

# Pepetela's Naked Revolution As An Imaginative Stride Towards African Recovery

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## ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of many Africans' demand that the African writer bring his artistic prowess to bear on the continent's multifarious problems, this paper examines Pepetela's "naked revolution" as enunciated in **The Return of the Water Spirit** as an imaginative stride towards African recovery. Unlike the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the capitalist democracy which have failed the Angolan people, naked revolution is truly organic and non-elitist. Its uniqueness lies in its originality in the African soil, a vote no doubt, for the continent to look inwards for its own salvation rather than rely on foreign "messiahs" and their questionable means, methods and modes. This, the paper contends, is the very essence of the connection with the myth of the water spirit and his uncanny exploits. Even so, the paper concludes, the revolution can only truly contribute to the African recovery if it goes beyond mere nakedness to full scale praxis like the Kianda in its operation. This way, the triumph of the water spirit becomes a metaphor for the eventual triumph of the revolution which will eventually bring about a new Angola where virtue is truly stronger because it is united.

**KEY WORDS:** revolution, naked, independence, elite Africa, recovery.

## INTRODUCTION

In *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1962), Georg Lukacs argues that modern writers should do more than merely portray the despair and ennui of late bourgeoisie society. According to him, writers should try to take up a critical perspective on this futility revealing positive possibilities beyond it. To merely mirror society, Lukacs contends, will bring into art the very distortions which characterize corruption-ridden bourgeois consciousness that is modern society. This is because, in the immortal words of Terry Eagleton (1977:52), "the reflection of a distortion will become a distorted reflection". , Lukacs (1971:8), advocates political consciousness on the part of the writer in order to effect societal change. According to him, "the true artist must be passionately committed to the great issues of human progress".

Concerned too with the seemingly never-ending state of disillusionment occasioned by the nauseating post-independence condition which has been the bane of the African continent, many critics, writers and social activists have challenged African artists to go beyond social realism in their artistic vision. Not a few of these critics have tasked the African artists to point the way forward or at least give a moral direction in their artistic endeavour to the struggle to salvage the continent from the crucible of underdevelopment, corruption and neo-colonialism.

As far back as the late sixties, the Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong'O (1969:69) (then known as James Ngugi) declared unequivocally:

It is not enough for the African artist, standing aloof, to view society and highlights its weaknesses. He must go beyond this... he can give moral direction and vision to a struggle which, though suffering temporary reaction, is continuous and is changing the face of the twentieth century.

Earlier, Wole Soyinka (1966:33), advised his fellow African writers that it was time they abandoned "the narcissistic phase" of African writing to artistically engage contemporary issues in the African continent. Rather than hide in the "womb", of his literary construct of literary inactivity, the African writer, he stated, should bring his vision to bear on the problems in the continent. Soyinka became even more trenchant in February 1967 in Stockholm where he stated that if indeed the African writer existed at all then he or she should vindicate his/her existence by helping the continent settle down, after the whirlwind of colonialism, to egalitarian planning and social stability. That many African writers, especially novelists, accepted the "literary gauntlet" thrown by Ngugi and others can be seen in the number and nature of post-independence novels in the continent. Some of these novels include Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* (1973), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973), Ngugi Wa Thiong'O's *Petals of Blood* (1977), Matigari (1990) and *Wizard of Crow* (2006), Iyayi's *Violence* (1987), Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) Usman Adamu's *Hope in Anarchy* (2007) and Pepetela's *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002) These novels stand out in their vision beyond the

disillusion in the continent. Organized action rather than individual messianism is celebrated as capable of reversing the ugly African condition. Adopting an omnibus assessment of many of these novels, Ime Ikkideh (1986:37) avers that:

It is not optimism in itself that distinguishes these novels; it is the positive manipulation of group action to achieve a reversal of odds through revolutionary action that signals the possible advent of a new order. To that extent, they express a new reality which marks them out as imaginative strides towards an African recovery.

The Return of the Water Spirit, a novel written about post independent Angola seems to be Pepetela's response to the call for this novel approach. Angola attained her independence in 1975 after a long and bitter struggle against Portuguese colonialism. Compared with other independent African states, Angola is politically young. But like these countries she has had her own share of the continent's disillusioned syndrome of disappointment in unfulfilled hopes leading to mammoth frustration, anger, poverty and cynicism. Since stepping down as the Vice-Minister of Education under President Angustinho Neto in 1982, Artur Carlos Maurico dos Santos nicknamed Pepetela, has been a devoted chronicler of Angolan history and society in his fiction. He has never relented in his fierce criticism of the corruption, poverty, polarization and general socio-political disillusionment in post-independence Angola. The failed socialist promises, the widening gap between the rich and the poor as well as the imperceptible transition from the proverbial frying pan of Soviet dictatorship to the fire of abused capitalist democracy have constituted a huge butt of Pepetela's criticism in virtually all his oeuvre. Pepetela is particularly piqued by the varnishing ethical and moral values that underscored the anti-colonial struggle in Angola. Since the socialist revolution, and indeed Europe's political solutions, seem to have failed in Angola, it is time therefore, Pepetela contends, the country looked inward for her salvation. This is the genesis of the "naked revolution" as espoused in *The Return of the Water Spirit* (2002) where the Kianda myth is artistically brought to illuminate contemporary struggle by Angolans for an egalitarian society. This paper is an evaluation of this new reality which marks it out as an imaginative stride towards Angolan, and indeed African recovery.

#### **PEPETELA'S THE RETURN OF THE WATER SPIRIT IN PERSPECTIVE**

*The Return of the Water Spirit* is set in post independence era in Angola. The People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) is trying to implement its Leninist doctrine. As Carmina, the fanatical member of the ruling party is getting married to the weak-willed Joao Evangelista at the beginning of the novel, the first building in Kinaxixi Square is falling down. Shortly, the Soviet Block starts crumbling, possibly under Gorbachev, and external pressures begin to mount on Angola to embrace democratic opening-up. At first, Carmina resists vehemently the so-called opening-up of the Angolan economy but soon adjusts to the new way. She contests and wins a parliamentary seat in the country's election. But the rival party breaks the cease fire and civil war resumes against the backdrop of the falling buildings in Kinaxixi Square, a syndrome that has made Luanda the Mecca for many scientists who try to no avail to unravel its cause. The political class' embrace of capitalism brings about the abrogation of social responsibility which in turn leads to the polarization of the society.

As the revolutionaries are no longer encumbered by ideological pretexts to egalitarianism they become ruthless business people. Carmina for example, imports arms for the ruling MPLA party in its war against the rebels. As the civil war devastates the country it is obvious that a change in regime and ideology has changed nothing, for apart from its claim to democracy, Angola's adventure in capitalism has been as disastrous as its romance with socialism. The plight of the masses is intensified by the falling buildings which renders them hopeless and homeless. It is only at the end of the novel that we are told that the water spirit is responsible for the falling buildings. And so, jobless, hopeless and now homeless, the masses decide to go naked to protest against the uncaring attitude of the sitting government. So, skillfully juxtaposed in this one hundred and two page-novel are two stories: the life of Carmina the hitherto strident Marxist but now dyed-in-the-wool capitalist and the collapse of buildings in the Kinaxixi Square aptly called Luanda Syndrome.

#### **NAKEDNESS AS A REVOLUTIONARY ALTERNATIVE**

In his analysis of *The Return of the Water Spirit*, Phillip Rothwell (2004:195) asserts that the novel, "in some ways continues Pepetela's profound and damning portrayal of a betrayed utopia", an imaginary place or state of things in which everything is perfect. The Angolans were not expecting to live in an imaginary island described as the seat of a perfect social and political life as described in a romance by Sir Thomas Moore and published in 1516. That is impossible in an imperfect world. They had expected that the exit of the oppressive,

racist and exploitative colonial regime of the Portuguese would usher in the much-desired independence where all Angolans would be free to take charge of their collective destiny as a nation without oppression and inequality. But as presented by Pepetela, post-independence Angola is seen as a veritable dystopia where the ruling elite are defined by their rhetoric of propaganda. The masses who fought the war of independence have become the dregs of society in post-independence Angola who daily dialogue with poverty and all kinds of social and political deprivation. While the nouveau-riches drive around in their air-conditioned cars, these wretched of the earth suffer from extreme want because they have been marginalized in the new political dispensation. The war veteran, who now begs for arms having lost both legs during the struggle for independence, is a testament to this neglect and uncaring attitude of the new political elite. Frustrated, he shouts angrily at Joao Evangelista who is unable to offer him any money

When I was in the war, I was a hero because I was with the glorious Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola which was fighting to defend your lives. All the while you were having it good here in the city. Now that I've lost my legs, I'm not a hero anymore. I don't even have the right to live. But you still continue to have it good (81)

The amputee's transformation into a beggar is no doubt an affirmation of the assertion of Emily Chow (2002:6) that "in post independence, the "hero" becomes "the beggar" and the nationalism that counted and mobilized a people against colonial rule, that made people offer their lives voluntarily is revealed to be nothing more than vacuous rhetoric". For these masses, independence has brought nothing, but "disaster, disappointment and disease" (Zezeza, 1994:474). The people's suffering is accentuated by their falling houses caused by the uncanny water spirit, Kianda. And so, poverty-stricken, hopeless and now homeless without any iota of care from their supposed government which has turned them into refugees in their own land, the people decide "to dress exclusively in their birthday suits" as a protest "against the passivity of the authorities which did little to sort out their basic problems" (93).

Like many revolutions in history, naked revolution is a child of circumstance -it is spontaneous, home-grown and devoid of textbook clichés and slogans from overseas. Honorio justifies the rationale for this shocking movement.

It's the new fashion in Kinaxixi. It's taking on. The homeless in Kinaxixi are protesting against a government which does nothing for them. Nakedness is our new national garb, the one that's in accordance with the standard of living of our people. We can't even walk around in a loin cloth. A loin cloth is a middle-class luxury (94).

The naked movement has no rigid structures or formulae. It does not portend authority or authoritarianism because it is a genuine mass-movement of people intent on driving the point home that going nude is simply a way of saying that showing off wealth cannot be tolerated in a new Angola as well as to exhibit the masses' total level of destitution. Although African ancestors once walked around semi-nude, this movement has nothing to do with traditionalism but everything with the indictment of the ruling elite who brutally exploit them even in post independence Angola; it has everything to do with protest because nakedness is the only garb compatible with the poverty into which the masses have sunk. According to Honorio, the movement is not even a political one

...it is a movement. It is a question of civic coherence. Everyday our currency is destroyed, the prices of goods rise, no one can work because salaries are the only things in this country which don't rise. Isn't it a shameful luxury to adorn yourself with clothes, even if they are the rags from some filthy cloth? (95)

The new uprising in Angola is gender-blind and truly class-less since, in the final analysis, human beings are all actually naked and therefore, genuinely egalitarian. Nakedness is everybody's birthday suit. Even so, the people's solace in nakedness as a protest against the selfish ruling class is hardly surprising, for if the Marxist ideology has failed with all its promises and the capitalist democracy is failing, it is only logical that the people go back to their natural state. Unlike many revolutions in the past which manifested a social disconnect right from their inception, this movement has "arisen from the masses and no one is going to control it and make use of it" (99) According to Honorio, unarguably the leading light of the new revolution in spite of his argument

to the contrary, “we-the whole lot of us – we won’t allow it” (99). He emphasizes the movement’s uniqueness and originality

we are creating history. It’s time to stop copying our formulas from overseas we have to invent our own methods for the struggle (99).

The revolution’s strength derives from the people’s freedom to express their initiatives. All the ideas of the revolution so far have arisen from the people’s regular discussions. It is not a political party with rigid structures which often prevents individual initiatives from flowering. Political parties with all their restrictions and sundry prison-like features are all very well and good for Europe where they were invented but certainly not for Angola where the people have their own ways of organizing themselves. According to Honorio, the next stage of real action is the one in which members of the movement will start taking off the clothes of people who walk around in the streets. This will finally lead to a class struggle in the society between the naked and the fully clothed. Joao Evangelista should not even think that the pro-rich law enforcement agents will be able to protect people like him and his wife Carmina because very soon the revolution’s members will run into millions, “and no one fights against millions” (90). Honorio, the former timid, hard working conformist worker and model socialist party activist has become fully drunk with the new revolution’s wine of optimism:

Then, yes, that will be the movement to impose social equality by force.

That is, to tear off the clothes of the rich (96).

The government counteracts this phenomenon of nudity by quickly announcing a plan to solve the question of the buildings that are falling down in Kinaxixi government counteracts this phenomenon of nudity is by quickly announce. But the people are not deceived because they know that a government that has not been able to unravel the cause of the building collapse cannot be thinking of a plan. The government’s announcement is therefore, nothing but a ruse. After all, if there is anything that the hapless masses are all in agreement about it is that their so -hascalded government is like a daddy who has abdicated his unselfish role of looking after his children and is instead looking after his own interests. To members of the ruling class like the hardened Carmina, the naked movement is nothing but “an immoral monkeying around” (100) which should be crushed vehemently. Despite this however, it is obvious that they will soon start looking for hiding places when the membership of the movement starts running into millions. This is because, so far, they have done nothing to address the issues at stake: refugees, thousands of children who live out on the streets and the case of the mutilated in the war.

The truths of a nation are its realities. The realities of a post colonial Angola as presented by Pepetela are quite damning and alarming. Post colonial Angola is now a country in which the Marxist revolution has failed by betraying its socialist principles. It is one in which the collapsed buildings are actually a metaphor for the failure of the state which has not succeeded in changing itself from what Zeleza (1994:479) calls “inherited colonial leviathan”. It is against this unremitting socio-political background that one begins to feel that Honorio’s revolutionary optimism may not be misplaced after all. Indeed, when the membership of the revolution eventually runs into millions then, Barry Riddel’s theory of “states without citizens” will have come to the fore. According to Barry Riddel (1992:80)

the present reality in sub-Saharan Africa is that people are withdrawing from a political system which is uncaring, corrupt, inept, predatory and unrepresentative and from an economy which operates to the advantage of elites and in the interests of the developed world.

The consequence of the above, continues Riddel, is that “government administrators are avoided and ignored by increasing number of people in both the country side and the city as a second economy emerges” (60). But how effective is the naked movement in enhancing African recovery? Can it truly be regarded as a burning candle in the continent’s social, political and economic darkness?

### **AN APPRASAL OF PEPETELA’S “NAKED REVOLUTION”**

In its consciousness of the post-independence African situation as exemplified by post-colonial Angola and in the call for a confrontation rather than hide in the artistic “womb”, *The Return of the Water Spirit* is a work of revolutionary vision. The uniqueness of the movement lies in its originality in the African environment. African writers like Achebe and Armah are never tired of saying that Africa’s salvation can never come from outside the continent. Achebe’s literary mouthpiece in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem Osodi says that it does not “lie in spouting clichés from other peoples histories and struggles” (159). Similarly, Honorio, Pepetela’s

mouthpiece declares convincingly: “we need to dare ourselves to think with our own heads” (98) instead of “copying our formulas from overseas” (99).

African women throughout the continent have been using naked protest and genital cursing for centuries to express their intolerance or resistance to the policies of those in authorities. According to Maryam Kazeem (200:3) “one of the most powerful manifestation of naked protest over the past century took place during the Women’s War in Eastern Nigeria in 1929”. This protest was a significant manifestation of black women’s resistance to colonial authority and racialized notions of the body. The significance of the history of the method, continues Kazeem, “continues to manifest in naked protests, which have taken place in West, East and Southern Africa” (3). Naked protest which was once again used against oil companies in the Niger Delta in Nigeria in 2012 has since spread to other parts of the world.

As seen above, the homeless people’s need for protest may be spontaneous or immediate but their method is not necessarily so. The common people are experienced enough to know that foreign ideologies cannot thrive in Angola hence the need to dare to think with their own heads and invent their own methods for the struggle. Honorio for example, “has read all the classics of Marxism” (99). So, when he says that political parties with their rigidity often kill people’s initiatives and oppress their members, and therefore, should be left for Europe where they were invented, we have no choice than to take him seriously. After all, Africans have always had their own unique ways of doing things . Confronted by widespread confusion in Angola a few years after independence, Augustinho Neto (1979:492), the president had asked Angolan writers to rediscover an Angolan cultural heritage, an authentic Angola experience to help anchor a new Angolan consciousness which would enable the people to assert an absolute and final distance from the culture of Portugal. He challenged Angolan literature to present a “true context of the Angola nation... the Angolan people” in order to assert the fact that “Angolan culture is African”. This is necessary, he emphasized, “to heal the epistemological and ontological trauma wrought by a life lived under colonization”.

True, as Frantz Fanon (1963:252) reminds us, such a call might have been nothing but a distraction of the people from the present condition of the Angolan society as many politicians often do so. But then, as warned by Helen Tiffin (1987:17), any attempt to retrieve an authentic image of a pre-colonial time is well-nigh impossible because “pre-colonial cultural unity can never really be truly recovered”. Even so, as Stuart Hall (1994:382), has asserted “cultural identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think” because it is “never complete, always in process; for identity is after-all a product of society”. However, one is not unaware of the need for writers to occasionally reconstruct the past in order to direct the present and even illuminate the future. Wole Soyinka, (1976:106), for example, regards Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons* (1973) as “the visionary reconstruction of the past for purposes of a social direction” on account of its provision of self-illumination for its African readers by taking them through an endless stream of time to know their past. Ashaolu (1980:183), also sees the novel as “a reconstruction of history, long distorted by the jaundiced intrusion, contamination and imposition of alien pre-colonial African World-view”. Pepetela’s retrieval of the myth of the water spirit for example, has a lot of artistic significance in this novel. This is because the naked revolution’s ultimate success may depend very much on its ability to adopt the spirits’ methodology of reclaiming its space hitherto appropriated by the oppressive and materialistic ruling class.

The revolution’s premium on immediacy, honesty, spontaneity and inclusiveness will no doubt promote genuine and creative initiatives for development. This new politics that repudiates the inherited and iniquitous system of the state is a promotion of a political freedom which Rocker (2004:16) calls a “free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces of life which is a necessary condition for the radically democratic libertarian political philosophy of anarchism”. The primacy of no authority and leadership is reminiscent of the libertarian political and social thought of the French thinker Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. According to Proudhon, the French revolution failed because it did not dismantle the very structure, systems and mechanisms of the society that had produced such a revolutionary will. What happened therefore, was nothing short of a replacement of “one ruling elite with another which applied violence, terror, secret police and a professional army to maintain their control” (Ward, 2004:2). In spite of its vaunted socialism, post-colonial Angola made the same mistake, for although, “the government called itself Marxist... many suspected that their Marxism never went beyond the level of propaganda” (3). It is therefore, no surprise, that the revolution has no place for leadership, whether political or economic, in order not to create an avenue for the interference of the intelligentsia or the economic elite. This revolution is therefore, truly “organic, a veritable product of the essential character of life” (Boggs, 1993:35); or according to Bakunin, a revolution that comes “from the very depths of the soul of the people” (Guerin, 1970:34).

If history of revolutions is anything to go by, one can understand the reason behind naked revolution’s fanatical distancing of itself from leadership and authority. History has shown that it is often the struggle for



leadership position that usually makes revolutions to destroy their own children like a hen gone berserk. For instance, the post-revolution struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky during the Bolshevik Revolution which led to the destruction of the latter, brilliant though he was, is a case in point. For now, the revolution remains a genuine mass-movement of the people out to foment a rebellion that will force the country to ignore the diabolical dictates of International Monetary Fund (I.M.F) which only make the people poorer and corrupt.

As promising as the new revolution seems, a few uncomfortable questions pop up their heads like a sore thumb. The revolution's lack of clear-cut principles, objectives and philosophy is rather unsettling. If at all these ideas exist, they are at best hazy and nebulous for now. Apart from the movement's rebellion which is aimed at dissuading the State from treading I.M.F's path of economic self-destruction, one is not aware of any blueprint for the country's recovery. In short, Pepetela's vision seems to suffer from a failure "to combine the historical and revolutionary with the dialectical and the analytical" (Ikiddeh, 1980:42). According to Honorio, when the membership of the revolution runs into millions, it will be time "to impose social equality by force, that is, to tear off the clothes of the rich" (96) Collective nudity may succeed in creating some form of social equality but one does not see any relationship between nudity and improvement in the life of the people economically, politically or even educationally. What exactly is the next stage of the revolution after Honorio and his group have succeeded in removing the clothes of the people who still walk around in the streets? Is everybody putting on clothes, even if they are filthy necessarily a collaborator with the oppressive ruling elite? Can going naked, actually succeed in swaying the minds of the hardened capitalist rulers to good governance?

By failing to concretely define the revolution's clear essence, Pepetela allows it to gather a certain mystique around itself. This amorphous feature can be seen in the way that Honorio refers to the uprising as a "civic movement", "civic coherence" and "a conscious madness" (95). According to him, the movement has no political undertones but politics has been there from the beginning. After all, as submitted by Terry Eagleton (2008:169), the "political is no more than the way we organize our social life together, and the power-relations which this involves". Against the background of many failed revolutions in history, one can understand naked revolution's emphasis on leaderlessness and the excision of political parties, authority and authoritarianism. The masses are in charge of everything. But the semantics about the word "masses" apart, has not history shown time and again that the masses are often spineless? Even so, the revolution's stand on political organizations is reminiscent of the stand point of the anarchists who declared "that the proletarian revolution must begin by doing away with the political organization of the state" (Guerin 1970:ix). This is because these organizations often manipulate the desires of the people. But in the submission of Hamilton (2013:12), many revolutionary theorists are not in agreement with the view of the anarchists. Friederich Engels, for example, sees the expurgation of state as a mistake since the state is only the organism by which the victorious proletariat can assert itself. Whatever the case, one must not forget that naked revolution is still at its inchoative stage. We must not in our petty-mindedness therefore, be forced to compare it with many revolutions that we know from the past, for the people this time around are simply creating history and inventing their own way.

## CONCLUSION

Since independence, Pepetela, a former member of the liberation struggle, has been particularly critical of the stultifying bureaucracy, crass opportunism and corruption that have been the norm in post independence Angola. Away from the former colonial power, Pepetela's critical barbs are now directed at "the political and ethical deviations of the national administration and civil society of post independence Angola" (Isabel Caldeira, 2008:98). Pepetela's pet revolutionary vision as enunciated in the naked revolution is a repudiation of all foreign ideologies which have led the country to nowhere. In a very skillful way, Pepetela tells us that the success of the new revolution depends on an appropriate lesson from the revolution of the water spirit. Seeing that the selfish ruling elite do not care about his songs of distress, Kianda decides to get more violent by disintegrating the houses in Kinaxixi Square. And as the last building falls to the ground, the hordes of naked people applaud the spirit's feat. He has at last succeeded in reclaiming his land and thus restores Luanda to its original state as an island. Kianda's organic revolution is directly relational to the people. For the naked revolution to truly succeed and contribute to Africa's recovery it must have its roots in the Angola soil like the water spirit. It must be genuinely in touch with Angolan people, the lumpen proletariat, the masses who have been marginalized in the new political dispensation. The revolution's present covenant with the masses must be sustained. This way, the expected regular discussions will not only clarify the objectives, principles and philosophy of the revolution but also its relevance to economic and political gain of the people. Like Kianda, the people may need to go beyond nudity to full scale confrontation if they must free themselves from the post colonial forces of exploitation, alienation and dehumanization. This way, the Angolan people will have succeeded in reinventing themselves to build a new Angola away from political demagoguery and ideological somersaults in the hand of turncoat

revolutionaries and political renegades. This way, the Angolan people will not only have succeeded in reclaiming their political voice but also in reclaiming their desire from the machinery of the state.

This way, the Angolan people and their revolution will have truly contributed their quota to the continent's recovery. The triumph of the water spirit is a symbol of optimism in the novel that the new revolution will succeed if the masses truly dare to be as resolute, determined and original in their quest for liberation from post-independence disillusionment which corruption, maladministration and fraud have visited on the continent courtesy of the selfish ruling elite. Only then can Angola's motto: "virtue is stronger when united" be truly meaningful.

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