

Revisiting the Issue of Resistance to Bribery in A.S. Ogundimu's *A Silly Season*

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Abstract: Bribery is a plague that seriously undermines the economic and social growth of postcolonial African countries and is viewed as a very complex structure deeply rooted in some African societies. It challenges the moral virtues so that almost all the citizens of the society cannot do without it in that the citizens who swim against the tide are frustrated, stigmatised, and pressured by their close relatives and co-workers. Ogundimu differs in his approach to tackle social and political issues in his novel *A Silly Season* (2008), classified among novels of disillusionment. This novel presents and contests the acceptance of a devastating plague by all workers of the civil service. This study focuses on the case of the character Kunle Bangbelu in the focus novel who vehemently resists a rampant social phenomenon and is regarded as the odd-man-out.

Keywords: Bribery, behaviour, challenges, pressure, resistance, role model

Résumé

La corruption est un fléau qui mine dangereusement le développement économique et social de certains pays africains and est perçue comme étant très complexe et enracinée dans certaines sociétés africaines. Elle défie les vertus de la morale de telle sorte que presque aucun citoyen ne peut s'en passer en ce sens que les citoyens qui rament à contre-courant sont frustrés, stigmatisés, et subissent une forte pression venant de leurs proches parents. Ogundimu diffère dans son approche d'aborder les problèmes sociaux et politiques dans son roman *A Silly Season* (2008), classé parmi les romans de désillusion. Cette œuvre romanesque présente et attaque l'acceptation du fléau dévastateur qu'est la corruption par tous les travailleurs de la fonction publique. Cet article met un accent sur le personnage de Kunle Bangbelu dans *A Silly Season* qui résiste avec véhémence au phénomène social répandu et est considéré comme une exception.

Mots clés: corruption, comportement, défi-pression, résistance, modèle

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Introduction

There is a bulk of literature related to the corrupt attitudes of civil servants in the discharge of their professional duties but little has been written about the fierce objection of upright civil servants to bribery. Colonialism creates in the mind of the colonizers the firm belief that it is their birth right to rule over other peoples. Similarly, some African political leaders, who took over from the white colonisers, unfortunately resorted to identical European ways to rule over their fellow citizens selfishly thus copying their white masters. On this score, Macheke

(2014) contends that “After independence, some Africans thought that they were welcoming victory in its fullness but their fellow blacks use their power improperly, replicating the colonial forms of repression” (p. 14). Indeed, after centuries of European imperialism, African countries won their political independence thus entitling the African intellectuals to take the destiny of the black continent into their own hands. But shortly after the political independence, African grassroots still face many great challenges; bribery is one of these. Indeed, bribery is a major social, ethical, political and economic challenge for which a lot of attention should be paid and on which an emphasis should be put. On this score, novels of disillusionment have come into being to reveal “that in African neo-colonial societies, the seeds of disharmony, mediocrity and macabre corporate distrust have been sown; corruption and rampant scarcity of personal integrity have replaced the hitherto peaceful existence” (Kehinde, 2004, p. 229).

Ogundimu’s novel recounts the major topic that exists in early postcolonial African literature where there have been a moral degeneration and loads of unscrupulous African leaders who fail to rule appropriately over their countries. In fact, the present work revisits the issue of bribery dealt with in the novel focusing on the means used to make Ogundimu’s viewpoint clear and obvious to the readers through the fierce criticism of the decayed values of post-colonial African politicians. This study broadens the notion of bribery as far as resistant attitudes are concerned. Non-conformists, that is to say, the righteous who reject the scourge of corruption, observe moral virtues that are unfortunately cast out by close people. The family is normally seen as the first protective institution of individuals but here it constitutes an element of pressure to give in to the practice of bribery. Besides, the spread of bribery at all the different social strata and its harmful weapons could cause the very few righteous people like the character Kunle Bangbelu in Ogundimu’s *A Silly Season* to do nothing but despair. In his novel published in 2008, Ogundimu exposes the moral decadence prevalent in every section of the civil service, using vivid descriptive images expressive of stench and disgust. In this vein, Ajakah (2018) contends that the postcolonial African writer “focuses on the politicians who usurp the power vested in them to pursue their pecuniary interests”.

Post-colonialism and sociocriticism constitute the bedrock on which this paper leans. Sociocriticism “aims to bring out the relations existing between the structures of literary (or cultural) work and the structures of the society in which this work is deeply rooted” (Cros, 2011, p. 33) or sociocriticism “is any approach to literature that relies on society, culture and tradition for potential meaning” (Pewissi, 2017, p. 118). Post-colonial criticism, on the other hand, “deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (Ashcroft, *et al.*, 2007, p. 168). This essay is structured around three principal mainstays. The first pillar of this research paper tackles some key factors that can bring people into bribery or corruption.

Bribery: an external pressure

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: New Edition for Advanced Learners defines bribery as “the act of giving bribes” and bribe as “money or a gift that you illegally give someone to persuade them to do something for you”. In other words, bribery can be viewed as any unlawful act used to get something. It is the practice of giving or taking backhanders before obtaining or rendering a service. So, bribery is an anti-social behaviour which confers unfair benefits, against legal and moral norms and it is an instance of corruption. Hellsten and Lwaitama (2004) define corruption as “using one’s position or office (or public resources in general) for one’s private gains”. As for Masabo (2014, p. 148), he defines corruption as the “actions undertaken for mercenary gain with no regard to honour, right or justice. Such

actions involve the use of abuse or selfish exercise of the power and influence attached to the public office”.

There are many distinguishing features that induce people to get involved in bribery/corruption: pressure from relatives and cronies, overweening ambition. In this wake, a knowledgeable politician contends that:

The root causes of corruption vary from place to place depending on the political, social, economic and cultural circumstances. In Africa, some of the identifiable causes of corruption include the negative colonial legacy, poor leadership, politics of the belly, omnipotent state, greed and selfishness, clientelism and patronage nepotism, absence of popular participation of the public in government, weak institutions of governance, lack of accountability and transparency, lack of political will, weak ethical values, centralist nature of the state and concentration of state power, weak judicial system and constant insecurity and conflicts (Lumumba, 2014, p.22).

Furthermore, external pressures—from the circle of family and close friends as well as in the discharge of professional duties—unfortunately lead some civil servants to take to bribery or corruption in postcolonial Africa. As a matter of fact, the generally accepted view in the civil service with dishonest people is that the shortcut to individual prosperity and enrichment is collecting and demanding bribes. When people are appointed to a position, be it ‘juicy’ or not, they face different kinds of overwhelming situations. On this score, relatives and cronies regularly pester postcolonial leaders to accept bribes or to grant them contracts. In Ogundimu’s novel published in 2008 for instance, the character Auntie Toun, Kunle’s aunt, enjoins her nephew, upgraded to the rank of commissioner, to avoid rejecting bribes in the discharge of his commissionership. Auntie Toun’s enjoinder to her nephew rings as follows:

Then what is this story I am hearing about you rejecting gifts? [...]. There is a time to sow and a time to reap. We have been sowing since you entered primary school. Now is our time to reap [...]. I mean you must take your time; don’t ever go out of your office to demand for money? That is what I call being careful. However, when people bring money to you, you must grab it; that is your own share, and it is your luck. Every morning you pray; you ask God to give you your daily bread. Is God a baker? Do you think he will come down Himself to place food on your table? (Ogundimu, 2008, p. 38)¹

As capitalists do, Kunle’s family circle is reminding him here that, as a commissioner or labourer, he has to create wealth, the means of subsistence of his entire relatives, by accepting bribes. Indeed, Auntie Toun appears as a capitalist on a mission ready to exploit Kunle Bangbelu. Kunle’s people as capitalistic want to see to it that the investment they have made schooling Kunle is yielding profits thus the reproving remark of their spokesperson, Auntie Toun. On the strength of this capitalistic stand, a critic posits that “Capitalism is based on the division between those who own the means of production—the tools and resources needed to make commodities—and the proletariat, who supply the labor power to use these tools to make commodities” (Klages, 2012, p. 12). On this score, the character Kunle Bangbelu in *A Silly Season* faces such uncomfortable situations with his mother, aunt, fiancée, mainly. The pressure coming from everywhere, with the view of taking bribes, can somehow justify the

¹ Further references to the same edition will be referred to as ASS followed by the page number in the main text.

capitalistic behaviour that some civil servants adopt in postcolonial Africa. In Ogundimu's *A Silly Season*, once Kunle has been fortuitously appointed Commissioner for Works, pressures come from all sides to favour this or that relative or friend or worse still to accept bribes offered him so that he can grant contracts to friends or relatives. In this vein, the character Abeji, Kunle's girlfriend, urges him to collect bribes for them to celebrate a plushy wedding. In addition, she harasses Kunle to help his former colleagues by awarding contracts to them with his ministry. The dialogue below—between Kunle and his fiancée Abeji—is very suggestive of the perverted environment in which the upright Commissioner for Works lives:

‘You have to do something for our friends,’ she insisted.

‘Like what?’ I was forced to ask.

‘Awarding contracts to them, for example.’

‘Are they contractors?’

‘They are not. But that's one way to help them’ (ASS, p. 17).

In fact, Abeji wants her fiancé to take advantage of his position as the Minister of Works to unduly award contracts to the self-interested friends who have organised a cocktail party for his appointment. But contrary to what is customary in literature whereby people holding key political positions usually favour friends and relatives, Kunle Bangbelu resists to all the opportunists around him inciting him to favour them. In the same vein, Akwa, a close friend of Kunle's, a former anti-corruption fighter, advises him to collect bribes so as to get rich very quickly. Being very regretful about their past stands against bribery, the ‘born-again’ character Akwa, advises his Commissioner friend to go with the tide. In what looks like a long plea, Akwa tries to mislead the upright Commissioner thus: “Look, old boy, everybody steals. It is just that those who get caught are called names and identified as *bàráwò*. And, if you play the game well, you will not get caught. So, if I were you, *I go play fast game; I go collect bribe so tay I go tire*” (ASS, p. 21). Amazingly enough, even Kunle's mother morally torments him enjoining him to avoid dying a pauper like his father. In the same wake, Kunle's auntie bids him to accept bribes condescendingly in this way:

If you don't need money, the family needs it. Take it and bring it home, we shall keep it for you. In the meantime, I will come for my own share this weekend. Bring money home for me. You understand? Maybe it is because we don't demand our share forcefully that you don't collect it in your office. From now on we shall demand it. Don't let people abuse us [...]. You must not fail, that's the main thing. If you fail, the family has failed. People will laugh at us. That should not happen. If you bungle your tenure, it will be impossible for us to claim that we were unable to give useful advice. So don't mismanage this opportunity; don't shame the family. If someone works as commissioner even for one day; can he go back home as a poor man? That is impossible in Ribalia; you and I know. Why do you want to be different?

Although I am not a government worker, I do execute petty contracts from time to time and I know what people demand from me. I won't say more than that; a word is enough for the wise. That's hoping there is nothing wrong with your head (ASS, pp. 42-43).

It appears that the family pressures on Kunle Bangbelu not to turn down any longer backhanders are too high but he proves to offer them a fierce resistance.

Not only does the pressure come from the family circle to make Kunle take bribes in the discharge of his political position, but in the ministry the unscrupulous staff pesters him to go

with the tide. As a matter of fact, Kayode, his personal assistant, rotten to the core, awkwardly points out to Mrs. Banji, the Permanent Secretary:

Can't the Commissioner behave like you? I'm sure he knows that we all like and respect you. But does he know why? [...]. We like you because you don't interfere; you don't take bribe, but you don't interfere.

That is unlike our Commissioner; he will not eat; yet, he will not allow others to eat. Is that reasonable? What's his problem? How much does he think we earn? How does he want us to make ends meet, if we cannot make extra money? [...]. If he doesn't want to eat, he should make way for those who are hungry. It is as simple as ABC! (ASS, p. 95).

It appears that Kunle is in under external influence from everywhere especially the staff of his cabinet taking their low incomes as a pretext for their malpractice. Nevertheless, he shows a strong and non-conformist attitude in an environment where bribery is people's daily lot. A. S. Ogundimu's *A Silly Season* props up enough the view that there are external factors which pave the way for the malpractice of bribery in African countries. How then has the character Kunle Bangbelu resisted the rampant plague surrounding him?

Resistance to bribery in the focus novel

The term 'Postcolonial' has gained significant meaning in contemporary literary and cultural theory and the basic claim implied by the use of the term in relation to literature is twofold. First, it is intended to promote and celebrate the 'New literatures' emerged from the former colonial territories. Second, it asserts and advocates the need to analyse and resist continuing colonial attitudes after the political independence in African countries. Pointing out the selfish attitudes of the post-colonial African leaders, Macheka (2012, p. 15) contends that "The leaders had wielded power and had been misusing it by pursuing personal interests".

In the same wake, Bhat (2014, p. 17) postulates that "The new indigenous ruling African class involved itself in practices that were not different from earlier colonizers". Ogundimu's *A Silly Season* deals with issues pertaining to post-colonialism. Indeed, the most important political figure showing resistant and non-conformist attitudes in the focus novel is nobody but the character known to be Kunle Bangbelu. Interestingly, Kunle, an exemplary teacher, embodies an anti-corruption fighter. Kunle holds a very important position in the administration, one of the juiciest political positions in the fictitious country known as Ribalia; yet, he refuses to keep up with the Joneses by rejecting systematically opportunities for corrupt practices. As can be seen, Kunle Bangbelu is not holding his political position to fill up his pockets and leave. Instead, he strives to change the way things are used to going on in his society. At the first meeting he has had with his staff, the autodiegetic character Kunle Bangbelu cannot be clearer about what his intentions and goals are as he insists to his staff thus: "I assured them of my openness, team spirit, sincerity and willingness to be focussed. Showing no disposition to compromise my integrity, I urged them to be on the level. Then I promised to support genuine efforts geared towards improving the lot of our people" (ASS, p. 16).

In literature, very often postcolonial African politicians are perceived to be seeking for their personal welfare and the ones of their relatives and friends taking an unfair advantage of their political positions by growing rich to the detriment of the general masses wallowing in utter destitution (Macheka, 2012; Gbaguidi, 2012; Bhat, 2014). Consequently, upright African politicians serving as role models in literature through exemplary moral practices are not

sufficiently brought to light. In Ogundimu's *A Silly Season*, the character Kunle Bangbelu is the prototype of the scrupulous postcolonial African political leader fighting for the interests of the grassroots. Indeed, throughout the focus novel it is noticeable that the virtuous Minister of Works, Kunle Bangbelu, is highly preoccupied with the improvement of the living conditions of the commoners putting the general interests before his. Kunle thinks about the well-being of the whole society; that is why he strives to impact positively his term. Interestingly, the character Kunle carries out his official duties with professional care and endeavours to remain faithful to his words and to what his father tells him before passing away. Kunle does not want to break his late father's words when he states this:

...I was only trying to protect my father's name and I had successfully done so for several years; first as a student, then as a teacher. My father used to warn, 'If you cannot lift my good name, don't drag it in the mud. If you cannot build onto the family's reputation, don't damage its moral standing'. And father was serious dead about his words. He meant every one of them (ASS, p. 37).

It turns out that the autodiegetic narrator is highly concerned with maintaining his father's good reputation at the head of the Ministry of Works contrary to what the narratee is used to reading about postcolonial African politicians who do not care about their good names but are given to demanding bribes and embezzling public funds. It is plain that Kunle's rejection of bribery stems from the basic education he gets from his father. The military rule in which Kunle Bangbelu holds a key position is smeared with corrupt practices in the award of public contracts. However, Kunle carries out his duties with high integrity despite temptations and enticing offers to force his hand. Interestingly, the dauntless Commissioner of Works realises that he can make huge amounts of unlawful earnings should he accept to go with the tide yet, he remains stony-faced in spite of the temptations. Kunle's doggedness in resisting bribery despite the achievements he can make out of it is highlighted in the passage below:

Wow! One quarter of a million! Even with the inflation rate in the land, it was a huge sum of money, enough to do many things. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have taken me less than sixteen years to save that amount, which was more than half the total number of years I would stay in service. Now I could have all that at a stroke in one single day, if I chose. (ASS, p. 61)

Undeniably, the character Kunle Bangbelu has large financial and material needs—he has no personal car, no house or important business suits—nevertheless, he rejects bribes. By swimming against the stream, Kunle thus runs counter to the selfish interests of his co-workers in that conventionally the minister shares out the illegal earnings from bribery with the close circle of co-workers, hence the remonstrance of Kayode, Kunle's Personal Assistant, as stated earlier. Workers of Kayode's type view the honest commissioner as a threat to their unprofessional conduct. Indeed, the unwholesome intention of the commissioner's staff is crystal clear; to take an unfair advantage of their political position by fleecing the users of the civil service, and to eliminate anyone standing in their way. On this score, Kayode, the Commissioner's Personal Assistant, has been chosen by the Landlords' Association, as he holds a key position in the ministry, to intervene with the Commissioner to speed up the installation of the new transformer in Sabo area; Kayode goes to the Minister with a twenty-five-naira envelop bribe. They have purposefully chosen the personal assistant to plead their case with the Commissioner in that Kayode's position as the personal assistant to the commissioner will surely make things easier. At this very level, everybody will expect the commissioner to accept the bribe but to the reader's surprise he turns it down. The dishonest personal assistant informs the minister of his visit thus: "As a matter of fact, I also

collected another sum of ten thousands Naira for the other members of staff. And, in view of your position, I asked the landlords to raise 25,000 for you. But you know our people. The money was taking too long to come. We couldn't be ready, as long as these envelopes don't come out" (ASS, p. 51). The aforementioned passage shows that workers in the public services are key participants in the prevalent bribery in the civil service. Unfortunately, the commissioner has learnt this at his expense in that the staff has plotted against him pushing Kunle Bangbelu's resignation. It can be inferred that Kunle Bangbelu is a victim of his unyielding determination to rid the ministry he is running of corruption. Yusuf Dogo, Kunle Bangbelu's former teacher, recommends him for appointment as Commissioner of Works for his integrity. But in the discharge of his official duties, the Commissioner of Works faces cases of bribery whereby prospective tenderers of the contracts bribe him to get contracts or to speed up the process. Corrupt practices are so rampant in the sector of the public services in the fictitious country of Ribalia that even the other commissioners are incredulous to the idea that the Commissioner of Works rejects bribes. Kunle Bangbelu appears as the odd-man-out as the other members of the government suggests giving him tutorials about bribe taking: "At that point the Commissioner for Education promised to give me appropriate tutorials; he vowed to bring me up to being compliant and gift sharing. The honorable members of the Executive Council rolled in the aisles wishing we be evenly bitten by the bug of compliance" (ASS, p. 73). It appears that bribery seems to be the national game of the government of which Kunle Bangbelu is a member and no one should shy away from it.

From frustration to resignation

The novel under scrutiny depicts African countries in postcolonial era where moral virtues are on the wane in the political arena. Indeed, Ogundimu remarks in *A Silly Season* that in a society where there are many people engaged in unscrupulous practices, those who keep their moral values and dignity are frustrated. To exemplify this standpoint, Kunle Bangbelu, a morally honest commissioner, is frustrated as a result of the unbearable pressure from his close relatives and the staff of his cabinet to accept and collect bribes like the others particularly with a view to using his office for his own benefit. However, Kunle never accepts; he refuses to comply with their whims and thus becomes their laughing stock. Interestingly and receptively, the Commissioner of Works stays aloof from illegal activities. Oddly enough, the frustration appears in this context by the fact that those who keep their ethics, like Kunle Bangbelu, are reviled by the unscrupulous ones. Surprisingly, the people who are shady while managing public affairs make a lot of money while those who have made up their mind to hold on to the moral standards find it very tough to make both ends meet or to meet their basic needs. Paradoxically, this situation causes a lot of frustrations to those who are honest like the character Kunle Bangbelu in Ogundimu's *A Silly Season*. Kunle Bangbelu, for that matter, wonders whether he has made the wrong or the right decision for accepting his appointment as the Commissioner of Works due to the corrupt environment in which he works or dwells. It turns out that Kunle Bangbelu is the embodiment of the ordinary people in Africa South of the Sahara who feel frustrated because they live in a society where corrupt people are extolled and borne in triumph while the very few honest people are mocked at and ostracised. It is noticeable that the vast majority of the postcolonial African leaders care little about the masses' welfare but what matters mostly for them is how to grow rich and make their relatives and cronies happy; for dishonest politicians the shortcut for economic prosperity is through bribery. For such unscrupulous leaders, there is no need for maintaining their integrities or good deeds.

Interestingly, in Ogundimu's *A Silly Season*, the character Kunle Bangbelu strives to hold fast, quite often against all odds, in a corrupt environment but he is never understood by his

people and the staff of his cabinet. As a matter of fact, regarding Kunle's fierce resistance to partake in the national game of taking and demanding bribes, his staff set a trap for him by introducing to him the character Engineer, an unscrupulous contractor, who has attempted to bribe him to influence the award of contracts (ASS, p. 56). With Kunle Bangbelu's stern objection to bribery, Ogundimu has deconstructed the traditional corrupt nature of the postcolonial African holding a political power in that the African fiction has so far associated the African ruler with bad governance and corrupt practices of all kinds. On the strength of the theory of deconstruction one can posit that the character Kunle Bangbelu, the Commissioner of Works, shows ethical behaviours while running the ministry under his control contrary to what has been in vogue in the political arena in Africa South of the Sahara up to now. On this score, Klages (2012), using Jacques Derrida's observation on the theory of deconstruction, contends that deconstruction is a "way of destabilizing these binary oppositions and seeing what happens to the certainty of our ideas and our philosophical systems when the binary structure on which they depend gets shaken up" (p. 19). Keeping to his moral standards not to take any bribe, the homodiegetic narrator, Kunle Bangbelu, makes Engineer see sense while the latter tries to talk into him: "Don't worry about me because I won't pity you if you attract some trouble to yourself. Please take your bag away; I don't need it" (ASS, p. 58). It appears that while the reader expects Kunle Bangbelu, a postcolonial ruler, to accept the graft brought to him he turns it down. It is worth mentioning that the upright Minister of Works is rejecting a bribe worth eighty-three times what he gets as salary for the commissionership. The homodiegetic narrator is so astounded at the huge amount of the bribe offered to him so as to influence the award of contracts that he cannot help pointing out: "Ordinarily, it wouldn't have taken me less than sixteen years to save that amount, which was more than half the total number of years I would stay in service" (ASS, p. 61).

Tempting as the offer might appear, Kunle Bangbelu rejects it and can therefore be viewed as a gem and a role model for the people around him even if the presence of the 'Ghana-must-go-bag' that the corrupt Engineer has left behind against Kunle's will can be compromising for him. Kunle's unshakeable determination and resolution not to keep up with the Joneses brings trouble and animosity upon him to the extent that he steps down from the commissionership in that some of the members of the staff of his cabinet start plotting against him. It can be inferred that Kunle's mission during his tenure is to change things in his society in order to pave the ways for development. Unfortunately, the members of his staff do not share his views. So, they plot his failure and causing him a lot of frustration. Kunle's resignation from work can be seen as an act of faith because he can no longer continue to put up with the misconducts of the people around him as he is quite aware that whether he stays or not things will never change. So he simply resigns to free his conscience and is eager to return to his former teaching job because he felt at ease when teaching:

No. There was no moral justification for me to continue in office. I should summon the courage to resign. I know it is difficult; but I should. Then I would leave on my terms because I would be unlike most of them. I would be unlike those without a definite means of livelihood and those who struggle to remain in office by hook or by crook. After all, I had my teaching job, which I could go back to. And, since I was a free man as a teacher, I could go back and be free again (ASS, p. 102).

Being left on his own in the resistance to take to bribery like the people in his social and professional environment, the upright Minister of Works does carry out his threat of resignation from commissionership showing that the postcolonial African ruler can do without bribery and thus carry out his official duties with dignity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the family and the members of the staff cabinet are the ones leading officials or political leaders into corrupt practices. Very few postcolonial African leaders succeed in standing up to the pressures from their social and professional environment with a view to accepting and demanding bribes in the discharge of their official duties. Indeed, Ogundimu's *A Silly Season* unveils and castigates this malpractice in the political arena in postcolonial Africa. This study has shown that accepting bribes in the postcolonial Africa is customary and those who swim against the tide are viewed as bizarre. Refusal to conform to the practice is regarded as a choice to remain poor.

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