

**African-Like Politics: A Comparative Study of Gabriel  
Okara's *The Voice* And Chinua Achebe's *A Man Of The  
People***

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**Abstract:**

Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* represent two periods of African political life. The former stands for the one-party system whereas the latter is set in a multi-party system, which proves the complementarity of the two novels. Both show the particularity of politics in African countries. African-like politics is characterized by totalitarian regime and African leaders' negative attitude to political opposition, just because these leaders have the mania of staying in power for as long as possible.

**Keywords:** African countries; One-party system; Multi-party system; Totalitarian regime; Negative attitude; Political opposition.

**Résumé:**

*The Voice* de Gabriel Okara et *A Man of the People* de Chinua Achebe représentent deux périodes distinctes de la vie politique africaine. Le premier se réfère au Parti Unique alors que le deuxième se situe dans un système de multipartisme, ce qui prouve la complémentarité des deux romans. Les deux montrent la particularité de la politique dans les pays africains. La politique à l'Africaine se caractérise par un régime totalitaire et l'attitude négative des dirigeants face à l'opposition politique, tout simplement parce que ses dirigeants ont la manie de s'éterniser au pouvoir.

**Mots-clés :** Pays africains ; Parti Unique ; Multipartisme ; Régime totalitaire ; Attitude négative ; Opposition politique.

**INTRODUCTION**

After independence, African countries have moved from one-party system to "democratic multipartism". It is good to put democratic multipartism in inverted commas because African multipartism is far from being democratic. Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

(1977) and Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the people* (1978) have different but complementary temporal settings. They represent respectively two periods, two political systems in Africa; a period of one party system and that of multi-parties.

By taking over power from the colonial administration, the black leaders are expected to fulfill the dreams of freedom, wealth and peace of the Africans. But the political life in African countries continues to suffer from African political leadership. The same question can still be put nowadays. Has something really changed in the African political life from monopartism to multipartism? A semiotic analysis of facts and discourse in the two periods will help to support the two sub-themes.

### **I- TOTALITARIAN POLITICAL REGIME**

There are many more common than differing points between the two systems, certainly because African political leaders were prepared for the one party system than for multipartism. Not long after the power is taken that political regime tend to be totalitarian. The enthusiasm of being under a new political regime is soon replaced by the fear of being arrested. Submissiveness becomes the rule if one wants to live in peace in the country. Tuere a rebel female character in *The Voice* dissuades Okolo from wasting his time questioning people whether they are satisfied or not with chief Izongo's way of ruling "*How do you expect to find it when fear has locked up the insides of people?*" G. Okara (1977, p.34). People lock up their insides, keep silent and control what they say because chief Izongo's messengers watch out for criticism against the regime; those messengers who arrest Okolo twice and lead him to chief Izongo's palace. In a face to face dialogue, chief Izongo himself confirms his position to Okolo as regards his absolute power: *listen, asking the bottom of things in this town will take you no place. Hook this with your little finger. Put it into your inside's box and lock it up*" G. Okara (1977, p.36)

The information service of Chief Izongo functions outside and inside the government. The elders who are parts of the ruling system are not free to express their opinions on their leader's way of ruling for fear of being ejected from the system. Okolo receives the visit of Tobeowéi, one of the elders, who confesses to him:

This thing you are doing is too heavy for you. I went to school only a little but I have killed many more years in this world than you have. You cannot get anything in this world if you do things

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like this. These happening things make my inside bitter perhaps more bitter than yours. But there is nothing I alone or you and I can do to change their inside. I just sit down and look. If they say anything, I agree. If they do anything I agree, since they do not yam out of my mouth. The teaching thing I want to say is that you change and do as others are doing. G. Okara, *The Voice*, (1977, p. 49).

Tobeowei knows that decision taking must come from a democratic process but he has to be indifferent although he recognizes that Okolo's spoken words are true.

In *A Man of the People* the lack of freedom of expression results from the monopolization of the official press and a strong censorship and even the suspension of some private mass-media that serve the cause of other voices. *In the afternoon, the radio, our national crier took up the message, amplified it and gave it in four languages including English*. C. Achebe (1978, p.134).

In both forms of political regimes there is a tendency to centralize the power. In their dictionary of political terms, Charles Debach and Yve Daudet define political centralization as follows: « *tendance à l'intégration croissante par l'Etat allant parfois jusqu'à l'absorption des autres centres de décision politiques (féodalité, collectivités locales)* » C. Debasch and Y. Daudet (2004, p.31). African political leaders have this tendency of controlling every aspect of the country's political life – speech, movements and gatherings – to detect their potential enemies.

In *The Voice*, to carry out his objective which consists in maintaining the whole population of Amatu under his domination, Chief Izongo is helped by the Elders and his messengers.

The Elders are the immediate Izongo's collaborators. After a meeting with their leaders, they are the ones who announce the decision taken. When Okolo must be arrested, they inform the messengers to go and look for him. They are considered as members of Izongo's cabinet. The major preoccupation of the Elders is to defend the new regime against its enemies. The enemies are all the persons who want to go against their interests. They have identified their own lives with the life of the absolute leader Chief Izongo. It means

that if Chief Izongo fails they must fail with him. Speaking to the Elders, Abadi said at a meeting.

What could you have been without our leader? Some of you were nothing in the days of imperialists. But now all of you are Elders and we are managing our own affairs and destinies. So you and I know what is expected of us, and that is, we must toe the party line. We must have discipline and self sacrifice in order to see this fight through to its logical conclusion. Our duty, therefore, is clear. We must support our most honorable leader. And on my part, I here and now declare my most loyal and unswerving support and pledge my very blood to the cause (G. Okara, 1977, p.43).

The representative of the Elders is Abadi, *he is the next man to Chief Izongo and to speak the straight thing, he was Izongo's adviser.* G.Okara (1977, p.42). The Elders also enjoy some privileges under Izongo. They are different from the population who are living in poverty. They have houses and lands protected by Chief Izongo's authority. The relationship between them and the poor people recalls the gradual violation of the seven "unalterable commandments" by which all the animals must live together in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. G. Orwell (1951). A gradual alteration which ends in the well-known contradiction that reflects the new nature of the farm at the end of the book: *All animals are equal. But some are more equal than others.* G. Orwell (1951).

The group of the Elders is a small administrative body consisted of many illiterate members except Abadi who is the only intellectual in the group. They discuss over public issues before Chief Izongo takes the appropriate decision. In consequence, they hold frequent meetings. The main purpose of their activities is to indoctrinate the people with the oppressive ideas of Chief Izongo and lead them to reject any orders and beliefs coming from outside.

The Elders are corrupted and they are not convinced of the cause they are fighting for. That is why one of them (Tebeowei) tells Okolo not to expect anything from his struggle and that he'd better stop his search for "it".

The messengers are Izongo's agents who help the Elders in their missions. That is why we see them looking for Okolo and trying to get him out of Tuere's house. The messengers believe as the population that Okolo is mad. That is why they hesitate to grasp him when they find him in his house. And they are superstitious like the population except the third one. We often see them in town spying on the people for Chief Izongo's political regime. They are in alert for danger of any kind that can prevent Chief Izongo to fulfill his ambitions. The body of the messengers is charged with the defense and the security of Chief Izongo's political regime.

As a minister, chief Nanga has easy access to National press and radio like all the member of the government apart from his personal guards. His security and defense are also assured by thugs recruited and paid by him in a movement known as Nangavanga: "*The Nangavanga were springing up everyday throughout the district. Their declared aim was to annihilate all enemies of progress.*" C. Achebe (1978, p.112). This Permanent organ of political repression is more active during the election. Its goal, annihilating all enemies of progress, is ironical, since it is only used to protect the P.O.P (People Organization Party)'s interests, chief Nanga's party. It fights for the progress of the party and its leader not for the progress of the nation. When chief Nanga uses the term 'progress' he means his own progress.

Political leaders of the one-party and the multi-party systems are essentially characterized by their greed and selfishness. Politics, in their mind has another goal. It is not the welfare of the nation but their own prosperity through embezzlement of public funds. "*Chief Nanga had built out of his gains three blocks of seven-storey luxury flats at three hundred pounds each in the name of his wife*" C. Achebe (p.99). He justifies his embezzlement by the fact that the money serves to finance his political party forgetting that a political party should not be a private property. "*They don't know that all the commissions are paid into party funds*" (p.116). In *The Voice*, Abadi is presented as the prototype of intellectuals who go into politics for the same goal: "Abadi who has finished giving to all big schools in this world did the same thing and had the same shallow inside that has room for nothing else but money and women" C. Achebe (1978, p.54). Generally, those intellectuals forget all the good theories they have defended in front of their students. When they find a way into a political regime, they become apostles of an all powerful leader who needs propaganda to establish his popularity.

In the dictionary of political term, Charles Debasch and Yves Daudet define propaganda as follows:

Terme désignant aujourd'hui exclusivement l'action  
multiforme(discours, presse, radio, affiche...) exercée  
en vue d'amener l'opinion à adopter certaines positions  
politiques ou sociales ou à soutenir certaines personnes...  
La propagande dans les régimes totalitaires est différente  
de celle des régimes libéraux en ce que d'une part propagande  
et information sont confondues et d'autre part il n'y a  
pas de contre propagande (S. Debasch et Y. Daudet, 2004, p.205).

Currently, the term exclusively refers to the multiform action (speech, press, radio, posters ...) taken in order to cause the opinion to adopt certain political or social attitudes or to support certain persons. Propaganda in totalitarian regimes is different from that in liberal regimes in the sense that on the one hand, propaganda and information are overlapping and on the other hand, there is no counter-propaganda. [My translation] This definition leads us to make a few remarks. First a government feels compelled to organize propaganda when they notice that they don't have the support of the people and thereby need to make their policy understood. Since any propaganda is an exaggeration or a falsification of the truth, it will bring the majority of the people' to adopt political positions consonant with its line. Second, in a totalitarian regime, there is no counter-propaganda because an absolute leader as we said exerts an arbitrary and unlimited power. Third, propaganda must be considered as an ideological system, "a system of thought which serves existing power structure." E. Ihekwezu (March 1980, pp. 1-16).

In *A Man of the People*, when the decision of combating Odile's candidature is taken, chief Nanga said, in his address to a crowd: *In the afternoon, the radio, our national crier, took up the message, amplified it and gave it in four languages including English.* C. Achebe (1978, p.131). His strategy is first to take the decision and then invite the people to a meeting to share it with them and finally win their support. This trick is repeated many times whenever he is confronted with a serious political issue. In *The Voice*, a praise song is composed in honor of chief Izongo in which one can read: *who can Izongo place take? /Nobody; who get money reach him? /Nobody; leopard in town? /Izongo; who is goat in*

*town? /Okolo; can goat fight leopard? /No, no.* G. Okara (1977, p.118). Propaganda also goes along with the cult of personality. The personality cult noticed during the monopartism is still in practice in many African countries during the democratic era. The cult of personality is one of the main expressions of selfishness. Political opponents are taken for real enemies.

## **II- LEADERS' ATTITUDE TOWARD POLITICAL OPPOSITION**

Okolo and Tuere are the main political obstacles to chief Izongo's ambitions essentially at political level. They symbolize two forms of opposition. First opposition guided by social justice represented by Okolo; second, opposition guided by revenge represented by Tuere.

Okolo is opposed to chief Izongo for two main reasons. First, he comes back to his town because he loves his country. He could have stayed abroad and work like many people who studies abroad. The second reason of his opposition to chief Izongo is the strong desire to see his people live a decent and happy life. That is why he's struggling to change the political way of ruling of chief Izongo. This explains his close contact with the people and the political authorities in the town. And his arm of the fight is the question he asked them: "have you got it?". He has a strong conviction of the cause he is fighting for; the fact is that he refuses to accept Tebeowei's advice to abandon the fight. Chief Izongo and his messengers make people consider Okolo as a mad person and people behave toward him as such. This is an irony in the novel. Okolo is fighting for people who cannot help him in the fight.

Tuere's opposition is a disguised one because at the beginning we did see her in opposition to chief Izongo. It was only when Okolo takes refuge in her house that her opposition to chief Izongo's political regime starts. Besides, people believe that she is a witch.

She had been a girl of unusual habits, keeping to herself and speaking to herself. She did not flirt with boys though she had a hunger-killing beauty. So it was in the insides of everyone that perhaps she had not the parts of a woman because of these her strange behaviors, call her a witch. They openly called her a witch when her mother and her father died one after the other within a few weeks and after every young man who proposed to her died one

after the other (C. Okara, 1977, p.17).

She was accused of taking witchcraft to kill her father and mother. She forms with Okolo a couple of opponents to Chief Izongo. But we notice that Tuere's opposition has become an open to Chief Izongo because now she speaks openly in public to express her ideas although people think that she is a witch. She continues Okolo's actions among the people and against the political authorities: "*we are the stone be! We fear not the Elders; Tuere's voice rang out to the crowd. We fear no one. It is they who fear us by fearing us they fear the straight thing. Now, I want to ask you, Izongo and the Elders, have you got it?*"

She fiercely defends Okolo because she also has in herself a sense of justice and she knows that Okolo is fighting for a right cause. When Ukule the cripple reported to her that Okolo risks to be eliminated when he comes back to Amatu, Tuere was shocked and very moved by the news: "*For ever and ever, she whispered, then aloud. Why do they want to do this? This bad thing to him who has done nothing bad to them? Why? Why? Why? O, why? She grieved.*" G. Okara (1977, p. 33). Her sadness is understandable because she is the only one supporting him openly and in whom Okolo finds comfort.

Winning a local or national or federal election does not depend on the relevance of your program of society but on your financial resources. It is the case of a man who came to Amatu to try himself in politics. His month salary is only six pounds. He has a wife and three children to feed. "*He had himself in politics mixed and stood for election. He was succeeding but his rivals had money to give and he had not. So he failed.*" G. Okara (1970, p.61). This phenomenon has become a common practice during the democratic era in African countries. There is no limit to the amount one should spend to beat constituency for local election or to beat campaign for federal or national elections. Money is distributed up till the eve of the vote. Augustus Adebayo who took part in the supervision of elections during the self-government in Nigeria was right to put in *White man in Black Skin* that "*Excitement and passion were generally at their highest during these elections occasions*". A. Adebayo (1993, p.70).

The elections in one-party system and multi-party system in Africa are occasions for corruption, cheating, violence and crimes. African politicians are convinced that the only way to convince people to vote for them is money in cash not words. The "purchase of

electors' conscience" can be deceiving. But the bribe is always taken even if the receiver does not vote for the giver.

Only people like Odili can resist bribe from a politician like Chief Nanga who is ready to do anything to maintain his political position in *A Man of the People*. To prevent Odili from competing with him in the same constituency for legislative election, he tries to bribe him through his father who actively militates on the side on Chief Nanga. *I'm only giving you this money because I feel that after all my years of service to my people; I deserve to be elected and unopposed so that my detractors in Bori will know that I have my people solidly behind me.* C. Achebe (1978, p.118). Chief Nanga fails to convince Odili with his money and his selfish words. The only thing he left for him is to destroy Odili. At the highest point of the electoral campaign, Chief Nanga took the microphone and said: *"My people, this is the boy who wants to take my seat."* *"The announcement was greeted by a wild roar compounded of this belief, shock and contemptuous laughter."* C. Achebe (1978, p.139).

Cheating can come from anywhere the day of the vote. The party in power particularly has many tricks to win. A few days before the vote all the parties are on the maximum alert. In spite of the vigilance, there are still people who succeed in cheating. Chief Koko's resourceful wife leads the women's wing of the P.O.P in an operation described as *"breast-feeding the ballot, that is smuggling into the polling booths wads of the ballot papers concealed in their brassieres."* C. Achebe (1978, p.142). Elections can be won by all means. *"The end justifies the means"*.

One of the means fully described in the two novels is violence. Violence is observed in the one-party system when there is an opposition force like Okolo against the all powerful leader, Chief Izongo in *The Voice*. It occurs in the multi-party system with the rivalry between political parties like the people organization party and the people convention party in *A Man of the People*. Okolo becomes Chief Izongo enemy because his presence in Amatu is a danger to his regime. With his question to the people he starts opening their eyes, and arousing their consciousness to the dictatorship of Chief Izongo. For that, he must be punished. *"They pushed and dragged him in panting silence ...Okolo became tired...they pushed and dragged him in tramping silence with buzzing mosquitoes. He looked at his hands; they were bound with a rope."* G. Okara (1977, p.40). He is asked to cooperate if he wants the torture to end. Such violence are often occasions to negotiate with the opponents or blackmail. In spite of all the sufferings he endures, Okolo stays firm

although he is told *"your hands will only be untied if you agree to be one of us."* G. Okara (1977, p.47). As a consequence of Okolo's refusal to cooperate, he is banished from the town of Amatu. If he does not leave, he will always be exposed to Chief Izongo's anger and torture. *"You must leave this town."* G. Okara (1977, p.48), Chief Izongo told Okolo in the presence of Elders. This banishment does not lead Okolo to be quiet. He has continued to ask the same question: "Have you got it" to people in Sologar the town where he takes refuge. He is warned by the "Big One" of Sologar to leave the town if he does not want to be sent to an asylum. Like Bako in *Fragments*. A. Armah (19774, p. 232) he will be put in an asylum for his political ideas. *"If we see you again in Sologa, you will be taken to the asylum."* G. Okara (1977, p.107).

Like Okolo, Odili suffers at the hands of the thugs recruited by Chief Nanga; they beat him up and set fire to his car after his arrest for a false motive disclosed to him at the hospital by his father: *"They said five machetes and two double-barreled guns were found in your car."* C. Achebe (1978, p.141). Before these physical aggressions Odili loses his job. This is another strategy to demoralize political opponents. Odili is sacked from the school where he teaches. He went to school one day and was sent for by his Director who gave him a letter of dismissal. *"When I got to his lodge; he handed me a month's salary and a notice of dismissal."* C. Achebe (1978, p.102).

The two incorruptible characters Okolo and Odili fail in their political fight. Okolo perishes with Tuere his helper in the fight. Odili is annihilated with Max the founder of the P.C.P to whom he is politically allied. *"When day broke, the following day, it broke on a canoe aimlessly floating down the river. And in the canoe, tired together back to back with their feet tired to the seats of the canoe, were Okolo and Tuere."* G. Okara (1978, p.127). Max is reported to be killed C. Achebe (1978, p.142). Political crimes are of two kinds: visible like the one of Max, leader of the P.C.P during the electoral campaign, and underground like the murdered people whose skulls Okolo perceived in the dark cell where he was confined. "People dragged me away and put me in the room with bones like human ... bones." G. Okara (1977, p. 79)

The negative attitude of African political leaders towards political opponents is motivated by their desire to maintain themselves in power. They use any kind of strategy to reach their goal, including corruption, cheating and crime that justify the ideology sustaining their power.

### III- CHIEF IZONGO'S AND CHIEF NANGA'S IDEOLOGY

Chief Izongo's and chief Nanga's political organizations reveal that they have set up important political units which are equally functional. None of them assumes a superficial role. The debate of the elders are serious issues of State. The duties of the messengers are important and delicate. Chief Nanga's movement 'Nangavanga' whose main slogan is "Chief Nanga forever" C. Achebe (1978, p. 113) has representatives in every district. The P.O.P.'s female wing is very active. All these units serve in a concrete way to suppress the people's aspiration to welfare and keep them away from State affairs. They are negatively depicted, as political instruments only fit for oppressing people in the name of the leaders they serve. Chief Izongo and Chief Nanga manipulate people's opinions to achieve their political goal. Their political systems which have many points in common can be defined as dogmatic repressive political doctrine serving a strong personalization of power. Okolo is treated in the same way in Sologa because the Big One who is ruling the town is also a dictator. Okolo returns to Amatu after his exile in Sologa to find in place the same tyrannical system. In spite of these last fifteen years of democracy, many political leaders still want to remain in power for ever.

Opposed to this ideology is that of Okolo, Odili and Max which aims at people's liberation from all types of dictators. Okolo wants his voice to be the one of the people, particularly the voice of the voiceless, of those who cannot express what they think for fear of being arrested. The word 'okolo' in Gabriel Okara's native language – the Ijaw language – means 'the voice.' It was chosen on purpose by the writer. The author expresses through him his ideology of political and social justice for the people.

Odili and Max militate in the people convention party with the purpose of slowing down the corruption and impunity going on in the country although they know they will not get the power soon. "*We will not win the next election, what we must do is to get something going. You simply cannot have this stagnation and corruption going on indefinitely.*" C. Achebe (1978, p.80) The military force seems to have understood the necessity of a radical change, if not they would not have staged the 1966 coup which swept away the civilian government and all its ministers.

### Conclusion

*The Voice* and *A Man of the People* are two parables that can be applied to any African country whose political situation is similar to that presented in the fictional places

of the novels. Whether in the one-party or multi-system, the political leaders have the mania of keeping the power for as long as possible. This mentality is characterized by an ideology of political intolerance, manipulation, corruption, cheating, violence and crimes. The leaders abuse of their power, the political regime becomes totalitarian. The political opponents are systematically dealt with until they are neutralized. After a decade and half of democracy, the contents of the two novels are still relevant to the political life in Africa. This confirms the fact that many African countries are still looking for good political leadership.

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