

UDK 371

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**EDUCATION, ELITISM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP  
FOR POSTCOLONIAL POLITICS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S  
NO LONGER AT EASE AND THE EDUCATION OF A BRITISH-PROTECTED CHILD**

*The article focuses on the importance of education and the interconnectedness between education and politics in two works written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (1930 – 2013).*

**Keywords:** *education, elite, university, politics, leadership, corruption.*

**Statement of the problem in general.** A relation of mutual dependence can be identified between education and politics. The educational system has always depended on the state for its proper functioning. On the other hand, the state (with its institutions) cannot operate successfully without the people's support and contribution in terms of knowledge. Education is the bedrock political achievement is built on because it is due to education that leaders are born. From this perspective, the history of education also assists us in shaping a historical perspective of the political system of a community. The history of politics goes hand in hand with the history of education and, consequently, both help us understand the past, the present and anticipate the future, in terms of failures, progress, and expectations. Moreover, the history of education helps us understand the current problems of education related to a specific community.

**Introduction of the Subject Matter.** Nigerian author and statesman Chinua Achebe was a pioneer of modern African literature, as well as a spokesman for his country and continent worldwide. Writing in English, Achebe sought to make the African culture known to the world, to expose the crimes and abuses of colonial ideology and its discourse, but also to reconcile persistent tensions between Africa and the West. A leader of Nigeria's independence, he challenged representations of Africa by the West and promoted African ideological liberation, encouraging Africa to "speak for itself" [1, p. 53]. In fact, his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), marked the starting point of what was to become the postcolonial African fiction.

A model for many contemporary African writers, Achebe was a strong criticizer of the colonial literary genre which spread degrading and derogatory images of Africa and its people. Somehow, literature became one of the instruments with which colonial rule controlled and dominated its subjects. Achebe not only made African culture known worldwide, but he also made a strong argument for the recovery of his country's real identity and unmasked the mischief of the abuser.

*No Longer at Ease* (1960) is the second novel in Chinua Achebe's 'African Trilogy' together with *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (written in 2009, published in 2011) is a collection of autobiographical essays which shed light on many of the events, experiences and attitudes fictionalized in his novels. The two works share a number of common themes and concerns, mirroring the difficulties of Nigerian identity at the intersection of tradition and modernity, homogeneity and hybridity, old and new. Moreover, the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease* and Achebe have a series of features and ideas in common. The autobiographical essays elucidate some of the problems exposed by his fictional work. Most of Achebe's writings record the struggle of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria to unite disjunctive poles in an increasingly globalized setting. Achebe portrays matters concerning personal and collective identity, literature, language, education, religion and politics.

**Analysis of the Most Recent Publications and Highlighting Unsolved Problems.** Numerous studies explored the post-independence political crisis as well as the present political turmoil in Nigeria and in many African states, as well as its causes and effects [2 – 6]. Educational matters have also received special attention in research because colonialism also facilitated contact with Western culture and its educational systems, and the use of English in education in Africa has intensified. The relationship between education, social, cultural and economic matters has also been investigated [2, 7, 8]. However, previous research did not clearly point out the intimate connection between education and politics for Nigeria's current state of chaos and its ideals of future progress. The reflection of this connection between politics and education in literature has also been insufficiently explored. In his writings, Achebe does not locate the roots of political mismanagement in the shortcomings of the educational system but rather in the inability of the educated men to contribute successfully to the growth of their country. It is thus the failure of the elite to adequately address the needs of the socio-cultural and political milieu that Achebe presents.

**Purpose of the study.** Criticism is twofold in Achebe's writings. First, his work makes a case for erasing distorted perceptions of Africa coming from a long literary and ideological tradition. Second, his voice is also critical of the many aspects that have gone wrong in Nigeria's post-independence existence, especially in

political matters which have prevented the country from becoming a powerful state. This article aims to explore the two works mentioned above from the perspective of finding the connections drawn by Achebe between education and politics and, consequently, the crucial role of education in building, ensuring and safeguarding national development. Thus, the paper seeks to make a contribution to understanding the importance of literature in expounding and promoting the role of education for the political development of Nigerian society, a fact which becomes essential under present circumstances of disorder and disorganisation.

**Education, elitism and the interrelatedness of education and politics.** Among the clichés proliferated by Western discourse about Africa was its barbarism and primitiveness. In this view, the lack of education turned African people into brutes with little intelligence, no manners and no endowment specific to the civilized world. Achebe endeavours to deconstruct this myth which dehumanizes the African, although he recognizes the great educational benefits of the colonial project.

The imposition of the Western type of education onto the African people was part of a common theme of colonial ideology, that of replacing *darkness* with *light*. Certainly, darkness meant a series of wants or deficiencies, a situation which needed amendment by the Western civilizer. Thus, the Africans had no soul, no history, no reason or awareness of themselves, no religion, culture, not even human speech, no intelligence, and no responsibility whatsoever [1, p. 114]. As a result, *light* represented the enlightening role of education destined to deliver the Africans from this state of darkness.

Additionally, the long European tradition portraying Africans often insisted on the so-called “‘problem’ of education for Africa” [1, p. 88]. The existence of a rudimentary setting inhabited by primitive creatures often generated a matrix of exclusion from the centre of civilization insofar as it was believed that “Africa and education do not mix” [1, p. 88]. Even though Africans perhaps did not benefit from the same level of educational training as compared to the Westerners, it was again an attempt to diminish their humanity, and this is what Achebe, like others, deplors. He condemns the dehumanizing ideology of Western powerful men of colonial and postcolonial times who deprived people of dignity and minimal conditions of subsistence. It seemed like an on-going terrible fictitious project neglecting one essential aspect: “Africa is not fiction. Africa is people, real people” [1, p. 157].

Nevertheless, Achebe acknowledges that the greatest merit of colonialism was, perhaps, education. Despite its many types of abuse, colonial policy did show interest in improving education in Africa. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British missionaries built schools and universities which became very popular among the population. After WW I they set up first-class boarding schools in Nigeria, one in Ibadan and another one in Umuahia, then Nigeria’s first university was founded in Ibadan in partnership with London [1, pp. 21-22]. A former student of University College in Ibadan, Achebe also celebrates the memory of outstanding British teachers who were very devoted to their profession and even went one step further, showing their humanity and humaneness in their relations with the natives. Humanity “was to be found primarily in the camp of the colonized, but now and again in the ranks of the colonizer too” [1, p. 23]. Teachers like James Welch or William Simpson managed to narrow the divide that colonialism created and treated their African human fellows humanely.

On the other hand, although the traditional adhesion of the clan was diminished by the colonial rule, a remnant type of bond among the Umuofians still exists even though they left their home town to work elsewhere in Nigeria. The local branches of the Umuofia Progressive Union are actively engaged in the education of its members, as it is Obi Okonkwo’s case (the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*), who receives a scholarship to study law in England. The Union itself had an overt educational role as it was formed “with the aim of collecting money to send some of their brighter young men to study in England. They taxed themselves mercilessly” [9, p. 6]. They held high hopes for these young men who were expected to become the elite shaping Nigeria’s future. Obi is the first to receive such a scholarship which was worth eight hundred pounds, so the investment of his countrymen underscores the great degree of trust and confidence that such men felt for the young generation. Obi was supposed to bring a significant contribution to guiding the state on its way to “political irredentism, social equality and economic emancipation [9, p. 25].

Achebe explains how we can make the appropriate connections between education and politics, the ways in which they influence one another, and concepts such as elite, universities as elite centres, elitism, leadership, competence are interconnected in a process whose accurate functioning or malfunctioning ultimately has a decisive influence on nation building.

The term elite, in line with its accepted definition, refers to those endowed with superiority of education and breeding. The most powerful, rich, gifted, or educated members of a community are usually expected to exercise much influence on the progress of society. The belief that a small group of people who have a lot of advantages should govern the society is not unfamiliar to Achebe. However, his message is that the best-educated group in a society should lay the foundations of an equally powerful and valuable political system which, in its turn, could engender the wellbeing of society. By virtue of their education abroad, young Nigerians held promise for erecting a strong independent state. Unfortunately, Achebe shows that Nigeria’s elite failed to do so in a number of ways.

From a different perspective, the failure of the so-called elite group shows that it could not live up to the promises made and to the expectations laid for them. In fact, the educated young men did not succeed to become the elite anticipated by their countrymen who invested in them. They fell in the trap of mediocrity and ordinariness because of their fascination with money, lack of productive initiative, and selfishness. Fully aware of this situation, Achebe warns that “what has consistently escaped most Nigerians in this entire travesty is the fact that mediocrity destroys the very fabric of a country as surely as a war – ushering in all sorts of banality, ineptitude, corruption and debauchery”.

The changes brought about by colonial rule transformed the African identity and its components at the level of cultural practices, traditions, religious belief, political organisation, social hierarchies, economic aspects etc. In other words, the very definition of ethnic African identity underwent significant changes at levels of both personal and collective identity. With the new educational system and its structure, in postcolonial Nigeria the demands of education have substituted the imperative of heroism of the old society: “Today we send you to bring knowledge” [9, p. 8].

Obi takes pride in being a second-generation educated Nigerian and Christian convert. After graduating university, he obtains a “European post” in the Civil Service [9, p. 6]. The socio-economic impact of academic education for a young Nigerian meant better living standards, good financial rewards, and inclusion in wealthy consumer groups: “a university degree was the philosopher’s stone. It transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior Civil Servant on five hundred and seventy, with car and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal rent” [9, p. 73]. Nevertheless, it also generated the erasure of his national identity which gradually merged with the European one. The westernization or Europeanization of identity results from occupying “a ‘European Post’ which was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the elite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: ‘How’s the car behaving?’ ” [9, p. 73].

Unfortunately, Achebe signals the failure of educated Nigerians to construct a wealthy nation state. The ones expected to build Africa’s future, were, paradoxically, less worthy citizens than the humble masses because of their snobbishness, carelessness and thriftlessness which could only impede the building of the new nation. In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe compares Mr Green, Obi’s superior officer in the civil service, to Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Mr Green strongly believes, like most colonizers, that it was his duty to cultivate and thus enlighten the African people, so he could only accept the existence of Africa in a poor, socially, politically and educationally low state, in a subordinate position to the Western world. He imagines he is just one of the missionaries who were entitled to free Africa from violence, blind worship, superstition and brutality. For him, Nigeria’s independence was premature, so he was impatient and sceptical about Nigeria’s ability to make decisions and live free from the control of the West. So, if “Kurtz had succumbed to the darkness” Green was overwhelmed by “the incipient dawn” of Nigerian freedom [9, p. 85].

As Mr Green shows, the temptation of money seemed much more important for the so-called elite than the welfare of the state or of their compatriots: “Education for what? To get as much as they can for themselves and their family. Not the least bit interested in the millions of their countrymen who die every day from hunger and disease [9, p. 93]. Those who were educated to be the great leaders of the future were in fact in stark contrast with the expectations of those who were paying for their education. Mr Green’s ideology epitomizes the common stereotypes of the West on Africa. Though he admits the hardships of the climate left marks on the African character, he suggests that the Africans themselves prevented equality from being gifted on them, too. He believes that the African did not take advantage properly of the benefits of education bestowed upon him by the Western world: “(...) over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him?” [9, p. 3]. Unfortunately, Mr Green does not realize that perhaps the same Western world also exhausted Africa’s resources and “sapped” its people physically, spiritually and economically.

The failure of the elite to improve the political situation in Nigeria is paralleled by ethnic tension and the politicians’ inability to deal with it. Achebe himself had to seek exile after the Biafran war (1967 – 1970) and his effort to “redefine” [1, p. 45] his relationship with his home country was rather tense. He laments the politicians’ and his people’s fiasco in building a strong state and the unfortunate compensation of independence with war: “I found it difficult to forgive Nigeria and my countrymen and –women for the political nonchalance and cruelty that unleashed upon us these terrible events, which set us back a whole generation and robbed us of the chance, clearly within our grasp, to become a medium-rank developed nation in the twentieth century” [1, p. 44].

The inefficiency of the Nigerian political class is caused, among other things, by its faulty leadership insofar as leaders are the generators and builders of state progress. A “sacred trust” [1, p. 143], leadership acquires a mystical value requiring mental worth and bodily discipline. However, the issue of leadership needs tackling in relation to education and both are affected by corruption. In the essay *The University and the Leadership Factor in Nigerian Politics*, Achebe discusses the connection between elitism and leadership. An essential component of every type of leadership is the “elite factor” [1, p. 143], the “salt of excellence” the nation depends on so as to spice up the “boiling soup pot of Nigerian leadership” [1, p. 149]. However, the

corruption of both the contents and reputation of the concept of elitist have caused the penetration of nepotism and mediocrity in politics. Although he admits the importance of three elements for the production of national growth (system, leader, and followers), Achebe insists on the crucial function of leaders as generators and builders of progress.

The inefficiency of the Nigerian political class is caused by faulty leadership, but its deficiency is rooted in education. Unfortunately, Achebe shows that the elite concept itself has been corrupted [1, p. 145] because it often refers to a fake reality in which people in key-positions are not selected on the basis of merit but on the basis of influence. The recruitment stage needs to take place outside corruption and must be based on competence. Thus, it is merit resulting from education that must facilitate access to status and power instead of having priority by doing acts of corruption.

Consequently, the political crisis is closely connected with education and, more precisely, with one of its most remarkable hubs of erudition, the university. Observing the current state of affairs, Achebe points out that education still represents the bedrock of development. It is the basis ensuring the necessary training for Nigeria's leaders. Higher education is a must for all those who want to be rightfully included in the elite groups entitled to elevate the nation's political position. By offering access to knowledge, universities are a source of truth, and, especially in the years following Nigeria's independence, the university was regarded as an elitist centre promising to be the birthplace of Nigeria's leaders. Universities still are the only legible institutions spreading "enlightenment and a desire for excellence in the entire constituency of the nation, including those who will aspire to national leadership" [1, p. 147]. Unhappily, the university could only produce politicians who made little contribution to national growth, who engaged in acts of corruption or served a number of powerful men, generally foreign sponsors [1, pp. 147-148, 163]. Critically enough, in the first twenty five years after independence, none of Nigeria's statesmen was a university graduate, and this makes the mission of academic education all the more urgent. Against this backdrop, it is not only the duty of society to reconsider its criteria for bringing forth valuable leaders, but the university as such must be reformed so that it could yield the great men Nigeria needs to build its future.

The joint failure of the "elite factor" [1, p. 143] and the corrupt and incompetent leadership have led to a state of collapse. Unfortunately, Obi Okonkwo's case also shows the tense struggle in which the man and the system are caught. His situation discloses two important ideas: individual mismanagement and failure are paralleled by the pressure of the individual to offset factors which are beyond his control. Ultimately, the system wins over, so Achebe's message is related to the thwarted realization of the fact that the whole system – political, administrative, public sector – is deficient, unruly, and corrupt and overwhelms the individual.

Achebe warns against the wide scale of corruption in Nigeria which sheds a terrible light on its development prospects: "The African is corrupt through and through. (...) They are all corrupt" [9, p. 3]. As Obi Okonkwo's example shows, educated young men of great promise, who often work for the Senior Civil Service, habitually fall in trap of bribery. Obi is tried for corruption, and his countrymen are utterly disappointed at Obi's shameful condition, risking "to go to prison for twenty pounds" [9, p. 5]. Under the weight of debts, Obi finally surrenders to the temptation of being bribed, so he gives up his bond with his "brothers", his family, his clan, and his whole past. In fact, corruption is related to the temptation of money, but this is also connected to disintegration in two ways. On the one hand, the money craze contributed to the dissolution of the family with children scattering everywhere in the world in search of money. On the other hand, for educated Nigerians now working for the Civil Service the general fascination with money is also the result of the disintegration and fragmentation of the traditional community.

Poverty is one of the consequences of wrong politics. African countries have commonly been referred to as some of the poorest countries in the world. But poverty is also caused by the continuous robbing of their capital "by corrupt leaders and their cronies" [1, p. 164] who deposit these funds in foreign banks. This accounts for the terrible statistics which show that "37 percent of African private wealth is held outside Africa" [1, p. 165], as compared to only 3 percent in Asia's case.

**Conclusion.** Achebe's works show that all aspects of the postcolonial Nigerian society are completely disenchanting since there's "war, genocide, military and civilian dictatorships, corruption, collapsed economies, poverty, disease, and every ill attendant upon political and social chaos!" [1, p. 93]. It is perhaps in the sins of the political system that all these are rooted. Regional animosity led to military coups, inter-civilian violence and killing, tribalism, corruption, indiscipline, political indifference, social injustice, indulgence for mediocrity [1, p. 139]. As a result, Africa's problematic condition is very difficult to deal with, so Africa is still a "terrifying problem admitting of no satisfactory solution" [1, p. 60]. However, Achebe proposes a solution which promotes political reform starting from an inherent condition which generates political leadership, namely the existence of efficient, uncorrupted elite groups. At the same time, elitism is the product of education, so the importance of education for the political management of a country is essential.

In the essay *What Is Nigeria to Me?* written in 2008, Achebe feels that Nigeria as a republic is still in an incipient stage of development. Metaphorically, Nigeria is merely a "wayward child" [2, p. 41], but a "gifted, enormously gifted, prodigiously endowed" one [2, p. 45] that needs to be tempered and bred healthily to respond

to the demands of the contemporary world without washings its “hands with spittle” [9, p. 8]. Nigeria still is a child who needs protection and guidance through education. Its people are its “parents”, and they have a decisive task in leading “this unruly child along the path of useful creative development” [1, pp. 45-46].

Achebe’s own work is an act of education. This is because it imparts knowledge about his people with the purpose of changing, developing or improving the others’ powers of reasoning, judgment and appreciation concerning the Africans. It constitutes a kind of enlightening process, or one which liberates the much oppressed African soul. The much-celebrated African writer Toni Morrison once called Achebe’s work a form of “education” for her, “liberating in a way nothing had been before”. Paying a tribute to Achebe’s contribution, we observe that he brought Africa to the rest of the world. It is due to his writings that the African world stretched out, voicing its fears, dissatisfaction, but also its ideals, hopes and struggle to cope with its position in the world.

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*Received 11.07.2013*

#### **Кулія Мікаела. Зв'язок освіти з появою еліти і лідерів суспільства в історії Нігерії**

Розглядається актуальність освіти і взаємозв'язок між освітою та політикою на основі робіт, написаних нігерійським автором Чинуа Ачебе (1930 – 2013).

**Ключові слова:** освіта, еліта, університет, політика, компетентність, корупція.

#### **Кулія Микаэла. Связь образования с появлением элиты и лидеров общества в истории Нигерии**

Рассматривается актуальность образования и взаимосвязь между образованием и политикой на основе работ, написанных нигерийским автором Чинуа Ачебе (1930 – 2013).

**Ключевые слова:** образование, элита, университет, политика, компетентность, коррупция.