

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

Towards a Regenerated African Cultural Development: a Post-colonial examination of Mphahlele's Chirundu

¹ *Mphoto Mogoboya*

¹ University of Venda (South Africa)

Mphoto Mogoboya: Towards a Regenerated African Cultural Development: a Post-colonial examination of Mphahlele's Chirundu-- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 18(15). ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: (neo)colonialism, stereotype,(de)construct, post-colonial theory, development, active citizenship.

ABSTRACT

Africa has been under cultural colonialism and neo-colonialism for centuries to date. Her self-worth has been eroded by the imperialists' choreographed fabrications that she is a dark continent, backward and uncultured. These colonial and neo-colonial false notions have, unfortunately, encroached into the post-independence era. This article strives to deconstruct these cultural stereotypes in order to construct a new reimagined African order by exploring Moyo as an epitome of cultural regeneration in Es'kia Mphahlele's *Chirundu* (1979). He (Moyo) is delineated as a cultural catalyst in the post-independence Africa. This article is grounded on the Post-colonial emancipatory theory. Qualitative approach, which is buttressed by exploratory research design, was employed to guide the study, with purposive sampling used to select *Chirundu* from other novels by Mphahlele. The novel, which also serves as primary data, was textually analysed. In the novel, Mphahlele, through Moyo's character representation, purports that active citizenship should be advanced as an instrument of attaining total African cultural emancipation and development.

Introduction

Chirundu (1979) is Mphahlele's novel which challenges the onset of moral and political bankruptcy in the post-independence African state of Zambia (1969), which serves as a fictional microcosm of the entire African continent. Through *Chirundu*'s character, Zambia is, though still in its nascent stage of democracy, delineated as Africa's post-independence nightmare. Mphahlele exposes this

fledgling democracy as a façade of African *uhuru* and depicts, through Moyo's character, how authentic African regeneration and development can be realised. In other words, Moyo serves as the messiah, sent by God to rekindle and salvage Africa's dream of the attainment of a true and selfless independence. He is portrayed as a proponent and embodiment of Africa's new dawn in the novel.

Theoretical Underpinning

This article is anchored on the Post-colonial theory guided by Afrocentric textual exploration of Mphahlele's *Chirundu*. This theoretical underpinning affords academic authority and credence to this article. Post-colonial theory covers "all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day" (Aschcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1998:2). These cultures were denigrated during the imperial era to date hence the neologised concept, neo-colonialism. Post-colonial theory is an emancipatory phenomenon that deals with the previously oppressed people's quest for the reclamation and reconstruction of their identity on the basis of history, language, race, and culture. In this article, Afrocentricity, like Orientalism in Asia (Said, 1978), is used as a strand of Post-colonial theory to falsify and debunk the myths and stereotypes the centre (Europe) has about the Africa and the Other continents. It is a discourse through which the (formerly) colonised countries resist colonial domination in all its manifestations. The colonised assert their sense of cultural difference and independence from their imperial masters hence "the Empire writes back to the centre" (Rushdie in Aschcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 1989:ix). Thus, post-colonial discourse forms an integral part of a *corpus* of literature of protest against imperialism. Issues such as colonisation, neo-colonisation, decolonisation, renaissance, reconstruction, development and transformation are pivotal to this literature. This literature, furthermore, endeavours to unmask the evils and the injustices of colonialism by exposing them as corruptive phenomena. In this article, Post-colonial theory concentrates on Africa and her attempt to re-imagine herself after colonialism.

Afrocentricity

Centricity is a word which is derived from centre, which originates from the Latin word *centrum*, which means the mid-point of anything, the axis, the nexus. It is a point around which things revolve. Asante (1999:1-2,4) defines Afrocentricity "as a critical corrective to a displaced agency among Africans". In other words, Afrocentricity is aimed at correcting the damage the Europeans inflicted against the Africans, through Afrocentric means. It is the African thought whose purpose is to assist Africans re-envision who they are; their worth and the reasons for their existence here on earth. Karenga (1988:404) defines Afrocentricity as "essentially a quality of perspective or approach rooted in the cultural image and human interest of the African people". This suggests that it is a state of being centred around Africa, which implies that in Afrocentricity, everything rotates around the African continent, her people, their customs, knowledge (including scientific and technological), art forms,

morals, habits, ideologies and politics, cultures, and traditions (Asante, 2000:4). Africa is used as the centre of discourse and narrative, a context for whatever content there is to pronounce on. In this way, Africa becomes a subject of analysis, a point of focus and concentration. Asante (1980,1987,1988,1990) and Diop (1974) have formulated these terms: Afrocentricism, Afroecology, and Afrocentricity in order to accentuate the significance of this theoretical underpinning to Africa. Afrocentricity also serves as an asseveration that Africans are capable of doing any other exploit that any person can do (Appiah:1992). One of the salient tenets of Afrocentricity is *ubuntu*, “which is the collective solidarity of the poor on survival issues” (Mbigi and Maree, 2005:vii). The overriding phrase embraced in *ubuntu* is sacrifice for the benefit of others (Mogoboya, 2019). In other words, one should overstretch oneself in an attempt to help others.

African Renaissance

The Latin prefix *re-* means again and the root *nasci-* means to be born. The French word *renaître* means re-birth. Renaissance, therefore, means the re-awakening of human talent in its totality. It deals with a people’s endeavour to regain their lost exuberance and vigour, and their tireless search for their common humanity. They attempt to resuscitate all the abilities and capabilities bestowed on them by God. Wynne-Davies (1992:2) notes:

Apart from the re-birth of knowledge, the Renaissance encompasses the valorizing of the individual, the centralization of power systems and the primacy of gold, as well as discoveries in the realms of science and the New World.

In the African context, renaissance means the development of renewed interest in the continent and her people after independence from imperial rule. It is the process of African self-re-definition and re-affirmation. African renaissance is transformative in nature in that it seeks to answer the following questions:

i) Who are Africans, where do they come from? What is their history and where are they going? ii) What constitutes the African renaissance, its objectives and implications nationally and internationally? iii) What is the history and destiny of national minorities in African renaissance? and iv) Why an African renaissance now? (Makgoba, 1999:ii).

African renaissance does not only address the recalibration and reconstruction of African “people and their destroyed heritages” but it also probes the “space in which all human beings find themselves in celebration of fulfilled lives” (Mugo, 1999:210) after independence. It encourages Africans to reflect on and be introspective about who they are, where they are going, and how they go there, in all spheres of human endeavour. Hoppers (2002:2) postulates further: The African Renaissance aims at building a deeper understanding of Africa, its languages and its methods of development. It is a project that includes the rewriting of major tenets of history, both past and contemporary.

One of the vexing issues which post-colonial Africa is currently grappling with is the restorative decolonisation of the contused and scarred minds of her people (Ngugi, 1986). This can be achieved by recreating and redeveloping their eroded identity by re-culturing them. Re-Africanisation process, albeit challenging, is accomplishable. Human elements such as apathy, moral decay, corruption, debasement of standards, and nepotism may serve as a threat to this venture because a large portion of the African population is steeped in these unsavoury activities. Notwithstanding this quandary, Africa does not have to despair and leave everything to chance. She has to strive to manage, circumvent and ultimately solve these social ills by advocating for renaissance, mainly through the revitalisation of her cultural values which lead to moral regeneration. In order for Africa to carve a niche in the modern world, she should first reclaim and validate her substantive identity by going back to her roots and embracing Africanity. This idea is aptly captured by David Diop (1998:73) in his poem 'Africa':

Africa my Africa
 Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs
 Africa of whom my grandmother sings
 On the banks of the distant river
 I have never known you
 But your blood flows in my veins
 Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields

Moyo as the Epitome of African Cultural Development in Mphahlele's *Chirundu*

In the novel, hope for Africa's renewal is put squarely on the shoulders of characters such as Moyo who is Chirundu's nephew. He is delineated as an embodiment of African identity and heritage. He is a round character who displays depth of understanding on issues of culture. Moyo exudes easiness and confidence when he is in the company of the village elders because he connects well with them. Thynsma (1989:234) reminds us that Moyo's "confidence stems directly from his faith in his ancestors", meaning that his faith is in the cultural identity of his people. He reveres and upholds the spirit of his ancestors because he believes that they give him a sense of perspective in life during his moment of despair. He is a product of parents from two different warring ethnic groups. His father comes from the Tumbuka tribe while his mother, Chirundu's aunt, comes from the Bemba tribe. The Bemba people had strong political and economic power over the Tumbuka and as a result of this advantage, they treated them with condescension. This patronisation is a stereotype which needs to be debunked because we are all human beings who are equally created in the image of God. No one, no matter how blessed they are, is, therefore, more important than the other as we are the same before the eyes of God. Here again, we see the forces of identity, even in Africa's natural setting being clouded by the dynamism of tribal intermingling. Moyo carries the blood of both tribes in his veins. He becomes a symbol of unity as he is a

reconciliatory figure between the two tribes. This tribal synthesis activity is bound to succeed because he draws his strength and courage from the treasury of cultural knowledge he has about his people. It may, conversely, also imply unity between the European and African cultures as Obee (1999:179) contends:

Moyo, on the other hand, rather than exploiting, combines the best of two worlds. A political activist who gets involved in trade unions, Moyo is African enough not to want to criticize his uncle and modern enough to see the need to do so. Realistic and modern, he is engaged in building a new order. He also adheres to the best African humanistic values without experiencing conflict. He reveres his grandfather and his wise counsel, respects his aunt, and shows compassion for his peers.

In his attempt to build “a new order”, Moyo amasses a wealth of knowledge from listening to stories, folklore, myths, songs, and dance narrated to him by the elders of the two tribes, foregrounded by his grandfather Ambuye whom ‘he reveres’. This is so because elders, like village chiefs, are the custodians of cultural identity. Since African tradition is oral, orality becomes the central factor in the transmission of African identity to posterity. Moyo is not like Waiyaki in Ngugi’s *The River Between* (1965) who tries without success to unite two factional ridges, Makuyu and Kameno. He fails in his attempt to bring them together because of the betrayal of his own ridges’ oath, which is regarded as one of its key traditional customs. This mistake makes him fall out of favour with them to the extent that he loses his life. Moyo, unlike Waiyaki, wins because he holds his culture in high esteem.

Moyo’s deep respect for the elderly continues when he takes his grandfather Ambuye to the city after the death of his parents. This symbolises taking the older generation to new ways, to experience new identity. It also signifies bringing the old into the new so that there is a balance. This is an act of balancing identity in the modern world. In other words, he works “towards multiculturalism in which all cultural perspectives are respected and celebrated” (Ramogale, 2006:24). Moyo’s goodwill gesture is in line with the African customary belief that the old and the aged have to be properly taken care of because they serve as worldly ancestors who will soon join the real ancestors yonder. This intimacy with his grandfather, therefore, makes him feel like he is “walking beside a god” (*Chirundu*:53). He serves as a beacon of hope for African cultural renewal by not abandoning his people and culture. It is only after the passing on of Ambuye that Moyo gets deeply involved in community activities. He becomes actively engaged in nation building projects and trade unionism where he soon assumes an inspirational leadership role. He extends a hand of support to his imprisoned immigrant brothers, Chieza and Pitso, in a genuine spirit of humanism, which is a hallmark of African identity. Educated and enlightened as he is, he helps his educationally underprivileged people in the trade union in the interest of African advancement. He is a true man of the people and he behaves as such. As an Afro-optimist, he serves as an

epitome of his people's hopes and aspirations. They look up to him for emancipation from their economic distress as well as the total liberation of the African continent from the foreign powers. Unlike Ngotho in Ngugi's *Weep Not, Child* (1964), Moyo does not disappoint his people by betraying them. He becomes their true black messiah. Thus, Moyo's struggle is the struggle of Africa, especially in the area of cultural identity.

Moyo as an African Nation-builder

Moyo does not stand idly by and watch his uncle's (Chirundu's) family fall apart. He, like a true son of Africa, brought up in the African ways, steps in to try and bring together the two parties caught in a love triangle. He advises Chirundu to also involve distant relatives of the family in an attempt to resolve his marital conflict as the inner circle of relatives seems to be making little progress. He does not give up on his uncle's marriage. He says to Chirundu:

It is like this: the elders teach that we must talk. We must talk among ourselves. Talk cleanses and frees the heart, it heals a lot of aches. It helps the boil to burst (*Chirundu:24*).

In terms of chronological age, Moyo is too young (as he is 21) to articulate such valuable words of wisdom to his uncle. This is a sign of intelligence because his mental strength and age appear to be above his chronological age. He is an asset to his family and to Africa at large because he is an agent of change, a catalyst for African development. Like the Biblical Stephen who, full of the Holy Spirit, boldly witnessed for Christ, Moyo, full of the knowledge of African culture, witnesses for Africa. He bravely juxtaposes the European and the African ways of doing things, as a reminder to Chirundu about who he really is, after realising that he (Chirundu) behaves like an European in an African body when he resorts to the European court in an endeavour to resolve his marital problems. He tells Chirundu that engaging the services of the European court is leaning on 'the white man's way' while 'we have our own ways' (*Chirundu:24*).

Moyo as a Patriotic Activist

Moyo leads a strike action against Chirundu's government department, irrespective of the financial assistance he got from him (Chirundu) during his mother's funeral. This does not go down well with Chirundu who accuses him of ingratitude. Moyo, being a child who was taught to respect elderly people, does not fight back nor does he raise his voice against his uncle. He says that he is "his (Chirundu's) nephew and I(*he*) cannot cross words with him" (*Chirundu:85*). He laments further:

I cannot understand my uncle – please help me good mothers – I do not want to go into a war of words against an older person, uncle or no uncle – that is the way my parents, my grandfather Mutiso, that is the way they taught me. Now

what am I to do? I am a worker, the other workers made me a secretary (*Chirundu*:85).

Moyo's strike against his uncle's department does not necessarily mean that he dishonours him. Rather, it indicates that he sees a bigger picture of the love for his country and its workforce. Chirundu does not fathom this patriotic gesture displayed by his nephew because of his narrow-mindedness. Moyo loves his uncle but hates what he does in government. Thus, he does not fight a person but he battles with a corrupt, selfish system. The fact that this unfair system and its incompetent politicians have been voted into those positions by the workers makes him angry. He has learnt this political truth from the evening classes conducted by Studs Letanka, the South African refugee teacher in his (Moyo's) country. Letanka taught them African political science which included the history of trade unionism and liberation movements as some of its modules. It is against the backdrop of this political education that Moyo becomes a staunch leader of the trade union, with no intention of enriching himself or bringing glory to himself but to work 'towards a better society' (Haarhoff, 1986:39). He struggles for a better Africa for all hence his refusal to heed Chirundu's advice to resign from his executive position as the secretary in the union. He feels that if he resigns from the union, he will not only be betraying the trust the workers have in him, but he will also be selling out on Africa's future as a prosperous continent. He identifies with the masses, the common people in the form of the working class in his country. He does this because he knows that the success or failure of the continent depends on its workers as they, through their hard labour, are the generators of wealth on the continent. The workers are, therefore, engaged in carving the economic identity of Africa.

Moyo is a man postcolonial Africa needs because he abhors graft and underhanded dealings which are her hallmarks. He is even prepared to lose his life for this ideal. Even Chirundu hates to love his nephew's unflinching fight for justice. He declares:

His eyes sparkled with life and anticipation. As if he were ready to take on the world. For sheer zip and enthusiasm, a go-ahead spirit – if we had ten of him in the Cabinet instead of some of the fatheads and fat-bellied worms we did have, this country would have little fear (*Chirundu*:53).

Moyo as a True Pan-Africanist

Like a true pan-African, Moyo embraces Africans who have fled from violence and injustice in their own countries. He is not xenophobic to these men: the Zimbabwean Chieza, the two South Africans, Pitso and Studs Letanka. This humane relationship with these two men enriches his political experience and reinforces his identity in that they exchange valuable ideas about the politics on the continent in general and in their own respective countries in particular. When his government arrested them because they did not meet refugee

requirements, Moyo was behind them all the way. He showed his concern by paying them regular visits in jail as well as buying them a newspaper every second Sunday of the month, which is, fortnightly. This serves as a solace to them in that it keeps them hopeful and alive. Chieza praises Moyo's positive effort: "Tell Moyo we wish him well. If the new day has deceived the Chirundus, the Moyos of this land may yet move to a brighter dawn" (*Chirundu*:101). Moyo's ability to bring hope to his people is also acknowledged by the village chief. When he (the chief) beats farewell to his friend Mutiso, who also happens to be one of Moyo's grandfathers, the chief positively laments:

Seriously now – the house of Mutiso has fallen yes – these are changing times – I need not tell you that - your grandson here will raise your house again – it will not matter where – you will still be in this land where your ancestors live – your grandson is not a man without a shadow –he has been to school he has hands – so your house still stands, Old Mutiso, to put it in other words' (*Chirundu*:112).

Though Mutiso's house has disintegrated, Moyo has the potential of building it again and therefore, continue the clan name, its identity. This means that his African identity will not be destroyed. In the same way, his country, which symbolises the continent, also looks up to him for liberation from the post-colonial ghosts such as debasement of standards, corruption, nepotism, and general incompetence. If this fact can be stated by the village chief who is the custodian of cultural beliefs, who has his people's interests at heart, then it is sound.

Conclusion

This article sought to examine African cultural renewal through the delineation of Moyo's character in Mphahlele's *Chirundu*. It has acknowledged that though Africa has post-independence woes such as moral and political degeneration espoused by *Chirundu*, there is light at the end of the tunnel. This hope for a better Africa is put on the shoulders of her (Africa's) youth, such as Moyo, because they have the necessary fresh and innovative ideas, and energy to bring about socio-cultural change. Well-meaning adults should support these youth by investing their wisdom in them for the common developmental good of everyone on the continent.

References

- Appiah, K.A. 1992. *In my father's house: Africa and the philosophy of culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Asante, M.K. 1980. *Afrocentricity* (revised). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Asante, M.K. 1987. *The Afrocentric idea*. Philadelphia: Temple Press.
- Asante, M.K. 1988. *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Asante, M.F. & Asante, K.W. 1989. eds. *African culture: the rhythms of unity*. London: Greenwood Press.

- Asante, M.K. 1990. *Kemet, afrocentricity and knowledge*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Asante, M.K. 1999. *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- Asante, M.K. 2000. *Afrocentricity: The theory of social change*. A conference paper delivered in Gaudaloupe. URL: <http://www.asante.net/articles/gaudaloupe-asante.html> (Accessed on 11/05/2018).
- Aschroft, B., Griffiths, G & Tiffin, H. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Aschroft, B., Griffiths, G & Tiffin, H. 1998. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Diop, D. 1998. *Africa*. (In Moore, G. & Beier, U. 1998., eds). *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*. England: Penguin Books.
- Haarhoff, D. 1986. *The South African Setting of Chirundu*. *English in Africa*, 13(2):39-45.
- Hoppers, C.A.O. 2002. ed. *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation*. Claremont: New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd.
- Karenga, M. 1994. *Introduction to Black Studies*. Los Angeles: The University of Sankore Press.
- Makgoba, M.W., Shope, T. & Mazwai, T. 1999. *Introduction*. (In Makgoba, M. 1999. ed. *African Renaissance*. Cape Town: Mafube
- Mbigi, L. & Maree, J. 2005. *UBUNTU: The Spirit of African Transformation Management*. 10th Anniversary edition. Randburg: KNO-RES.
- Mogoboya, M. 2019. *Repurposing African humanism as a catalyst for peace through Mphahlele's The Wanderers: an (auto) biographical Approach*. *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation*, 8(2), 113-127.
- Mphahlele, E. 1979. *Chirundu*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Mugo, M.G. 1999. *African Culture in Education for Sustainable Development*. (In Makgoba, M.W. 1999., ed. *African Renaissance: the new struggle*. Cape Town: Mafube & Tafelberg.
- NgugiwaThiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: Heinemann.
- NgugiwaThiong'o. 1964. *Weep Not, Child*. London: Heinemann.
- NgugiwaThiong'o. 1965. *The River Between*. London: Heinemann.
- Obee, R. 1999. *Es'kia: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism*. Ohio University Press.
- Ramogale, M.M. 2006. *The Native Club needs to bat for Afrocentricity*. *The City Press*, 23 July. 24.
- Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Thuynsma, P.N. 1989. ed. *Footprints along the Way*. Braamfontein: Justified Press and Skotaville Publishers.
- Wynne-Davies, M. 1992. ed. *Bloomsbury Guides to English Literature, The Renaissance, From 1500 to 1660* London: Bloomsbury.