Review

Democracy in Africa: A “one step forward, two steps backward” policy

Labo Bouché Abdou
Department of English, University Abdou Moumouni-Niamey-Niger.

Received 26 July, 2014; Accepted 8 December, 2014

Better known as a historian than novelist and playwright, the Nigerienne André Salifou, just like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, the Ghanian Ayi Kwei Armah and the Kenyan Ngugi Wa Thiong’O, used history to develop the various topics evoked in his novel entitled La valse des vautours (The Waltz of the Vultures). If the colonizer stressed the domination and systematic exploitation of various African resources and potentialities, the new leaders of independent Africa have excelled in illicit enrichment, preferential treatment and abuse of power. Through precursory stories, André Salifou has skillfully denounced the unhealthy practices of the new African political class after the independence. The new democratic wave having swept the African nations, the new African leaders have difficulties adapting themselves to it for the common interest of their compatriots and their nations.

Key words: History, ill / good governance, democracy, Africa, politics.

INTRODUCTION

African leaders, under pressure from Europeans and Americans, are forced to democratize their regimes. One notes here and there some hesitations and/or imperfections as for the introduction of a true democracy in Africa. Sometimes one attends helplessly to regimes of exception, and sometimes to mixed military and civilian regimes; if it is not generally a fake democracy, developed and maintained by a group of relative, friends, and allied, having for only objective to stay on power for ever and taking control of the national economy and developing corruption and excessive illicit enrichment.

The aim of Andre Salifou is to describe African democracy, which is an eternal "beginning of the end and the end of the beginning" where one is never far from the starting point. In La valse des vautours, the author captures this model based on mismanagement, nepotism and lawlessness through the life of key characters such as Sololo, Gaika and her husband Mougou, Chedane, Dao, Yao and Wawa.

One has the right to ponder the title of René Dumont’s L'Afrique noire est mal partie (Black Africa Started With Wrong Foot) and the claim of a French president that "democracy is a luxury for Africans". Indeed in contemporary independent Africa, in spite of proclamations of intention and electoral promises, the report remains bitter: exacerbation of intolerance in all its forms; systematic practice of exclusion; propensity to privilege partisan quarrels and personal ambitions. These attitudes
and behaviors in the background of chronic instability too often lead to disastrous management of a country and a progressive degradation of the situation in all aspects of life.

If Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi Wa Thiong’O have used the history of European penetration and invasion in the years 1850s and 1960s to denounce the misdeeds of colonization in their novels Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, Fragments and Petals of Blood, Pr. André Salifou, in The Waltz of the Vultures, showed through history how democracy is suffering in the hands of the Africans on power. Apart from the fight for the conservation and valorisation of the black culture preached by the above three mentioned writers, André Salifou protests against colonialism and imperialism which dominates black world, while laying stress on the jolty and catastrophic mismanagement of the "new riches persons", who I named the African political leaders, having replaced the white colonizer. This new African class does worse than the Western dominator- systematic plundering of national resources, corruption, embezzlement, nepotism, preferential treatment and social injustice. In fact, they think

"... that the charm of power lies in the possibility of those who hold it to deceive inhabitants each time they judge it useful" (Translation mine, and all the translations which will follow are also mine) ["...que le charme du pouvoir réside dans la possibilité que s'accordent ceux qui le détiennent d'en abuser chaque fois qu'ils le jugent utile."] (La valse des vautours, 66).

For them, people are nothing because either “they do not exist, in this case their problem does not arise, or they exist indeed, and they would never say a word except serving their Masters”. (La valse des vautours, 63).

The comprehension of the leading intelligentsia of the role of the people is erroneous. It tends towards an objectification of fellow-citizens. Worst, these leaders assume the right to do what good seems to them. "Colonial vampirism is plugged so much that it does not spare the colonizers themselves. It is conceived by them and for a minority of associates which are arranged to notch the others." (Omgba, 2004). In A Man of the People, Achebe also decries this situation where "the minister lives in a residence which has seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms, one for every day of the week." (36)

The goal of this article is to examine the novel of Andre Salifou entitled The Waltz of the Vultures. The objective is to determine how the writer has decided to school his people through his work, which has a historical background. By definition, a waltz is a dance in three times, where each couple turns on itself while moving; and a vulture is a big-sized bird of prey, with a hooked beak, stripped head and neck, which nourishes itself with carrions and refuse. The combination of these words has given an unusual title to the novel. Taken in a figurative meaning, the Waltz in this context puts forward historical accounts announcing or illustrating the practices of the new political African class heiress of the colonial administration. The following comparison defines the thought of the author: "Like birds of prey, sharpened claws, powerful beak and incandescent glance, they will open a singular ball around their prey, and will carry out a true macabre dance: the Waltz of the Vultures“ (La valse des vautours, 68).

For a better understanding of Andre Salifou's work, this paper is divided into three sections: Use of Historical context in novels, Bipolarisation of political life and Vampires of the court.

In Use of Historical Context in Novels, we will see how Andre Salifou succeeds in using the history of French colonial penetration in West Africa as the setting of his novel. Section 2, Bipolarisation of Political Life, deals with the monopoly of the national policy by a group of individuals. The last section, Vampires of the Court, criticizes the behaviour of the African ruling classes.

Use of historical context in novels

Towards the end of the 19th century, Europeans launched out to the conquest of Africa in order to materialize the borders of their colonies and take control of them. After the new Franco-English convention of June 1898 delimiting the spheres of influence of France and England, a mission known as the Central Africa Mission, led by Captain Voulet and Lieutenant Chanoine, left France for Central Africa. The two French officers "were appointed to lead the mission with the goal of recognizing the theoretical demarcation line on chart" (La valse des vautours, 9). Unfortunately, the mission, which was supposed to be a materialization and recognition mission, changed, by the will of the commanders, in a group of criminal conquerors, guided by the madness of greatness and disdain for the black race. As proof, carriers in the mission "were attached by the neck, five by five, with a solid rope, as they progress painfully"."[Tels des oiseaux rapaces, les serres aiguës, le bec puissant et le regard incandescent, ils vont ouvrir un bal singulier et exécuter, autour de leurs proies, une véritable danse macabre : la valse des vautours.]" (La valse des vautours, 68).

Informed about all the atrocities committed on its behalf by the commanders, the French government ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Klobb, who was at that time in station in Mopti, Sudan (present Republic of Mali), to pursue them and carry an investigation on the all edged atrocities. On July 10th, 1899, Colonel Klobb arrived in the province of Tazarawa, i.e. the current department of Tessaoua. Unhappy with the arrival of Klobb, Voulet and Chanoine killed the emissary on July 14th, 1899. This assassination, speaking about the colonial penetration in
Tchad."

[43x275]reprend dans la sérénité, sa marche en direction du lac
française qui après une dizaine de jours de repos,
lew order and discipline reviennent au sein de la mission

Chad"['name was given to it after a plane crashed there. The
onomastic is a means of cultural identification. The village

for 'canoe'. Most of the time, with André Salifou

concepts, Hausa people say:

jirgin-sama

or canoe in

Hausa. To distinguish between the three


capital. The French captain Solomon
(Capitain Salomon was the colonial administrator of
Niamey before independence. That is why Nigeriens

nicknamed Niamey "ra kaptan Salma").

In the same way, when the author says Mai-Abio, he

refers to the village of Mai-Jirgi. Abio means plane, train

or canoe in Hausa. To distinguish between the three

concepts, Hausa people say: jirgin-sama for 'plane',
jirgin-kasa or dogo for 'train', and jirgin-ruwa or kolokolo
for 'canoe'. Most of the time, with André Salifou
onomastic is a means of cultural identification. The village

Mai-Jirgi mentioned in The waltz of vultures is real. The

name was given to it after a plane crashed there. The

author, by quoting it, wanted to insist on the historical

aspect of his writing. This technique of narration on a

historical basis was developed by the novelist throughout

his work. To conclude the history on the Central Africa

Mission for example, he says:

"After the death of the two blood thirsty officers, order and
discipline returned within the French mission. The

members of the mission have had a ten day rest before
they continued in serenity in the direction of the Lake

Chad"["Les deux officiers sanguinaires étant morts,
l'ordre et la discipline reviennent au sein de la mission
française qui après une dizaine de jours de repos,
reprend dans la sérénité, sa marche en direction du lac
Tchad." ] (La valse des vautours, 11).

This conclusion ends the historical background of the

infamous French colonial mission also known by its

nickname of Mission Voulet and Chanoine. The historical

background allowed the writer to make a junction with the

history of Gaika, one of the key characters in the novel.

For André Salifou, it is a question of "making the past

present, to bring the distant near" (T.A. Ezeigbo, 11).The

significant thing for him is to use a historical situation to

illustrate aspects of the fate of human beings, having an

importance and a direction in the day to day life. In fact,

André Salifou is not far from the style used by the

South-African Peter Abrahams in his novel Wild Conquest,
where "he depicts the conflict between the Boers and the
Matabele people overland at a particular point in the
violent history of South Africa (History and the Novel in
Africa, 13). Furthermore, regarding the use of historical
context, André Salifou shares the same point of view with

Chinua Achebe. He is among those who believe that to

restore the dignity and self respect lost by Africans, the
past needs to be recreated, not only to inform Africa's
detractors but also for the education of Africans
themselves. To each character corresponds a story and a
moral to be drawn in order of appearance:

1) Story of Gaika and the three charlatans.
2) Story of Tarana.
3) Story of Shipkaw.
4) Story of Sololo and his marriage.
5) Story of Arzika, cousin of Gaika.
6) Story of Zeynam and Zinaria.
7) Story of Kasko.
8) Story of Tamure.

All these stories around the characters of Andre Salifou
make it possible for the reader to better understand and
better determine the message conveyed by the writer. He
claimed that he "tried to decorate (his) book with some
tales and legends drawn from the Nigérienne oral
literature" (Andre Salifou, back of the novel). These tales
and legends are traditional cultural expressions. After
contact with the West, the depravation of manners settled
with the bipolarisation of political life.

Bipolarisation of political life

To deal with political themes, Andre Salifou walked his
reader through history. He made use of the terminology
of the Nigérienne traditional chieftaincy which he
transposed to the modern political system. He talked
about bipolarisation of political life in the country between
Wizir nicknamed Ouban-Gouri and Langa-Langa who is the
Head of State in these terms : "...The more time is
passing, the more we assist to the bipolarisation of the
country's political life. In fact, disregarding a good
governance and, being careless as regard the State,
each of the two highest responsible of the Kingdom,
starting with the Wizir, is mobilizing his partisans to fight
the other so that, the country's political debate has turned
into an endless affront between the two sides"["...plus le
temps passe, plus on assiste à la bipolarisation de la vie
politique du pays. En effet, au mépris du bon
fonctionnement, voire de la survie de l'Etat, chacun des
deux plus hauts responsables du royaume, à commencer
par le wizir, mobilise ses partisans et diabolise l'autre au
point que le débat politique du pays se résume en un
affrontement quotidien entre les deux camps." ] (35).

The author denounced the behaviour of the ruling
class, through the story of the recklessness of the chief of
the armed forces Sololo, who was taken in obvious
offence of adultery and was beaten by a warrant officer
helped by some neighbours as written in the novel:

It is a big, fat and strong warrant officer who, while crying
for help, in front of a thief, just to alert his neighbours,
continues to beat severely his undesirable guest. Some of the neighbours seize also the opportunity to give a memorable correction to Sololo since they recognize him... For sure, the adultery made by Sololo is rapidly heard by everybody throughout the country...(35).

On this point, Andre and Achebe share the same ideology. For the two artists, the new democratic institutions in Africa do not represent more than a regime of "relatives, friends, allied and acquaintance". Gaïka has clearly and singularly said it: "... Providence has decided to take care of us, it propelled you to the presidency of this country to profit and let your relatives, allies and close associates serve themselves, too."(66). Gaïka's statement prefigures the idea of ill governance evoked by the Nigérienne Andre Salifou and the Nigerian Chinua Achebe in A Man of The People (1966) and Anthills of the Savannah (1988). The only difference is that the Nigérienne simultaneously criticized the democratic and "military-civil" regimes in Niger in the same novel, whereas the Nigerian did it in different novels and in a distinct way, with Nigeria as a setting.

One can notice that even the Ghanaian Ayi Kwei Armah has evoked the failure of the new ruling class just after independence in his novel The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born (1969). The conclusion made by Andre Salifou at the end of his novel is illustrative:

... The militaries came to power, cut the throat of Dao and Yao and threw in prison scores of barons of the late regime, including Mougou, Wawa and Chedane. The kingdom-republic of Zangana must restart all over again (137).

It is generally what occurs to Africa. The regimes follow one another without any improvement. The new barons are sometimes worse and more covetous than their predecessors. And each time it is a replication: the country is plunged into misery. The word 'good governance' is only a formality. The African ruling system from the end of colonization up to now is a real Waltz of Vultures, as said by André Salifou; one goes and returns, one goes up and down without any noticeable progress. It is an eternal 'one step forward two steps backward'. One attends to a hesitant democracy with the step of a chameleon. People do not know what they want; or rather the African leaders develop and knowingly maintain a policy which enables them to remain the longest in power. They do not care about the interests of their people or their country. Sometimes they have neither experience nor knowledge of the fundamental principles of governance. They come to power without any preparation, as underlined by Achebe in Anthills of The Savannah:

His Excellency came to power without any preparation for political leadership,... a fact which he being a very intelligent person knew perfectly well... Therefore, when our civilian politicians finally got what they had coming for them and landed unloved and unmoored on the rubbish heap and the young Army Commander was invited by the even younger coup makers to become His Excellency the Head of State he had pretty few ideas about what to do. And so, like an intelligent man, he called his friends together and said: 'What shall I do?' (Anthills of The Savannah, 12).

The lack of preparation to political leadership evoked by Achebe and the cupidity of the civilian politicians led the majority of African countries to chaos. This satirical comment intimated by Achebe on military regimes is the focal point of what has become the experience of politics in Africa. It is this tortuous experience of politics in Africa that the Nigérienne André Salifou in Waltz of Vultures, under the informed eye of a historian who has taken part at some point in the management of his country, decried. In fact, André Salifou was elected President of the Presidium of the Nigérienne Sovereign National Conference held from July 29th to October 03rd, 1991 at the Palais Des Sports in Niamey. On that occasion he nicknamed himself Paper Tiger. This qualifier fits him like gloves. André Salifou has lived under the first republic of Diori Hamani, the military regimes of General Kountché, Général Ali Chaibou, Général Baré and the famous two transitions after the National Conference in 1991 under the Prime Minister Chéfou Amadou and in 1999 under Commandant Wanké. Did not this experience condition the writing of Waltz of the Vultures? From time to time, the author gives some hints concerning what I have guessed as in the following:

"Operation for the putsch started one Thursday between three and five o'clock a.m., the day before the commemoration of the 7th anniversary of the country's independence"(41)

"Sololo takes the reins of power. He has three years to reorganize the country... Sololo, Gaïka and her husband Mougou will try to rule the country with the complicity of some friends."(42)

For those who know the evolution of the democratic process in Niger, while reading Waltz of the Vultures, they can easily understand that the policy denounced by Andre Salifou is founded on the basis of friendship and alliances. This explains why certain characters in the novel manage to participate in successive civilian or military regimes, for example Sololo, Colonel Dan-Darara, Chedane, Dao, Yao and Wawa. For this reason, the author talks about "bipolarisation of the political life of the country"(35) between two blocs: Wizir and his friends on one hand, the Head of State on the other hand. These Masters "carry out the dance as well as they feel it." Nobody has the right to act out of their policy line even if...
their ideas are bad and are outdated. Dao has notified it to the President Sololo in these terms:

My poor! You still have done nothing! What we have asked you my friends and I, is to become, and forever a dictator. A true one! However, a good dictator does not just temporarily confiscate the rights and freedoms of the people. He confiscates even the hope of it! For eternity!

(133)

In fact, for this political class, instead of good governance, they claim the installation of a pure and hard dictatorship, going up to the confiscation of the rights and freedoms of the people.

In short, through The Waltz of Vultures, André Salifou has not just explained or made the genesis of the political past of Niger. He has at the same time made the evolutionary documentary of the Nigérien modern society, while commenting on the process of this evolution. It is neither the defence of political freedom or protection of cultural integrity, even less the politico-economic relations with Europe or the United States. It is rather about a problem of social positioning between the various reigning classes blocking de facto the installation of a true participative democracy.

VAMPIRES OF THE COURT

André Salifou characterizes the close collaborators of the ruling class as vampires around the king. The vampires are the persons around the head of the State who are either special advisers, "chargés de mission", security forces or other associates working for the President. In his novel, Andre negatively put all these persons in the same bag. Moreover, he gives the history of each character before proceeding to his portrait. It is the case of Gaïka, Tarana's daughter, who is the fruit of three charlatans who have slept with the mother respectively "at dawn, in middle of day and at sunset. Her (Tarana) fourth partner, the same day, but late in the evening, will be her husband"(13). Thus, there is nothing surprising if at twenty three "Gaika has got a lot of sex appeal ."(15) This scatological description of Gaïka is specific to Andre Salifou. The example of Sololo's portrait is telling. The author presents him like a "young obliging person, generous and human, inveterate womanizer and amateur of sex."(14) After Sololo comes Colonel Dan-Dara who is also presented as a "principal collaborator, minister of state, responsible of the national dialogue. For this reason his obsession was granted to him: political funds, beautiful car, honors, body guards and of course women and alcohol."(43)

The three examples quoted above, give us an idea of the characters responsible for leading to "good port" the development policy advocated by their Chief. André Salifou clearly refers to a thinking in African philosophy, according to which the actions of a person can be explained by his or her social origin .That is, what one does depends on whether one comes from a respectful noble family or a vulgar one. A Hausa proverb says : "There is no bad chief but there are only bad advisers."("Babu mugun sarki, sai mugun bafade") These advisers- vampires profit from the prerogatives of power to dilapidate the meagre resources of the State. Through these looters, André Salifou denounces the attitude of certain Nigérienne leaders who, under the cover of power, do not hesitate to put their personal interest ahead, to the detriment of the common interest.

The author draws the reader's attention to the new turning point of the democratic power in Africa:

… even if in his country the democratic process, due to its newness and the unpreparedness of the executives charged to animate it, is as imperfect as fragile, he prefers not to remain in history as the man who will have one day encouraged the soldiers to stop it. Unless of course if that interruption creates at last the conditions for a good revival of the democratic process in his country, which is due, above all, to become soon, let us recall it, a republic.(134)

Opulence, illicit enrichment, preferential treatment and abuse of power are practices likely to block good governance. In La double tentation du roman nigérien, Abdoul-Aziz Issa Daouda is right to say:

"Generally, African novelists of the disenchantment attach more importance to political voices. It is especially a question of denouncing the inadequacy of the new political institutions to the legitimate hopes of populations, which against expectations, assist to the emergence of a new class of privileged whose only concern is personal material satisfaction." (72)

This new class of privileged people evoked by Abdoul-Aziz, represents the new 'colonial yoke' or the 'bottleneck' of good governance preached by African leaders in general and Nigérien thinkers in particular. In fact, since 1963, Frantz Fanon, in his novel Les damnés de la terre, had denounced the trickery of the African intelligentsia, which has replaced colonial masters, in these terms:

"Inside the new regime, a certain inequality in the enrichment and the monopolization, some eat in several racks and appear like brilliant specialists in opportunism. Corruption and preferential treatments multiply, traditional African ways or manners are degraded." (113)

'Some' here is impersonal but quite significant. It is symbolic and represents a category of privileged intellectuals always siding with the ruling class. Such very important personalities mentioned by Fanon have their
guarantors in the work of Andre Salifou. They are the characters of Gaika or 'the top model of corruption', Ouban-Gouri and Mougou 'the cheaters of the businessmen'. President Sololo, who is supposed to protect the interest of the people, also enters the dance by giving his uncle-in-law Zakou, a "40 tons" - truck and "an envelope of 200 million francs...."(136)

Conclusion

To conclude, the satire in the novel entitled The Waltz of the Vultures is on the one hand, a description of the nature of the successive regimes from independence to the year 2000 (the publishing date of the novel) and on the other hand, the description of the change in social manners and the African ancestral practices from the colonial period as well as the cultural clashes that followed.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES