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## Identity Politics, Self Determination and War in Postcolonial African Movies

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### **Abstract:**

*Some of the themes that have marked the identity of African literature and other cultural products for decades are war and insurgency. The dominance of these themes is predicated on the sad fact that war and insurgencies have become a recurring decimal in the African life. The film, therefore, is one site where this sad narrative is projected.*

*This paper examines Sometime in April- a film on the conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda- Across the Niger-a film on the Nigeria-Biafra war- respectively, to reveal that politics of identity and self determination is a major catalyst for the wars and insurgencies in Postcolonial Africa. It argues that the history of most African nations, fifty years after independence, is a history of war, insurgency and terrorism and that all these are traceable, more than anything else, to colonialism, neo-colonialism and politics of identity.*

*The paper concludes that the panacea for reversing this sad narrative is for African leaders to govern their subjects with fairness, accountability and justice and to stand up to foreign interests whose goal is the perpetual polarization and subjugation of Africa and Africans.*

### **1. Introduction**

Since the dawn of civilization, man has ever been concerned with who he is in relation to nature and the universe generally but, specifically, he has often been more concerned with who he is in relation to other men. Some major considerations in this quest to differentiate self from others are geography, colour, class, religion, ethnicity, language, religion and power. Therefore, any discourse on war and conflict has found ample ground in one or more of these factors. It may even be argued that while some reasons adduced by man for waging war against fellow men are 'reasonable', 'rational' and 'common- sensical', most wars have also been found to be precipitated on whimsical, irrational, egocentric and phobic sentiments. Seyom Brown (1987: 38) attempts to give some of the reasons why people go to war or resort to violence to resolve crises:

*Some are physical, tangible interests, such as territory and economic assets that supposedly need to be defended or acquired for the nation to sustain itself in an acceptable material or economic condition. Some are ideational interests such as a religion, an ethno-linguistic culture, or a particular kind of political system, without which life itself is believed to have drastically diminished value.*

In our understanding of the causes of war, we may have to agree that no one reason or set of reasons will be adequate to understand why men go to war. Also, it is impossible for scholars and historians of war to agree on when the first war was waged. In a changing world, the reasons for waging wars and the way wars are waged are also of concern for scholars of war both in the humanities and the social sciences.

One major ancestors of war scholarship is Carl Von Clausewitz. His work, *On War* has remained a bible to all war scholars and theorists. In this work, Clausewitz concludes that war has a place in human society as it is a rational phenomenon and is actually 'a continuation of politics by other means.' This submission also brings us to another problem: What is politics? Why do individuals and societies politic? Is the aim of politics/or politicians rational and beneficial to the larger society or does it serve the interest of an individual or a group of individuals? These questions cannot be adequately and satisfactorily answered as they are similar to those being asked by war scholars for millennia. Most scholars have come to agree that we may never fully and uniformly agree on the real causes of war. Dokuboh (2012) says it succinctly when he posits that;

*Unfortunately, we still do not know what the causes of war are, or if we do know them, we are far from being in agreement about them. No single general theory of war exists that is acceptable to social scientists in their respective disciplines or to authorities in other fields from which social scientists borrow insights.... We cannot identify any single cause of war; the putative causes are not only multiple but they have kept multiplying throughout history.*

Dokuboh's views above follow those of earlier writers on war, (Keith and Olin, 1979, Brown, 1987, Rice, 1988, Toffler, 1993 and Azeez, 2012) who have expressed the view that there are as many reasons for war as there are men and women who initiate and prosecute it. Since the focus of this paper is not to arrive at an agreeable reason or reasons for initiating and prosecuting war, let us move to a study of war in artistic works generally and our case studies specifically.

## 2. African Artists and the Burden of War

The continent called Africa is not different from other human societies in terms of war and insurgence. In fact a testimony to this assertion can be found in the various wars fought by various African empires such as the Mali Empire, Oyo Empire, Benin Empire, Ashanti Empire and many more. In the same vein, the reason (s) for these Empires to go to war against fellow Africans have not changed from those advanced by other Empires or peoples in other parts of the world; economics, politics, egoism, territorial expansion/protection, power, ideology, religion, cultural supremacy etc. The Oyo Empire, for instance, built a strong army to suppress or conquer its neighbours; the Mali Empire had both religious and economic interest while the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio is regarded as a purely religio-cultural war. These tendencies find ample and earlier examples in the Greco-Roman world where wars are fought over women and other ideational reasons.

Despite the above, however, Africa's burden of war is a multifaceted one occasioned by the incursion of other cultural super-powers into Africa by virtue of the inhuman slave trade and the equally sub-human colonial and post-colonial interventions. Much time and attention shall not be placed on how these events have affected the African psyche as various scholars have devoted volumes to them but it is pertinent to note, with dismay, the spate of violence in Africa since the post colonial period. It is also important to underscore, at this point, the changing nature and texture of war from positional and traditional warfare to what Rice (1998) classified as 'wars of the third kind'. In traditional or positional warfare, the rules are spelt out by both aggressors. For instance, in this type of war, the armies wage war on one another while the civilian populace are protected and only become vulnerable booties when one side loses. In wars of the third kind or guerrilla warfare, the lines are not well drawn as the civil populace may be part and parcel of the army. However, the reasons behind wars of the third kind and traditional wars are often identical.

Despite the above, however, reasons for wars of the third kind in Africa and other places are waged for political and ideological reasons-self determination, power and religion. Examples of these can be found in the liberation struggles of South Africa, Angola, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Algeria etc. In fact, as we shall show later, the wars dramatised in the movies under study are as a result of the 'politics of preference' played by the colonialists before what many refer to as 'flag independence'.

## 3. Of Artists and Wars

It is interesting to know that all through the ages, wars have been a major concern of the artist. The reason for this is, perhaps, that war is both a sad and intriguing phenomenon that man is still and will for a long time continue to understand. Azeez (2012) argues that the artist, like the historian and social scientists, in their various artistic creations, are driven by the need to arrive at the causes of war and thereby seek ways of preventing it in the future;

*Another reason for both the artist and historian writing about war may be to correct certain impressions and misconceptions about the war. Both the historian and the imaginative writer are men and women with keen research interests, seekers after truth. For this reason, they may not be content with the explanations or reasons of warring parties about the war. Thus, they, after the war, may want to portray an 'objective' view of the war and by so doing, inject their 'subjective' opinions on the issue.*

## 4. War, Insurgency and African Cinema

Just like every artistic and cultural product, African movies respond to social ethos. It follows, then, that since war has become a regular feature of the African political, social, cultural and economic life, filmmakers must necessarily react by creating works that portray this reality. The movie, therefore, over the years, has become a veritable site for an understanding of the African life, aspirations, fears and history. Most scholars agree that some of the finest works of art derived their themes from war. This is true across ages and cultures as evident in the works of great writers of antiquity such as Euripides, Shakespeare, Tolstoy and almost all the writers of the absurd tradition. The practice of making war a major thematic concern for writers and especially dramatist can be traced to the youngest of the Greek dramatists, Euripides who, as a young man who grew up at a time when Greece was engaged in several wars, dedicated a large number of his dramatic oeuvre to war. In fact, fifteen of the plays of this great writer are dedicated to war and women. Today, the plays of this ancient writer have become more relevant to contemporary times as critical bequests by this creative mind to understand man and the phenomenon called war. As Vellacot (1975: 153) reveals, the plays of Euripides more than those of any other writer of his time have almost a direct relevance to modern societies because he, more than his older contemporaries like Sophocles and Aeschylus devoted attention to a major theme that has revealed man in his most bestial nature- war. Vellacot posits that;

*The extant plays of Sophocles, of which several were written during the same period, contain little identifiable reference to the strains and anxieties which occupied the lives of author and audience outside the theatre; but, of Euripides' fifteen war-time plays, nine either deal directly and primarily with the subject of war, or contain clear comments on such topics as the difference between a just and an unjust war, the treatment of refugees, the concept of sacrifice, the principle of reprisal, the fate of the defeated.*

It is, then, not surprising that African writers generally and moviemakers, specifically, as witnesses to the carnage on the continent have been inexorably drawn to the wars and insurgencies on the continent. Following in the footsteps of other artists before them, they have engaged war using the cinema, a very potent medium to reach a mass audience to comment on the destruction that these wars and insurgencies bring upon individual and collective psyches of the African people. While a lot of works, literary and filmic exist on war and insurgency in Africa, critical works that examine these works as war literatures or movies are scanty hence this paper. As Chimalum Nwanko (2008) posits;

*If colonialism was quiet, the wars which came at the heels of colonialism or in some cases with colonialism were not quiet and did more deleterious damage. African writers have followed the pulse of the continent and chronicled the historical event and upheaval simply and persistently, quiet often with great candor, directness, simplicity, and in many cases an inventiveness which does not lose sight of the prize, to remain, as in much of traditional Africa, the last moral bastion of the people.*

Since film, more than any other art form vividly captures events in a naturalistic way, more and more creative minds are turning to it to tell the African story. Also, as a cultural and artistic product, film has the potential to reach a larger number of people across time and space. Also worthy of note is the fact that images have a more direct and lasting impression on the mind as Kolker (2006:14) says: *We so believe in the presence and reality of images that we may take them at face value. They are, we often think, exactly what we are (or what someone tells us they are). ... we invest images with emotion and meaning; we may forget that they are images- mediations- and create a kind of short circuit.*

Stephens, (1998:18-19) adds;

*... video can help us gain new slants on the world, new ways of seeing. It can capture more of the tumult and confusions of contemporary life than tend to fit in lines of type. Through its ability to step back from scenes and jump easily between scenes, video can also facilitate new, or at least previously underused, ways of thinking.*

## **5. Ethno-Minority Conflicts in Across the Niger and Sometimes in April**

As mentioned earlier, postcolonial Africa has witnessed more wars and insurgencies than can be imagined. Sadly, too, most of the wars were caused, directly or indirectly by the anomalies of the colonialists who, in different regions of the continent, placed political and economic powers in ethnic nationalities that serve their interests. In some cases, the balkanisation of the continent by the different colonial masters without regards for cultural, religious and linguistic differences or affinities has remained a major reason for peoples who have hitherto lived peacefully together for centuries to draw their swords against one another. This balkanisation has placed ethnic nationalities into artificial and arbitrary sub-groups of 'majority' and 'minority' or 'superior' and 'inferior'. Every attempt by successive African governments to correct this anomaly has further created new groups who fall, 'politically' into these categories. In some cases, the 'majority' or 'superior' is defined by which ethnic nationality controls political and economic power. A good example is Nigeria where the Hausa-Fulani, due to political control of the nation constitutes the 'majority' and 'superior' while other nationalities, collectively, constitute the 'minority' and 'inferior'. Thus, the nation is faced with two classes; the powerful minority and the weak majority. The effects of such arrangements of the colonial masters and the effort to correct them are the concerns of the two films under discussion.

The film *Across the Niger* (2007) is derived from the Nigerian Civil war of 1967-1970 while *Sometimes in April* (2005) is derived from the Rwanda genocide of 1994. The choice of these two movies is based on their historicity and relevance to contemporary carnage around the world generally and on the African continent specifically. Since the years following the events dramatised in these two movies, the continent seem not to have learnt any moral lesson about the damage caused by fratricidal wars.

The two movies begin with captions that tell the viewer the historical sources of the events presented in them. The two directors, Izu Ojukwu (*Across the Niger*) and Raoul Peck (*Sometimes in April*) respectively, make no pretensions about the sources of their content just as they do not make any pretensions about their goal- the need for Africans to shun violence and division and seek peace and unity.

The narratives of the two movies are woven around two soldiers, one a major in the Nigerian army Dubem and Augustin Muganza, a captain in the Rwandan army. The two soldiers, as the narratives reveal, are men who genuinely love their countries and who would do anything to protect their unity in the face of hate created by their various colonial masters. In the case of Nigeria, the country was unified under Britain in 1914 while Belgium took over the control of Rwanda from Germany in 1916. By the time Britain was leaving Nigeria in 1960, political powers were vested in the northern part of the country; a region that most political analysts agree was a stooge of the colonial masters. The same scenario played out in Rwanda where the minority Tutsi the favoured tribe of the Belgians were in 1959, given political control of the country over the majority Hutus. The actions of Britain and Belgium, respectively, no doubt created resentments and ethnic rivalry between the various nationalities in both countries.

The film, *Sometimes in April* dramatises one of the most horrendous genocide in human history. The film opens on two brothers, Honore and Augustin. Honore, the older, tries to persuade his brother an army captain to join forces with them to exterminate the Tutsis whom the majority of the Hutus see as their enemy. Captain Augustin Muganza, however, is married to a Tutsi woman Jeanne and they have three children. As far as Muganza is concerned they –Hutus and Tutsis- are both Rwandans and there should be no segregation between them. However, this voice of reason has no impact on Honore who works for a tribalist radio station whose aim is the extermination of all Tutsis.

The drama becomes gory when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) shoots down the plane conveying the president of the country, a Hutu, and killed him and all on board. Violence broke out immediately and within 100 days, over 800,000 people, including women, children and the aged are killed in their homes, on the road, in schools and in churches and other places.

Juxtaposing this with the event dramatised in *Across the Niger*, one sees a thread running across the two films. In *Across the Niger*, Major Dubem, a major in the Nigerian army was serving in the northern part of Nigeria when the Nigerian-Biafra war broke out. The events leading to the Nigerian-Civil war is not dissimilar to those portrayed in *Sometimes in April*. Following the exit of Britain and the granting of independence in 1960, a new government emerged led by a northerner Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. This government soon became reckless and corrupt that it was toppled in 1965 by a group of young Nigerian soldiers led by major Kaduna Nzeogwu, an Ibo man. In the coup that ousted the government of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, some northern elites were killed including the Prime Minister, Tafawa Balewa. With Tafawa Balewa killed, an Ibo general, Aguiyi Ironsi became the military head of state. These events gave birth to a deep resentment of the Igbos by the Hausa-Fulani who by 1966 began their reprisal attack on the Ibos. In 1967 the Igbos, led by another Nigerian soldier of Igbo extraction declared the separation of the Igbos and the entire people of eastern Nigeria from Nigeria to form a new nation. The new nation where the Igbos hoped to find solace was named Republic of Biafra. This secession led to the outbreak of the war in which the Igbos like their Tutsi counterparts in Rwanda became victims of genocide.

Like Captain Augustin who is married to a perceived enemy, a Tutsi, Major Dubem, an Igbo prince is married to a Hausa woman, Habiba. The movie, *Across the Niger* begins with the attempt by the couple, Dubem and Habiba to shun tribal hate and deciding to get married. In the marriage scene, we see a soldier to whom Habiba was betrothed threatening to deal with Dubem for snatching his wife. From this point on, the film takes us into the efforts by the newly wedded couple to prove their love as they embark on a dangerous journey across the river Niger to the eastern part of the Niger, Dubem's home, where they hope to find peace.

Again, Dubem and Habiba's dangerous journey towards the east in search of peace is similar to that of Captain Muganza in *Sometimes in April*. Major Muganza, faced with the reality of the extermination of his wife and children whom the Hutus regard as 'cockroaches' pleads with his hate-filled brother, Honore to take his family to safety. Honore, after a long time grudgingly accepts to help his brother. However, on their way, they are stopped by an irate, hate-filled mob that refuses to let him pass. He introduces himself as the journalist who has been helping to fan the embers of hate on the radio. This introduction would have saved him alone but not his sister-in-law, his niece and nephew as well as family friends of his brother's, a Tutsi in the Rwandan army. Jeanne, Muganza's wife, sensing danger drives off with her children to avoid their being killed on the spot as cockroaches.

A similar scenario plays out in *Across the Niger* where Dubem, Habiba and his orderly, also an Ibo man, have their truck stopped by men of the Nigerian army who are mainly Hausas. The men of the Nigerian army, knowing that people of eastern extraction who have lived all their lives in the north prior to the war, are positioned at different road blocks to fish out all Igbos and kill them irrespective of their age or gender, disguise as Hausas by wearing turbans. At one of the road blocks, Hausa is spoken to a suspected Igbo man and when he replies incorrectly, he is dragged down and shot on the spot. The manner of the Ibo man's death is similar to the way that Xavier, Captain Muganza's best friend in *Sometimes in April* is killed by the irate Hutus at a road block.

One other thing that is common to both movies is that they both rely on the use of news footages in the unfolding of their narratives. At important moments in the films, we hear radio announcements or see television news footages infused into the plots. Also, the wars are between the ruling governments and insurgents who are dissatisfied with the way the governments are being run. The Rwandan Patriotic Front is similar to the Biafran Army in *Across the Niger*. However, we must note that while the Rwandan war dramatised in *Sometimes in April* lasted only 100 days, the Nigerian Civil war lasted 30 months. Sadly for both Nigeria and Rwanda, thousands of civilians lost their lives in these senseless wars.

One must note that both the Rwandan genocide and the Nigerian-Biafra war stemmed from perceived repression of the true causes of the wars. As stated earlier, the Nigerian-Biafra war was a product of an unfinished and unresolved disaffection created by the colonialists occasioned by their privileging of northerners over others. This privileging eventually led to the coup of 1966 and the killing of some northern leaders which led to a reversal of resentment where the northerners see the Ibos as their enemies. The mutual distrusts between both sides led to reprisal attacks on Ibos by the Hausa-Fulani of the north and consequently to the civil war and the genocide against the Ibos. The Nigerian case is similar to the Rwandan case where the Tutsis and some moderate Hutus went on exile to form a rebel group when Belgium in 1959, handed over the country to the minority Tutsi tribe over the majority Hutus. These events reveal, as Rice (1988: 18) noted, that;

*Wars of independence may be defeated and rebellions may be suppressed, leaving the aims for which they were fought unattained. However, after a time, if the problems that gave rise to them are fundamental, defeated or suppressed struggles are likely to resume. Moreover, much as a recurrent fever is likely to prove more virulent than the one that preceded it, a cause is likely to become radicalised by passing through a cycle of suppression and re-emergence.*

At this juncture, it is important to take a look at the two couples around whom the narratives are woven. In *Across the Niger* Major Dubem and Habiba are newly wedded while in *Sometimes in April*..., Captain Muganza and Jeanne have long been married with three children. However, in the two films, the two women are rejected as 'cockroaches' by their in-laws. The Igwe, the traditional ruler of Dubem's town and father to Dubem tells his son that Habiba, his Hausa wife is a cockroach and can not be accepted in a gathering of hens. The same is said to Captain Muganza by Honore in *Sometimes in April*. This goes to show that in times of war, language becomes a powerful tool in the evocation of hate and a feeling of superiority of one's ethnicity, religion and culture over those of the enemy.



Dubem and his wife, assisted by his orderly finally succeed to cross the Niger after several ordeals and near-death circumstances. However, they arrive to face a more virulent and bitter war that gave rise to the war, in the first place; Dubem has a woman, Nneka already betrothed to him in his absence while he comes back home with a pregnant 'cockroach' as a wife. He has, thus, survived the battlefield to come into another battlefield. The entire community rejects his choice of wife and would have him marry from amongst them. This is also the case with Captain Muganza in *Sometimes in April* whose wife and children are referred to by his brother, Honore as 'cockroaches'. Dubem eventually pays for his action with his life while Muganza lost all members of his family. Dubem's uncle, and traitor to the cause of his people, Chief Ichei, shoots him in error while attempting to kill Dubem's wife, Habiba.

Muganza, however, is alive at the end of the movie and, in his attempt to live again, gets involved with another woman, one of the teachers of Muganza's daughter, Anne-Marrie. While Muganza's new wife is pregnant, Dubem's pregnant wife delivers a baby boy. The pregnancy and the baby, respectively, symbolise a renewal of life, of hope and a united people.

Also important to this study is the fact that during the wars, thousands of innocent Africans lost their lives, property and dignity. In *Sometimes in April*, for instance, women are serially and brutally raped. Even though this inhuman phenomenon is not present in *Across the Niger*, one cannot rule out the fact that in wars, rape is seen as a past time activity by soldiers. In both the Rwandan genocide and the Biafran- Nigerian wars, scores of 'rebel' soldiers' families lost their lives- men, women, children and the aged who were not part of the decision to embark on war in the first place. While the Rwandan genocide claimed a total of over 800, 000 people in 100 days, the number of Biafrans killed by the Nigerian troops remain unmentioned till the present. This, as Dawes (2002) noted, is because in times of war, human beings killed in their thousands or millions become mere numbers and not human beings with identity.

## 6. Of War and Human Dignity

In the two movies studied, one observes, and sadly too, how men reduce fellow men to objects and lesser animals. In both movies, enemies are regarded, not as men and women with identity but as cockroaches that could be stamped upon and that must be killed without thinking. In both movies, the media is used to whip up and spread the message of hate. Honore, in *Sometimes in April*, specifically, uses his position as a radio presenter to spread the message of hate against the people with whom his own people, the Hutus have lived for centuries. His language in the radio broadcast achieved the desired effect on the teeming, gullible populace beyond his expectation; thousands of gullible Hutu youths and men take to the street to hunt down their preys, the Tutsis. The same scenario plays out in *Across the Niger* when Habiba, Dubem's Hausa wife goes to the market only to be chased away as an unwanted guest. Dawes (2002: 15) captures it succinctly when he asserts that,

*Wars are born and sustained in rivers of language about what it means to serve the cause, to kill the enemy, and to die with dignity; and they are reintegrated into collective historical self-understanding through a ritualistic over plus of the language of commemoration.*

Since men, in the language of war are reduced to cockroaches in the two films, little wonder, then, that killing them is seen as a past time- the men, women and children have no names, no identity as they are mere statistical figures counted only for the records.

*Counting is the epistemology of war. War is bounded by the referential extremes of the prebattle roll call and the postbattle body count, and is constituted by the mundane and innumerable calculations (days counted, supplies counted, miles counted) that make war in theoretical writings susceptible to formulation.... A single death is a tragedy,... but a million deaths is statistic. If naming is a projection of identity, counting is an abstraction out of identity; if naming is an assertion of individuality, counting is an assertion of a category or type. (31)*

## 7. Conclusion

In the pages above, attempts have been made, not to analyse the films studied from a formalist perspective, but essentially to bring out the similarities between the causes and nature of war in postcolonial Africa. Through a study of the films, we have been able to show that the film has become a major site for the study and understanding of the African reality and that war has become a major recurring factor in most postcolonial African states and that these wars, though recent, have their sources in the anomalies perpetrated by the various colonial masters who favoured some ethnic nationalities above some others by placing political control of the colonies in the hands of their favoured tribes.

The films, therefore, are political statements on the sad impact of war on the continent and pointers to the need for Africans to shun hate politics planted by colonialists and forge a united front towards the advancement of the African peoples.

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