

Review Article

“Untamed Pests, Night Storms, Smouldering Charcoal and Prospects for Democracy in Africa”: Tiyambe Zeleza’s *Smouldering Charcoal*, (1992), Heinemann, London. ISBN: 0-435-90583-X.

“The book would be about the raping of a dream, the subversion of the aspirations of independence. No, it would go further; it would show how those dreams and aspirations had been vested in the wrong people. Yes, it would be a book about... people, their inadequacies and frustrations, their lives and struggles to break out of the monstrous concentration camp that is independent Africa.” (Tiyambe Zeleza:106).

The book does more than what it claims. It goes further than recounting the raping of dreams and subversion of aspirations of independence. It shows more than how those dreams and aspirations were vested in the wrong hands. The story of *Smouldering Charcoal* also shows why the politics of oppression and exploitation in Africa is a vicious circle that may never be broken. It is a story of frustrated dreams and aspirations, of disillusionment with post-independence leadership with no break in the cycle. It reviews the mistakes committed at independence which seriously shadows the prospects of regaining the dreams and aspirations of independence even through recent democratic efforts in many nations in Africa.

Tiyambe Zeleza’s story of the *Smouldering Charcoal* is set in the post-independence Malawi of President Banda. President Banda’s thirty-year rule was characterised by terror and brutal suppression of dissent and while the story seeks to show that, does more. *Smouldering Charcoal* took about 10 years to release because of fear of what the novel calls “untamed pests and night storms” in President Banda’s regime. When the Malawi Special Branch Police picked up the news of his intention to publish a novel critical of President Banda’s government in 1982, they threatened the author’s family relations in Malawi with harassment. For fear of the lives of his relations, he shelved the book until 1992. In the story President Banda is referred to only as “The Leader.” Nowhere in the story does President Banda appear in person. However, his presence is still powerfully felt through the Party (which is the only one allowed to exist in the country), especially in party membership renewal campaigns, ministers opening breweries which are regarded as the result of the Leader’s personal wisdom and foresight and in prison. The Leader is well served by vigilant party women, youth leaguers, chairmen, and ministers, informers employed as house workers, university lecturers, newspaper editors, house wives and prostitutes.

There are three groups of people presented in the story. There are the men and women of Njala, living in a shanty village on the edge of the city, represented by Bota, Mchere, Nambe, Biti, and Lucy. Their lives are characterised by poverty, prostitution and infidelity, a typical third world squalor. Those from this village who are employed like Mchere and Bota, do menial jobs earning very little, forcing them into perpetual debts, failure to pay rent or buy adequate food. The other group is that of the intellectuals in high employment like Dambo, Chola, Catherine and Dr Bakha working as journalists, academics, lawyers or studying in the university. The third group is that of the party functionaries – the party militia, chairpersons, ministers, members of parliament represented by Mrs Gonthi, Mrs Malimba and others. Members of this group wield a lot of power and influence, more than the other members of the society. This power is derived from the unquestionable authority of the Leader. The Party has no boundaries and has no competition. In all the three groups are “untamed pests” – those who have chosen to serve the party either in positions in its hierarchy or as undercover agents in clandestine activities.

The story centres on Chola and Mchere and on the strike as the major event. The strike at a bakery, where Mchere works, reveals intriguing betrayals. Strikers at the bakery are betrayed by fellow workers and are imprisoned without trial. Chola, a journalist with a daily paper is arrested and shares a cell with Mchere. Chola is killed in prison while Mchere is released later. The prevailing atmosphere in the country is one of fear and uncertainty as one does not know who is spying on who. There is a Movement opposed to the regime that operates underground. Chola joined it before he was arrested and killed in prison. Dambo, a lawyer, also joined the Movement after failing to influence the Party from inside when he joined it. He dies mysteriously, apparently killed by Party agents. Before Chola is killed in prison he introduces the Movement to the inmates. The idea is enthusiastically welcomed. He drafted the manuscript (manifesto) for the Movement which after his death is smuggled out of prison on the release of the prisoners. When the Movement continues in exile, the draft manifesto is used to prepare a new manifesto for the movement. The novel is supposedly that manuscript.

The novel is in three sections, Untamed Pests, Night Storms and Smouldering Charcoal.

The Untamed Pests

Zezeza's untamed pests are the Party Militias, with power to stop and hold traffic until road users buy/produce the Party membership card on highways, who rape women whose husbands have been put in prison by the regime; Party Women's Brigade with power to evict fellow women from their homes; Members of

Parliament and a host of informers employed as house boys, newspaper editors, lecturers and administrators. Taming the pests is not only a hazardous enterprise but also futile. When Dambo joined the Party he vowed to reform it from within, but failed. When he turned to an underground Movement, the pests preyed on him. Though Dambo did not join the Party with a clear agenda of how to reform it, the fact that he was out to reform the untamable pits him against a futile endeavour. He dies a mysterious death. He is found in Nkhona river after several days of being missing. There are no stated reasons for the killing, and under President Banda no reasons were to be offered. The Party was accountable to no one. It is inconceivable that the eyes of the dictator would miss and fail to suppress such fermenting of dissent and opposition as proposed by the Movement. Suppressing dissidence ruthlessly is probably the only thing dictators are capable of doing very well.

There are untamed pests in the Party, and as many in all other sectors of society. The whole nation is infested by the untamed pests. Strikers at the bakery are betrayed by fellow workers, Chola is spied on by his own house boy, teachers are given over to the Party by their wives for refusing to buy them party uniform. Bakha, a university lecturer wants to take over Catherine, Chola's girlfriend, taking advantage of Chola's arrest. There are untamable pests in prison like Bonzo, who is used to kill Chola. There are untamed pests in offices employed as editors to check what the newspapers carry. Untamed pests infest and contaminate all life. There are pests which go about looting the spoils from the Party victims. There are untamed pests everywhere from the beginning to the close of the story.

Night Storms

The story of *Smouldering Charcoal* reveals that dictatorship is a stormy and devastating experience. Mchere took his son Ntolo to the hospital through rains in the night and his family is evicted from his house for non-payment of rent. He meets Chola in the hospital who with Alipo have come to collect the dead body of Dambo killed by the storms of dictatorship. Dambo's sin was to quit the Party and join in the underground Movement. Mchere and Chola are to meet again in prison where they share a cell. There are storms of torture in prison, of hunger strike and death. The prisoners decide to go on hunger strike in prison for improved conditions. This brings more torture of electric shocks, nails, and burning charcoal to Chola from prison guards. Chola is suspected of organising the hunger strike. Eventually, Chola is killed by a prisoner on death row, Bonzo.

Mchere's wife, Nambe, suffers eviction from the house they were renting and a sick child who later dies in hospital in the absence of a husband who is in prison. Gwape, a Youth Leaguer takes advantage of her plight to sexually exploit her,

making her pregnant. But more than that, she and other women who decided to go to the prison to visit their husbands instead of practising dances for independence celebrations are deported to their home villages from Njala. In the process of being evicted, Biti loses her sewing machine which is looted by the Party Youth Militia. This was her only means of survival. On account of Chola's arrest, Catherine, who was only a girlfriend to Chola, is dismissed from the university. Dr. Bakha, typical of sycophants tries to use his position of influence to use her for sex just as the policeman that arrested Chola wants to rape her.

Ndatero who survived prison is released only to find that his wife is no longer interested in their marriage and divorces him, while Mchere finds Nambe nursing a child of Gwape who picked her up as spoil from the storms of dictatorship. The storms go beyond the borders to exile where Mchere's mother who has stood by Nambe and Mchere through all the storms, dies. But even for the rest of the refugees, life is not easy as they cannot get employment and for them to obtain a paper, is a long process. So the events from the strike through prison to exile are nothing short of a night storm. The devastation caused is evident throughout the story: murders, torture, evictions, dismissal from school/work. Dictatorship is stormy.

The Smouldering Charcoal

The untamed pests and the storms that rage in the novel do not seem to daunt the efforts of the people to resist the oppression and exploitation and their desire to fight for better conditions. Dambo joined the Party to reform it from within but failed and joined the Movement for National Transformation. He is killed but the Movement lives on through the storms of prison and death. Chola introduced it in prison and it moves into exile where Catherine and Ndatero work to realise the dream of a better nation. The manuscript that Chola drafted while in prison is smuggled out from prison by a warder and handed over to Mchere who takes it into exile. By the end of the story, Mchere has recruited mercenaries to wage war on the regime and bring change to Malawi.

The killing of Dambo and Chola and the expulsion of Catherine from college do not kill the Movement. Catherine, Mchere and Ndatero in exile continue from where the others left. Actually, the expulsion of Catherine leads to student riots which have to be quickly suppressed by the police. Though suppressed, the seeds of discontent are sowed regardless. Pockets of rebellion are not totally crushed, and the manner in which life is picked up again after violent suppression and uprooting testifies to the eminent demise of the regime and the resilience of the people. For example, Biti who lost everything because of her rebellion picks up life again in

the village. Her husband finds a new job as she herself starts poultry farming to earn a living. She buys a new sewing machine. The charcoal smoulders. Untamed pests are individuals who corrupted by power, refuse to respect the human rights of others, and abuse it to exploit, oppress and suppress. This experience is no less of a night storm. But there is hope in the resilience of the people to fight for their freedom from such bondage and suffering. Freedom from untamed pests and night storms: that hope is the smouldering charcoal.

Comment

The story of *Smouldering Charcoal* is not simply an historical account of events in Malawi under a dictatorship from 1964 (the year of independence) to 1992 (when democracy came to Malawi). It is 180 pages of accounts of cruelty, detention and brutality that breeds resentment, anger and exile. Zeleza has a unique talent as a story teller and does this without undue exaggeration or extreme formalism of an historian. Though he deals with a painful subject, he, though with some difficulty, conceals his bitterness to tell a moving story. He successfully distances himself from the experiences using the third person narrator predominantly. Personal hatred and emotions are suppressed in order to give his readers the chance of a personal reaction to the story.

But much as the story of *Smouldering Charcoal* gives hope that the untamable pests and the inevitable night storms of dictatorship that characterised governments that took over from colonial masters can be consumed by the smouldering charcoal, the trend of events in Africa in general, give little reason for optimism. If the trends towards democracy across Africa since the late 1980s raised hopes for a new dawn in African politics, the story of the *Smouldering Charcoal* suggests that this democracy will not be easy to come by. The story itself ends on a hint of guerrilla warfare as a means to liberate the country from untamed pests and night storms of a post-colonial regime. There have been two types of guerrilla warfare fought in Africa: one against the occupying colonial forces to gain independence and the other against post-independence regimes that had refused to share the cake fairly or embraced an ideology that did not satisfy everyone. This second is what Tiyambe Zeleza's story concerns. However, recourse to guerrilla warfare or civil war to regain independence and establish democracy leaves more questions for democracy than answers. Guerrilla war does not ascertain the possibility of realising the dreams and aspirations of independence, neither the right people taking over power. Thus the legacy of power vested in the wrong hands as at independence from colonial rule, is assured to live on despite efforts to democratise in many countries.

In Malawi, for example, the removing from power of President Banda in 1994 was supposed to bring in democrats but the reality seem to show that power is still vested in the wrong hands. And it is not clear whether there will ever be right hands in which to vest power on behalf of the people. The untamed pests and night storms characteristic of President Banda's thirty year rule show a notoriety to persist. President Banda was fondly referred to by his sycophants as *Wamuyaya* (He who lives for ever), and it seems indeed he will live forever. He set the pace of political life as a dictator and even when he firmly placed the country on the road to democracy through the 1993 referendum and subsequent multi-party general elections in 1994, when he handed over power, it was to his former boys now in new parties. It was certain that he would never die. On Malawi he made indelible marks as a dictator who knew exactly what he wanted and how to obtain it. It is this style of leadership of such a man that Tiyanbe Zeleza's *Smouldering Charcoal* tries to account for in this story. But the story does not show democrats as successors of dictators. Rather, inheritors of dictators. Guerrilla warriors nowhere in the world have been democrats, and it is these in the book that are fighting to assume power. The fight is not to change the system but to topple the regime and replace it.

While the comparison between the story and what happens on the ground in Malawi seem to end when those who fell foul of the regime move into exile, the guerrilla organisation in exile waging war on President Banda is akin to Malawi's situation in reality. Immediately it became apparent that President Banda was failing in 1992, those that had fallen foul of him quickly organised into other parties and wrestled power from him in the elections. Most of these had not only fallen foul of President Banda but also helped him plunder the country and subvert people's aspirations of independence. Just like the Movement's efforts to write democracy into its manifesto, so did most of these parties in Malawi insert the word 'democracy' in the names of their parties. Since assuming power, they are yet to come to grips with the meaning and reality of democracy and embrace it fully. They are yet to divorce themselves from the undemocratic past that not only haunts but influences and informs their political thought and action as well. The robes of democracy are slowly and surely proving too big for the dwarfs that adorn them and efforts to take them off are seen in the amendments to the constitution meant to sustain the leaders in power than serve the needs of the people.

And in the story, democracy is apparently not on the agenda of the Movement that has assembled a battalion of guerrillas to oust a dictator in Malawi. We are told that the Movement in exile "*was in danger of ossifying into a propaganda machine*" (p177); hitherto we are not told the ideology on which it is founded apart from Chola's preaching on it in prison. Does it envisage democracy? What is the programme of the Movement? A guerrilla warfare or democratisation? A summary of its congress says:

"In the end everybody agreed that the congress had been a success. A programme of action was adopted. For the first time the Movement reserved for itself the right to wage armed struggle if necessary to effect change back home. The Movement's charter was also revised and pruned of nationalist demagoguery masquerading as socialist principles. Democracy became enshrined as one of the Movement's objectives, although it was not clear what was meant by democracy. Previous references to the Movement as the sole representative of the people, and to its intention to form one-party state were removed" (p178).

The paramount question is, what is the potential of the Movement to effect change inside Malawi with war and bring democracy while still being very unclear on the meaning of democracy? The story of *Smouldering Charcoal* does therefore leave the question of changing the situation inside Malawi to democracy in doubt if not unattainable. It is also not clear either what form of state the revolution will create – a socialist state or simply a take-over to replace old masters with new ones and continue the vicious circle of oppression and exploitation. Manifestos of most parties spell out democracy that is hardly understood by the party actors and is non-existent. This story is not unique to Malawi. It is a phenomenon of most African nations. The history of our nations on the continent of Africa is replete with cases of civil wars and recent gains towards democracy are already being eroded in West Africa, in Angola, in Zambia, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and others. President Chiluba of Zambia, for example, has been at pains to redo the constitution to solidify his power grip and remove his potential contenders. President Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo has found out that he has not been helped by the word 'democratic' inserted in his country's name. He has to deal with a mutinous battalion of soldiers, the very instrument of his coming to power. Assurance for democracy, let alone the realisation of Africa's dreams and aspirations of independence, is not certain.

The story of *Smouldering Charcoal* provides an account of the failures of leaders to realise the dreams and aspirations of independence. It shows the imprisonment of people in their own country making the freedom they fought for an illusion. It demonstrates how power vested in the wrong people can corrupt and be turned against those who are meant to benefit from it. In effect, it shows that Africa's dreams and aspirations of independence were entrusted to the wrong people at independence and Africa is still a struggling continent to find the right people in whom to invest her well-being. Africans are today still a struggling people to get rid of post-independence oppression, exploitation and brutality, to "*break out of the monstrous concentration camp.*" Since power is on the side of the rich, the smouldering charcoal may as well no longer be a symbol of hope for

change rather than our inability to break free from a vicious political circle. It is becoming more evident that, just like the Movement's unclear agenda, the process of change to democracy sought even now has no clear agenda. People are even given an empty ballot paper that only helps to put into power pests that are out to make the most from the poor people's sweat. Untamable pests that rape the people's dream and subvert their aspirations of independence and freedom.

Shall Africa ever be free from untamed pests and night storms to be a democracy?

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Book Reviews

Nurtured by Knowledge: Learning to do Participatory Action-Research. Edited by Susan E Smith, Dennis K Willms & Nancy A Johnson, The Apex Press, New York, 1997, 279pp. Includes Foreword, Preface, Figures, Tables, Photographs and Bibliography

People's right to actively participate in the production of knowledge is hardly acknowledged in conventional academic research. Participatory Action-Research (PAR) however, not only acknowledges people's right to participate in the generation and consumption of knowledge, but also consciously strives to promote it. PAR involves people in the entire research process in the hope that it would have a transformative effect on them. Paulo Freire captures the transformative character of PAR in the foreword to the volume thus: "*People rupture their existing attitudes of silence, accommodation and passivity, and gain confidence and abilities to alter unjust conditions and structures*" (p xi).

The volume *Nurtured by Knowledge: Learning to do Participatory Action-Research* attempts to shed some light on the involvement of people in the research process.

The book has seven chapters: six case study reports and one theoretical article. The six case studies from Mexico, Canada, Honduras, Uganda, India and Chile are used to illustrate concepts and principles of Participatory Action-Research.

In the first case study Gerald Debank (a Canadian dairy farmer) and Arturo Ornelas (a Mexican educator and community activist) narrate their experiences "*full of twists, questions, doubts as well as moments of great joy*"