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“Shortcuts are Wrong Cuts: A Critical Study of Nana Grey-Johnson’s *The Magic Calabash*”

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Abstract

A critical reading of *The Magic Calabash* leaves us with the impression that Nana Grey-Johnson belongs to both negritude and disillusionment periods. He is a negritude writer in the sense that he seeks to rekindle and add value to a culture that is intrinsically African: dishing out wisdom through folktales. And he is a disillusioned writer in that he lays bare and public the aberrations of those political leaders and their underlings whose mimicry of the replaced colonial master rendered the new republics insolvent sooner than anyone could ever have imagined. Grey-Johnson understands that the period under review does not cater for any misty-eyed romanticism of the post-colonial ills that have ruined the hopes of the people of The Gambia. To analyze the post-colonial nightmare Grey-Johnson conveys to the reader through folkloric channel, we shall adopt Pierre Brunel’s mythocriticism theory which imposes on the mythocritic the responsibility to delve deep into the metaphors and decode the message(s) encoded in them for the good of mankind.

Key words/phrases: Mythocriticism, shortcuts, Real Independence, Structural Adjustment Programmes

Résumé

Une lecture de *The Magic Calabash* donne l'impression que Nana Gray-Johnson est un écrivain de la négritude qui n'en est pas moins un désillusionné. Autant il cherche à valoriser une culture essentiellement africaine en fouillant dans les contes, autant il fait montre de désillusion. Ainsi il met à nu les aberrations des dirigeants politiques et de leurs acolytes dont le mimétisme du maître colonial a rendu les nouvelles républiques insolvables plus tôt qu'on l'aurait pu imaginer. Gray-Johnson comprend que la période actuelle n'a point besoin d'un romantisme qui occulte le mal postcolonial qui a ruiné les espoirs du peuple gambien. Pour analyser le cauchemar postcolonial que Gray-Johnson transmet au lecteur par le canal du conte, nous adopterons la mythocritique de Pierre Brunel qui impose à ses

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adeptes la responsabilité d'examiner les métaphores en profondeur afin de décrypter les messages encodés au bénéfice de toute l'humanité.

Mots-clefs: Mythocritique, raccourcis, indépendance réelle, programmes d'ajustement structurel

Introduction

It is perhaps useful to open this investigation with a word on the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) proposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a possible solution to the economic downturn African governments began suffering from in the 1970s. The implementation of the SAP, particularly the worker retrenchment one, has unleashed frightening and unquantifiable disasters for Africa's sinking nations and has led to the further impoverishment of so many homes. It is perhaps important to observe here that Grey-Johnson uses one of the immediate effects unleashed by the SAPs as an entry point into the postcolonial discourse particularly as is presented by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. Said's arguments in this work seem to point to one thing summarized as follows: the West will use every available wile to ensure that their economic and political hegemony over the Orient Other – not excluding Africans – remain unchanged and unchallenged.

Sincere economists have not seen the wisdom in the proposal and implementation of the SAPs. One of such economists is Carlos Lopes. In his article, "Are Structural Adjustment Programmes and Adequate Response to Globalization?", Lopes adopts Elliot Berg's famous World Bank report which justified the implementation of the SAPs, to add his voice to earlier criticisms and condemnations made particularly by Jeffery Sachs and UNCTAD against international financial institutions for the inadequacy of their solutions to curb financial crises in the world. In regard to the SAPs in Africa, Lopes points to the fact that the central tenet of rolling back the State, which actually means drastically reducing State expenditures, has led to very undesirable consequences. In his words:

This solution has failed because the cognitive framework within which it is derived is faulty. (...) The cutback in public expenditures,

intended to improve the fiscal discipline, resulted in a decline in investment in basic physical, institutional and standard scientific and technological infrastructures required by local and foreign investors provoking a reduction in the level of private investment (2).

FE Ogbimi corroborates Lopes' evaluation by arguing that,

Nigeria has implemented SAP for almost a decade now, but none of the objectives has been achieved, and there is no indication that any of them can be achieved using the chosen program instruments. Indeed, all that is still conspicuously present in Nigeria is the foreign exchange market and the ceremonies associated with it. The situation is not different in Ghana, Zambia, and other African nations implementing SAP (1-2).

Both Lopes and Ogbimi agree that the focus should rather be on creating balance of payments equilibria, particularly for African economies. Grey-Johnson is not unacquainted with the views of Lopes and Ogbimi, but his concern in *The Magic Calabash* is to demonstrate how the tenet of downsizing the civil service has traumatized The Gambia, probably like Ghana, Zambia, and the other African nations that have implemented it.

Before analyzing the mythical value of *The Magic Calabash*, we consider it useful to shed light on mythocriticism and the importance of myths in any given society. This discipline – mythocriticism – was hatched as early as the 1930s; we owe this appellation to the French man Gilbert Durand who coined it in 1972 in an attempt to distinguish it from Charles Mauron's psychocriticism invented in 1962. It remained a moot point for many years to various literary critics such as André Jolles (a German university lecturer), Raymond Trousson (a Belgian university lecturer) and Gilbert Durand, to mention just three. However, all three agree on the universality of the myth – derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which means the spoken word – and on the significant role it plays in nurturing a wise and cultured citizenry. Expressed otherwise, myths are essential vitamins for the strengthening of the wisdom and moral fibre of a people. But it was not until 1992 that Pierre Brunel was able to make a synthesis of their views to formulate the theory that informs this discipline in his work entitled *Mythocritique, théorie et parcours (Mythocriticism, Theory and Scope)*. Brunel's excursus on mythocriticism culminates in defining the responsibility of the mythocritic as

one who should delve deep into the metaphors and decode the message(s) encoded in them for the good of mankind. In the current mythocritic assignment, we shall think beyond the images in order to interpret Erubami's nightmare, such as is related by Grey-Johnson.

A casual reading of *The Magic Calabash* will very likely create the impression, especially on the amateur reader's mind, that it is yet another tale designed to remind the reader about Africa's formidable mysteries. The story of Erubami and the Kondorongs which constitutes the main thrust of the novel cannot obviously be evicted from the orbit of myths or fables. With our understanding of myths/fables as narratives with an objective to amuse and moralize, as Pierre Brunel, Gilbert Durand, André Jolles and Raymond Trousson submit, it might not be erroneous to assert that Grey-Johnson's prime objective in *The Magic Calabash* is to amuse and make the young reader (contemporaneously have the junior reader) imbibe certain indispensable virtues of life. In this case, Grey-Johnson seeks to crystalize the virtue that shortcuts cannot replace hard and honest labour. By the same logic, it might also not be erroneous to classify *The Magic Calabash* as a fable designed to amuse and sharpen the intellect and linguistic competence of the non-adult reader. This can be explained by the inclusion of comprehension questions at the end of the narrative, thus giving the novel a semblance of a text book. However, any attempt to lock up this novel within the realm of juvenile interest shall obviously be considered naïve and simplistic. The novel is more than a fable: the other side of it reveals a metaphorical presentation of the trials and tribulations of Africa's sinking post-independence republics, a situation that is exacerbated and accelerated by the retrenchment 'solution' proposed by the International Monetary Fund.

It is in view of the foregoing that a second or even a third title can be proposed for our study namely: *The Two Sides of The Magic Calabash* or *Two ways of Interpreting The Magic Calabash*. On the other side of the magical coin, we see a truly organic Grey-Johnson lacing into the insufficiencies of the first republics in Black Africa, using The Gambia as a specimen. The title of our study should therefore be understood in emblematic terms. And since our inquiry revolves around myth and reality, we have deemed it necessary to partition our study into two main components: the first shall be a review of

the mythical value of the novel, and the second, a survey of how the first generation of post-colonial leaders buried the dream of creating utopic republics in the graveyard of hopelessness.

As hinted in our abstract, we shall delve deep into Grey-Johnson's mythical presentation of *The Magic Calabash* as proposed by Pierre Brunel. In reviewing the myths and administrative malaises contained in this work, we shall endeavour to relate fictionalized experiences to underpin them. That is to say, our study shall largely be premised on a comparative approach: *The Magic Calabash* shall be studied alongside other works from different geo-political spaces, exploring similar, if not the same thematic concerns.

The Mythical Value of *The Magic Calabash*

In the dystopic society depicted in *The Magic Calabash*, wisdom, morality and cultural identity are seemingly under intense threat. Therefore, there is no gainsaying the necessity of journeying back to native myths in order to mitigate or even reverse the threat. This, in no equivocal terms, is the idea Nana Grey-Johnson intends to sell through this novel. Koroma's words are evidential of this intention:

“Children of this generation,” Koroma said, “you don't believe in anything. No wonder this country is in trouble. We are dying because we have nothing to believe in, nothing to hold on to, to be a people. We give up on our stories, we sell our land and we forget who we are. We are just very confused Africans. The white man can never respect us.

“The white man believes in Father Christmas and witches flying on broomsticks. We believe what he tells us to believe. You forget something your great-grandfather saw here in this square because you want to look smart and modern. But what does your education benefit you if it makes you deny your own country's stories? (75).”

Here, Koroma goes beyond making a simple advocacy for us to drink deep from the fountains of our myths to gain wisdom and moral strength. He believes that the new African is so confused that he does not seem to know

what to do with himself and with his very culture in his new republic. There is probably nothing wrong in accepting what is good about the other's culture, but certainly everything is wrong to do so to one's own sorrow. Koroma bemoans here the apparent dementia demonstrated by the new Africans in swallowing western culture hook, line and sinker.

One might not be wrong to see this practice as a direct participation in the economic destruction of the fatherland. This, indeed, is not the sort of hybridity Bhabha would desire to see in the third space of cultural enunciation, neither is it the eclectic or melioristic hybridity that Achebe and Senghor would love to see in the post-colonial interstitial spaces.¹

The Magic Calabash revolves around three plots from which we draw very serious moral lessons including the ineluctability of calamity attendant on ill-acquired wealth, the danger of adopting shortcuts in life, and the importance of making hay while the sun shines.

In the first and main plot, that is Erubami Roberts' confrontation with the Kondorongs, he is portrayed as a desperado in extreme dire straits. A desperado that will not stop at anything in his drive to acquire riches for the reasons he gives below:

A man must be a man. I have to take risks and find my own riches.
If I don't, I will spend my life selling lemonade bottles to buy
cigarettes, one at a time. And begging my friends to buy me a drink.
I can't feed my family if I don't have my own money. There must be
a way (25).

The only way, according to him, is 'the hat or death' (75). So, with all the bravery he is able to muster, he snatches and latches on to the kondorong's magic calabash. This is the short-cut he adopts in order to extricate himself from the claws of penury. Leaning on Jolles, Trousson, Durand and Brunel's presentation of myths as a vector for the dissemination of wisdom, we can interpret Erubami's brave action as not just being reminiscent of the *Barsa-*

¹ Achebe opines that the African has the possibility of becoming an angel if he borrows the good in the culture of the Other and maintain the good in his (Cook 1977, 88). Similarly, Senghor preaches universality believing that it is the way forward for humanity (1977).

*or-Barsak*² short-cut which desperate Gambian youth often resort to as the only way out of poverty, it is indeed the short-cut that has culminated in the transformation of the Mediterranean Sea into a graveyard for the corpses of desperate African youth. Experience has taught us that not all risks are worth taking especially where one's life is at stake, and that expropriating what belongs to others is an abominable act that will never go unpunished. Apparently, the author is aware of this. He is probably aware that any attempt to give a happy ending to Erubami's theft would have meant complicity in celebrating indolence and evil. If the society is to rely on young people for the achievement and sustenance of Real Independence, a culture of honest labour should be nurtured in them. This is probably the main lesson the author wants us to learn when he makes Erubami go through the worst form of mental turbulence after obtaining the magic calabash by foul means from the Kondorongs.

The author goes further in this same plot to demonstrate that when one finger is dipped into dirty oil, that finger almost invariably soils the others. Erubami's abominable act not only unleashes suffering on himself, but also on the entire New Town community of Banjul. A reading beyond the image allows us to interpret Erubami's nightmare as an admonition to the youth: bad actions carried out by one individual within a community can be injurious to the entire community.

A secondary plot of another materialist thematic is centered on Uncle Nicol who, on two occasions, schemes to expedite Granma Lou's journey to her Maker. First, he dispossesses Granma Lou of her house and second, he rooks her out of her jewelry. From the story of Uncle Nicol, whose irreversible inclination towards evil eventually forces him to totally abandon dignity and humanity, we learn that evil wishes, like chickens, always come back to roost. This is what our ancestors mean when they say that plotting evil against someone is like a man urinating. He sends the urine far away from himself at the beginning of the exercise, but it comes progressively towards him as he finishes. Uncle Nicol's evil machinations to ruin both Granma Lou and

² 'Barça' is short for Barcelona, meaning Europe; 'Barsak' is a Wolof word meaning 'the land of the dead': 'death' for short. This is the slogan in many a young Gambian's mouth.

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Erubami succeed to a large extent but, in the end, everything boomerangs on him. The swindler's esteem dwindles to the lowest ebb when his criminal conduct comes to light, thus buttressing the old adage that evil can never triumph over good. Although the dream does not go as far as seeing him sent to jail, there is reason to believe that he cannot escape this fate since his accomplice, Beola, has already been incarcerated.

The novel further teaches the readers, especially the guardians among them, not to be too discriminatory when they are to raise their nephews together with their children. We do not intend to contend with the normalcy of parents loving their own children more than those of other parents, but we do contend with their attempt, either directly or otherwise, to undermine the progress of their wards. Granma Lou does everything possible to see her son Beola attain grandeur in the society. She even sends him to Sierra Leone, a country then considered by many as the Athens of Africa, to search for the Golden Fleece that will ultimately guarantee his entry into the high society. While this may be considered acceptable, she however registers a tragic moral fall when, in addition to making Erubami, Quashie and other children work like soldier ants in her anthill of a house, she continually takes pleasure in heaping curses on them. And according to Erubami, she even prays that one day he sells fish and push a cart around and even prays for him to fail (5).

It is true that, in the dénouement, which coincides with the day of reckoning, Erubami is seen doing a very degrading job that of a messenger, but he is still better than Granma Lou's Beola who, in addition to suffering the misfortune of being a liability to his mother, ends up playing the worst moron that has ever walked the land. He accepts to be used as a stooge by foxy Uncle Nicol to divest Granma Lou, Beola's own mother, of her jewelry. In so doing, he participates directly in his own destruction.

Ordinarily, Granma Lou should receive the wrath of the critic's pen in full measure, but the critic stops short when, in an act of self-pity, Granma Lou accepts responsibility for causing the disintegration of a one-time closely knit and harmonious Aku family in Banjul.

Lucy, you are right, Granma Lou said. I did not lead this family well, and I have asked the Lord to forgive me. The question is: what are

we going to do about this curse? How are we going to make things right (109)?

The pathos is heightened when, Jeremiah-like, she laments the systematic moral decline of their family, a family that belongs to a community that enjoyed considerable social hegemony during the colonial period:

“Our family are in the courts,” Granma Lou began, “not as brilliant lawyers and judges as Papa planned, but as criminals. My son, Beola, has been sent to prison for a year and six months for taking my own things and planning my own death. Erubami is waiting to hear whether he will live or die for killing a policeman (108).”

Nana (a grandmother too) expresses a similar disappointment in Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Dilemma of a Ghost* at Ato Yawson’s decision to marry and bring home a woman of doubtful origin. Although she does not claim responsibility for her grandson’s decision to sideslip tradition, she is worried, just as Granma Lou is, about the discomfiture this social lapse will likely bring to bear on their departed elders:

NANA: [...] My children, I am dreading my arrival there
Where they will ask me news of home
Shall I tell them or shall I not?
Someone should lend me a tongue
Light enough with which to tell
My Royal Dead
That one of their stock
Has gone away and brought to their sacred precincts
The wayfarer (14)!

The reader might not be too well disposed to forget about Granma Lou’s part in the destruction of her family, but s/he cannot fail to be moved and mellowed by her sudden recovery from inhumanity when she convokes the entire family in order to reunite it and pray for Erubami:

“Let us move forward in prayer,” said Granma Lou. The judge will write his decision about Erubami’s case tonight. Let us ask God to touch the heart of the judge and guide his pen as he writes his decision about our own child (110).

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This is indeed a noble initiative although it is taken a bit too late. She is seen here pulling down the walls of discrimination and unconcern for her kinspeople so that they can forge ahead in one united phalanx.

We wish to conclude this section anchored on mythical value by factoring in the shock Chinua Achebe claimed to have received from his students in Nigeria but particularly so from a young Nigerian woman pursuing a degree programme in America when he was there as a lecturer in the 1970s:

“I hear you teach Tutuola.” It was not a simple statement; her accent was heavy with accusation. We discussed the matter for a while and it became quite clear that she considered *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* to be childish and crude and certainly not the kind of thing a patriotic Nigerian should be exporting to America. Back in Nigeria a few years later I also noticed certain condescension among my students towards the book and a clear indication that they did not consider it good enough to engage the serious attention of educated adults like themselves. They could not see what it was about (100).

In our valuation, assessments like these can only come from amateur readers. Contrary to the opinion held by the Nigerian student abroad and by those Nigerians within, Amos Tutuola is perhaps the most engaging moralist writer in Nigeria. The moral message the young girl in America and her compatriots back home fail to see in the *Palm-Wine Drinkard* is that, all play and no work makes the individual an ever dependent and hopeless failure. In our estimation, it does not seem to be justifiable to accuse Amos Tutuola of being unpatriotic and an enemy to the Nigerian federation since independence at the macro level (national) is expected to begin with independence at the micro level (individual homes).

Similarly, Nana Grey-Johnson’s *The Magic Calabash* may not be built on exactly the same moral foundation as Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, but by impressing on the mind of the youth the predicaments of taking shortcuts in life, he joins Tutuola and undoubtedly many other moralists, in trying to mould a responsible Gambian/African citizenry. Probably dreading that the reader will not be able to get the full import of this concern through the myth, he decides to hire the services of the radio in the narrative:

The president has been visiting villages in the Kombo where he warned the large crowds of people to watch out for greed. He reminded them that every citizen must help in the difficult business of nation-building. He repeated his message from Independence Day: “Groundnuts will not turn into diamonds but only honesty and hard work will bring us the value of diamonds (110).”

This message, delivered to the people years ago still holds true; it is even more important today for a community that is steadily shunning education and other forms of honest labour at home for an uncertain *meilleur ailleurs* (a better world away from home: Europe, America, etc, where the youth believe one can make a fortune overnight. The saddest thing is that, those who manage to cross the Mediterranean unscathed often get engaged in drug trafficking to make fast money and end up in jail yards).

Killing the Dream for a Utopic Space

Have we been engaging with the shadow and ignoring the substance? This is not an unlikely question that the previous part might tempt the reader to ask. Such does not seem to be the case even though there is very close chemistry between the shadow and the substance. The preoccupation with the shadow has helped elucidate the utility of myths. By way of recapitulation, we shall in this component study those internal and external factors that short-circuited the dream of achieving true independence in The Gambia. This section shall therefore be centered on how the sons of the soil ruined the fatherland and how this ruin is sealed by Western powers through the IMF. We should hasten to mention that, though the IMF is often considered by pure economists as a key agent in the said ruin, we have not deemed it necessary to participate too deeply in that discourse in this part of our study.

In *The Magic Calabash*, Grey-Johnson reveals the misconduct of those stake holders who are supposed to paddle the canoe of independence to the shores of human dignity and happiness. These include negative nepotism, graft and misappropriation of funds. Grey-Johnson is certainly not the vitriolic type of writers like Ayi Kwei Armah or Sony Labou Tansi in the presentation of the rottenness of African governance. Armah and Labou-Tansi are to African

'nation builders' what Kim Chi-ha is to South Korea under Park Chonghui and Chun Doo Hwan. But unlike Kim Chi-ha who adopts a Juvenalian posture in his writing, Armah and Labou-Tansi adopt a Horacian style to deal a twist of their knives in the rotten vitals of corrupt functionaries, to bend Reverend Daniel Berrigan's expression to our purpose (1978: 39-44). This is quite evident in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (Armah), *La Vie et Demie* and *l'Etat honteux* (Labou-Tansi). This notwithstanding, it is enough to read *The Magic Calabash* and feel like taking up arms against the agents under review.

The novel lays bare many serious governance lapses that can only provoke the implacable disillusionment and ire of the likes of Nana Grey-Johnson who might have heard it all on that memorable night of political transition and manifesto reading (110). Thus, it can be projected that the various manifestos pronounced during such historic moments manifest the dream strength of the new African leaders. What seems to be their major non-strength is that, they are neither intellectually equipped, nor sincerely willing to be able to transform those dreams into reality. Nana Grey-Johnson bewails two such instances of lack of political will and sense of direction: the electricity management and food self-sufficiency programmes.

In *The Magic Calabash*, Grey-Johnson's onomastics includes deforming the official names of important government institutions like the Gambia Utilities Cooperation which becomes Gambia Uses Candles, echoing thus similar nomenclatural deformations done by Nigerians to deride the inefficiency of the national power company NEPA which they insist on calling Never Expect Power Always and in Sierra Leone the NPA which stands for National Power Authority becomes for Sierra Leoneans 'No Power at All'. Nana Grey-Johnson forces a laugh out of the adult reader, but it is certain that he does not want this laughter to be protracted because behind it lurks a grim economic calamity probably believing that it is a sacrilege for any nation to talk about economic growth when electricity supply is erratic. It can be projected that by laying bare in *Magic Calabash* divulging the seemingly inordinate comportment of government authorities whose graft transformed the Green Revolution and other development programmes in Africa into one mighty joke as he does below,

Speaker after speaker attacked the PDM and the government “club” as they called it. One speaker pointed a finger at the Agricultural Development Bank and said that its managers themselves had taken all the bank’s money.

That money was for the farmers, but now it is used for new cars and big houses for the managers. And the same thing has happened with other government projects for the poor people: boreholes that need repairs, village gardens without water, town halls that aren’t built. Where did the money go? Not into the pockets of poor people (180)!

Grey-Johnson is certainly inviting the reader to believe that governments should spare themselves the hubris of celebrating independence in great pomp and fanfare when Africa is still dependent on the East and the West even for our gastric needs. It is perhaps Chinua Achebe, who, in his characteristic good-natured banter, makes the most compendious evaluation of the experts’ failure to make the Green Revolution bear the desired fruits in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*:

So there is a limit to what experts can do for us. In 1983, just before the overthrow of President Shagari’s administration, I gave an interview for a television programme which subsequently caused some offence in certain quarters. One of the questions put to me was what did I think about the President’s Green Revolution programme. And I said then, as I would say today, that it was a disaster which gave us plenty food for thought and nothing at all in our stomach (157-8).

Nepotism, precisely the negative type which involves putting square pegs in round holes, is also another political disorder that does not escape Grey-Johnson’s vigilant eye in this novel. Nepotism itself may not be a major problem because it seems normal to remember the people you know when it comes to dishing out privileges. What is unarguably abnormal is when nepotism excludes the assessment of the individual’s potential to produce the desired results, or deliver the goods, to use a vogueish phrase. Such is not the case in the African spectrum as demonstrated by Quashie’s debasement at the insurance company, done in order to create space for the Chairman’s nephew Abraham Gaye, parachuted from nowhere to assume the position of Planning Manager in the Dugoo Insurance Company:

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Then Quashie remembered something important: the Chairman was the husband of the younger sister of Abraham Gaye's mother; an uncle (in-law) of Abraham Gaye, Dugoo Insurance Company's new Planning Manager. Of course, why hadn't he remembered the facts before he went into the Chairman's office? The facts of life that put a dull school drop-out into a position in senior management in the heart of the private commercial sector for his first job (79-80)!

This is a stark display of hatred for one's country! It is obviously outside the bounds of propriety to make a numbskull novice to head important institutions. For insurance companies in Africa, often used by governments through individuals to legalize thieving and mask thieves, the critic probably has a reason not to be perturbed. But where public institutions are concerned, s/he has to. Such is the feeling when in *Jazz et vin de palme*, Dongala relates a case where corruption goes unpunished because the culprit is the cousin of somebody important in the party, a single party that is more of a trade union. This is how he presents the incident in his characteristic sarcastic verve:

Evidemment, il y a eu quelques détournements de fonds et une fois, l'usine a même été arrêtée pendant une année entière parce que l'ancien directeur, un membre de la bourgeoisie autocritique – pardon, bureaucratique, avait volé deux millions trois cent mille francs soixante-dix centimes destinés à acheter de nouvelles machines pour l'usine et des pièces de rechange. Il s'était bâti une villa au bord de la mer. Mais notre Parti d'avant-garde, vigilant, a pris des mesures sévères : il n'est plus directeur ici, il n'est maintenant que le directeur d'une sous-agence quelque part, bien que, pour des raisons humanitaires, on n'ait pas saisi la villa (il a dix enfants, le pauvre et il est le neveu du sous-secrétaire général de notre syndicat unique) (121).

[Obviously, there was some embezzlement and once, the factory was even closed for a whole year because the former director, a member of the self-censoring bourgeois – sorry, bureaucracy, stole two million three hundred thousand francs seventy cents to buy new machines and spare parts for the factory. He built a villa by the sea. But our vigilant vanguard party took stern measures against him: he was relieved of his post as director of the factory, only to be redeployed elsewhere as an ordinary director of a sub-agency, although, for humanitarian reasons, his villa was not impounded (he has ten children, the poor man, and he is the nephew of the assistant secretary general of our one party)]

In both scenarios, one detects a celebration and encouragement of mediocrity in the society by those who should not do it. In our view, it is even a betrayal of the hopes of the people. This is the selfsame heart-rending shortcoming Martial's men bemoan in Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie*: «Ah! ce pays où (...) au lieu de s'adonner aux tristes problèmes du développement, on s'occupait simplement à développer et à structurer les problèmes (132).» [Ah! This country where (...) instead of harnessing our energies to address the thorny issues that continue to asphyxiate our development programmes, we rather simply create and develop new problems].

Other specimens of professional lapses captured by Nana Grey-Johnson's moral radar are the police and the lawyers whom he attacks in the most sarcastic fashion with a simple but weighty rhetorical question: Can't sinning be left to criminals? (65). It is indeed the paradox of paradoxes to see police officers working in cahoots with criminals to have justice miscarried. Mr Nicol's (the criminal) initiation of a larceny case against Erubami, in which he enlists the complicity of Mr Njie (the police officer) so that the theft can be pinned on poor Erubami, is perhaps the mother of all frustrations. *Quo vadis*, The Gambia, when those who are expected to uphold probity are seen debasing themselves into the status of criminals? This is not an unlikely question that Grey-Johnson wants an answer to.

In addition to the homemade problems, Grey-Johnson also captures in this work the ravages caused by the International Monetary Fund in an 'effort' to salvage The Gambian government from insolvency. Grey-Johnson seems to agree with a host of other scholars on the insidious retrenchment solution the IMF recommended for Africa when she is challenged by a deep economic crisis in the 80s. In his possible audit, the Structural Adjustment Programmes proposed as a medicine to cure the economic malaise of the continent was simply killing it. The Gambia version of the SAP saps the economic strength of Erubami and withdraws smiles miles away from his home and his immediate community at large. It is observed that after his retrenchment, Erubami takes a short-cut to access wealth by snatching the Kondorong's magic calabash and to reclaim the said calabash, the angry Kondorongs do not only subject Erubami to unlimited terror, they also terrify the community in the process.

Both economists and laymen see the SAPs as a pestilential subterfuge designed by modern westerners to complete the destruction started centuries ago by their forefathers. We may not be obliged to patronize this position but we cannot help wondering why the IMF should recommend a remedy that is unarguably worse than the disease. What adds to our consternation is the following question: Is there not a system in the West which gives doles to the unemployed to guarantee their survival? It stands to reason that the retrenchment measure is an attempt to deepen the chaos inherent in many African states. It is perhaps not Grey-Johnson's desire to create a little corner in this novel to cudgel the western homo sapiens, who does the maximum to remain human to his complexion mates and recommends exactly the opposite when it comes to dealing with issues relating to the black subaltern.

Sony Labou Tansi proposes a different reason in *La Vie et Demie* as to why the white man would be the happiest to see the new republics be immersed in inextricable difficulties: they were weaned of the breast milk of mother Africa rather prematurely. This is what Jean alludes to in these words: "Excellence, nous devrions avoir honte. Ceux qui nous ont jeté l'indépendance avaient parié leur tête et leur sang pour dire que nous serions incapables de gérer la liberté (163). » [His Excellency, we should have a sense of shame. Those who flung independence at us had bet their heads and blood that we would not be able to manage the acquired freedom].

The use of the word 'jeté' is suggestive of the Whiteman's unwillingness to relinquish Africa to the Africans; so, it is only too normal to be wary of the solutions they propose for our crises.

It is unarguably a combination of all the factors studied above that led to the wrecking of the independence boats in the shallow waters of despair. However, despair does not mean inability to repair. Armah seems to express this conviction through Asar and Ast in *Osiris Rising* so too does Ogbimi, to mention just a few out of the legion of fiction and non-fiction writers who believe in Africa's ability to recover from her current economic asphyxia. Ogbimi sees indigenous industrialization as the solution to the balance of trade deficit and therefore recommends:

Scientists and engineers should be engaged in the following activities: workshops for cutting, welding, tooling, foundry operations (iron, aluminum, copper); study the design and fabrication of prime movers (electric motors, pumps, compressors, fans, capacitors, valves, fuses); presses (hydraulic and pneumatic); internal combustion engines; maintenance of transportation systems (automobiles, railways, ferry/water boats, airplanes); maintenance of refrigerating and air-conditioning systems; and water treatment and distribution systems. The graduates should also study the maintenance, design, and fabrication of health care machinery/equipment like x-rays, ultra-sound and other diagnostic and monitoring devices and structures. The graduates who complete this linkage program would become the vanguard of African industrialization (5).

We cannot agree with him more! This in essence is education for Real Independence; the form of education that has made the westerner a major producer and exporter. This is the same form of education that can distance us away from the situation of major consumers of imported commodities. This, in economic parlance, is the education we need if we hope to establish a balance of payment (equilibrium) or even surplus. It can be projected that it is in view of the foregoing that Nana Grey-Johnson chooses to inject some vital aspects of pedagogy into the novel – comprehension questions and prompts for the teacher at the end of the narration - for the benefit of the young readership.

Conclusion

It can be asserted that *The Magic Calabash* is a protest novel couched in very civil language, quite the reverse of what is seen in Sony Labou Tansi's *La vie et Demie* or Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born*, two novels bearing both shocking and frightening titles. It might not be as probing as these two novels but it surely cannot fail to create an impact. In times like these, when the need for African leaders to go back to the drawing board and increase the stakes of their different polities is most urgent, this little novel is a sure companion. It is charged with high profile information which,

harnessed properly by statespeople, will not fail to produce the truly independent nations we always yearn for.

Above all, the novel implicitly urges Gambian youth to adopt an Erubami-like posture, but in a positive light. That is, not to take what is not rightfully theirs, not to attempt to take shortcuts in life, but to go aggressively in search of the magic calabash, which we might not be wrong to interpret here as gainful education. Gainful education is just about the right magic calabash the individual needs for a change of life for the better. To seal our discussion on *The Magic Calabash*, a work with strong moral pillars, we cannot resist the urge to capture for the second time the admonition made by the president of the First Republic to our fathers and mothers that “groundnuts will not turn into diamonds but only honesty and hard work will bring us the value of diamonds (110).” His argument is valid and to render it more salient, we suggest that it be considered alongside Ogbimi’s recommendations on the production-oriented education Africa should adopt in order to attain Real Independence. Ogbimi’s recommendations, in the possible audit of the mythocritic, should be the contents of the magic calabash that will prevent the African dream of Real Independence from becoming a nightmare and translate it into reality. This is a process that does not condone shortcuts for they are terribly wrong cuts.

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