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Eating the National Cake: Neo-Colonialism and Economic Exploitation in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People (1966) offers a no-holds-barred critique of neo-colonialism and economic exploitation in post-independence Nigeria. Through the allegory of "the national cake," the novel explores how local elites, represented by Chief Minister Nanga, collaborate with foreign corporations, such as "British Amalgamated," to perpetuate economic dependency and systemic corruption. This paper looks into Achebe's depiction of the ruinous contrast between the wealth of Nigeria's political class and the poverty of its masses, arguing that the novel presents independence as a hollow victory when colonial economic structures remain intact. The paper looks at some very important events in the novel: Nanga's properties built upon graft; the cynicism of the people, and the ambiguous resolution of the military coup, which show Achebe's warnings about the evils of neo-colonialism. Therefore, this novel suggests that genuine liberation must accompany political independence with economic and moral responsibility.

Keywords: Neo-colonialism, Economic exploitation, National cake allegory, Political satire, Class disparity.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's independence in 1960 marked a watershed moment in African history, symbolizing the triumph of anti-colonial struggles across the continent. However, as Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People (1966) powerfully demonstrates, the euphoria of independence quickly gave way to profound disillusionment. The novel captures this historical moment with acute precision, revealing how the promise of self-rule was betrayed by the very leaders who had fought for liberation. As Fanon (1961) prophetically warned in The Wretched of the Earth, "The national bourgeoisie...will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent" (p. 122), a prediction that finds its literary embodiment in Chief Nanga and his ilk. This betrayal forms the core of Achebe's scathing critique of post-independence Nigeria, where political freedom failed to translate into genuine economic emancipation.

The concept of neo-colonialism, first systematically articulated by Kwame Nkrumah (1965) in Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism, provides the theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Nkrumah defines neo-colonialism as a situation where "the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty" while "in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside" (p. ix). This definition perfectly encapsulates the predicament of Achebe's fictional African nation, where figures like Chief Nanga serve

as willing intermediaries for foreign economic interests. The novel's portrayal of "British Amalgamated" - a clear stand-in for multinational corporations - illustrates how former colonial powers maintained economic control through local collaborators (Achebe, 1966, p. 54). As Wren (1980) observes in Achebe's World, "The colonial departure from the scene was not really a departure" (p. 101), a sentiment echoed by Achebe himself in interviews when he stated that "independence was unreal" (Lindfors, 1972, p. 10).

A Man of the People stands as one of African literature's most potent satires of post-colonial governance, employing irony and allegory to expose the rot at the heart of newly independent states. The novel's very title is deeply ironic, as Charles Sarvan (1992) notes: "Nanga, the ostensible ally and friend of the people, is selfishly destructive of the community and the nation" (p. 51). This irony permeates the entire narrative, from Nanga's populist rhetoric to the grotesque disparity between his lavish lifestyle and the poverty of those he supposedly represents. Achebe's decision to universalize the setting - creating an Africa that could be any post-colonial nation - amplifies the novel's satirical force, transforming it from a specifically Nigerian critique to a commentary on the broader failures of independence across the continent (Wren, 1980, p. 98).

The novel's publication in 1966 proved remarkably prescient, appearing just months before Nigeria's first military coup and the subsequent civil war. As Bernth Lindfors (1992) notes, "Achebe was writing about Nanga's four storey structure at Ananta while real-life politicians were constructing their own 'palaces'" (p. 84). This uncanny foresight underscores Achebe's acute understanding of the political dynamics of his time. The novel captures with brutal honesty how the nationalist elite, having inherited the colonial state apparatus, simply replicated its extractive logic rather than transforming it. Odili's observation that "we had all been in the rain together until yesterday" (Achebe, 1966, p. 37) perfectly captures this betrayal, as the new political class barricaded themselves in the "one shelter our former rulers left" while the masses remained exposed to the elements.

At its core, A Man of the People is a novel about the corruption of power and the moral compromises of independence. Achebe's portrayal of Chief Nanga - described by Lindfors (1968) as "one of the finest rogues in Nigerian fiction" (p. 15) - reveals how charismatic leadership can mask profound venality. The novel's famous opening lines, where Odili begrudgingly admits Nanga's popularity before revealing his corruption, establish this central tension between appearance and reality that drives the narrative (Achebe, 1966, p. 1). This tension reflects what Udumukwu (1991) identifies as the "distorted perception" (p. 485) of both leaders and citizens in post-colonial societies, where the rhetoric of nationalism obscures the reality of exploitation.

Achebe's critique extends beyond individual corruption to examine systemic failures. The "national cake" metaphor, repeatedly invoked by characters (Achebe, 1966, p. 12), symbolizes how national resources became objects of rapacious consumption rather than foundations for development. This metaphor gains particular potency when contrasted with the novel's vivid depictions of poverty, from urban slums where human waste accumulates in pails (p. 38) to villagers who can "hear the smell" of open latrines (p. 38). Such imagery underscores what Nkrumah (1965) identified as the fundamental contradiction of neo-colonialism: the coexistence of elite opulence with mass deprivation in ostensibly independent nations.

The novel's enduring relevance lies in its unflinching examination of how colonial structures persist after independence. As Ball (2003) observes, "British Amalgamated represents the multinational economic imperialism that sustains African dependency after the withdrawal of colonial political power" (p. 104). Through this and other narrative elements, Achebe demonstrates how the formal end of colonial rule often meant not liberation but merely the Africanization of exploitation. The military coup that concludes the

novel offers no real resolution, suggesting that merely replacing civilian kleptocrats with military rulers fails to address the underlying system (Achebe, 1966, p. 139). This ambiguous ending reflects Achebe's sober assessment of post-colonial possibilities, far removed from the naive optimism of early independence.

Ultimately, A Man of the People stands as both a specific indictment of Nigeria's post-colonial trajectory and a universal meditation on power and corruption. As this paper will demonstrate, Achebe's novel remains essential reading for understanding how independence movements across Africa were co-opted by neo-colonial structures, producing what Fanon (1961) called "the great disappointment of modern times" (p. 135). Through its incisive satire and profound moral vision, the novel challenges us to confront the unfinished business of decolonization - not just political independence, but genuine economic and psychological liberation.

The Symbolism of "The National Cake"

The central metaphor of "the national cake" in A Man of the People serves as Achebe's most potent symbol for the rapacious exploitation of post-colonial Nigeria's resources. This metaphor encapsulates the novel's fundamental critique - that independence merely transferred the right of plunder from colonial masters to a native elite. As Nanga crudely advises Odili: "We shouldn't leave everything to the highland tribes...our people must press for their fair share of the national cake" (Achebe, 1966, p. 12). This revealing statement, delivered with shameless candor, exposes the prevailing mentality among Nigeria's new ruling class - that governance amounts to distributive larceny rather than national development.

Metaphor of Consumption

The "cake" imagery achieves its full symbolic power through Achebe's meticulous depiction of the elite's consumption patterns. Nanga's accumulation of three blocks of seven-story luxury flats, built at £3000 each in his wife's name (p. 54), represents the most grotesque manifestation of this consumption. These properties, financed by bribes from "British Amalgamated" in exchange for insider information about import duties (p. 54), exemplify what Nkrumah (1965) identifies as the "neo-colonialist trap" of economic dependency (p. xiii). The flats' subsequent leasing to foreign embassies at exorbitant rates completes the cycle of exploitation, demonstrating how neo-colonial structures enable local elites to profit from continued foreign domination.

Odili's reflection on generational change - "We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us...had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left" (p. 37) - provides the metaphor's historical dimension. This poignant observation underscores Fanon's (1961) warning about post-colonial elites who "logically pursue their mission as go-betweens and rob the people as a whole" (p. 122). The "shelter" imagery contrasts starkly with the "rain" of colonial oppression, suggesting that independence merely created a new privileged class rather than universal liberation.

Public Complicity

Achebe extends his critique beyond the elite to examine societal complicity in this plunder. The villagers' resigned attitude - "Let them eat...After all when White men used to do all the eating did we commit suicide?" (p. 144) - reveals how corruption becomes normalized through historical comparison. This fatalistic acceptance reflects what Nkrumah (1965) describes as one of neo-colonialism's most insidious effects: "the subjection of the people to economic, social, political, and intellectual paralysis" (p. 253).

The character of Max embodies the moral compromises necessitated by this system. His pragmatic justification - "How do you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little?" (p. 126) - echoes Fanon's (1961) observation that "the leader pacifies the people...and in turn is pampered by the colonialist bourgeoisie" (p. 135). Even the novel's putative reformers cannot escape the logic of the "national cake," as demonstrated when Odili himself diverts party funds to pay Edna's bride price (p. 108). Through these interconnected examples, Achebe's "national cake" metaphor evolves from simple imagery to a comprehensive critique of post-colonial political economy. It captures both the elite's predatory behavior and the populace's weary acquiescence, illustrating what Wren (1980) identifies as the novel's central concern: "the materialism that pervades all levels of society" (p. 113). The metaphor's enduring power lies in its ability to condense complex economic realities into an image of shocking visceral immediacy - a cake being greedily devoured by few while the majority starve.

Opulence vs. Poverty: The Elite's Exploitation

Achebe constructs a devastating portrait of post-independence inequality through stark juxtapositions of elite opulence and mass poverty. The novel's most searing social commentary emerges from these contrasts, which reveal how Nigeria's new rulers perfected colonial patterns of exploitation rather than dismantling them.

Nanga's Ill-Gotten Wealth

The minister's seven-bathroom mansion stands as a monument to kleptocratic excess, with Odili noting the irony of reading about slum conditions "from the cosy comfort of a princely seven bathroom mansion with its seven gleaming, silent action water closets" (Achebe, 1966, p. 38). This architectural obscenity - where bathrooms outnumber residents - mirrors what Fanon (1961) describes as the post-colonial elite's "flight into prodigious eroticism" and "obscene opulence" (p. 123). The mansion's very construction, funded by public money as a ministerial residence (p. 38), embodies the corruption Nkrumah (1965) identifies as neo-colonialism's hallmark: "the use of bribery and corruption to influence the officers of the government" (p. 253).

The three luxury flats Nanga builds through bribes from British Amalgamated (p. 54) complete this picture of institutionalized theft. These properties, registered in his wife's name to conceal their illicit origins, exemplify what Udumukwu (1991) terms "the privatization of public wealth" (p. 475). Their subsequent leasing to foreign embassies at £3,000 annually (p. 54) creates a perfect neo-colonial circuit: foreign capital bribes local officials, who reinvest in property rented back to foreign interests. As Wren (1980) observes, such arrangements show how "those in power could make deals with considerable ease" (p. 101).

Foreign Corporations as Enablers

"British Amalgamated" functions as the novel's most potent symbol of enduring imperial control. The firm's £400,000 payment to Nanga's party (p. 126) and advance notice of import duty changes (p. 54) illustrate what Nkrumah (1965) calls "the continued exercise of power by international finance capital" (p. xi). This fictional entity embodies Ball's (2003) observation that multinationals under neo-colonialism "sustain African dependency after the withdrawal of colonial political power" (p. 104).

Jean's guided tour of the capital provides the novel's most vivid geographical contrasts. Driving Odili through "wide, well-lit streets" named after politicians into "stinking, maggoty" slums (pp. 53-54), she

maps the spatial economy of neo-colonialism. The description of "Stephen Awando Street" - named for an obscure councilor (p. 53) - satirizes the elite's self-aggrandizement while people languish in poverty. This tour confirms Fanon's (1961) warning that the national bourgeoisie "will prove itself incapable of great ideas or of inventiveness" (p. 122), merely replicating colonial urban hierarchies.

The OHMS ("Our Home Made Stuff") coffee incident (p. 35) crystallizes the elite's hypocrisy regarding local industry. When Chief Koko nearly has his cook beaten for serving local coffee instead of imported Nescafé, he unwittingly reveals what Nkrumah (1965) identifies as neo-colonialism's cultural dimension: "the perpetuation of the colonialist mentality" (p. 254). This moment underscores Achebe's broader critique - that Nigeria's rulers mimic colonial tastes while mouthing nationalist rhetoric.

Through these contrasts, Achebe demonstrates how neo-colonialism operates as a system of coordinated exploitation. The luxury flats and ministerial mansions exist in direct proportion to the slums' squalor, just as British Amalgamated's profits correlate with national poverty. As Odili reflects: "Here was I...reading about pails of excrement from the cosy comfort" of Nanga's mansion (p. 38). This moral contrast between privilege and deprivation ultimately indicts not just individual corrupt officials, but the entire neo-colonial structure that enables their predation.

Achebe's Critique of Neo-Colonialism

Continuity of Colonial Exploitation

Achebe's disillusionment with post-independence realities permeates the novel, crystallized in his later assertion that "Independence was unreal" (Lindfors, 1972, p. 10). This verdict finds dramatic expression in Chief Nanga's relationship with British Amalgamated, where he serves as what Fanon (1961) calls "the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism...wearing the mask of neo-colonialism" (p. 152). The minister's acceptance of ten buses "on never-never terms" (Achebe, 1966, p. 54) from the foreign firm exemplifies Nkrumah's (1965) warning about "the granting of favorable contracts to foreign firms" as neo-colonial control mechanisms (p. 253).

The OHMS coffee scene delivers Achebe's most biting satire on cultural neo-colonialism. When Chief Koko nearly has his cook beaten for substituting local coffee for imported Nescafé, his hysterical reaction - "You have poisoned me!" (p. 35) - lays bare the elite's colonial mentality. This moment epitomizes what Wren (1980) identifies as the novel's central irony: "a cultureless man going abroad as Minister of Culture" (p. 98). The government's "OHMS" (Our Home Made Stuff) campaign becomes hollow propaganda when its own ministers reject local products, confirming Fanon's (1961) observation that the national bourgeoisie maintains "a showy, vulgar, and fundamentally sterile character" (p. 123).

Military Coup as False Hope

The novel's abrupt conclusion - "The Army arranged a permanent settlement of the dispute" (p. 139) - offers ambiguous resolution. While ending Nanga's corruption, the coup perpetuates what Udumukwu (1991) calls "the cycle of political violence" (p. 474). Achebe's terse narration ("The politicians had been tried and found guilty by the Army" p. 139) suggests not justice but mere replacement of one oppressive system with another, validating Fanon's (1961) warning that "the military...becomes the arbiter" in neo-colonial states (p. 136).

The Josiah parable provides Achebe's most allegorical critique. When the trader steals a blind man's stick to make "juju medicine to sell to blind buyers" (p. 144), his crime mirrors the elite's exploitation. The villagers' eventual retaliation ("the owner was the village, and they had noticed" p. 144) parallels the coup, suggesting systems only collapse when exploitation becomes too overt. As Ball (2003) notes, this episode

serves as "a parable which anticipates the final destruction" of social order (p. 108).

Through these elements, Achebe constructs a comprehensive critique of neo-colonialism that transcends Nigeria's specific context. The novel's enduring power lies in its prophetic understanding of what Nkrumah (1965) termed "the last stage of imperialism" (title) - where economic control replaces direct rule while maintaining unequal power structures. As Odili reflects on his nation's predicament: "None of us had been indoors long enough to say 'To hell with it'" (p. 37). This poignant admission captures the tragic paradox of independence - political freedom without true liberation from colonial economic and psychological bondage.

Conclusion

Achebe's A Man of the People stands as a prophetic warning that political independence without economic sovereignty creates merely the illusion of freedom. Through the grotesque figure of Chief Nanga and his foreign collaborators, the novel demonstrates how, as Nkrumah (1965) warned, "the essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty" while remaining economically controlled from abroad (p. ix). The "national cake" metaphor ultimately reveals itself as a cruel irony - the cake exists only to be devoured by the few, while the many receive crumbs.

The novel's enduring legacy lies in its uncanny prescience about Africa's post-colonial trajectory. Contemporary African kleptocracies continue to mirror Nanga's playbook, from Nigerian oil politics to South Africa's state capture scandals. As global neo-colonialism evolves through mechanisms like IMF structural adjustment programs and Chinese debt-trap diplomacy, Achebe's critique gains new relevance. The novel's universalization of its setting, as Wren (1980) notes, makes it "generally Africa and not necessarily Nigeria" (p. 98), allowing its themes to resonate across the Global South.

Odili's compromised idealism - his transition from critic to participant in corruption - poses the novel's most troubling question for readers. His final justification ("a man could only be sure of what he had put away safely in his gut" p. 149) mirrors what Fanon (1961) identifies as the post-colonial intellectual's tragic trajectory: "The leader...objectively becomes the transmission line between the nation and capitalism" (p. 152). This moral ambiguity challenges us to confront our own potential complicity in systems of exploitation.

The military coup's ambiguous resolution offers no easy answers, only what Udumukwu (1991) calls "the cycle of political violence" (p. 474). In our era of African coups resurgent, from Mali to Burkina Faso, Achebe's warning about replacing one oppression with another remains vital. Ultimately, A Man of the People compels us to ask, as Odili does: "How important was my political activity in its own right?" (p. 108) - a question that continues to haunt societies struggling with the unfinished business of decolonization. The novel's power endures not in providing solutions, but in its unflinching exposure of neo-colonialism's bitter realities.

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