

EUROCENTRIC IDIOSYNCRASY AND THE NARRATIVE VIEWPOINTS IN G.T. BASDEN'S *AMONG THE IBOS OF NIGERIA* – A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the arrival of Europeans on African soil in 19th century, the story of the continent changed from the native narrative viewpoints to that of the colonial masters. Much as African scholars rose to the challenges imposed on them by their European counterparts by refuting their insinuations and asserting their own views over the colonial hegemony, the controversy still goes on between the truth and falsehood of the viewpoints of both European and African scholars. To most Africans, the European viewpoints generally lacked objectivity but were popularized and accepted in the 'western' sphere as facts and authentic. Due to the subjective nature of these narratives, most African scholars picked interest in this aspect of textual expression and often criticized the mindset of these Europeans as idiocies. One of these Europeans is an anthropologist, G.T. Basden, whose text *among the Ibos of Nigeria* has received wide attention, not only in Sociology and Anthropology, but in the study of Literature, especially the oral literature. The study viewed Basden's text as biased based on racial interest and observed that superiority complex contributed to the attitude of the 'whites' on the 'blacks'. It concluded that all men are born equal and need equal treatment at all times.

Keywords: Eurocentric, Europeans, Africans, Basden, Ibos.

INTRODUCTION

One major challenge that confronted the early English colonial masters on arrival to the shores of Nigeria at the dawn of the 19th century was their inability to accept Africans as a people with well established and defined culture. Chinua Achebe, for instance, wrote *Things Fall Apart* to refute some of these feelings that Africans were a people without culture, especially as expressed in the works of Joseph Conrad and Joyce Carey.

A closer study of the language of the colonialists, otherwise known as the white men shows that they seriously denigrated the blacks who, to them, had inferior science, without culture, religion and technology, alongside illogical methods of reasoning at the point of the arrival of the whites. Such terms as 'pagan' 'heathen' 'beasts' 'nigger' 'local', 'dark', and other pejorative terms were used to define the blacks while the colonial masters saw themselves as 'godly', 'masters', 'lords', 'chosen', etc. The first paragraph of Basden (1921) on arrival, 'From Liverpool to Onitsha' states that

...Perhaps also no other country has been shrouded in so much mystery, or held in thrall by such powers of darkness. More particularly the Niger has dominated the minds of men with a fascination well-nigh incomprehensible, except to those who have felt its influence.

Typical of the white man and his idiosyncrasy, Basden felt that the River Niger had been an enigma to the 'Ibo' who never had any opportunity to educate the white but the whole accolade was given to the white saints: Pliny, Lander brothers, Mungo Park, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Prince Albert and then Macgregor Laird. Later in Basden's account, it was the natives who led the whites through the mangroves of Delta until they connected the Atlantic Ocean, a feat which no white man could accomplish. Why would the black man not qualify to be acknowledged in Basden's canon? The preface to his anthropological study gives an answer to this question. According to Basden (1921)

...the black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things, and cannot explain why he does them. He is not controlled by logic: he is the victim of circumstances, and his policy is very largely one of drift. The will of the tribe or family, expressed or implied, permeates his whole being, and is the deciding factor in every detail of his life.

This attitude of white man which negatively influenced his narrative viewpoints in most African literature has created a problem of study as the issue of culture conflict has been one of the major themes in the study of the early Nigerian literature. Obviously the white man's feeling is biased and has narrowed down his vision of the black man who he has generalized as abnormal creature. This issue therefore calls for serious attention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nigerian literature until 1950s was not established as a written literature, even though it was in oral form. With the arrival of the European colonial masters in 19th century, most scholars that started writing during this era of colonialism were exposed to the fact that there were challenges facing them in defense of their culture and their texts started coming into the market from the early fifties. Starting from Amos Tutuola's *The Palm wine Drinkard*, published in 1952, followed by Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* published in 1954, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria published his first novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Achebe was able to refute the general notion of the Europeans that there was no literary work in Africa until the first Europeans set their foot on the shores of the continent. Achebe's writing was in response to Joyce Carey's *Mr. Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' biases on African people and their heritage. The experiences of Africans outside and inside their fatherland gave rise to such self centered writings that were influenced by such movements as negritude. A Francophone term, negritude is a reflection of the French Assimilation's policy. In West Africa, for instance, such writers as Leophold Sedar Senghor, Leon Damas, Aime Cesaire, David Diop and Birago Diop started writing poems that idolized Africa. These expressions of nostalgia largely influenced African scholars to look inwards and borrow from their environment and write texts that could be qualified as Afrocentric. African-Americans, those in the Caribbean and other parts of the world became conscious of their identity as blacks and started writing texts that reflect their colour, from this developed massive criticisms of European based idea that Africa had no culture and were not a people but more of beasts of the nations.

Idiosyncrasy and the Narrative Viewpoints

A writer is a member of a society. As a person, he has his views, feelings and obligations which should be expressed in writing. This view can be objective or subjective, but they come out in peculiar manner. That peculiarity of the writer's mind is the writer's idiosyncrasy. According

to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, idiosyncrasy means, “a person's particular way of behaving, thinking, et cetera, especially when it is unusual; an unusual feature.” (740) An idiosyncrasy may be right or wrong but is usually held tenaciously to by the expresser to justify a belief or conviction. Due to their nature, idiosyncrasies are often subjective but the progenitors strongly propagate them to justify their argument or tenets.

A critical survey of most European literature reveals that civilization embraced them earlier than Africans. Yet, such epics like “Beowulf”, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”, Homer's “Iliad”, Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* and Aristophanes' *The Frog*, made use of mythologies as found in African literature, which are indications that they passed through different phases of National civilization. For the ‘white men’ to feel that such African nations like the ‘Ibo’ is uncivilized is to commit that racial guilt which Chinweizu (1980) referred to as ‘Eurocentricism’ (Chinweizu, 7, 8, 9, 10, 8, 7). By Eurocentricism is meant both the Eurocentricism scholars' subjective views and those who uphold them - these may include Africans who have been brainwashed to accept the white man's views as innocuous. Advocates of this view have expressed themselves in different fields like literature, religion, anthropology, et cetera through different narrative viewpoints. Chinweizu et al (1980) state that

Any African writer who insists on making the West his primary community on the grounds that he can thereby reach a larger audience, should be told that if he writes with clarity on matters of sufficient general concern to his educated African peers, chances are that most literate Africans will appreciate him, and he will have all the audience he needs. In addition, foreigners will also appreciate him (as they appreciate Tutuola and Okot P' Bitek), and rather than have less of each audience he will have more.

A narrative viewpoint is an angle of expression in a written work, whether literary or non literary. It is also known as point of view in which the first, second or third persons' view is expressed. Whereas the first person maintains “I” as a witness, the second often goes with dramatic plural “we”, while the third person omniscient goes with the singular but distanced pronoun “he”, “she”, et cetera. Ogene defines point of view as “an angle from which a story is told”. (5) Different exponents of this literary term have their opinions on the points of view, but the commonest is the third; the omniscient point of view.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the library and internet sources of data collection. Qualitative research method is consistently applied to dissect and sift facts and fictions from the contents of the study.

RESULTS

The results from this research show that the negative projection of black people in most European writings is as a result of biases held by some European writers over Africans, especially the feeling that Africa is an inferior race. This has informed the reactionary trends in some African writings alluding idiocy to the Europeans assessment of African writing.

DISCUSSION**An Analysis of G.T. Basden's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria***

An ace African novelist, Chinua Achebe in an essay, "The Novelist as Teacher" states his view on the problem of Eurocentric idiosyncrasy on African culture. According to Achebe (1973),

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.

Being conscious of his role as a writer, Achebe decried the disaster imposed on the African psyche when they were under the control of the European forces. The attitude of European colonizers so much alienated Africans from their culture that African dances were shied away from by young Nigerian children who were converted to Christianity. In schools, young school children saw African weather as shameful and preferred to use the word 'winter' to the Nigerian 'harmattan' (weather) in English classes. This fear was to avoid being called a bushman.

A comprehensive study of Basden's *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* shows this Eurocentric idiosyncrasy all over his work. As an anthropologist, Basden says that another name for his work is, "The Igbo As Seen By The Early White Men". (Preliminary pages) In one of his chapters, Basden, while commenting on the religious rites observed in an Igbo community of Awka, calls the indigenes 'cannibals.' According to Basden (1921) "... they are afterwards collected and disposed of in accordance with the usual custom prevailing in a cannibal country." This chapter titled, "In the Shadow of Death" is reporting Basden's observation of transactions before a deity 'Abwala', a corrupt name for 'Agbala'. Other deities observed by Basden are 'Igwe-ka-Ani' and 'Eblu-okpa-bia', a corruption of Igbo 'Ebulu-Ukpa-bi'. The case above is that of witchcraft during which a human life is wasted by the deity. Basden seems to be ignorant that masquerades or deities like 'Agbala', 'Udo', 'Ogwugwu' and 'Ani' were the only courts of justice existing before the advent of colonial/customary courts of justice. In the European courts, when death sentences were pronounced over crimes like human slaughter, armed robbery, arson and looting, they were not viewed as cannibalism.

In his interpretation of the Igbo secret societies, Basden took an exception to "maw" which is a distortion of the Igbo figure of 'mmanwu' or 'mmuoo'. To him, 'maw' mean "spirit" which he saw as lacking any religious significance but manufactured for purposes of visitation to the living, as they act as the ancestors. As a white man, Basden contradicts himself because every masquerade in Igbo land plays a religious function. European scholars limited the Igbo masquerade to serving the role of ancestral worship. Basden (1921) states that

This making *ju-ju* has no religious significance; it is held to be a visitation of the spirits of the dead to their late familiar haunts, and especially during festivals when the spirits manifest a lively desire to participate in the general rejoicings.

The question is: does festival not represent a religious rite? Compared to Roman and English festivals; what makes the Igbo festival different? The height of Basden's idiosyncrasy is manifested at a particular experience he shared at a Christians festival where he was invited to act a Father Christmas. He states that:

At the Christmas festivities held at a large girls' school I was invited to impersonate Father Christmas. The early part of the entertainment passed off excellently, until the advent of the venerable father became due. Full of excitement the girls waited for the promised visitor, but when he did appear, dressed in the conventional garb, with the traditional white hair and flowing beard the whole crowd of girls cried out in fear, arose and fled! It was some time before they could be induced to return, in spite of the old man's benevolent aspect; and when they did come back they could scarcely be persuaded to accept presents from his hand; they quite believed that the spirit of an ancient crony was actually present before them. A similar experience invariably follows when a common Guy Fawkes is placed over the face. (Basden: 1921)

The scene of Father Christmas established here by Basden shows that it shares similar circumstances with African masquerades. It starts from the legendary figure that originated from Western or European Christianity that is known to share gifts to homes of children who behaved well, during Christmas eves, that is 24th December.

This legendary figure is believed to be Saint Nicholas who was born around 280 A.D. in Patara, near Myra located in modern day Turkey. He is much admired for his piety and kindness and is known variously as Santa Claus, Kris Kringle, or Santa. Stories have it that Saint Nicholas gave away his inherited wealth and travelled to the countryside helping the poor and sick until his deeds spread and he popularly gained the name of the protector of children and sailors. "His feast day is celebrated on the anniversary of his death, December 6. This was traditionally considered a lucky day to make large purchases or to get married". (Santa Claus: web)

This issue of benevolent spirit as credited to the 'patriarch Saint' or 'ancestral spirit' above by name Kris Kringle is also discussed by Basden when he talks of the 'abaw-maw', that is 'agbogho-mmanwu'. According to Basden (1921),

Certain maws are intended to represent the spirits of departed virgins (abaw- maw) and the dress is always one which distinguishes a girl at the time she is passing through the *nkpu* ceremony preparatory to marriage.

In the Igbo cosmology, this masquerade is for pure entertainment, usually very neat and pretty and (it) distributes gifts like Father Christmas, as it throws sweets and chewing gums just like Santa Claus any time it performs on stage. The difference here is that the Igbo do not see masquerade from the human angle of saints, but as representative of the spirit, especially of the dead among the living.

Apart from denigrating the Igbo culture which Basden derogates as primitive, his other viewpoint is that the Ibo culture will die at the onset of the English commercial venture into Igbo land. Sailing through the coasts of the Niger, Basden (1921) states that,

Every native institution has been shaken in its foundations and, at the present rate of progress, a great many of the most interesting facts concerning the primitive customs of the people will soon be matters of history and tradition only...

To him, all the science and technology of Ibo people will be overtaken by the British commercial venture. This view is reiterated on page 28 of Basden's text, "The old conditions and landmarks are disappearing and modern developments will soon obliterate all signs of ancient history." (28)

On the issue of weather and climate, Basden qualifies the Ibo country climate as the "white man's grave." Thanks to the increase in the number of medical personnel and modern drugs starting with quinine, otherwise, the Ibo country climate had in the past, "maintained its evil reputation and fully justified its claim to rank as part of the "white man's grave".

The Ibo country's weather matches the tropical environment in which the natives existed. Such weather is very friendly with the black Ibo and encourages the growing of such trees as mango, paw-paw, avocado, cashew, palm kernel, raffia palm, dates and coco-nut. It is also friendly with plants like cassava, maize, water melon, vegetables and tomatoes. Its stream, rivers and ocean is inhabited by different species of fishes, crabs, snails, crocodile, alligator, hippopotamus, whales, crayfish and stock fishes. The place is rich in culture and traditional religion which the European colonizers tried to suppress, subdue and annihilate as a result of their idiosyncrasy. To Basden, the Ibo country is the introduction to "darkest Africa."

Even though Basden met a large coffee plantation in the area referred today to as 3.3. Onitsha, he condemned the maps of the place as useless, as none contained reliable data. Basden (1921) states that

To the north of the town, following the left bank of the Nkissi stream, on the site now covered with Government buildings, a large coffee plantation was laid out of the surrounding country, even of that comparatively near the settlement, but little was known. The existing maps were useless as one contained reliable data, the names inserted being based upon reports and conjectures. Some names were curious e.g. "Akpam" and "Nri".

Even though 3.3. is presently annexed to Onitsha, the area was originally under land boundary contention. "Akpam" supposedly is Akpaka Forest Reserve which today had been filled with buildings and the forest reserve cleared.

Basden used the first person narrative point of view to write his text, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* whose other name is "The Igbo As Seen By The Early White Men." For instance, while writing on the Christmas festivities where he acted as Father Christmas; he states that, "I was invited to impersonate Father Christmas." (238).

Earlier in his preface, he states that;

I am bound to confess that I feel, after seventeen years, more puzzled over many things than I did after the same number of weeks in the country. I believe my experience is not unique. Old coasters have often expressed themselves to the same effect. Hence in putting into print the following pages. I do so with no little diffidence. Though I have sifted the information as thoroughly as possible, yet I should still consider it highly presumptuous to think that no statement stands in need of revision. (Basden: 1921)

Basden's Eurocentric views make him link the Igbo native affairs to the Battack of Sumatra in Indian Archipelago, even though he recommended "a careful study of Levitical Law," to understanding the Igbo native law which was similar to the Mosaic system". His inspirers in

studying the Igbo native affairs were Lieutenant Colonel A.F. Lockyer- Ferryman's *British Nigeria* text and Reverend Dr. R.H. Nassau's *Fetishism in West Africa*, all of these were European scholars biased against the black culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Racism has informed most of the negative attitudes that informed some European writers in assessing African literature. This attitude is deeply rooted in superiority complex and subjective thinking which make the 'whites' to look down on African culture and discriminate against it. This problem influenced such reactionary measures that influenced most African writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe and Kenneth Kaunda. Kaunda (1962:41) states that

We had to make our people conscious that they were human beings just as good or as bad as any other... I was aware that most of our people who had gone to fight in defense of the British Empire had suffered for nothing; we were only employed as hewers of wood and drawers of water, and we could not eat from the same tables nor share the same bed in hotels. I would ask which was more important: to prepare someone else's meals and beds or to share them? Was it not common sense that a person who prepared your meals and made your bed and looked after you was controlling your life but I will not sit at the same table with you because you are stinking or because you are black.

It is therefore obvious that the Eurocentric idiosyncrasy over African world is baseless, altruistic, if not man's inhumanity to fellow man. This psyche had been entrenched on Africans as normal and acceptable, but time shall prove it wrong. Africans are not beasts, neither are they "darkness" but men like their European counterparts. Race, Region and Reason should not be denied the black skin coloured people (known as Africans) but love and humanitarian feeling, plus godliness are factors that will build them.

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