

**Dictatorship and the Quest for Social Emancipation in Ahmadou Kone's  
DE LA CHAIRE AU TRÔNE**

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**Abstract**

Postcolonial francophone African literature portrays dictatorship as a phenomenon of concern in African countries due to its devastating effect on the nation's economy and on the lives of the people. Often, dictatorship arises as a result of wanting to remain in power for ever, and this is part of Africa's postcolonial reality. Some writers have criticized the negative effects of dictatorship by bringing to light the personality and selfish intentions of African rulers. This study is inspired by the following fundamental questions: Who are dictators? What are the factors that incite dictatorship in Africa? What are its impacts? Who suffers the consequences and what is the way forward? Using the social critic theory, the paper examines the quest for social emancipation in a fictitious despotic setting in sub-Saharan Africa through a theatrical struggle in Amadou Koné's **De la chaire au trône**. The paper portrays the protagonist –Princell as a depiction of an African dictator who, rather than bringing peace and development, brings disdain and disenchantment to his people. His tragic end on in power denotes end of dictatorship and hope for Africans and Africa.

Key words: dictatorship, social emancipation, Africans, theatre, disenchantment

**Introduction**

Dictatorship is a popular system of government in the sub-Saharan African since independence featuring leaders who aspire to rule and die in power. They long to enjoy absolute power to the detriment of the people who may have elected them into power. The incessant aspiration for power by dictators has brought disenchantment and disillusion rather than hope and development to the people. In the light of this, Mutharika affirms that it is socially unacceptable or morally degrading for a leader to reap huge profits from swindling his people or hijacking the economic development machinery for his personal benefits. Needs of the people become secondary because resources are spent on military hardware for oppressing the very masses for which government came into power and negation of

human rights became absolute (6). It is obvious from Mutharika's point of view that the masses are at the mercy of these dictators whose objective is oppression. The incessant negligence from this system of government has resulted to civil wars, genocide, terrorism, kidnaping and other forms of social vices that is a menace to the people.

Similarly, Olson discovers that people in a dictatorship do not rise up and overthrow the dictatorship in order to install democracy even though it is in their best interest to do so (261). Olson refers to this as a –logical mistake‡ that has kept the people in constant oppression which could also lead to a state of anarchy. He refers to dictators as –roving bandits‡ whose act of stealing is uncoordinated through mismanagement and them leaving little for the population. According to Olson, whenever an autocrat expects a brief tenure, it pays him/her to confiscate those assets whose tax yield over his tenure is less than their total value (256). This incentive plus the inherent uncertainty of succession in dictatorships imply that autocrats will rarely have good economic performance for more than a generation. He made it clear that dictators have undoubtedly, performed badly in sub-Saharan countries in Africa since independence to date. Going by the present times, African dictators had been in power for more than three decades with no positive impact on the lives of the people. The likes of Paul Biya in Cameroon, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in Equatorial Guinea have brought poverty and misery to their citizens.

Agitations for liberation from dictatorship are being promoted both in fiction and reality. Some francophone writers have depicted dictatorship in their works in different ways through their perception. For Marquez, –A dictator novel draws upon the historical record to create a fictional version of dictators, in this way; the author is able to use the specific to explain the general, as many dictator novels are centered on the rule of a particular dictator‡ (21). Marquez's notion of a dictator novel explains how a fictitious novel about a despot ruler could be known. The theatre piece *De la chaire au trône* by Ahmadou Koné depicts this assertion. Koné is a prolific francophone writer and has many novels, essays, children's books and plays to his credit as well as published academic articles and books. His satiric and humorous style is noticed mostly in *De la chaire au trône* where he portrays the devastating side of leadership in an African setting. In this paper, we shall examine the strategies adopted by a dictator to cling on to power, the people's reaction against the regime and the quest for social liberation through this theatre piece. The study deploys the social critique theory as framework in the analysis.

### **The Francophone African Crisis of Dictatorship**

Dictatorship has indeed ravaged most countries in the francophone African regions. This menace has prompted the attention of renowned scholars and critiques to comment and criticize the authoritarian system of government. Apart from restricting the people from their freedom and right to live, we saw the degrading conditions such as torture, imprisonment, force to exile and murder meted on them by the notorious leaders. The case of imprisonment is seen in Ahmadou Kourouma's *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages*. In this novel president Fricassa Santos imprisoned Koyaga one of the major characters for political reason. Kourouma depicts President Sekou Touré in this novel. As for torture, Soyinka's work *The Man Died* is a good example. This literary work reveals how the Nigerian military through dictatorship tortured and degraded its citizens. Some writers, who attack dictators openly and directly, flee on exile to save their dear lives. They seek refuge in Europe and America leaving the dictators to their full grasp of the authoritarian regime. But interestingly these new countries of abode tend to give them a conducive atmosphere to fight back through literary struggle. Olanikpekin stated that:

Fleeing from African dictators within the ‘us’ now controlling authoritarian regimes, they were forcefully exiled into the ‘them’, that is, into the west where they found a more comfortable livelihood

and receptive audiences (especially in universities) to their writings, and from where they sometimes called for the overthrow of what they described as ‘native tyrants’ now parading as ‘neoliberalist’ leaders in Africa (14).

It is evident from the above point of view that dictators do not tolerate any opposition. The usual practice is to force such oppositions out of the way or lock them up permanently. The regime of some francophone president like Houphouët Boigny, Sekou Touré, Mobutu Seseke, Laurent Gbagbo, Bokassa and Gnassingbé Eyadéma indicates this clearly. Majority of the people in countries where these despotic heads of state ruled were disenchanted. Their dreams and aspiration of being free to choose a leader of their choice was never achieved. Independence was hardly enjoyed due to incessant tyranny, domination and subjugation. According to Adebisi, these politicians in power pretend to be there for the interest of the people but in reality, they are in power for their personal interest. Les hommes politiques au pouvoir se présentent comme les défenseurs des intérêts du peuple alors qu’en vérité ils ne poursuivent que leur propre intérêt (13). In Adebisi’s view, deception is the order of the day and the people are faced with disappointment. However, the hope for democracy is dashed and the people become frustrated. Balarabe also revealed that African countries faced with dictatorship are unfortunate because it is not what they voted for. According to Balarabe, this is a civilian dictatorship. We didn’t vote for democracy because it never existed. It is just a futuristic aspiration. What we voted for was a civilian government as opposed to a civilian dictatorship (8). There is no doubt that Balarabe did not envisage pure democracy in Africa and precisely in the francophone region because the dictators who took over power as military tend to continue ruling even as civilians. François emphasised on the absolute power exercised by dictators: –Les dictateurs estimaient qu’ils pouvaient décider seul de tous sans même écouter leurs conseillers. L’argent de l’Etat était leur argent. Tous ceux qui devenaient riches appartenaient au pouvoir. Il était si absolu que tout le monde attendait tout de lui (65). This simply implies that these dictators estimate that they can make decisions alone without their advisers. The state money and riches belong to them. They are so absolute that no one can do without them. Obviously, this practice by African dictators is a factor that triggers poverty in most of the societies.

Camara Laye left no stone unturned when he portrayed the situation of Guinea in *Dramouss*. In this work, he attacks Sekou Touré who was elected as the first President of Guinea in 1958, a position he held until his death in 1984. During his rule, he banned all opposition parties and declared his party the only legal party in the country. Touré ruled Guinea as a ruthless dictator with no tolerance for opposition. He was accused of several cases of human right abuse and extrajudicial killings. Camara Laye uses *Dramouss* as an instrument to fight against this mayhem of dictatorship on his people. Just like Camara Laye, Ahmadou Koné also agitates for total liberation from dictatorship by using *De la chaire au trône* as a weapon.

### **Ahmadou Koné and his works**

Born in May 1953, Amadou Koné who is from Burkina Faso, has a Doctorate degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Tours and the Doctorat d'Etat ès Lettres from the University of Limoges. He is presently a Professor at the Georgetown University faculty. Amadou Koné's field of research and teaching extends from the oral literature of Africa to its modern written literature. He has been particularly interested in the oral literary genres of Africa which comprises initiation tales and epics and how they influence the modern novel. Koné started his first novel while still finishing high school but was not published until later. His first published book was released in 1976 and was titled *Jusqu'au seuil de l'irréel*. He published another novel shortly after under the title *Les Frisques d'Ebinto*. He has published a total of six novels, three plays and several short stories. His play *Les Canaris sont vides* won the grand prize at the Interafrican Theatrical Competition in 1976. Then came

*Le respect des morts* suivi de *De la chaire au trône* in 1980. In *De la chaire au trône*, Koné exposes the tragic situation of a highly educated elite who was elected as ruler and chose to become a dictator. He has also published two studies on African oral literature. He co-published an anthology of literature from Côte d'Ivoire and has edited a collection of essays on African literature and cinema. Koné has taught several courses on literature and culture of Africa south of the Sahara. Besides teaching, and as a teacher, Koné has received international recognition as an award-winning author. He was the 1981 Fellow of the Pro Helvetia Foundation in Zurich, Switzerland and in 1985 he received the Best African Novel Award from the Léopold Sédar Senghor Foundation. From 1990 to 1992 Professor Koné was a Fellow of the Alexander Von-Humboldt Foundation in Bonn, Germany.

### **Perspective of the Palace in the Play**

The description of the palace in Koné's Play, *De la chaire au trône*, is captivating. The playwright paints a picture of a palace full of attraction. He portrays a palace in which anyone would like to have as an abode after taking the mantle of power. The description made in the prologue is inviting as seen in the prologue *Un palais dans lequel tout le monde aspirerait à vivre... Un palais dont la vue seule pousse l'homme à sombrer dans un rêve merveilleux, un rêve plein d'amertume* (80). It is evident that the playwright has given his audience a good clue on how the people who build this attractive palace are in a dying need of a new leader to replace Prince whose tenure has come to an end. Although there is a controversy on relinquishing power and Prince's attitude reveals that the love for power gives room for dictatorship. The playwright uses the character *Le Voyageur* (The Traveler) to make us understand the situation of the palace. The interaction between him and the two Guards (*Premier Garde* et *Deuxième Garde*) reveals that the palace is in chaos. One would wonder what could be the dilemma associated with such an enticing Palace but the fact is that the people are in anticipation of a new government that will uphold their tradition and improve their living condition. There is no doubt that the beauty of the palace symbolizes a new dawn and hope for the people of Koné's fictitious country which is obviously a country in the francophone sub-Saharan region of Africa.

### **Dictatorship in De la Chaire au Trône**

A first reading of the play *De la Chaire au trône* of Ahmadou Koné would leave most readers unaware of the elements of dictatorship portrayed by the playwright. Koné's notion and view of dictatorship in the play is not as radical as some of his contemporaries like Ahmadou Kourouma, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Tchicaya U Tam'si or Henri Lopez. He militates against dictatorship in a parody which makes his struggle mild. The play portrays a country where traditions play a very important role in the lives of the people. According to the tradition of his fictitious setting, no ruler shall leave the throne alive. Quitting power simply means death and despite that death is inevitable, Prince rejects it totally. Prince is bound by customs that obviously, prevent him from enacting the democratic reforms since he wishes to continue ruling. Obviously, the people of the fictitious setting in Koné's play are in need of a democratically elected ruler but in the play, it is clear that the *Maîtres de la tribu* chose the leader (116) and Prince is obliged to adhere strictly to the norms of the land. Prince was given the leadership mantle on the condition that he loses power and dies on the twelfth year of his rule. He accepted this condition but having tasted the beauty of power for twelve years, he rejects the pact and put a mercenary in place to favour his continuous stay in power. *Il a fait venir les gardes du gouvernement, il veut trahir la coutume* (107). This is one of the characteristics of brutal and notorious dictators. They first promise all kinds of comfort to their people who gave them the mandate and change the laws in their favour when they get into power. One would say here, *La coutume* which means culture, represents the laws of the land and the constitution that gave Prince the mandate of 12 years. But at the end of 12 years in power, he surrounded himself with the military in order not to relinquish power. It is evident that the best mercenary used by dictators to continue to remain in power is the military. The rule

of Prince is not an exception. He uses Garde for self-protection. Prince uses Garde to secure himself while some dictators recruit child soldiers in a situation where there isn't enough mercenary to guarantee their security. Some of this child soldiers narrate their ordeal in the quest for survival. The case of Faustine in *L'ainé des orphelins* is pertinent. He was recruited into the military as a child soldier by a dictator for the purpose of war at a very tender age despite not having the physique of a real soldier. Like Faustine, Brahim in *Allah n'est pas obligé* is also a victim of the same situation. The mayhem these child and adult soldiers caused to the people provoked Ahmadou Kourouma to say that: —ce sont des montres abominables on ne peut pas et on ne doit suivre des individus qui ont perdu le sens des valeurs humains! (www.cpatri.org). He calls them abominable monsters who are to be avoided.

Another very important characteristic of a dictator portrayed by Prince is paranoia. As a tyrant ruler, he did not trust anyone. He adopted some strategies for his safety. Firstly, he equips himself with the necessary weapons to ensure his safety: Depuis un mois, il se defend comme un animal traqué. Il porte toujours un pistolet sur lui et se méfie même de son ombrel (106). Secondly, he sacked all the palace aides for the fear that his enemies may use them to plot a coup against him: Il a renvoyé tous les serviteurs aujourd'hui pour être sûr qu'aucun d'eux ne pourra le sûr frapper du coup mortel (107). Prince adopted these measures not only because he wants to protect himself from his adverseries but also because he wants to maltreat and torture his people: C'est pour-être idiot, mais mon refus de mourir, d'état simplement pour les torturer! (111). This expression portrays Prince as a dictator. But the question one may ask at this juncture is that: Did Prince come into power with the intention of being a dictator? Obviously, the answer is No. According to him: En vérité, quand je venais, ce n'était pas pour jouir uniquement, je pensais pouvoir changer quelque chose! (117). His initial intention was to impact positively on his people's life but the impotence to change the tradition prevented his carrying out of democratic reforms. The tradition might have transformed him into a despotic leader who rejected death and becomes intransigent in renouncing power.

The young lady (La jeune fille) living with him and who is supposed to be his wife is aware of this persistent attitude of Prince. Obviously, she became uncomfortable with his attitude when she says: Toute ton attitude ces derniers temps n'était donc qu'un caprice? (111). The young lady (La jeune fille) terms Prince's attitude towards Les maîtres de tribul as capricious. This shows that he is not reliable and cannot be trusted by his people. This is the reason why the first guard (Première garde) gives his impression about Prince by saying: D'après moi, d'état un homme trop ambitieux et trop cupide. Tu vois, lui, il gagnait bien sa vie. On ne peut pas dire qu'il était venu au monde pour accompagner les autres, lui (123). It is unacceptable for a ruler to be selfish to the extent of not making the interest of his people his major priority.

A good leader should be trusted by his people and live an exemplary life. But the life of Prince was never the case because he rejected the pact that brought him to power and he became selfish and unjust. It goes beyond saying however, that dictatorship is a bad system of government for Africa or any other continent of the world for that matter.

### **The Supremacy of Culture and Tradition**

Culture and tradition play a very important role in the lives of Koné's characters. He portrays the values of African culture and tradition by showing how supreme it is on the regime of Prince. He made us to understand that Prince was elected into power according to culture and tradition. He is to rule for twelve years and after which it is mandatory for him to die. Death in this case represents the end of his tenure as leader in order to allow another leader take over leadership. Koné uses culture and tradition to represent the law and constitution of the people in his fictitious setting. The tradition of the

people is meant to be respected and it is on this basis that he was elected into power. He is to respect the pact of death at the end of 12 years of his rule but his refusal brought disappointment not only to the custodians of the tradition but also to his people. The third old man expressed his disappointment saying: Tout le monde sait aussi qu'il ne veut pas respecter le contrat, qu'il veut enfreindre la coutume, qu'il refuse maintenant de mourir après avoir joué (106). This implies that the people have lost confidence in Prince. We can say here that Prince chose his tragic fate when he accepted the cultural pact of becoming a ruler: Une vie réglée par la coutume et la fatalité! Tu as simplement choisi la coutume et la fatalité! (110). Koné reveals the supremacy of culture and tradition in Africa and how Africans are often subjected to it in their autochthonous society. It is difficult to say No to the obligations of culture: La coutume veut que cela soit toujours ainsi (108). Since no one can understand the mysteries of some cultures, it is better for it to be respected. Mystère! Ce sont des choses qui ne peuvent pas se savoir! (123). Koné makes it clear that even though the mysteries of culture are not for the comprehension of all, it must be respected and kept. We deduced from this point of view that no one is above cultural obligations in Africa just as no one should be above the law. But what makes the imposition of culture interesting in Koné's fiction is its exigency. The third old man (Le troisième vieux) states clearly that it is not sacred for Prince to die in the hands of a maid and that the culture obliged that he dies by the young lady (La jeune fille) supposed to be his wife: La coutume ne peut pas permettre que le souverain meure de la main d'un serviteur (108). Prince is a sovereign leader ordained by the culture and tradition of his people and his fate is determined by the same culture. Death becomes inevitable for Prince despite all his effort to avert it.

Koné adopted a unique style in passing across his message to his audience. He uses the traveler (Le voyageur) and the guards (les gardes) as proactive character and through which he enlightens and educates his audience on the importance of African values and the dangers of abuse of human rights through a dictatorial government. One of such dangers is death just like in the case of Prince in the theatre piece of this study.

### **The Quest for Freedom**

In many countries around the world, citizens facing dictatorial rule are longing for freedom. This we see revealed in many African novels of the post independent era. Koné uses his play to show how those facing this menace crave for liberty. The quest for freedom is portrayed through the role played by the three old men (Les trois vieux) who obviously represent the stake holders of the country. Koné reveals how desperate they are to have a new beginning of leadership through their roles. This is seen clearly when the second old man (Deuxième vieux) exposes that: Et la tribu vivra une nouvelle époque (108) this may imply that the people of the fictitious country will be free from tyranny if a new system of government is put in place by a new leader. The expression made by the third old man symbolizes hope for freedom in all dictatorial countries in Africa. The greatest wish of the people of a dictatorial state is for their ruler to leave power dead or alive. In *De la chaire au trône*, Koné made it clear that the people want their ruler dead. The three old men (les trois vieux) who are the stake holders and the custodians of the tradition of the fictitious country, fought for the freedom of the people. They used a young lady (La jeune fille) who is assumed to be Prince's wife as an instrument to gain their freedom. This could also be seen as a coup d'état against Prince. At the climax of the play, when prince has lost confidence in everyone around him, it was only the young lady (La jeune fille) living with him that had access to him. She was however used by the three old men (les trois vieux) to plot the death of Prince. She killed Prince and committed suicide thereby terminating the phase of the dictatorial regime. It is possible to deduce from this circumstance that women are instrumental in the quest for freedom in a dictatorial regime. Koné portrays woman as a vital vessel for conquering dictatorship in his fictitious country. He used the Guards (Les Gardes) to reveal the liberty the people envisage after the death of Prince. According to the second Guard (Le deuxième garde): Ça y est, nous sommes

libres de rentrer chez nous (122). They are free to go back home and live a new life after the death of Prince and this means hope for the people. According to the first guard (Le premier garde), all has ended the way it should because the will of the people supersedes any form of leadership: C'est fini comme ça devait finir, le Prince est mort pendant la nuit (122).

## Conclusion

One can deduce from our analyses that dictatorship is a form of government that hinders development. Although Ahmadou Koné is not too radical about his struggle against dictatorship but his parody brought his audience to a state of awareness as he drives his message home. We saw from the attitude of Prince, the ruler of the fictitious country, the real attributes of a dictator. He subjugated his people and brought disenchantment to them by failing to improve their living condition. He never realized that he will be faced with death because he was carried away by the pleasure and beauty of power. The attitude of Prince is no doubt a representation of some African dictators such as Gnassingbé Eyadema, Ahmed Sekou Touré, Sani Abacha, Muammar Gadhafi who died in power. Just like the character Prince in *De la chaire au trône*, their regime was marked by horror, terror, chaos, and bloodshed. They exercised their powers through various mechanisms to ensure that the entities of power remain strong. They are also known to be notorious leaders who led their countries towards economic regression. The case of Prince in *De la chaire au trône* is not an exception and the ultimate price for him is death.

We can conclude here by saying that Koné's parody stems at denouncing the negativity of dictatorship in Africa using culture and tradition as an instrument of struggle. He assures everyone that democracy is the only system of government that can foster development and improve the lives of the people of Africa.

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