THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS IDEOLOGY:
A Celebration Of
Fred Agbeyegbe

Edited by:
'Tunji Azeez
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CHAPTER SEVEN

Shame and the Myth of Power: A Sociological Reading of Fred Agbeyegbe’s The King Must Dance Naked

By
Sola Fosudo

ABSTRACT

In a clime where the attainment and retention of power and position have become a “do or die” affair, the vainglory that usually accompanies such philosophical obsession has always been a certainty, thus, lending voice to the popular maxim that “power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Leaders, who see Power and governance as private property and a self-enriching enterprise, have always been greeted with shame, infamy and self-destruction. From the traditional monarchical system up to the modern democratic form of governance, our society is suffused with self-styled despots and tyrants who are prepared to do anything in order to clinch to and remain in power. Yet, in spite of the shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and loss of dignity which many of them suffer and end up with, it is rather ironical that instead of such evil to abate, it continues to recur especially in third world countries. It is in view of this rather bizarre culture of tyranny that one of Nigeria’s foremost dramatists, Fred Agbeyegbe, captures in his play The king Must Dance Naked, the truism that, excessive love of power, automatically leads to the ruin and destruction of its lovers. This essay examines and discusses the issues of leadership and power ascendancy in The King Must dance Naked, viz – a-viz the intrigues that traditionally exist between kingmakers, contesting candidates, the oracle and its priest, and the entire Community. It concludes that when Power is unjustly acquired and cruelly misused, it leads, usually, to shame and disgrace.

INTRODUCTION

The Longman dictionary of Contemporary English (2005:1281) defines Power simply as the ability or right to control people
or events; the ability to influence people, or the authority to do something. The German Sociologist, Max Weber (1954:323) refers to power as “the ability that enables individuals or group to actualise their personal will against the will of others”. In other words, power is the possibility of imposing one’s will upon the behaviour of other persons.

According to Mabel Evwierhoma (2002:178), Power “could be comprehended in terms of ability, capacity or an enablement of some sort” while for Marilyn French, (1953:509):-

...Power is a process, a dynamic interaction. To have power really means to have entry to a network of relationships in which one can influence, persuade, threaten or cajole others to do what one wants or needs them to do.

We can then safely submit that power is the potential influence over the attitudes and behaviour of one or more target individuals. Power is exercised when potential power wielders, motivated to achieve certain goals of their own, marshal in their power bases, resources that enable them to influence the behaviour and motives of followers.

The feeling of having no power over people and events make us feel helpless and sometimes miserable. Power is desirable. No one wants less power, everyone wants more. Instead of struggling against the inevitable, instead of arguing and whining and feeling guilty, it is far better to excel in Power, because as a matter of fact, the better you are at dealing with Power, the better friend, lover, husband, wife and person you become.

Ordinarily, Power is supposed to give its possessor honour and respect, but since it is basically seen as a game, and depending on how it is played, it can lead to several other outcomes. Robert Green
(2000:xvii) in his book, *The 48 Laws of Power*, informs us that Power is actually a paradoxical game. In his view, it is dangerous to seem to be too power hungry. He recommends a subtle, congenial, yet cunning, democratic, yet devious approach to the power game. This game of constant duplicity, he says, "resembles the power dynamics that existed in the scheming world of the old aristocratic court". In serving their masters, courtiers attempt to win their masters favour and yet try hard to protect themselves from other courtiers. In his words:

*The successful courtiers learned over time to make all his moves indirect, if he stabbed an opponent in the back, it is with a velvet glove on his hand and the sweetest of smiles on his face. Instead of using coercion or outright treachery, the perfect courtier got his way through seduction, charm, deception, and subtle strategy, always planning several moves ahead. Life in the court was a never-ending game that required constant vigilance and tactical thinking. It was civilized war.* (xvii)

Learning the game of power requires a certain way of looking at the world, a shifting of perspective. It takes effort and years of practice, for much of the game may not come naturally. According to Robert Green, "certain basic skills are required, the most important of which are mastery of emotions, control of anger, forward thinking, deception (i.e playing with appearances), patience, amongst others.

To learn and master Power, one must develop the ability to study and understand people. One must be a master psychologist, and possess the ability to recognise motivations and see through the cloud of doubt with which people surround their actions. Essentially, Power is meant to be a leadership tool. And by virtue of that quality and function, it can be vested, granted, bestowed, or ceded, and it can be stolen or hijacked. Also, it can be well used or misused. However
it is obtained or applied, what is certain is that, there are always accompanying consequences.

Nicolo Machiavelli in his treaty *The Prince* translated by George Bull (1961:24), submit that there are actually, two main ways of becoming a Prince, that is, a leader, and they are either by “Fortune” or “Prowess”. He describes as “Hereditary principalities”, those who come to Power by Fortune and the other group he describes as “Composite Principalities”. He, however, also discussed another but unusual means of becoming a Prince. Using the story of Agathocles, the Sicilian for illustration, with the essay titled “Those who come to Power by crime”, he informs us that, “Agathocles not only rose from the status of a Private Citizen, but from the lowest, most abject condition of life, to become King of Syracuse”. Continuing, he writes.

*At every stage of his career, this man, the Son of a potter, behaved like a criminal; none the less, he accompanied his crimes with so much audacity and physical courage that when he joined the militia he rose through the ranks to become praetor of Syracuse.* (29)

After he had been appointed to this position, he determined to make himself prince and possess by force and without obligation to others what had been voluntarily conceded to him. Then, one morning, according to the story, “Agathocles assembled the people and Senate of Syracuse, as if he meant to raise matters which affected the republic; and at a prearranged signal, he had all the senators, along with the richest citizens killed by his Soldiers; and when they were dead, he seized and held the government of that city”. A study of Agathocles’ actions and life will reveal little or nothing that can be attributed to “Fortune”, since it was not by anyone’s favour that he rose through the ranks of the Militia. Though his life and progress was attended by countless difficulties and dangers, he maintained his position with many audacious and dangerous enterprises. That was
how he won his principality. Yet, it cannot also be called “Prowess” to kill fellow citizens, betray friends, and be treacherous, pitiless and irreligious. Machiavelli summarises that “these ways can only win a prince Power, but not glory”. (P.29)

In the same book, Machiavelli also discusses a very topical and crucial issue on Power by distinguishing between cruelty and compassion, and asking whether it is better to be loved than feared. In answering, he started by advising that a Prince must “be slow to believe allegations and to take action, and must watch that he does not come to be afraid of his own shadow. Also, his behaviour must be tempered by humanity and prudence, so that overconfidence does not make him rash, or excessive distrust make him unbearable”. Now to the question, he says “one would like to be both the one and the other, but because it is difficult to combine them, it is far better to be feared than loved if you cannot be both”. He tries to justify his view with the following submission:-

...One can make this generalisation about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit; while you treat them well, they are yours. They would shed their blood for you, risk their property, their lives, their Sons, so long, as is said above, as danger is remote, but when you are in danger, they turn away...Men worry less about doing an injury to one who makes himself loved then to one who makes himself feared...For love is secured by a bond of gratitude which men, wretched creatures that they are, break when it is to their advantage to do, but fear is strengthened by a dread of punishment which is always effective. (54)

In concluding, he believes that the Prince must nonetheless, make himself feared in such a way that if he is not loved, at least he escapes being hated. According to him, “fear is quite compatible
with an absence of hatred; and the Prince can always avoid hatred if he abstains from the property of his subjects and citizens and from their women”. In his words: "Men sooner forget the death of their Fathers, than the loss of their Patrimony. (P.55)

The foregoing picture of Power is the same “paradox” if not “Surprise” painted by Robert Green’s 48 Laws of Power. Some of the laws are quite inspirational, and they seem natural and positive, while others appear negative, puzzling and curious. Nonetheless, they are part of the recommended laws for everyone who intends to play the game of Power successfully.

Some of the good and “positive” laws include:-

Law 5  -  So much depends on Reputation, guard it with all your life.
Law 26  -  Keep your hands clean
Law 29  -  Plan all the way to the end
Law 43  -  Work on the hearts and minds of others

Some of those puzzling or “negative” ones include:-

Law 2  -  Never put too much trust in friends; learn to use your enemies
Law 3  -  Conceal your intentions
Law 15  -  Crush your enemies totally
Law 17  -  Keep others in suspended terror, cultivate an air of unpredictability.

(Ix-xvi)
A closer look at Robert Green’s law 17 above, for instance, will reveal an ideological semblance with Machiavelli’s discourse on cruelty and compassion and on the question of whether it is better to be loved than feared as a “Prince” or leader. Generally, it is not in doubt that Power is a delicate phenomenon which must be thoroughly understood and cautiously treated by all, especially its possessors. One can safely presume that some of those laws of Power that are curious or seemingly negative are probably those that leaders who abuse Power, misuse or overuse and which eventually lead to their downfall.

ABOUT THE PLAY: THE KING MUST DANCE NAKED
The play is set in an unnamed community, although the names of the characters suggest an Itshekiri community. The King Must Dance Naked is an exploration of the intrigues common-place with problems connected to making decisions on choice, and installation of Kings in a typical African community, especially when there are critical issues surrounding eligibility of contesting candidates and oracular injunctions. Although the play begins with Omajuwa the 10th firmly on the throne, and in a period when the community is faced with famine and draught, the story actually takes its roots from the transposition of Bagiwa, a mere chambermaid, into a Queen in the palace having been put in family way by King Ogbodume, (Omajuwa the 9th). Bagiwa, now Queen Odosun, soon after the delivery of her twins, faces serious psychological stress and community opposition following the recommendation of the oracle that one of the twins, precisely the girl, should be sacrificed to the gods, lest she grows to become a wild flower, and sits on the throne as King in future – a total abomination.

Queen Odosun will not hear of this, determined to confront the oracle and shame the community, she manipulates the release of the male Child for the sacrifice. She also schemes the unsuccessful assassination of Omagbemi, son of her senior Queen (Lube) and the only other eligible heir to the throne. Time passes, Ogbodume
i.e Omajuwas the 9th passes on, Queen Lube also dies and with Omagbemi sent away by Odosun to be killed in faraway land, she then succeeds in enthroning her daughter to become King Omajuwa the 10th.

But, with the wrong sacrifice of the male child, strange things begin to happen. The windstorm washes the remains of the baby back to the shore, a sign that the sacrifice is rejected by the gods. To further compound the problem of the community, a big rock was also washed up the shore by the storm, and considered a bad omen in the land. The Rock, apart from being the eventual source of death for Queen Odosun also disappears in mysterious circumstances, similar to that which brought it to the shore. King Omajuwa’s reign has generally left the community in search of Peace. Famine, disease and all forms of affliction have been the lot of the towns’ people. Convinced that the gods are angry and are not at all appeased, the people demand that the King must explain the cause of the pestilence in the land. The oracle is consulted by Asinotan, the Chief Priest and the verdict is that, for peace to return to the land, The king Must Dance Naked.

At the climax of the entire saga, Mejebi, Omagbemi’s son appears to claim the throne of his father. And, in his story, he alludes to the fact that King Omajuwa is actually his mother. He exposes Omajuwa, the King, as a woman, as he narrates his father’s story of how Omajuwa meest him (his father) in exile and betrays her womanhood to prove her love for him. Knowing at this point that the die is cast, Omajuwa, calls for the drummers, dances naked and vacates the throne for Mejebi, her son.

*The King must dance naked* is a drama replete with dramatic conflicts suspense, intrigues and comic reliefs at every stage as the plot unfolds. Told with the narrative style and a flashback technique, it is a literary work that is rich in language and spectacle, lyrical dialogue and theatrical action.
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: FRED AGBEYEGBE.
Fred Agbeyegbe was born on the 22nd July 1935 in Ekurede, Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. He displayed his love for the arts at a very tender age of fourteen when he gave animation to a pictorial almanac of English Royal Household in his play titled, *The Tomb of Westminster Abbey*. The young Fred lived with his elder brother who was a Police Officer. He attended about four different primary schools between 1942 and 1949 because of the frequent transfer of his brother. He later attended Police College, Ikeja, Lagos and left for the U.K in 1962. While in England he attended Pitman’s College, London. (for a Reporter’s course); Holborn College of Law, Languages and Commerce, London for his O & A level General Certificate of Education. Thereafter, he attended the University College, London for Diploma in International air and space law, and for his LLM degree, and Post graduate Studies in Administrative and International laws of the common wealth Nations. In 1972, he was admitted to The Hague Academy of International law, and Nigerian Law School Lagos, in 1973. He also embarked on a PhD research on the Nigerian Law of Financial institutions at the University of Lagos between 1982 and 1984.

Equipped with the kind of solid education and background described above, Fred Agbeyegbe has been thoroughly prepared for the Multi-dimensional roles he has been playing in the National life of his country. As Jahman Anikulapo (2011: iv) puts it:-

*If there really were ever, that specie of a man i.e “a man of many parts”, in the true sense of the word, Fred Agbeyegbe is one of those entitled to the appellation. Never ceasing to display proficiency and thereby gaining recognition and respect in any endeavour he cares to embark upon and always exuding the nuances of a man born with a mission in all of them: he is a living testimony of God’s endowment of one being with a multitude of facets and talents.*
Right from his school days, his liberal activism knew no limits. He was a frontline student’s leader. For instance, he was the president of University of London United Nations students Association and he organised several International students’ activities, such as the "Forum on Poverty, Race and Armaments" at the London University College in 1970.

Apart from his legal career in which he has clearly distinguished himself as a solicitor of the supreme court of Nigeria, he was one-time member of the National Executive Committee of Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) and Founding member/First Vice President of the Nigerian Insurance Law Association, amongst others. Also, apart from his involvement in Politics with such notable groups as National Democratic coalition (NADECO) National Association of State Movements of Nigeria (NASMON) and The Coalition of Ethnic Nationalities of Nigeria (CENN), Fred Agbeyegbe is undoubtedly one the legendary figures in the Nigerian literary and theatrical arena having published over thirteen (13) Plays, three (3) poetry collections and a book of selected articles published over the years in three Nigerian top Newspapers- The Guardian, This Day and Vanguard. Some of his plays include The Will, Competition for Ever, Woe unto Death, The King Must Dance Naked, The Last Omen, “Budiso”, Human Cargo, Brains and Hearts, Conflict Resolution, Stop the Bullet etc. His poetry collections include The Confused World, Songs of Africa and Miscellany.

Fred Agbeyegbe can be described as a man that is creatively fecund. He is not only a productive playwright, he is also a human rights activist, social critic and lover of the arts. His love for the arts, most certainly, must be responsible not only for the establishment of Ajo productions, but for self-financing an entire festival of theatrical productions aptly named “AJOFEST”.

Tracing the history of Ajo Productions, Sola Balogun in his article titled “Vision in the theatre house” in the Guardian of Saturday
August 31st 1996, reasoned that “dreams always live and grow in the minds of men, and that, when these dreams are well nurtured in steadfastness, they transform even insignificant ideas into monumental and enduring legacies”. This was the character of Fred Agbeyegbe’s Ajo Productions’ dream, conceived in 1983 and used to debut The King Must Dance Naked which subconsciously set the pace for subsequent efforts by the theatre company into a yearly repertory of play productions.

In 1984, Woe Unto Death was staged, followed by The Last Omen in 1985 and Budiso in 1986, all directed by Jide ogungbade. “Budiso”, the 1986 production was actually commissioned by the Nigerian Bar Association to mark 100 years of legal practice in Nigeria. All the four plays were later re-staged in August 1986 as part of the celebrated “Ajofest 86”. In an interview with Sola Balogun published in the Guardian, Saturday 31st August 1996, Agbeyegbe disclosed that the name “Ajo” is actually taken from his third daughter’s name “Ajomuodeli” meaning, “The reign of the wise one, who is the custodian of the lineage. The playwright said his daughter has always shown interest in theatre practice and that he was quite observant of her keen interest when the Ajo project was about to start. So, the name of the group was conceived in her honour and in furtherance of her interest in the theatre.

“Ajo Productions” and “Ajofest” have been described by theatre scholars, practitioners and the Media as Agbeyegbe’s most outstanding gifts and special contributions to the Nigerian theatre. Jahman Anikulapo (2000: xii) quotes Professor Osofisan as saying, “It is a rare and touching gesture of Patriotism and Nationalistic fervour on the part of the lawyer-playwright and his company of actors, but also, a courageous demonstration of their passionate devotion to the Arts”. In the same write, up Dr Ola Balogun commends the endeavours as “a simulating and praise worthy attempt to revive English Language drama as a popular mass audience art form”. Orji Onoko in his article The Wig on Stage in THIS DAY Newspaper on Saturday May
16th 1998 writes: “Besides the interest the productions generated, it marked the opening of the National Theatre to the public” (P.12)

Also, commending the Ajo project, Toyin Akinosho in his article “Colour, Thrills and suffering (Ajo Productions end a month of spectacle)” writes:-

For the first time, English Drama contested for audience with Yoruba Movies as crowds thronged the lobby of the National Theatre to choose between the popular movie Mosebolatan and Woe Unto Death (P.41)

Finally, Fred Owhelawa in the Article “Nigerian Theatre: On the path of Eminence” in the Guardian Express of Wednesday August 27th remarked that “Ajobfest 86 was a bold attempt to put Nigerian Theatre where it belonged: Eminence” (P.4)

“Uncle Fred” as he is fondly called by his younger professional Colleagues and admirers especially those he mentored, is a great achiever by all standards. And to prove this, he has won various prizes including the Wole Soyinka Award for Literature and Drama, 1993, and his play The King Must Dance Naked also won the Prize of The Play of the year in Ghana in 1987 amongst many others.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES IN THE PLAY: The King Must Dance Naked might look “deceptively simple”, in terms of thematic preoccupation and its dramaturgy, but, it is, in truth, a play, that is multi-themed and dramaturgically rich and robust. Yeriba Kena in his article “Agbeyegbe, The World he gained” in Vanguard Newspaper of Thursday December 23, 1993, notes that;

...Agbeyegbe writes about matters that are decidedly familiar and universal in prolixity. And as
a meticulous realist, his concerns about Royalty and succession serve as template for most of his works (P.10)

The above assertion may be true of *The King Must Dance Naked* because indeed, it portrays the themes of Royalty and succession, selfishness and greed of the 18th Century Itshekiri aristocracy, a culture which Agbeyegbe understands very well. There are, however, several other themes, such as social injustice, inordinate ambition and lust for power, tyranny, corruption desperation and wickedness, deceit, deception and manipulation.

In depicting the theme of lust for power, the play exposes the chambermaid turned Queen, Odosun as she schemes all the way to enthrone her child, Omajuwa as King. Apart from manipulating the wrong release of her male Child for sacrifice to the gods, instead of the female child as recommended by the Chief Priest, she is determined to eliminate all opposition in order to achieve her selfish ambition. The chorus tries to prick the conscienceless Odosun about her lust for power as it sings:

**CHORUS:** Does it really matter
What human matter
Must be wasted
For you to be a taster
Of the sweet wine of Power
To enthrone your own Child. (P.47)

She has commanded the guards to take Prince Omagbemi, Son of Queen Lube (and the only other eligible heir to the throne apart from her daughter), out of the palace and be wasted in far away land. This also shows desperation, wickedness and injustice. Just like Agathocles of Sicily, Omajuwa could not have been said to ascend the throne by Fortune or even Prowess, but by the many crimes and abomination committed by her mother, a mere chambermaid
turned Queen. Odosun’s rise from a courtier to a Queen Mother could actually have been a cleverly calculated scheme and plan. Who knows, she might have seduced or charmed Ogboduma to get attention and eventually be taken to bed.

The question of succession, rotation of Power and tenure elongation is a major problem of African Politics. The “Sit-tight syndrome” is a common feature with many African leaders and it is the bane of development on the continent. In an interview with Yeriba Kina, in Vanguard Newspaper of Thursday December 23, 1993, embittered Agbeyegbe complains:-

_They (African Leaders) do not want to go. Who is going to take over from them? And it is still enacting itself today. Even in the present set-up that we have, the question is still that of succession (P.10)_

Just like King Omajuwa who confesses that though she has ruled for twenty nine years, it looks only like yesterday. And she boasts “I am the throne and the throne is me, bequeathed to me by my fathers....” A study of the trend on the African continent, shows that many of the leaders who have ever left office were forced out. With the new wave of democracy sweeping across and becoming more and more popular in Africa, many of the military generals have suddenly become politicians, i.e shedding their military uniforms for civilian garbs, and also changing their countries’ constitution to manipulate the situation and stay in power forever. These men have held Africa down for years. They have killed thousands of people in order to remain in Power. Examples include Muamor Ghadafi (Libya) who has ruled for forty two (42) years, Jose Santos (Angola), for Thirty two (32) years, Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), for twenty nine (29) years, Blaise Compraore (Burkina Faso), for twenty four (24) years, Idrissu Deby (Chad) for twenty one (21) years to mention a few. All these leaders are still on the throne as at the time of writing this paper, and there are no signs that they are willing to let go.
Back home in Nigeria, Dictator Sani Abacha who ruled between 1993 and 1998 is an example of a Power- drunk military general who brooked no real and imagined opposition. He came in on the heels of his predecessor, General Ibrahim Babangida’s annulment of an election considered to be the freest and fairest in the nation’s history and won by the Late M.K.O Abiola. Abacha killed and jailed in order to remain perpetually in power but, he eventually died a shameful death and the news of his demise was celebrated with glee by citizens across the country.

Also, former Cote’dvoire President, Laurent Gbagbo was caught alive in a bunker before agreeing to let go of his presidential power which he lost to Alliasane Quatara during the country’s last election. Also, Ben Ali of Tunisia who has ruled for twenty three (23) years and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt who has ruled for thirty (30) years were humiliated out of office by the citizens of their countries. They are now in exile just like Omajuwa in The King Must Dance Naked.

The Shame that normally attends the fall of these power drunk leaders is better imagined than experienced. King Omajuwa, the illegal female King portrayed as a dictatorial monarch, in The King is eventually compelled to come down from her high horse to face reality and embrace humility, compassion and reason. She is commanded by the oracle to dance naked as a sacrifice for peace in the land. At first, she says:

Sometimes, I wish I were not a King that my nakedness be only my affair, and not a commodity to be haggled by enthusiasts of unequal birth and prowess. (10).

But when all the lies, deceit, greed, corruption, abomination and injustice that have been perpetrated over the years are un-covered by Mejebi who comes to claim the throne that rightly belongs to him, King Omajuwa succumbs, admits her disgrace and shame and says:-

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CONCLUSION
Fred Agbeyegbe’s contribution to the growth of Nigerian theatre is not only noteworthy but also deserving commendation and honour. He has proved himself not only to be an accomplished playwright, he is also a successful producer and financier of the arts. His play, The King Must Dance Naked, which has been described as his “Magnum opus” is an enactment of very topical and contemporary issues of strong relevance to the political and socio-cultural practices of our time. The play reveals the vanity and emptiness of Power-drunkenness, it condemns the unnecessary tension, manipulation and treachery usually associated with the election or selection of leaders. And by depicting the loss of the throne by Omajuwa, the protagonist of the play, in circumstances that are shameful and ignominious, Agbeyegbe is literally canvassing for a new social order, that is rooted in justice, fair play, democratic ideals and good governance.

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