hope of surviving in Africa to make any positive impact in either their own lives or that of their dependents, and therefore resort to domicile in one western country or another. I once encountered the young lady Sabina (not her real name) in the lecture hall, lamenting her misfortune of having been born an African, during a discussion of the African situation in my lecture. Another friend confesses to me, that to live and raise a family here in the continent, to him, is just impossible. There are still those in the final category who lay every responsibility squarely on the shoulders of Blacks themselves who inhabit the continent. This group reason that, in spite of all the historical baggage that could be bundled along in sentimental narratives, life is short and should be lived on one’s honour.

The postmodern position of many African countries are regrettable, since the concept of democracy, that once promising and desirable model for all African states now stands as an abiding icon of disillusionment, mischief and parody. Busumtwi-Sam (n.d) elucidates better the treachery of most African governments towards the very states that they took oaths to develop;

The irony of the situation in Africa today, is that although many countries have shown broad evidence of having given recognition (to democratic governance), either de facto or de jure to these privileges; some countries even going further to the extent of expanding them, with considerable embroidery, into a national constitutional
document, yet because the people themselves suffer from a lamentable lack of democratic, culture, their representative (the government) takes them for a ride by subverting their rights and privileges i.e. human rights under the constitution (p. 53).

Leaders that are so immoral, they readily capitalise on the ignorance of the people to loot the essential resources of the nations. A watchman who rob the goods from the house he is paid to watch over. Does this perhaps point to the out datedness of democracy in Africa?

I base the study on the constructivist paradigm which rest on the following tenets "(a) We make subjective meanings of our experiences" (b) "our meanings are diverse and multiple and (c) our meanings are formed by interaction with others and are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts" (Chen, 2012: 35). I look at several art works by a number of artists as basis for the Stream-write method, after establishing the problem that prompts the realization of this work. The Stream-write itself is a stream-like write-up that serve as the discussion, a non-equivocating discourse and focus of the entire study, before the conclusion is drawn.

What Makes Me Write

I have been mindful of the African situation so long as I could remember. Though I started drawing in an early age, I added poetry writing towards the end of my secondary education, which has a number of verses on Africa. I hold a personal adage that 'words work wonders'. Words evoke presence, build divergent associations with humans and things, words could revive and empower and words do impact lives. I write to clarify and to account for my responses to things that interest me (Barnet, 2011:8). I write to contemplate as well as interrogate what I see around me, and most of what I see about Africa today does not make sense. For instance: why a sizeable country, such as Ghana with every human and natural resource imaginable should still run at loss, even huge losses till leaders have to travel on expensive begging expedition overseas. You do not need experts to weigh in with some fatuous blovitations. Anyone with four brain cells could tell that something is fundamentally wrong. Over the years conditions have not gotten better, instead the pretences and pretexts appreciated among governments, while well-meaning citizens become worried and disappointed without recourse to any meaningful panacea. The current body of several African Governments have evolved very hard and thick skins deeply inscribed “come what may”. How should such an intractable case be approached? Perhaps using such biting and satirised means, and sometimes cynical, might stir her sanity out from her debauchery, and make her start to think before it becomes too late.

LITERATURE

Most artists are very passionate about what they do. Many a time they go through hard times of ideation and interdisciplinary research in order to realise their dreams. "However skillful and perfect he may be in techniques, if the artist unhappily has nothing to tell us, his work is valueless" (Cerevas et al, 1971:31). Cerevas here, attempts to reveal the necessary conception and delivery process artists have struggle to go through in order to get their works out to the society. William Kentridge, born in apartheid South Africa in 1955 to parents who actively supported anti-apartheid activists, works to reflect his history and experiences among others, possibly maintaining what reminiscences and reflects that of Africans south of the Sahara. In his Making Sense of the World video (Bruus, nd) Kentridge asserts that “…The category of political uncertainty, philosophical uncertainty, uncertainty of images is much closer to how the world is” (Figure 1). I may not fully agree with Kentridge, many blacks agree with him and therefore do not seek to find any meaning in a world gone senseless. A carefree or cutthroat life chosen should then be no one’s business of course. Why must it be a dog eat dog world, when in reality dogs sniff dogs and that playfully? I do not hold briefs though, for white superiority and dominance with its concomitant apartheid regime, but how does South Africa now fare since governance fell into black hands?

Yinka shonibare also is British born but grew and schooled in Nigeria and finally went to study in London. His works are heavily influenced by his own past, exploring ideas of cross-cultural heritage and the creation of hybrid identity. The theme of his works simultaneously capture aesthetics of Romanticism in Europe and African textiles a hybridised identity presented for celebration as well as condemnation (Jagoe, nd). A celebration of the aesthetics of Romanticism and condemnation of colonialism in past centuries by Europe. In How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Figure 2), The Dutch wax printed cotton is present as well as the Romanticism fashion aesthetics of Europe. The colonial and postcolonial commentary of the work widens to cover the complex dialogue that has long existed between Europe and Africa. As regards the focus of this study, his work bear nothing more than what I call cautious condemnation of colonialism by Europeans in Africa. Shonibare picks up a sensitive issue as if to make it the centre of his work, and fancifully par it along with his other playful themes such as hybridity fashion and parody. Does he take it easy by reason of benefits availed him by his cultural hybridity? It is pointless to discuss colonialism on seething emotions, when the period is over and the event could yet have been any other historical event, good or bad.

El Anatsui, a Ghanaian born and trained artist spent the greater part of his practicing life in Nsukka Nigeria. Born in 1944, Anatsui studied art in the College of Art, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. "Anatsui's art has focused on and found its core meaning in Africa: the continent, its people, its history and cultural heritage, its predicament." His featuring piece in this work is titled On their Fateful Journey Nowhere (Figure 3). The support for this work is a traditional wooden tray used by Ghanaian market women in the 1970s. He used incisions,For instance, a number of artists are very passionate about what they do. They go through hard times of ideation and interdisciplinary research in order to realise their dreams. "However skillful and perfect he may be in techniques, if the artist unhappily has nothing to tell us, his work is valueless" (Cerevas et al, 1971:31). Cerevas here, attempts to reveal the necessary conception and delivery process artists have struggle to go through in order to get their works out to the society. William Kentridge, born in apartheid South Africa in 1955 to parents who actively supported anti-apartheid activists, works to reflect his history and experiences among others, possibly maintaining what reminiscences and reflects that of Africans south of the Sahara. In his Making Sense of the World video (Bruus, nd) Kentridge asserts that “…The category of political uncertainty, philosophical uncertainty, uncertainty of images is much closer to how the world is” (Figure 1). I may not fully agree with Kentridge, many blacks agree with him and therefore do not seek to find any meaning in a world gone senseless. A carefree or cutthroat life chosen should then be no one’s business of course. Why must it be a dog eat dog world, when in reality dogs sniff dogs and that playfully? I do not hold briefs though, for white superiority and dominance with its concomitant apartheid regime, but how does South Africa now fare since governance fell into black hands?

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the late 1950s had really taken them somewhere, then he would have had a better report to write “…about Africa” (Figure 4).

Akinola Lasekan was born in 1916 at Ipelle, Ondo State. He was among the early pioneers of art in Nigeria, a self-taught painter, author and an illustrator. His *Eternal Servitude*? (Figure 5) interrogates colonial and of course postcolonial space of power play and existence between the two continents (Landau and Kaspin, 2002:128; Fosu, 1993).

Another artist whose art retains a socio-political effect is the Zimbabwean born mixed media artist Kudzanai Chiurai who attended University of Pretoria in South Africa. He does much to lambast the absurdities and corruption that prevail in African politics. In the *Cabinet series in 2009* (Figures 6 and 7) where he gets fictional cabinet ministers to perform for the TV camera. “…he reduces African leaders to the point of parody” (Stielau, nd), which seem to be among the limited options for critics.

Estale Sukuro is a prominent Kenyan artist born in 1954 and has received several commissions including a mural at the United Nations’ General Assembly Hall in New York. Sukuro also produces satirical works to radicalize the people at local art fairs. In this one a large woman in traditional Turkana necklaces and clayed hair laughs hystericly at her small sophisticated sister, who hazarded herself as she foolishly attempts to westernise her looks by using a gadget without being able to read the instructions on the package (Figure 8). Almost every African believes western life is the standard to live by. This is reflected in the lifestyle of the African youth and adult as they overfeed off the media which now function to decide how people should brush their teeth and wear their mustache… Sukuro’s other work (Figure 9) shows the package of a product labelled “HUMANCIDE ON SALE HERE! KILLS INSTANTLY! All types of homosapiens and nature. CONTENTS: pollution, nuclear and other chemical wastes 100%. Buy now while stocks last!” (Vogel & Ebong, 1991) The aspect of government that deploy poison directly for continental homicide is the agricultural department which maintains similar structure across the continent. Almost all foodstuffs, fruits and vegetables are copiously sprayed with chemicals from seedling to harvest. Florence (not her real name) an inhabitant from a tomatoes producing village reports of how local folks could taste the deadly mixture with finger to tongue in order to check the concentrated level! Let us as well long for the time when the chemical is taken for milk as a result of its creamy look when mixed with water. How could elected leaders look on for deadly chemicals to be imported and manufactured in (to) the land for agricultural purpose, when there are other better means that bypass this deadly approach and yet gives a higher yield. Is it a wonder then, that the majority of the population have serious health issues and therefore must depend heavily on the poorly facilitated hospitals which themselves depend very much on chemicals anyway?

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Figure 1: William Kentridge. Untitled Artist and Model Drawing
Figure 2: Yinka Shonibare. MBE How to Blow up Two Heads at Once (Ladies), two maniquins, two guns, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, shoes, leather riding boots, plinth 93 ½ x 63 x 48 inches

Figure 3: El Anatsui. On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere. 1974-75. Wood, paint, lacquer, aluminum Diam: 65cm

Figure 4: El Anatsui. When I last wrote to you about Africa, I used a letterhead parchment paper, There were many blank slots in the letter…………………… I can now fill some of these slots because I have grown older. 1986. Wood. 188 x 142 cm.
Figure 5. Akinola Lasekan. *Eternal Servitude?* West African Pilot (Lagos), Dec. 19th 1950

Figure 6: Kudzanai Chiurai. The Minister of Finance, 2009. Ultrachrome ink on photo fibre paper 150 x 100 cm Edition of 10.
Figure 7: Kudzanai Chiurai. The Minister of Health, 2009 Ultrachrome ink on photo fibre paper 150 x 100 cm. Edition of 10.

Figure 8: Estale Sukuro. Kali Kit (Sharp kit) 1985.
METHODOLOGY

Art based research method is employed in this study, since researching through art is able to bring forth different revelations each time the same phenomenon is observed (Given, 2008). Barnet (2011) avers that “We write about art in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interests or excites or frustrate us.” She continues using Picasso’s example. “Picasso said ‘to know what you want to draw, you have to begin drawing’; similarly, writing is a way of finding what you want to write, a way of learning”. This written section which is of a genre sharing some qualities of prose, poetry, drama and other literary devices, is employed to benefit from the expressive qualities available to these forms of writing. The model is also to allow for the liberty needed in exploring the domain of the irrational and creative impulse as well as in dealing with certain intractable phenomena which hardly follow the cause-effect continuum. The concept here is not to unveil or decode the art work in bits or the sum of its constituent parts but to experience the total piece through contemplation, meditation or even blunt dream. Writing frees you and holds you. It frees you as you share your position on a subject and holds you to allow you to make up your mind, by thinking through and then carrying on. Again, as you coagulate your thinking to visible statements it frees you of the burden of a held up thought. While holding your ideas to your honour, as one’s word defines and identifies him or her.

The Stream-Write

How did she come to this state?
Who is to blame?
Ourselves.
With the leaders and their elites deserving a lion’s share.
We have chalked a history that is painful to look back at.
Grievous to think about.
A disturbing story for posterity.
So bizarre that it makes our few shiny stars dim like ugly coals.
Or are the stars too supposed to be black?
But how could the lives of millions amount to this?
How did it happen?
How many academic titles has she groomed since the late fifties?
Where were they, and what were they doing?
The watchmen slept for the city to be overrun.
How did we become a fodder for the rest of the world?
A jesting sight for entertainment.
Drumming and dancing our lives way.
Wha-a-at?
Somebody tell me.
Don’t tell me things will change.
When we do not even know what change holds.
Because we do not even know our needs, nor interested in diagnosing it.
When did squirrels start begging rats for palm fruits?
How about what we have?
We do not even think of them.
Do we ever think?
THINK… THANKING… THINKING… TANKING… THINKING… TALKING… SINKING…
Think not! Media does it for you
Refusing to think year in year out
About ourselves, and about tomorrow’s children?
I am forced to believe the words of Botha about the black man! (Mkwela, 2012)
You writhe in condemnation.
But don’t you confirm them in your very own steps.
What have you done to yourself?
What did Nkrumah see to declare that;
“The black man is capable of managing his own affairs”?
Kidding!
It must rather read the black man is most effective in messing his own affairs.
Look at South Africa! In the dayspring of the Blackman.
How could you undertake such an expensive joke, and then clap for yourself,
Years round? Decade after decade
Do you ever figure out the implications of your actions, inactions, and reactions on our future and on the future of your children?
Why should it be the black man to experience such a history?
Why have you travelled such a long way and still cannot come to yourself?
A fateful journey to nowhere! (Binder, 2010).
Was he right when he said; “The fact that the black man looks like a human being and act like human beings does not necessary make them sensible human beings”?
Do you take him serious now?
Behold the collective, cumulative result of the black man!
Eye sour!
Since independences till now…
Hard to find one problem, genuinely and reasonably tackled.
Leaders with bellies of greed have become puppets to Global Monsters.
Holding the interest of foreign corporations above local citizens.
For they must live insensitive to their local surrounding.
If they will live up to the expectations of their collective masters.

"Give them guns and they will kill each other."

But you cringe before foreigners in worship.

Can you prove Botha wrong?

“They are good in nothing else but making noise, dancing, marrying many wives and indulging in sex”.

Making noise for entertainment…

Jamming nights away.

One joke daubed Ghanaians the acronym – TONA

Talk Only No Action!

Workshops, seminars, committees, symposia with Respectful Queens English.

Resulting in the wind.

Is it true that majority of you mostly live to womanise, wine and dine?

Amidst the culture of showmaship.

You hardly meet a black man or woman who is not anxious to prove something.

Who cares when everybody is doing it?

“Let’s get it now” you say “who cares about the future”.

Concentrating on minors and leaving the most important undone.

The black man loves to enjoy the best in life, but willing to produce nothing, absolutely nothing!

You love to deceive and be deceived.

You hate to face the truth about your situation and what to do about it.

And when you are told you fume

The whole continent is involved in one big joke!

Perpetrated by hypocrisy and corruption

Don’t worry lets live like true blooded Africans.

With hollow cultural policies, we salivate for foreign ones.

And sell our heritage for rotten pottage.

Oh Let us relax.

Give me channel 4.CCNNB.FOXXICO

Happyghanao line

They tell us all the truth.

Don’t worry everything will be fine

Be happy!

This is OUR REALITY.

Anchor Joe Brown bears the evening news.

Grab your kebab and soak in the news blues.

Your reality scope, cut sanded and polished.

Line up the children for the new shot.

For super iron immune system.

Stronger than that of Adam, when he first rose in the early morning light.

Enjoy your GMO food it will make you wise …

And swallow all the chemicals, nicely packaged in boxed bottles.

And in the vegetables too
Let us confirm who we really are.
Let us follow impeccable democracy till everything is wonderfully fine.
And by party politics drain all your national resources away.
With your brains already washed clean, follow on while you can
Time to follow carefully.
Let them draw you along with ropes.
In our nostrils.
Do not worry. All is well.
Just watch!

We are going to be the next superpower continent to rule the world,
The African renaissance is picking
Though we cannot create a tooth-pick.
Do not forget we are not supposed to imagine and create.
That is the exclusive domain of Others.
To think, imagine and create new realities for your needs.
No no no. that is not for you.
Yours is to accept and wonder at reality as it comes.
Why should you think for yourself?
When there are think tanks to think of you and for you.
For a good life that is easy and groovy.
Nkrumah was on a dream land, when he cited those projections for the new African future.
Let the ideologies of Nkrumah perish with him.
Leave him alone in his grave.
He was too antagonistic to the western world.
They are all great friends to your continent.
As a Dear Dark Continent fresh from the dark,
She has many lovers around the world who care for her and all her children.
Call them lovely donors.
They lend her money to pay salaries.
Even Ghosts are well covered.
They will do anything for her.
Sponsor her.
Educate her.
Feed her.
‘Drink’ her.
Rape her.
Sick her.
Fumigate her.
Even kill her.
And she will resurrect to start thinking!
This is her destiny (?)
Is it not BEAUTIFUL?
Surely it is!

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to sound a wakeup call to Africa. Since the tough skin of her leaders indicated by carelessness and indifference towards good and desirable governance over the decades, I resolved to employ lambasting and satirical approach to awaken her from her slumber. I take an abiding pessimistic position as regards the future of Africa, daring her to react to prove me wrong. The artists whose works were discussed are among the keen and expectant citizens of the continent who long to witness the necessary transformations a continent such as Africa could hope for. These artworks served as foundation of contemplation that spurred and energized the Stream-write, which as well serves as a commentary and discussion of the body of works. The freedom of the artist, pressed to the hint could birth new methods of exploration for fresher experiences and revelations. The method of Stream-Write which employs the qualities of prose, poetry and drama is an intriguing approach on its own, as it allows the researcher to go beyond well beaten paths, probing into dimensions of harrowing surprises and serendipitous amusements to both researcher and reader. The artist maintains the liberty to tackle projects the best way s/he is inclined since it is only within such an arena of permission that possibilities can be accessed and made useful.

These artworks certainly play their vital roles as expressions of the African cultural situation, albeit from diversified perspectives of the various artists involved. As artists their creative vents found means to convey their thoughts, under the circumstances. The artists whose works were discussed are among the keen and expectant citizens of the continent who long to witness the necessary transformations a continent such as Africa could hope for. These artworks certainly play their vital roles as expressions of the African cultural situation, albeit from diversified possibilities can be accessed and made useful.

Africa’s situation is intractable, promising no light at the end of the tunnel. New and ingenious results cannot churn out from old stale actions. Life is full of options and outcomes. A whole lot of fundamental changes in options must drastically occur before any positive outcomes could be expected on this continent and I doubt her willingness thoughtless of readiness. Some recommendable options might perhaps plunge her into complete cognitive dissonance. The best counsel yet perhaps, under the circumstance for Africa, is to galvanise her focus in her current direction and accelerate to embrace her doom.

AKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks to the contributors who granted permission for the use of pictures used in this article.

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DOI: 10.24297/jah.v4i2.1299