

# Poverty, Corruption and the Nigerian Church: Chukwuma Ibezute's *Stain on a White Robe*

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## Abstract

This article contends that despite the fact that Nigeria is still referred to as a country that is blessed with enormous natural resources, writers and scholars have referred to it as a country that harbours some of the poorest people in the world. For this reason "419ing" has taken the centre stage. "419ers" now feign to be pastors and prophets and own churches where they extort the people. Using Chukwuma Ibezute's *Stain on a White Robe* (2004) this is demonstrated. The novel depicts how poverty and corruption have crippled contemporary Nigerian churches and got them all ruined.

**Keywords:** .Poverty .Corruption .Christians .Church(es)

## Introduction

In recent years, majority of the literatures pouring out in the country have always included Nigeria in the list of the poorest countries in Africa (Charles Nnolim 2009: 229). This claim is also antithesis to other research claims that the country is blessed with enormous natural resources. What this means is that the country in actual sense is not poor but its rich resources have been so wrongly managed to the extent that instead of enhancing the value of its human resources, it has ended up impoverishing them. The situation is now so bad that the country is said to now harbor "some of the poorest people in the world with as many as 69 percent of the population, which is about 112.47 million Nigerians living below the poverty line" (Abdult 2015: 6).

In his book, Abdult links this case of poverty amidst plenty to corruption. This is because it involves the stealing of the country's resources that would have been used to provide 'wealth-creating infrastructure' for its citizens. Oduwole Tajudeen and Fadeyi Adebayo (2013: 106) describe poverty in Nigeria "as an economic situation where a household income is insufficient to meet the minimum nutritional need for growth and long-term survival and that it is a vicious circle of multiple adverse circumstances that limit the choices of the poor". Ajulor (2013:237) also notes that with the way Nigeria is moving, it is clear that the country is retrogressing "to become one of the 25 poorest countries in the world".

With extreme poverty among the people, Charles Nnolim posits that Nigerians now depict "a people adrift, hedonistic [...]" (2009:229) and the country now represents a "society without direction, operating on the principle of catchment, geographical spread, federal character, disadvantaged state where the individual is irreligious, debauched and thinks with his crotch. Women took to whoring as business where they are either trafficked by a syndicate or quite often traffic themselves by migrating to the flesh pots of Europe" (2012: 158). Seeing the level of poverty in the country, Ben Okri laments the state of the country through one of his characters in *The Landscape Within*, thus: "I think ours is another damned generation of loss." Camillus Ukah (2007: 166), through one of his own characters in *When the Wind Blows*, states: "I weep for this generation. I weep for a generation hunted by its own machination and ensnared by its own trap".

In order to survive this extreme situation of poverty, most Nigerians get involved in all sorts of shady businesses and crimes, such as trafficking, kidnapping, robbery and '419ing'<sup>1</sup>. As a matter of fact, UNESCO (2006: 11) report on Nigeria about human trafficking confirms that "Nigeria has acquired a reputation for being one of the leading African countries in human trafficking with cross-border and internal trafficking". It goes further to point out that "Nigeria is a country of origin, transit, and destination for human trafficking" (2006: 11). Yet the report recognizes trafficking of persons as "the third largest crime after economic fraud and the drug trade" (2006: 11). Hence, this accounts for the high number of persons being jailed in Nigeria for human trafficking and other related crimes yearly. Recent report on poverty has also shown that robbery activities have been on the increase for the past ten years in Nigeria (see Abdult 2015:6). However, the campaign against crime and crime related activities recently launched by the federal government of Nigeria has helped in the sensitization of the populace on the consequences of getting involved in crimes and crime related activities. However, in order to avoid being caught up by the law, most criminal minded Nigerians sort for other means of survival that may not necessary land them in prison. And the most available and viable business for them became the "church business".

Since, Karl Max rightly observed, "Religion is the opium of the mass," and the more neck deep into poverty the mass are the more religious they become, these criminal minded Nigerians or '419ers'<sup>2</sup> are guaranteed of the viability of the "church business". They now feign to be "born-again" and then crown themselves with such titles as pastors and prophets. They go ahead to establish churches. This is the reason according to Paul Kollman (2010:4), "Africa [...] houses a larger variety of manifestations of Christianity than any other continent". Such pastors or prophets become eventually money conscious and lay emphasis on money than preaching the gospel. One of the reasons they seem to be succeeding is because, as Michael A Gomez (2013:78) puts it, "religion has been central to the African experience". Nigerian Christians hardly doubt pastors or prophets, especially when they claim they are sent by God. One other reason for this is the fact that one needs no capital to begin church in Nigeria, hence, it has led to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria to the extent that make-shift batchers are now built by the road-sides and shops are now rented for church purposes.

It is therefore not surprising that most Nigerian writers are beginning to reflect this situation in their fictions. Among these Nigerian writers is Chukwuma Ibezute. Ibezute's fictional works reflect the day-to-day activities and problems associated with contemporary Nigerian society. His novel, *Stain on a White Robe*, for instance, is about "the corrupt Nigerian religious (church) system" (see Solomon Awuzie 2016), while his other novels are about other aspects of the Nigerian society. As Michel Zeraffa (1976: 10) rightly observed "it is through its formal character and through the techniques used to create that formal character that a work of art exposes reality"; through the characters of the novel, *Stain on a White Robe* (2004), how poverty and corruption enter into contemporary Nigerian churches and got them all ruined is revealed.

#### **Poverty and Corruption in Ibezute's *Stain on a White Robe***

Like many contemporary Nigerian fictions that reveal the extent of poverty in Nigeria and the extent at which criminal minded Nigerians are using the church system as a means of swindling money from their poor fellow Nigerians, Ibezute's *Stain on a White Robe* (2004) exposes the level of poverty in the country and links it to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. Of importance in the novel is the fact that poverty and corruption have led people to start contemplating religious centres as business centres and like the country itself, the church is at its verge of collapse.

The novel is set in contemporary time when poverty and corruption are at crescendo—at a time when one does anything to survive. The novel is dominated by Christian characters who are all out to deceive others in order to make a living. This also

accounts for the reason why the novel ended in chaos. This goes to say that any society where the majority of its populace is made up of those who earn their living through deceit, such a society is heading for doom. The novel achieves its message of focus through the use of a number of corrupt characters and these characters include Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke, Archbishop Ronald Mezie, Sir Matthew Agu and Christie Okonga. Through these characters it is revealed how in order to make a living some individuals end up turning their society upside down and making it a place that is not fit for human habitation. Of course the society of the novel is a microcosm of the Nigerian society and the novel is saying that this can only happen in a country like Nigeria where everyone is assumed the lord of the jungle: A place where everyone thinks of "sucking" from the country stream of wealth and thinks of only sucking it dry. However, this is what happens in a country where the government leaves the people with nothing to survive with. In such situation, the people look the other way and start struggling on their own to make ends meet. The consequence of this is that while the corrupt politicians are up the government ladder taking everything and squeezing them into their pant pockets, the corrupt and criminal minded people are down the masses ladder stealing from the poor. This is what happened in the society of the novel. The criminal minded people among the masses discovered how lucrative the church business can be and when into it. In order to succeed in carrying out their mindset, they bend the rules governing the Nigerian Christian society to suit themselves. The novel further reveals that most of reverend pastors are not genuine; they are like the "419ers," who become reverends, pastors or prophets in order to "get away from restlessness and competitive challenges of the world and its attendant worries and heartbreaks" (2004: 30). The novel explains:

Once they successfully passed through the rigours of studentship and got ordained, those who chose the vocation to run away from the hardship and difficulties of the world felt they had been authorized to lead a normal life like their contemporaries in the wider world. But in practice, they would maintain their ordination and vocation ceremoniously, without spiritual uplift and growth and would not care to live by their teachings. Yet, most often, these flesh and world clergymen grew envious of their colleagues who, due to their devotion to their vocation and spiritual commitment to their calling, were elevated by God to perform miracles and wonders [...] Some church ministers who, by their calling, preached the gospel and championed the cause of people loving one another, sometimes, out of envy and jealousy, witch-hunted their colleagues. A few of them sometimes carried out nefarious acts of poisoning and murder. (2004: 30)

In the novel, Reverend Pastor Martins Okeke and Archbishop Ronald Mezie are used to represent this group of Christian leaders in Nigeria who become reverend pastors to get away from the harsh realities of contemporary Nigerian society or who become pastors in order to extort from churchgoers. While in the novel, Archbishop Ronald Mezie represents leaders of the Pentecostal Churches who do not need to go through the former seminary in order to be ordained pastors, Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke, on the other hand, represents reverend fathers of the Catholic Churches in Nigeria. The difference between the two Nigerian churches is seriously stressed in the novel. For instance, since corrupt Archbishop Ronald Mezie, of "Reapers Christian Believers Fellowship" (RCBF) discovered that to attract more people to his church, he needed to perform "miracles", he travelled to India to acquire powers and visited "*Babalawos*"<sup>3</sup> for evil powers. Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke, on the other hand, does not need such power because CdHGM does not attach so much importance to the issues of miracles. Unlike Archbishop Ronald Mezie, Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke's greatest challenge is the issue of women and the acquisition of wealth. Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke is an example of

those corrupt reverend fathers in Nigeria who are chronic womanisers and who would go extra miles to defraud the church in order to impress a lady or woman they have their eyes on. During one of his conversations with Henry Onyema, Ronald Mezie spoke for such clergies. Onyema had asked: "But you told us here that you love the life of clergymen?" and in reply Mezie said:

'Yes. I said so. Try to get my point. I said instead of wobbling up and down in search of elusive success like in my own case, becoming a clergyman who automatically becomes king the moment he is ordained has to be considered the best option. But the hard nut to crack lies in this condition of chastity and celibacy for life. Even if a morally-conscious man ignores these beautiful daughters of Eve who are moving about in their captivating and majestic gait, he cannot promise not to have at all, any woman he could fall back to. Unless the man is not healthy. Or, if he is castrated. Let us be realistic' (2004: 42–43)

Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke and Archbishop Ronald Mezie are the proverbial "roadside mechanic that would not allow one know the distinction between the sane and the insane."

Of interest in the novel is also the character of Chief Sir Matthew Agu who believes that church is business. Chief Sir Matthew Agu is like most Nigeria Christians who help to build the church with the intention of reaping their investments later. He contributed to the building of RCBF and expected that he got some share of the offerings and tithes. When Chief Matthew Agu saw that Archbishop Ronald Mezie was not ready to share the offerings and tithes, he requested for the 'Sir' title.

Christie Okonga is another corrupt character like Chief Sir Matthew Agu. She is not a clergy but is one of those through which the entire system is corrupted. She is also a business lady. She comes to church just to meet men of different vocations and to see if she could seduce them in order to get some money out of them. In order to make some money for herself, she sold her naive friend Loretta Onwe out for sex to Martin Okeke when Martin Okeke was a young seminarian. Having almost had sex with all the women in his church and was still not satisfied, Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke decided to secretly marry Loretta Onwe. Henry Onyema, Loretta's ex-husband, soon discovered and planned to expose the corrupt practices of Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke and his kinds in a symposium he was to organise at the Republican Stadium, Lagos.

In the novel, there are still some good Christian characters. Among this group of characters are Berthrand Ekwunike, Henry Onyema and Reverend Pastor Obed Dauda. At different times in the novel, Berthrand Ekwunike is used by Archbishop Ronald Mezie and Chief Sir Matthew Agu to enrich themselves without him realising it. At RCBC, where he is the administrative officer of the church without pay, he does all the preaching and makes members to bring offerings and tithes into the offering and tithe boxes, while Chief Sir Matthew Agu and Archbishop Ronald Mezie siphoned all the funds. The novel reveals that corrupt Nigerians like those they always cheat. Berthrand Ekwunike is loved by Chief Sir Matthew Agu and Archbishop Ronald Mezie. It is also depicted in the novel that the society like corrupt people and hate those who try to do the right thing or who want to force others to do the right thing. Henry Onyema is a character through which this is demonstrated. When Comrade Henry Onyema spoke out on the corruption that was ravaging the Nigerian church and the entire Nigerian society, he was found dead the next day by the corner of the road. Though before his death the *Christendom today* magazine expressed a similar fear for him thus:

'How safe is Henry Onyema in a polarized African state whose government cannot guarantee the safety of her citizens? He is brave and may be factual but

what's his arrangement for his security in a country with an increasing rate of kidnapping, assassination and brazen murder?' (2004:189)

However, Reverend Pastor Obed Dauda explained Henry Onyema's fate in a country like Nigeria during his sermon in following words: "while we are talking of change, reforms and boomerang, let us not lose sight that the arrow does not rebound only when one does wrong or is guilty. Sometimes, actions intended to be for one's good, or for the betterment of the people boomerang to unpleasant consequences against the initiator" (2004:144).

### **Conclusion**

Through the novel, we are made to realise that all hope is not lost and that something can still be done to savage the collapsing Nigerian churches. To save the churches, Reverend Pastor Obed Dauda is of the view that we should stop complaining and tackle the Nigerian church problem. This is because "there's a saying that whenever an old man in the midst of children mimics crying, he has indirectly told the children around him to cry themselves numb" (2004:178). Every genuine Christian should do everything to solve the problem and to purge the church of corruption and all corrupt practices. The first way of achieving this is by giving sincere sermons and enlightenment campaign. Since it is a nationwide problem, Reverend Pastor Obed Dauda is also of the view that without enlightenment campaign, it will be –

"[...] difficult to achieve change and reforms. A situation where someone like you, a university graduate and former civil servant does not know some basic things you are supposed to know, leaves much to be desired. No meaningful change can take place in a situation where a greater percentage of the citizenry is ignorant of its rights as citizens, and is typically illiterate in the country's current affairs and basic citizenship education." (2004: 144)

If the sermon and campaign fail to work, Henry Onyema's observation that Nigerian Christians "should not relent in challenging evil and the agents of backwardness which stand on our way to greatness" (2004:162) should be put to use. In order to match action for action, Nigerian Christians should stop patronising corrupt and "fake" pastors, prophets reverend pastors and reverend fathers and stop allowing reverend fathers like Reverend Pastor Martin Okeke and pastors like Archbishop Ronald Mezie to have their ways. Since "it is only he who teaches a man with ear-ache that usually gets exhausted by repeating himself and shouting" (2004:155) let us not involve the government because "that is the very root of corruption" (Ukah, 2007:121) or "our politicians" because they "have no value for history and do not learn from the past" (Ukah, 2007:155).

However, the novel reveals that the poverty in Nigerian can only be addressed if Nigerians sincerely want the problem solved. Unfortunately, Nigerians seem to be more interested in acquiring wealth and in sex related activities. They seem not to be interested in societal values. Everyone is so engrossed in how to survive and be respected without seeing problem in the situation. These are the reasons why it could be difficult for the situation to change.

### **Notes**

- (1) In Nigerian parlance "419ing" means the criminal act of swindling money out of people. This came about as a result of the fact that section 419 of Nigerian Criminal Code pertains to all such matters that include false pretences and fraud.
- (2) '419ers' are persons involved in the criminal act of '419ing.'

(3) *Babalawos* are what the Yoruba call witch doctors in their native tongue.

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