THE IMAGE OF EXPATRIATES IN MODERN AFRICAN POETRY: A STUDY OF SELECTED AFRICAN POEMS

Echezona Ifejirika (Ph.D)
Department of English,
Anambra State University,
Igbariam.

Abstract
The Expatriates (foreigners) who came to Africa by the circumstances of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism, were perceived and portrayed in diverse ways by African historians, politicians, journalists and literary artists. The expatriates saw themselves as nothing less than agents of enlightenment and development, beacons of hope for the hopeless Africans, as missionaries who brought Christianity and knowledge of God first to Africans, civil and paramilitary administrators among other lofty roles of a God sent saviours of people in the dark continent of Africa. This paper traces the negative image of expatriates in Africa as perceived and depicted by notable African poets, who are believed to be the most sensitive members of the society, because they observed and reported the minutest incidents or events in the society. In this paper, from the study of a number of poems written by widely read African poets, the expatriates in Africa are traced to have been portrayed in the image of butchers, tormentors, killers, despots, foreign hawks, vultures, blood suckers, weaver birds and heartless colonial masters, who believed in high-handedness and use of force in dealing with Africans. These African are said to be emotion ruled.

The presence and roles of expatriates (white foreigners) who came to Africa through the instrumentality of colonialism, have remained a matter of controversy among historians, religious scholars, journalists and literary writers. This situation has led to the perception and depiction of expatriates in African history books, newspapers, religious books and literary works in the genre of prose, drama and poetry revealing discordant voices. In spite of the various polemics among scholars with regard to the various roles of these expatriates in Africa, this study presents an evaluative panoramic journey into the actual roles of expatriates in Africa through a critical analysis of some poems written by Africa poets. By this methods a true image of these expatriates who came to Africa to work as missionaries, civil administrators, colonial masters, agents of enlightenment and beacons of hope for the hopeless, through education, establishment of schools, hospitals and administrative headquarters, is identified and critically
analyzed from the poems written by notable African poets, through the title of their poems and the description of the poems’ personae.

African Poets and the Image of Expatriates

Of the notable African poets, David Diop, stands out in a special way. He was born of a Senegalese father and a Cameroonian mother and he wrote a number of poems in which Africa and the roles of expatriates in the continent were depicted. For instance, David Diop depicts the expatriates as “Vultures” in his poem entitled: “The Vultures.” In the poem, the expatriates’ “civilization” is described as “kicking the Africans on the face,” and the holy water from the priests were actually “slapping the blacks in the face and eye brows,” their churches are described as “The blood stained monument of tutelage,” where the “monotonous paternoster” was sung. The poet vividly described the expatriates thus:

*O the bitter memories of extorted kisses/of promises broken at the point of a gun. of foreigners who did not seem human, who know all the books but did not know love (110)*

Anwonor perceives the expatriates as war mongers who have brought war to the doorsteps and indeed huts of the black man. To this extent, the expatriates must be fought back at all costs. As he puts it in a poem entitled: “Song of War”

*War has come upon the sons of men. Let the boys go forward Kpili and his people should go forward. Let the white man’s guns boom, we are marching forward. The war is within our very huts, cowards should fall back. And live at home with women (12).*

According to the poet, the war must be fought because it came as a challenge to the people for:

*Where has it been heard before that a snake has bitten a child in front of its own mother, the war is upon us. And the sons of men shall fight it, let the whiteman’s guns boom and its smoke cover us. (20).*

The war being talked about here by the poet is symbolically the war of colonialism or colonization, the war that the expatriates waged against Africans in terms of cultural, political, economic and religious domination. The enemy must be fought without hesitation to the extent that the poet and his people are ready to die in the war front fighting for their freedom. He puts it thus:

*We are fighting them to die. We shall die on the battle field, our guns shall die with us, and our sharp knives shall perish with us (19).*
The above is an eloquent testimony of the poet’s determination to fight the colonial masters to a standstill. In his poem entitled: “Piano and Drums,” Gabriel Okara describes the expatriates as negative symbols of the white man’s culture. The “piano” which stands for the white man is derogatively described and depicted as:

*Wailing piano solo speaking of complex ways, in tear-furrowed concerto of far-away lands and new horizons with coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint crescendo... it ends in the middle of a phrase at a dagger point (36).*

Significantly, to associate the “Piano” which symbolizes the expatriates with words such as “wailing,” “complex ways,” “tear-furrowed,” “counterpoint,” “complexes” and “dagger point,” shows the poet’s derogatory depiction of expatriates, and all that they stood for.

Imoukhede sees the expatriates’ preaching “one man for one wife,” as anti-culture of Africa’s practice of polygamy, whereas his grand father and his own father enjoyed polygamy, but the “new culture” talks about; “one wife be for one man”. According to the poet;

*My father before my fader get him wife borku. E no get equality palaver. He live well for he be oga for im own house. But dat time done pass. Before white man come with Im’ one wife for one man (11).*

The poet does not see how the idea of “One wife for one man,” can work in Africa. No wonder he raised the following questions:

*Jus’ tell me how one wife fit do for one man; How go fit stay all time for him house for time when belleh kommot. How many picken self, one woman fit born when one wife be for one man? Suppose, self, na so-so women your wife dey born. Suppose your wife sabe book, no’ sabe make chop (22).*

According to the poet, the expatriates’ recommendation of one wife for one man could not work for some reasons. For instance, he wonders if the woman (one wife) becomes pregnant, what would the husband do sex-wise, again how many children can a woman deliver to an African man who is insatiable with children, and suppose the one wife gives birth to only females, considering Africa’s attachment to male children and suppose that one wife does not know how to cook delicious food despite her western education, what would the husband do. For these and other reasons, the expatriates’ idea of one wife for one man cannot work in Africa. The expatriates are therefore seen as intruders and spoilers of cultural beliefs and principles.
Also, the Sao Tome poet, Aldo do Esprinto Santo, sees the expatriates as nameless butchers in his poem; “Where are the Men Seized in this Madness? According to him, through the action of an expatriate Ze Mulato and his cohorts:

*Blood is falling in drops to earth, men dying in forests, those cast into the sea the fetters, the lash of beatings resound, resound, resound of cries and howls of pain from men who are no more men, in the hands of nameless butchers (11).*

*The nameless butchers* were insensitive to the feeling of “the men fallen in the furnace of death,” “imploring for pity” and “screaming for life.” The blood of these men killed by expatriates in cold blood must “cry for revenge” and demand justice from:

*All you torturers and tormentors what have you done with my people? Where is my peoples for you tormentors, forgiveness has no name (50).*

In a nutshell, the poet depicts the expatriates in Sao Tome- as tormentors, torturers, hangs-men, “butchers” pervader of justice and killers.

In his own view, John Ekwere, in retrospect, describes the expatriates as “pale faced, strangers, with unhallowed feet,” “benevolent despots: and “foreign lawks.” The negative roles of expatriates in Africa are compared with the destructive roles of some African leaders during the post colonial period in African. He puts the idea thus:

*Now no more the pale-faced strangers with unhallowed feet, the heritage of our fathers profane: now no missioned benevolent despots; bull-doze an unwilling race; No more now foreign hawks on alien chickens prey-but we on us (52).*

Ekwere’s diction in depicting and describing the expatriates in Africa shows the despicable roles they played in the continent. Osahon in his poem entitled: “Independence,” retrospectively referred to the expatriates as “blood suckers” and “teachers of evil.” According to him:

*The rains have stopped. The war is over. The bloodsuckers have laid down their guns. But wait, wait. Don’t turn your back yet, devils are full of cunning ways. Who is going to teach my people the new tricks (53).*

The impression created in the last two lines of the quoted poem is that expatriates are the pioneers and teachers of Africans in tricks and criminal activities such as bribery and corruption, partiality, pen-robbery, ten percent syndrome among other crimes previously alien to Africans.
In a similar vein Awonor perceives and depicts expatriates as “Weaver birds” in his poem entitled: “The Weaver Bird.” This bird, known widely for the destruction of farm produce had the guts to build in the poet’s house, which is a sign of problem shooting. It does not only build in someone’s house but also lays eggs. An egg symbolically portends the unknown. The egg may contain something good or bad. Because the “Weaver Bird” was allowed to lay the egg, it comes back “in the guise of the owner of the house,” and starts preaching salvation to the actual owners of the house. In the process of preaching salvation to the original owners of the house, their shrines were destroyed and defiled completely by the intruders. According to Kofi Awonor:

*The Weaver bird built in our house, and laid its eggs on our only tree, we did not want to send it away, we watched the building of the nest, and supervised the egg laying (77).*

The poet indicts Africans for complicity in aiding and abetting the white man or expatriates, here referred to as, “weaver bird,” in the systematic but gradual destruction of African culture. This was done by Africans who watched the egg laying and supervised the weaver bird during the egg laying. An egg portends the unknown, and later the egg yielded dangerous fruits of colonialism, neo-colonialism or imperialism. To prove that the poet was writing about expatriates and colonialism manifested through religion, the use of the following Christian terms are informative: “preaching salvation,” “its sermon,” “But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants,” “New altars,” among other relevant terms.

In his view, the Cameroonian poet, Dipoko, sees expatriates as “deadly waves that brought with them, “hump-backed divers from far away seas.” “Their luster gave the illusion of parts,” while in actual fact, they, “looked like the carcass of drifting whales.” The people were totally deceived because “the sun’s glint on the spears blade passed for lighting and our sight misled us.” The quote put it thus:

*And our sight misled us, when the sun’s glint on the spear’s blade passed for lighting, and the gun-fire of conquest, the thunder bolt that razed the forest (11).*

The overall effect of expatriates’ colonial activities was “a change of Africans garb from hides of leopard skin to prints of false lions that fall in tatters like the wings of whipped butter files. The effects of expatriates’ colonial activities in Africa were full of disappointments and disillusionment. Similarly, Mbella Dipoko depicts the expatriates as *tyrants* that were brought by wind to cause confusion that led to suffering and real agony to the people. According to him:
All was quiet in this park until the wind, like a gasping messenger, announced The Tyrant’s coming, Then did the branches talk in agony (4).

The activities of these foreigners did not only lead to agony and shameless open crying by Africans but also led to their falling down. Dipoko puts it thus:

“We cried in agony as we fell, slashed by the cold blade of an invisible sword.” (11).

Furthermore Okot P’ Bitek hides behind a pseudo-African woman named Clementine to satirize white women in his Poem entitled: Song of Lawino. The Poet describes the skin of expatriate women as being pale and their faces tender like that of a “newly born baby.” According to Lawino, in her criticism of her co-wife Clementine who aspires to be a white woman:

I do not like dusting myself with powder. The thing is good on pink skin (white people) because it is already pale, but when a black woman has used it, she looks as if she has dysentery... The face of the beautiful one is tender like the skin of a newly born baby, and she believes this is beautiful. Because it resembles the face of white woman. (Line 41).

And the complainant quickly adds:

I do not understand the ways of foreigners (Expatriates). I do not know the Dance of white people. I am ignorant of the dance of foreigners and how they dress. I do not know their games (37).

In this poem, the poet despises white people or expatriates by criticizing their dance and their way of showing love to each other. The poet criticizes the way of life of the expatriates thus:

I cannot dance the ballroom dance, being held so tightly in public, I cannot do it, it looks shameful to me… Each man has a woman. Although she is not his wife, they dance inside a house, and there is not light shamelessly they hold each other tightly tightly (42).

From all indication, Okot P’ Bitek is unpretentiously depicting these aspects of expatriates’ culture as mundane and unclean. He goes ahead to describe the dirty things that happen in the expatriates ballroom dance, particularly between a man and a lady. He puts the scenario in the ballroom dance thus:
It is hot inside the house, it is hot like inside a cave... And the women move like fish, that have been poisoned, they stagger. You kiss her open-sore lips, as white people do. You suck slimy saliva from each other’s mouths, as white people do... I am completely ignorant of the dances of foreigners, and I do not like it. Holding each other tightly in public (45).

Through this poem, the poet depicts the ugly and scatological images that follow the expatriate dances which makes him prefer Acoli local dance. In this ballroom dance, the following nuseating things can be seen: steaming sweat, hot wet breath, coughs and saliva from sneezing drunken sick, staggering drunken women who force urine out as if they had syphilis, stench odour from latrine and urinal, dry dung and dysentery, old dungs and fresh dungs, young ones that are still steaming, short thick dungs sitting like hills and snake-like dungs coiled up like pythons.” (46).

In summary, Okot P’ Bitek uses his poem: Song of Lawino to depict the aspects of expatriates’ culture that are forcibly imposed on Africans and which the educated class imitates as models and a sign of belonging to the mainstream culture of the civilized lot. The climax of the negative influence of the white man is its democracy that has brought great divisions between fathers and sons, brothers and sisters and long standing friends: He puts the idea thus:

“My husband is the leader of the Democratic party.
... Ocol does not enter his brother’s house you would think there was homicide between them that has not been settled Ocol dislikes his brother fiercely... The new parties have split the homes (104).

Because of these bad influences, the expatriates must go back to their countries. The poet put it thus:

White men must return to their own homes because they have brought-slave conditions in the country, white people tell lies. They are good at telling lies, like men wooing women (104).

Finally, the poet uses his poem to satirize the monotony of the expatriates new religious praying pattern. According to him:

I once joined the Catholic Evening Speakers class, but I did not stay long, I ran away, I ran away from shouting meaninglessly in the evening like parrots.. They shout like mad people... A strange language they speak, these Christian diviner-priests and white nuns, think the girls understand what they are saying (75).
In addition, Diop uses the poem “Africa” in *West African Verse* to depict the fate of Africans in the hands of expatriates who saw nothing wrong in crushing and killing helpless Africans through forced labour and slave trade. He sums up the brutality of the whites on the blacks in these words:

*African my African… I have never seen you, but my gaze is full of your blood, your black blood… spilt over the fields, the blood of your sweat, the sweat of your toil, the toil of your slavery, the slavery of your children* (111).

From the poet’s choice of words, it becomes obvious that he holds the expatriates squarely responsible for the rampant cases of “Blood spilt,” heavy “sweat” that come as a result of “toiling” in the fields personified in the “slavery of African children.” The picture of Africans sold into slavery to work in the white man’s plantations readily comes to mind.

**Conclusion**

Through self-evaluation; particularly with regards to visible works of mercy and developmental strides in the area of establishment of formal schools, building of hospitals to cater for the health of the natives and the expatriates themselves, and establishment of administrative headquarters for political/administrative functions among other roles, expatriates perceived themselves as agent of civilization and beacons of light for a people in a dark continent called Africa.

However, a panoramic journey into some African poems written by African poets themselves, presents entirely a different and contrary picture of the expatriates and their roles in Africa during the period of colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. Africa poets collectively and individually presented expatriates in the most negative and derogatively picture or image.

In these poems, expatriates are symbolically presented in many ways that made them less friendly and attractive. They are presented as vultures and in Africa, vultures are not eaten as meat neither do men of title wear the feathers of vultures as status symbol. This is because vultures eat dead bodies of human beings (corpses) and that of fellow animals (carcass). They are destructive and unclean animals. So for the expatriates to be described as vultures is to perceive them negatively.

In a similar vein, expatriates are presented as aggressive war mongers who came to Africa and used their superior military superior military might to forcibly lead many a erstwhile powerful towns, villages and communities into shameful and painful submission to the expatriate’s authorities during the colonial expeditions.
In the process, they were painted and presented as cultural denigrators and destroyers of African established ways of living. A living example is the expatriates condemnation of polygamy and extolling of monogamy at the detriment of men’s marital and sexual freedom and at the expense of women’s elastic marital opportunities. In fact, the expatriates caused things to fall apart to the extent that the centre could not longer hold.

Similarly, the poems studied clearly portrayed expatriates as butchers, tormentors, torturers, killers of innocent and helpless and hapless Africans during the colonial era in African. They were depicted as "benevolent despots,” “foreign hawks,” “strangers who knew all the books but did not know love,” heartless blood suckers, weaver birds and teachers of evil practices such as bribery and corruption, political division and brotherly hatred. In a nutshell, expatriates are depicted as tyrants, oppressors, colonialists and despots.

References


