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## A Sociopragmatic Study of Values of Nigerians as Exemplified in Wale Okediran's *Tenants of the House*: Implication for a Political Caste System

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Rachael Bello, PhD / Eugenia Abiodun-Eniayekan, PhD

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### Abstract

When Basil Bernstein postulated the Deficit Hypothesis Theory, little did he know that nonverbal means of expression much more than the "code" would help in establishing the social class system which Bernstein had intended to eradicate by formally uncovering it. In Nigeria, today, the concept of social class, much more than accepted social norms and practices, is celebrated and accentuated. The old idea of relating and integrating culturally with other members of a communal African society seems to have been lost. By scrutinizing Wale Okediran's *Tenants of the House*, we unravel the pragmatic features of the various social classes in the present political institution of the country as demonstrated by the Honorables in the House of Representatives, using the critical discourse analysis model. In doing this, we look beyond the referential end or grammatical meaning of the words to studying how para-linguistic and non-verbal expressions get situational meanings in context. The group dichotomy talked about makes aspirants a relatively higher social class members compared to where they originally belong. They become oblivious of the close tie that ordinarily exists among Nigerians who are of the same region or state. It is culturally disapproving how Lizzy, "a tenant of the House" could be involved in a plan to impeach her kinsman, the speaker of the House, a cotenant though of a higher social rank. We understand the importance placed on social class rather than kinship affinity or social norms where we consider the idea that the haunted speaker is Lizzy's close friend. What incessant political impeachments result in—especially when they are indexed by politicians' zeal to indiscriminately move up a higher class—are unremitting inconclusive projects and uncultivated ideologies.

**Keywords:** caste system, pragmatic, Nigerian community, ideology, kinship affinity



## Introduction

THE HUMAN COMMUNITY IS INDEXED AND GUIDED NOT ONLY BY ITS LANGUAGE BUT ALSO BY ITS values, norms and practices. While some sociolinguists hold that members of a community are restricted by the said laid down rules (not having the ability to act or reason outside these norms), some others believe that such principles are simply designed to guide members' behaviour thus making them accepted within the system. The said social regulations more often than not do impact on associates' conception of ideas and the world at large. A people's practices, beliefs, ways of life, etc., add up to make their culture. For the purpose of this study, we adopt Kroeber's (1948) definition of culture as taken from Akinwunmi. (2009: 20) To him,

Culture is the mass of learned and transmitted motor reactions, habits, technique, idea and value and the behaviour they induce.

Sociolinguists hold that class disparity is an expected and common phenomenon in a speech community. Factors which bring about such social inequality could be natural or man-made. Such social incongruity sociolinguists refer to as stratification. This is what we, in this study, refer to as caste system. To Schaefer (2002: 212), "social inequality describes a condition in which members of a society have different amounts of wealth, prestige, or power." When a system of social inequality is based on hierarchy of groups as demonstrated in the text under study, sociolinguists refer to it as stratification. Simply put, stratification is the structured rankings of entire groups of people that perpetuate unequal economic rewards and power in a society. (Schaefer, 2002: 213)

"Caste system" refers to one of the fixed social classes which cannot be changed, into which people are born in India. It also refers to a group of people who have the same position in society. The concept of caste system is used metaphorically in this research. Contrary to the usual religious connotation associated with the caste system, we adopt the term to indicate the Nigeria political structure. This categorization has developed in the country over time. Consequently, the concept is used symbolically, not limiting it to its ideational meaning. For the purpose of this study, therefore, we define the political caste system in Nigeria as the automatic accreditation of a group into politics conceiving such certification as a genealogy right. This group of Nigerians tends to segregate themselves from the larger group, following their political aspirations and identifications. The pragmatic behaviour of this social class is unravelled in this study.

## Research Problem

The crux of this research is to examine how the inmates of the 5th House of Assembly in Nigeria structure their ranking system, by unravelling how members adopt pragmatic strategies to move up the social ladder. In other words, we unearth how members of this speech community attempt to stand higher in social rankings, dominate the few available scarce resources, command power and receive special treatment as propelled by certain social and practical qualities, thus disrupting the country's traditional indigenous knowledge system. Simply put, we examine how in-groups' pragmatic behaviour much more than the foreign language could cause a threat to the social order in Nigeria as a speech community.

### **Aim and Significance of the Study**

This research proposes that mental advancement of members of a speech community following the general development and social needs of the humankind is essential if a rational system of governance as well as objective actions based on good judgement is desired. Thus the study holds that as developing countries strive to maintain their indigenous languages and cultures, they must not be oblivious of the development that is evident and inevitable in the human race. The research is significant in establishing that the recognition of a speech community by the world at large is ensured when in-groups of the larger group de-emphasize selves, recognise other social groups and aspire to establish such groups. After all, indigenous knowledge system transcends linguistic to include pragmatic knowledge.

### **Background to the Study**

The notion of indigenous knowledge system readily prompts two ideas namely: empowering the indigenous African languages and ensuring development (mental, social, economic, technology) by the elaboration of such languages with the belief that such elaboration is tantamount to the promotion of the African culture. As much as this is true, we need to be informed that the African development which we advocate must be both linguistic and pragmatic. After all, indigenous knowledge system is the knowledge that transforms over time by members' interaction with their environment. Based on this backdrop, we examine how politics in Nigeria has been able to reflect the transformation expected of the Nigerian community as far as managing the populace based on good judgment is concerned. Certain propositions would be relevant to guide the course of the research.

### **Working Questions**

We expound the thesis of this study by working round the following questions:

- i. What is indigenous knowledge system?
- ii. What is development?
- iii. What are the features of development?
- iv. What are the types of development desired?
- v. What is the scope of development promoted?
- vi. Is economic and power disparity expected to close up with time or do we expect a further widening of the gap?

### **Methodology**

The study is simply a descriptive qualitative one with the novel *Tenants of the House* by Okediran serving as the major source of data. Consequently, the two main methods used in this present research are (i) pure description of the occurrences in the Nigeria House of Representative and (ii) critical analytical study of Okediran's use of language. The happenings in the House are well-described by the author. That is not to say, however, that the researchers, being members of the larger Nigerian society, are ignorant of such political behaviours. Thus the participant observation method, however passive, is also one of the procedures adopted for collecting data. The researchers, being adults (born and bred

in Nigeria) have been participant observers of the country's political activities before the 3rd Republic, during the 3rd Republic and even beyond. The various data collected were analysed using the critical discourse analysis model.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is based on critical discourse analysis, propounded by the Lancaster School Linguists of which Norman Fairclough was the most prominent figure. Ruth Wodak also makes a remarkable contribution to this field of study. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a contemporary approach to the study of language and discourses in social institutions. It draws on social theory and aspects of linguistics in order to understand and challenge the various social discourses.

The theory postulates that texts have a constructive function in forming up and shaping human identities and actions. According to Dijk (2003), critical discourse analysis deals primarily with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it. Dijk goes on to remark that the model studies the way that social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. He opines that CDA research focuses primarily on social problems and political issues, rather than on current paradigms and fashions. He goes further to state that, more specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimize, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society. This theory is relevant to our study in that Okediran, in *Tenants of the House*, acts as a critical discourse analyst going by the way he exposes and paints the grotesque picture of the happenings in the House of Representatives, thus, uncovering the caste system being established and instituted in the Nigerian politics. A look at some historic happenings will help to complement how we attempt to unfold this.

### Literature Review

In this subsection, we do an evaluation of related works. Notable of these are a cursory exploration of the mode of governance in Nigeria from Fredrick Lugard to the Fourth Republic; democracy in Nigeria during Olusegun Obasanjo's era and a brief synopsis of the novel, *Tenant in the House*.

#### Mode of governance in Nigeria from Lugard to the Fourth Republic

The country, Nigeria way from its discovery underwent several modes of reign under varying constitutions. We discuss the different jurisdictions under major institutions. Lugard's Constitution of 1914 is marked mainly by the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates. Hugh Clifford's Constitution of 1922 witnessed the introduction of elective principle into the history of Nigeria. Following this is the Arthur Richards Constitution of 1946, where the provision of regionalism brought about the unity of Nigeria in diversity when the country was segmented into North, East and West. In 1951 the Stuart Macpherson Constitution marked the provision of regional legislature and executive. Three years later, in 1954, the provision of federalism was constituted by Oliver Lyttleton's constitution. Nigeria was declared a sovereign state in 1960 by the Independence Constitution. Following this is the Republican Constitution of 1963, which marked

the country as a first republic along the lines of the Westminster system. This system was abandoned for the American Presidential System in 1979 when Nigeria became a second republic, thus reflecting the federal character of the country. The Republican Constitution of 1993 ushered the country into the Third Republic. The intention was to return democracy to Nigeria but with non-implementation paving their way for military rule until 1999. The current mode of governance was introduced by the Republican Constitution of 1999, ushering in a Fourth Republic, thus restoring democracy in the country. The 1999 Constitution was under the leadership of Olusegun Aremu Okikiola Obasanjo.

### **Nigeria and Democracy from the Obasanjo Era (Fourth Republic)**

Nigeria's democratic governance until May 29, 1999 could best be described as a series of hiatus punctuated by frequent military putsches, an unfortunate development that blighted Nigeria's promising start and thwarted its potentials of emerging as Africa's model of representative democracy. Military rule in Nigeria reached its dastardly apogee during the brutal reign of Gen. Sani Abacha, whose death on June 8, 1998 reinstated democratic governance in Nigeria. The feverish political activities that greeted the lift of ban on politics culminated in the emergence of Obasanjo as the presidential candidate of the then newly-formed Peoples Democratic Party, PDP. Obasanjo, now addressed as Chief Obasanjo after sloughing off the title of general, eventually won the presidential elections after a landslide victory in an election believed to be unabashedly rigged in favour of his party. Despite this taint in the electoral processes, the election marked a watershed in the political history in Nigeria, what the successive civilian administrations would later consolidate. Analysts saw in the choice of Obasanjo not only a forced attempt by the Northern oligarchs to pacify the Southwest for the death of its son, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, whose death in 1998 in detention sparked off a deadly violence that almost consumed Nigeria, but also a return to civil rule that illustrated the success of the frenetic, dogged and brave attempts by pro-democracy activists to break the shackles of military governance.

Since the return of democratic governance, strenuous efforts have been made by governments at all levels to raise the bar of responsive governance, tackle the vicious circle of chronic poverty and scale up the deplorable infrastructural deficits that have taken their tolls on the nation's economy and have made Nigeria grossly uncompetitive in global ease-of-doing-business indices. In addition, there is a new approach to governance aimed at tackling waste, mismanagement and inefficiency, the tell-tale marks of self-inflicted woes foisted on Nigeria by inveterately corrupt elite and vested interests who frittered the nation's enormous resources and instituted a culture of intolerable corruption, making Nigeria a byword for decrepit infrastructure, chronic unemployment, epileptic power supply, widening income gap, vicious, pervasive and disappointing, deplorable public services.

Talking about the root of the problem of governance in Africa, Okere (2003: 9) has this to say:

Our leaders—who should have been encouraging and leading us by examples of principled frugality or husbanding the continent's resources optimally to achieve the common good or exhorting us to a more equitable distribution of our meagre resources—have gone beyond maximum corruption to looting the national treasuries.

Etuk (2003: 121), talking about the practical and theoretical problems in the emergence of responsible governance in Africa has this to say: "Hence in Nigeria, we are still struggling with what we call nascent democracy on which we can absolutely blame all our political, economic and social woes." Another scholar, Ekei (2003: 453), commenting on the governance in traditional Africa and its implication for a nascent modern African polity, says: "There is no gainsaying that contemporary African leadership has been in shambles." This disorganization and confusion is what Okediran tries to unearth and expound in *Tenants of the House*.

### About *Tenants of the House*

Wale Okediran's 27-chapter novel is a fictional narrative of the act—both linguistic and non-linguistic—of the honorables of the 5th Assembly. It is an account tied around impeachment plan of the originally elected Speaker, Hon. Yaya Sulaimon by the sponsored Wenike's group; his reinstatement after there had been some moves; the proposal to pass a third term bill which was propelled by usual moves of Ghana bags; the move for the impeachment of the President Onoye himself having been alleged of gross misconduct in the performance of the functions of his office. The novel is not devoid of love moves between the honourable members on one hand and between Samuel Bakura (who unfolded the happenings in the House) and Batejo, the pretty Fulani girl on the other hand. The novel is replete of Nigerian politicians' attempts to have power at all cost, accrue wealth thus creating a class up the social ladder for themselves in society. The struggle for unending supremacy by the inmates is indexed by the inconclusive plot of the storyline. *Tenants of the House* is a very interesting and revealing read, built on an intriguing plot that engages readers and guarantees the pages keep turning until the very last. (Abubakar Ibrahim's reviews for *Sentinel Nigeria*)

### Analysis of Data

We discuss the honorables' class brouhahas following Schafer's (2010) three systems of stratification namely: slavery, caste and social classes, while we tie our discussions around the claims of critical discourse analysis.

#### Slavery

For the purpose of this study, we conceive of slavery as a situation whereby someone is captivated or subjugated by certain practices or elements such as greed and drug. The honorables are held psychologically, socially, financially and emotionally. Let us consider how such subjugation play out in some of the characters.

- (A) i. Honourable Elizabeth Bello enslaved herself in a number of ways: - To money (she keeps changing her base; having neither personal philosophy nor conviction) but rather depending on the camp that offers the fattest Ghana bag. Similarly, she, throughout the story line, could not locate her basis emotionally.
- ii. Elizabeth Bello is psychologically enslaved to the power of the gun. In her words, "To kill is a crime but to kill at the right time is politics."
- iii Lizzy, as she was popularly known in the House, seems to be under the servitude of

an unknown power. For instance, she instructed Samuel, a novice politician at that time to meet them (certain other honourables who are going through such captivation) at midnight of a set day with a newly made earthenware, ten fresh eggs and the drained out blood of a freshly killed fowl.

- (B) Majority of the honourables constitute those who have no business being in the House; they are simply slaves to money. This class of politicians takes their seats only whenever there is money to be shared and thereafter disappear. They are not there when they are needed to cast their votes as it concerns important bills such as the amendment of the constitution.
- (C) Some of the politicians may not be free from drug entanglement. This is reflected in the Deputy Speaker who, from time to time, needs a powdery substance that assures him that he can do a day's job in an hour. Such influence from the little "something" is targeted towards his achieving social relevance and not in his making political significance.
- (D) The height of the financial slavery in which the honourables find themselves is clearly expressed when Honorable Edobor makes himself so dishonorable that he levels up with filth by hiding a bribe he had receives in a dustbin on sighting his co-camp member.

### The caste system as an indication of social stratification

The three definitions of the caste system as provided by the dictionary find expression in what obtains in the 5th Assembly. We consider each below illustrating with the behaviour of the honourables.

- 1 The caste system is an ascribed type of status following the Indian's caste system. It is any of the four (though Schafer introduces a fifth, 2002) religious bodies of Hindu society. These have ascribed roles. Similarly, a set of Nigerians seem to have ascribed for themselves political positions. Honorable Elizabeth Bello, for instance, does not seem to have a concise reason she is in politics. Little wonder she could neither take a decisive position nor make incisive contribution. She had become a member of the House simply because her father was a well-known politician. Smollet (President Onoye's political aide and accomplice) seems to know little or nothing about political rudiments.
- 2 The second dictionary definition of caste is a social class, especially one whose members do not allow others to join it. How can Africans experience the advancement advocated towards indigenous knowledge when practical awareness and experience is limited? The politicians might not have said through words that they are excessive members of the caste system but their actions and inactions suggest this. This pragmatic behaviour Morris (1938) in Akhimien (2012: 49) elucidates thus:

Since most, if not all signs have as its interpreters living organisms, it is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspects of semiosis; that is, with the entire psychological, biological and sociological phenomenon which occur in the functioning of signs.

- 3 The third definition of the caste system exemplified in this study is the system of

dividing society into class, based on differences in family, origin, rank or wealth. In the novel examined, politics is presented as a tug-of-war from character to character, scene to scene, region to region. It is a case of naira for naira; dollar for dollar with money being the name of the game. All activities are geared towards a goal – that of maintaining an acquired social status or moving higher up the ladder.

### Social classes as indices of stratification

Social classes relate to income inequality among members of an in-group. Personal gains (not national interest) run through the honorables' acts. If we desire scientific advancement through indigenous knowledge system, members' intentions must be centred around acceptable conventions. To Fitch and Sanders (2005: 53),

Comprehension involves more than the decoding of a linguistic signal; works in pragmatic and philosophy of language show that there is a gap between the semantic representation of sentences and the thoughts actually communicated by utterances. This gap is not by mere coding but by inference.

The various political parts played by Lizzy Bello under the establishment of power by the chosen few are noticeable. Lizzy, representing other tenants, showcases a character interested in intrigues, back-stabbing, money-sharing and sexual escapades. Thus, through the interplay of language and intrigues, a clear picture of the honorables with their ludicrous and sordid activities is vividly shown by the author, who himself is a participant, or a co-tenant. Corroborating such non-linguistic signals, Fitch and Sander (2005: 394) submit:

Many micro ethnographic studies of power go beyond analysis of language to include gesture, the manipulation of materials resources and the organization of bodies in spaces. The level of attention to situated context and semiotic resources other than language marks the difference between a micro-ethnographic approach to power and that of sociolinguistics or critical discourse analysis.

The various characters in the novel help to establish unspoken political power tussle through their body language. Generally, the honorables' actions and inactions reveal a number of things about the political system in Nigeria. Consider them.

### Findings

Following the exploration of the characters in the book under study, we make the submissions below:

Nigerian politicians like the Hindu caste members seem to enjoy inherited political prowess, this time not of dexterity but of popularity, thus making them untouchable.

It is worth noting that contrary to the hereditary system of rank in castes that tend to be fixed and immobile, members of the House of Representative keep juggling up and down political social ladder as dictated by their moves.

The social norms and values identifiable with the members of the House differ from the commonly acknowledged pattern of life within the larger community; that is, their acts negate the recurring activities, materials and social arrangements expected of a people who share a common problem, aspiration and goal.

The social behaviour of the in-group studied is not conspicuous to the outer and larger group. In this instance, the honorables' behavioral patterns are pragmatic.

The various situational contexts in the novel reflect some individuals' attempts to establish their class; displace some other individuals; destroy some; run down a few; yet eliminate those necessary in order to move up the social ladder cum cadre.

Of the three systems of stratification identified by Schafer (2001) (i.e. slavery, castes and social classes), our informants (the tenants of the House) may not be physically ascribed to slavery but they seem to be bound to the power of money and influence. Nonetheless, in spite of their ascribed status (social position assigned to a person without regard for that person's unique characteristics or talents), and their achieved status (social position attained by a person largely through his or her own effort), the caste system seems to be actually an ascribed type of status in the community examined. Nigerian politicians like the Indian caste members seem to enjoy inherited political prowess.

The non-linguistic elements employed by the honorables to pragmatically register their intentions (that of excluding others to attain a position; including some others to further register their attained position and that of establishing an aspired class) include the Ghana bags, the gun, sumptuous meals, big unwarranted and wasteful parties, Fulani cows, not excluding the traditional Sanda and knives.

The honorables "behaviours" are pragmatic. Oke (2009: 20) refers to it as an instance "whereby people structure their experience and perceptions, formulate acts and choose between alternatives." Instances of inclusion, exclusion and registration of status run through the novel. Social classes simply relate income inequality among different social groups.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have attempted to show that re-structuring the social stratification of the African society as delineated among Nigeria's honorables (an in-group of the larger African community), could serve as a pointer to discovering steps that will lead to the scientific advancement of the African society. As researchers strive to work on the African languages cum cultures (maintaining some and reviving others) in order to bring about substantial growth, we argue that the norms and practices of the Africans must be engineered and re-engineered to make every social class relevant and consequently safe. The initial sense of African communalism must be revived; the essence of living must be redirected; the urge for materialism must be de-emphasized; economic and power stratification must be eradicated or downplayed so as to bring in all citizenry to the knowledge of the systems. If Africans must advance, we need to move in that direction. We must do away with unhealthy diplomacy, blackmail, propaganda etc. The development talked about must exhibit cultural intelligence expected of the group. The civil society must demonstrate that they actually possess the know-how of the elaborate code while the media must be ready to serve as the models of the elaborate code.

Following Akinwunmi (2010), we reiterate that culture has critical implications for development. The fruits of intangible culture, the humane qualities of honour, integrity, de-emphasis of social stratification will help to ensure intangible development which is



the advancement of the mind. This is different from material development. Without intangible development, there can be no sustainable development. Consequently, to bring about the evolution of indigenous knowledge system with reference to Nigeria politics, mental expansion much more than individual material furtherance and empowerment must be hammered on, pursued, attained and retained. When these are put in place, advancement will not only be accomplished but will also be total.

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