



Ambivalence in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*

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Received 2 Jun 2023; Accepted 11 Jul 2023; Published 20 Jul 2023

Abstract

The African continent holds a unique historical heritage of colonialism which is closely connected to its contemporary literature and imagination. This paper digs deep where it is difficult to dig as it studies the subjugation of the colonized subject, his mindset and condition with respect to the colonizer's agenda. On the one hand, the article scrutinizes the cultural values and social cohesion that featured the African continent prior to the intrusion of any other belief and tradition in Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, seen through the concept of ambivalence of African indigenous people. On the other hand, it sheds lights on the turmoil the colonial power has brought to the colonized subject's social balance and sovereignty.

Keywords: ambivalence, African heritage, colonized, colonizer, cultural values

Introduction

Undoubtedly, colonialism has had a great impact on the African continent. A close analysis prior to the missionaries' exploration of Africa and, later on, exploitation of the continent by the British, French, Portuguese and Spanish, to name but a few, will surely hold colonialism as the core prejudice of progress and social stability. Besides, in his book, *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*, the Guanine writer, Walter Rodney highlights the colonial experience as counter-balance of growth, thoroughly speaking:

In the period of African development preceding colonialism, some areas moved faster than others and provided the nuclei for growth on a wide regional basis. Northern Nigeria was one of those; and it virtually went to sleep during the colonial period. The British cut it off from the rest of the Moslem world and fossilized the social relations, so that the serfs could not achieve any change at the expense of the ruling aristocracy. (Rodney, 1989:232)^[9].

Another African writer, Abu Boahen hits the nails on the head in his book, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, to converge with Rodney's viewpoint on the factual prejudice of the colonial outcome in Africa:

However, within the incredibly short period between 1880 and 1900, all of Africa except Liberia and Ethiopia was seized and occupied by the European imperial powers of Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and Italy; and Africans were converted from sovereign and royal citizens of their own continent into colonial and dependent subjects (Boahen, 1987:27)^[4].

In fact, the two African historians have shown the abrupt and destructive violence of colonialism in Africa. Within a short time, the European invaders have succeeded to install an unprecedented chaotic situation by leaking the African social backcloth based on an absolute sovereignty. Not only have they imposed their political system, but have collapsed a solid social system that revolved around collaboration, solidarity and

exchange between the most thriving areas and the deprived ones in order to quell prospective economic disparities or droughts through the concept of bartering.

It is noteworthy to juxtapose the historian perspective of the situation with the cultural distort. Because beyond the economic side effects of colonial exploitation, there is still at the individual level an emotional and a cultural 'mess up' that weigh down heavy at the collective level, which rings loud in African literature. Thus, the choice we put upon Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* is not fortuitous as it is a novel that rakes up the binary of the destructive violence of colonialism and survival. From therein, the discussion can be seen through the concept of ambivalence.

1. The colonial fact

The presence of the colonizer on the African continent occurred with a fuss. The fact that the colonizer came to settle down in Africa, even if the missionaries did not mention it plainly, has impacted the traditions and cultures of the indigenous people they came across. The astuteness of the White man vis-à-vis the African is perceivable in the way he challenges the African customs, traditional gods, cultures, and even way of life. One of the pioneers of modern African literature, Chinua Achebe, comes back on the first contact of the Black man with the White man as the starting point of cultural ambivalence and powerlessness. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the first challenges of the White man regarding African divinities and sacredness. A good illustration is the "Evil Forest". This portion of land is spotted as a "non-dwell zone". Igbo people classify it a wretched place. In other words, misfortune will befall anybody who dares live there. It is a cursed land where they built their shrines dedicated to making their sacrifices. When the first missionaries set foot on Iboland and "begged" for land, the Igbo people offered them the "Evil Forest", tongue in cheek, believing full well that nothing good will happen to them in that part of the forest. Surprisingly enough, nothing as such happens to the White man

on that so feared land, they granted the White man:

They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they care to take.... The next morning the crazy men start actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. The day passed and the second and third and fourth; none of them died. Everyone was puzzled. And then it became known that the white man fetish had unbelievable power. (Achebe, 1958: 149).

The day the White man treads on, unscathed, the dharma and traditional beliefs that govern African societies, there began the springing up of the seeds of discomfort and mitigation among the indigenous people, say *ambivalence*. In effect, in *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane succinctly weaves the concept from the challenging situation of Africans in contact with a new form of worshipping God and a daring attitude towards the sacredness of everything they hold dear of. In analyzing the concept of *ambivalence* in Kane's work, one should lay emphasis on its vicinity with postcolonial discourse, rather than its simplistic notion or psychoanalytic perspective:

Adapted into colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha, [ambivalence] describes the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized. The relationship is ambivalent because the colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. Rather than assuming that some colonized subjects are 'complicit' and some 'resistant', ambivalence suggests that complicity and resistance exist in fluctuating relation within the colonial subject. (Ashcroft and others, 2007:10) ^[2].

From a postcolonial viewpoint, *ambivalence* is the mere outcome of the dismantlement of the cultural stability the African is known for with a ravaging Western civilization. Thus, it creates a feeling of discomfort on the part of the colonized as there exists a corrupt environment between him and the colonizer. The sense of discomfort between the colonized and the colonizer is somehow understandable, given the rupture of the harmony through which social matters were handled within ethnic groups. That is, *Ambiguous Adventure* provides a fully-fledged African oral tradition embedded in Koranic principles, i.e., the "Word". This safeguarded peace and security among the Diallobé community under the reign and vigilance of the noble lineage. The charm of the ruling system under the noble lineage lies in the spirit of collectiveness, togetherness and social commitment that "every man and jack" jointly dedicates themselves for the advancement of the community. The enforcement of matriarchal order carries a tinge of complementarity between men and women. Even though the power of the Diallobé chief is unquestionable, his elder sister, the Most Royal Lady, still remains categorical and uncompromising regarding any outer threat that could jeopardize the community and social unit. Besides, the uncomplimentary of men and women, the patriarchal order and masculinity is indicative of African societies collapse with colonialism that came to stiffen and turn everything "helter skelter":

The coming of colonialism upset the traditional set-up by driving men away from their families to the city, where they tried to find work in order to provide food for their families instead of laboring in the cornfields. The separation of men from their families was designed and implemented by the colonial rulers and not by African men.... This meant that young people, both female and male, could no longer rely on their parents to satisfy their material needs, instead they had to fend for themselves by seeking employment from the colonial masters. (Ndlovu, 2007: 93) ^[8].

This evidences the quintessential questioning of some African historians and writers about the positive impacts of colonialism. For them, the loss of power and the crisscrossed cultures Kane comes up with in his novel provide the crux of a problem that is causative of Africa's economic impoverishment and cultural downfall. The unprecedented disarray and condition of the colonized subject, during, and in the aftermath of colonialism, invalidate Eurocentric conclusions on colonial issues:

Chinua Achebe has warned ... that 'the European critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience on the African continent. Achebe, 1995:11 REF these p.281) ^[1].

The above-mentioned passage pertains that, contemporary African literature on Africa and colonialization can be biased, if seen from a Eurocentric perspective. This is all more true, as an African viewpoint of the subject matter in Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* extols a degradation of African way of life. This is inevitably true because of the cultural clashes the Diallobé people desperately see unfold which results in a torment. What is more, the social instability that befalls the Diallobé community is ravaging all while leaving them very little to choose. They are accountable for the progressive loss of power against the White colonizers. The seemingly successful imposition of colonial power over the Diallobé people ultimately deters on the collective balance. As Most Royal Lady recalls:

A hundred years ago our grandfather, along with all the inhabitants of this countryside, was awakened one morning by an uproar arising from the river. He took his gun and, followed by all the élite of the region, he flung himself upon the newcomers. His heart was intrepid, and to him the value of liberty was greater than the value of life. (Kane, 1963: 33) ^[7].

In the same token, the Nigerian female writer, Buchi Emecheta highlights in her novel, *The Rape of Shavi*, the British invaders' visit in the village of Shavi as a heavy blow on Shavians' face and social stability. The British invaders have discovered the village of Shavi hazardously. But given the value of the cultural and natural wealth they have found on that remote and fertile land; they decide to settle down on there. But the crisscrossed civilizations and cultures have been more perilous to the African than it was for the White man, especially young children who start to be hooked by the new Western lifestyle. A good example of the Shavian people's mitigation over their

cultural integration is King Patayon's confession regarding the crucial dilemma he faces:

I remember the day our visitors came, something rattled a warning sign in my old bones, telling me that things weren't going to be the same anymore. Our young people have seen the albinos and we can't tie a cloth over their eyes. (Emecheta, 1983:135) [5].

It goes without saying that the colonizer does not restrain the colonial agenda at merely imposing his power. Rather, he has been more ambitious as to implement the realization of the indoctrination of Africans. The sticky questions that loom large at this level is the educational tools he leans upon to tame the African indigenous people the way he wishes. The answer to this question is no other than the edification of missionary schools. These were the places where the intellectual and spiritual and/or religious training or transformation were supposed to happen. Very often than not, the mission was used not only to teach children the Western civilization, but also their faith in God, say Christianity. That is the charm of Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, i.e., the writer puts his finger in the sore as he hinges the telling story on the delicacy for Africans in general and for his Diallobé community in particular to "cross the Rubicon" without turning back to the heritage of African cultures and civilization, and also religion to embrace the new faith the colonizer imposes them.

The contamination effects of Western cultures and religion in Africa that have resulted in colonialism have surely brought about an unprecedented social disintegration on the continent. The Koranic school or the *Glowing Earth*, i.e., the sacred place where the master, Thierno, unmercifully teaches his disciples the Koranic verses is pivotal. It is the place where, at early age, when the mind is already malleable, the master seeds in the toddlers the faith in God, human values and autonomy that would help them live as true Diallobé people in order to have an outlook on their surroundings and the unknown. But there comes up the issue of power and bone of contention between the tenets of the *Glowing Earth* and those of colonial school once the two antagonistic religious teachings start to shuffle. The survival of the cardinal values the master of the *Glowing Earth* has already installed in his disciples, particularly in the hero, Samba Diallo, is at a trial in parallel with the colonizer's craftsmanship, commonly known as the skill of joining *wood to wood* which is, in the eyes of the majority, more trendy and responsive to the Diallobé people's daily trial and tribulations. Besides, the elders, the élite members, the Knight of the new school, the chief of the Diallobé people, and the Most Royal Lady are ambivalent regarding the enrollment of young people in the colonial realm or about keeping the *Word of God*.

Generally speaking, it goes without saying that African societies existed as a harmonious and cohesive set prior to colonialism. In *Ambiguous Adventure*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane perceives the implementation of colonial schools as destructive of indigenous people's religious and cultural stability. But there rebounds the question of coexistence between Western civilization and the Diallobé people's way of life and what resistant strategy they brandish against the colonial agenda to retain their sovereignty, cultural identity and religion.

2. The resistant colonized subject

Be it the imposition of colonial rule in Africa or the education of the indigenous people, the two processes did not occur peacefully, i.e., most African people and leaders viewed the invasion of their land as an offensive blow, though they were some African pro-colonialism. Thus, the education of children was seen with mixed feelings. In other words, the same vehement resistance of African heroes and heroines, like Lat Dior Ngoné Latyr Diop, Samory Touré, Aline Sitöe Diatta, Ndatté Yalla Mbodj, from Senegal, against the implementation of the colonial agenda for the economic reasons, is also noticeable at the individual level through the psychological trauma of the colonized following his contact with the colonizer. The only difference between the anti-colonial military resistance, at the national level and at the individual level, is that in the latter, the defensive repulsion of Western cultures, religion and schools is not necessary military, but rather a psychological confusion regarding the Other. This creates a mental discomfort on the colonized subject whose resistance is palpable in his psyche.

Analyzing the situation from a postcolonial perspective in his work, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha postulates that:

From the impossibility of keeping true time in two longitudes and the inner incompatibility of empire and nation in the anomalous discourse of cultural progressivism, emerges an ambivalence that is neither the contestation of contradictories nor the antagonism of dialectical opposition. In these instances of social and discursive alienation there is no recognition of master and slave, there is only the matter of the enslaved master, the unmastered slave. (Bhabha, 2004, 187) [3].

Bhabha infers that the uncomfortable situation in which the colonized subject finds himself does not necessarily imparts resolute actions in the beginning. The crisscrossed cultures and education he is injected induces him to ponder over his *self* and condition as a human being that will later determine which decision to take in his procrastination:

The Other – with the capital 'O' – has been called *the grande-autre* by Lacan, the great Other, in whose gaze the subject gains identity. The symbolic Other is not real interlocutor but can be embodied in other subjects such as the mother or father that may represent it. The symbolic Other is not a 'transcendent or absolute pole of address, summoned each time that subject speaks to another subject. (Boon-Grafé, 1992: 298 in Post-colonial studies: 155) [6].

Kane centers the portrayal of his characters between the binary opposition of the *grande-autre* of the colonizer, whose invading power on the colonized is unquestionable, and the *symbolic other* is on all the colonized subjects. This creates clouds over the latter's heads as their mindset balance is tormented and shaken by the devastating Western cultures and their own cultural realities and *milieu*. This explains the ideological gap between the Most Royal Lady, the chief of the Diallobé, the Master of the *Glowing Earth*, the teacher, and Samba Diallo himself. They share the same environment and cultural background, but there appears a bone of contention between them regarding children's education and the future of

the Diallobé, which is indicative of the unyielding domination of the imperial gaze.

Ambiguous Adventure provides useful details of the colonial power, but more importantly lays emphasis on the way in which traditional African leaders in general and the noble lineage in particular apprehend and maneuver the “threat”. The Most Royal Lady analyzes the complicity of the situation from a futurist perspective. She acknowledges the straight and narrow through which the Diallobé community is embarked, especially children, and their cultural wealth. Nevertheless, she is aware that the “Word” sacredness hangs by a thread and that there is a new wing that hooks her community, under her powerless eyes. From a leader’s perspective, she foresees the decadence of the noble lineage and, worst of all, that of the Diallobé cultural values. At the crossroad of such a situation, she astutely prefers not to give in, but instead develops a survival strategy based upon a blending of Western know-how with her community’s cultural legacy. In fact, African writers do not overlook this pervasive ambivalence in their satire to play down the negative side effects of colonialism. Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* is a good example. Achebe portrays the cultural mix between the Igbo people and the British colonizer as a resultant of his community’s fading faith and authoritarian collapse.

In *Arrow of God*, the advent of Christianity on Igboland is conceived with *ambivalence* and psychological resistance. The chief, Ezulu, is a telling picture of Kane’s heroine, the Most Royal Lady, regarding the armor they should put up against the Western civilization which overtakes the divine sacredness. The two heroes, i.e., Ezulu and the Most Royal Lady, have a common problem or enemy, the White man. Even though their religious belonging is dissimilar, they worry themselves sick about what will become of the future generation, especially children who are visibly lured by the Western cultures and novelty. What is more, they do not openly wage war against the colonial rule, the root cause of the undercurrent social turmoil, but rather incline to know better about the Western knowledge. The concern of both characters is children. This is understandable as they are more vulnerable and exposed to religion and education, the two destructive weapons the colonizers base upon to indoctrinate the people. When things come to the worst, the Most Royal Lady resorts to exile her Young cousin, Samba Diallo, to France to be educated. To her the fact of “transplanting” Samba Diallo is a candid way of resisting and circumventing what seems to destroy them. It is noteworthy as “journey” is central in analyzing postcolonial discourse. It bridges the gap between hybridity, alienation and the quest of “self-invention”:

(Black writer) treat journey as a means of self-knowledge through into collective historical experience, itself defined by the journeys from Africa into slavery, and from the rural south to the urban north. (Willis, p. 211) Susan Willis, “Black Women Writers: *Taking A Critical Perspective*” in *Making A Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, op. Cit, p.211.

The Most Royal Lady leans upon exile to escape from the Western cultural domination, whereas Achebe’s hero, Ezulu, is

somehow prudent and uses the same cultural survival strategy to usher his son to embrace Christianity to “spy” on the colonizer:

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. If there is something there you will bring home my share [...]. My spirit tells me those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying ‘had I know’ tomorrow (Achebe, 1974:45-46) ^[1].

It comes out that most traditional African rulers start to yield ground to the invader to their own peril. They would rather keep their own interests and privileges than overtly preserve the community’s survival. In so doing, they are blindfolded by the lust for power while ignoring that in Africa the community’s interests generally prevail before that of the individual’s. And it is this uncertainty, on the part of some rulers, that paves the way for the convergence to the Western civilization and the scramble for traditional African cultural values.

The soliloquy of the Knight embodies the avalanche and furious force of the Western civilization under the powerlessness and blindness of the noble family whose ultimate prerogative is to safeguard the cultural legacy bestowed to them by their elders:

What the Knight felt when he received the letter was like a blow in his heart. So, the victory of the foreigners was complete! Here were the Diallobé people, here was his own family, on their knees before a burst of fireworks. A solar burst, it is true, the midday burst on an exasperated civilization. The Knight was suffering deeply in the face of this irreparable thing which was being accomplished here, before his eyes, upon his own flesh.... If they could only understand that their course was a suicide, their sun a mirage! If only he himself were of the stature to rise up before them on their road and put an end to that blind contest! (Kane, 1963: 62) ^[7].

Beyond the mild resistance of the colonized subject, one has to take into account the real stakes the colonizer offers to him in terms of opportunity. In other words, if we keep aside the repressive forms of subjugation, there lies in the advantages of social mobility for the first African indigenous people who have joined the colonial school and converted to Christianity, to say nothing of the challenge the colonizer has taken up to evidence the demystification of some superstitions and traditional beliefs indigenous people thought of as sacred. Kane shows the naked challenge of the “Word” and the Diallobé traditions versus a triumphant White supremacy. This explains the sojourn of Kane’s hero, Samba Diallo, to France that will probably help him have his bread buttered on both sides, which inevitably sends him back to the point of departure, i.e., home with a mental breakdown and a dramatic outcome.

Conclusion

We can safely say, prior to the introduction of colonial rule in Africa, there reigns a cultural and social cohesion. In his work, Cheikh Hamidou Kane harps on the abrupt destruction of the social backcloth of the Diallobé people as a resultant of

colonial violence that gives way ambivalence to the colonized subject. Kane analyzes the colonial fact as a powerful instrument that upsets the “set up” and introduces the novelty and defiance that weaken the core of African values and faith. For that matter, the loss of power brings about uncertainty and discomfort among the family lineage in particular and African traditional rulers in general, who want, not only to keep their fading status and authority, but also satisfy their “technical” curiosity the colonizer uses as bait to entangle them in a web they would never decipher. Kane’s work provides the notion of *Otherness* and *self*. The discomfort that looms large in the local authorities’ faces and colonized subjects is reflected in their daily interactions in a way as to shake off the demon in them. Consequently, even though the colonized subjects have gained a so-called power from the colonial school and new religion that helps them move a few ranks up the social ladder, their assimilation does not carry much weight as it saps the true substance that should guarantee them a decent life. Besides, this urges the African-American thinker, Carter Godwin Woodson, to question the true efficacy of American schools in his own context, he somehow judges as institutes where African-Americans were “culturally indoctrinated” thus unable to fit in the society and secure decent jobs. Kane genuinely puts the facts out without coming up with a clear-cut solution to the Westernization of his Diallobé community. He uses a plot as a succinct foil just to remind that “Africa never spares those who do what they want instead of what they should”. More still, Kane implicitly carries the “Word” as a unique alternative and viaticum to live peacefully in a globalized world.

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