A Loss of Self-Identity:

Blind Loyalty to Party Ideology and the Acceptance of Political Corruption

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In “The Ceremony,” Emmanuel Dongala examines the progression of distorted perceptions of a proletariat worker in a post-colonial central African Marxist state. Through this viewpoint, Dongala narrates the day of the ceremony commemorating the new director of the manure factory, a position the worker at first claims to be his goal, after having worked tirelessly and loyally as a guard for ten years. The worker explains his initial confusion with the identity of being a true “Red,” proudly wearing and displaying the color before realizing its ideological meaning. As the worker narrates the progression in his life as a communist, he continuously offers praise to the Party and its leaders, vigorously rejecting any hypocrisy or criticism of the totalitarian state and supporting censorship, even when his own mind has its doubts.

During the ceremony, the protagonist emphasizes that he is one of the first people there, the first to clap for his glorified leader, and even bribes his boss so that he can adjust the microphone between speakers, a task he claims to be significant due to the presence of photographers. His continual praise for the leaders and the new director is a drastic shift from his earlier coveting of the job, and he even goes on to justify the ethnic preferences of the leader in regards to political appointments. His overly enthusiastic loyalty to the president causes him to become a political prisoner of the totalitarian regime; in the direct aftermath of an explosion likely aimed at killing the president, the protagonist jumps on top of the president with the intent of saving him and giving his body to the Revolution, only to end up being considered an accomplice in the act. However, this outcome only causes his loyalty to the Party to become stronger, offering to do anything for it in order to end his body’s torture. After having lost any sense of self-identity, all he knows or feels individually is physical pain.

Dongala's story highlights the loss of self-identity via blind loyalty to party ideology and the acceptance of corruption among party officials, solely due to their idealized status. While narrating the story, the protagonist appears to be more of a cog in the machine of the regime rather than an individualized character, as his story could be that of any other worker, especially since he is never given a name. The protagonist's account, unbeknownst to him, conveys the dehumanizing psychological effects on the citizens of a totalitarian regime, such as a loss of personal beliefs and values, a common experience in postcolonial Africa. The degradation of self-identity, as a result of intense loyalty to party ideology, leads to citizens' casual acceptance of political corruption, further fueling the repressive abilities of the regime.

Through the protagonist's characterization of himself and his obsession with party ideology, Dongala subtly reveals the loss of self-identity. The unnamed protagonist immediately identifies himself as a "militant" and a "citizen," displaying the importance of the relationship to party and state, while ignoring personal connections and identities.[1] He justifies his early arrival to the ceremony by characterizing himself as a "sincere militant, fulfilling (his) obligations to the Party," again displaying his connection to the Party as his foremost commitment.[2] He even admits to learning "so many things in so little time that it all gets a little mixed up in (his) head," which demonstrates the serious use of propaganda and brainwashing methods. This brainwashing leads to his gradual obsession with "redness," referring to the Marxist ideology of the ruling party. At one point when discussing his lack of qualifications to be factory manager, the protagonist explains, "redness was all that was missing," cementing the idea that party ideology

[1]Emmanuel Dongala and Dominic Thomas, "The Ceremony." *Jazz and Palm Wine*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2017), 67.
[2] Ibid., 67.

possesses a paramount position in the protagonist's view of value in society.[3] Subsequently, the protagonist explains that he cheated on his wife, not due to "debauchery or immorality" but as "sacrifice" to "advance the revolutionary cause and its redness."[4] Therefore, it becomes evident that the loyalty to party ideology takes complete precedence in the life of the worker, eroding the value of his personal relationships and his own identity. When explaining his decisions or beliefs, the ideology and loyalty to the party serve as the only justifications, with no considerations given to his own morals or beliefs. At one point, the protagonist somewhat admits his loss of self-identity, explaining "I can see now how one has to start by rendering one's personality colorless, before one can successfully climb the arduous path to redness."[5] This psychological repression on the individual level allows the ruling party to maintain immense power since the oppressed are convinced that they are benefitting from the status quo.

Dongala's demonstration of ideological obsession in the story provides an avenue to understanding the implications of similar instances in postcolonial African politics. In particular, the implications are quite relevant in relation to the ability of single-party states to remain in power for long periods of time. While the eagerness to begin state building somewhat justified continuing personal rule in postcolonial Africa, ruling parties took advantage of the situation and relied on enforcing an intense commitment to political ideology to remain in power.[6] For example, the ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe has been in power since the country's inception. Taking advantage of its initial popularity for freeing Zimbabweans from the rule of the "Rhodesian white settler regime," the party "intended to institutionalize (its) control of the political sphere."[7]

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[3]Dongala and Thomas, "The Ceremony.", 69.
[4] Ibid., 70.
[5] Ibid., 74.
[6] Class Lecture, 9/18.
[7]Sara Dorman, "The End of the Mugabe Era in Zimbabwe." *Current History*, (Philadelphia, Current History Magazine, 2018), 163.

Although opposition parties existed, the "ruling party was very much the controlling force in the political system."[8] President Mugabe "incorporated those who had opposed the armed struggle for independence as well as white farmers, businessmen, and workers into the nation-building project."[9] This process has parallels to "The Ceremony" in that the ruling party maintained power by attempting to convince and brainwash the people that all citizens were part of a greater ideological cause and that the ruling party must be in power for its goals to come to fruition. Sara Dorman argues, "by creating a wide umbrella party that incorporated not just the diverse factions but also many of their erstwhile opponents, Mugabe made it nearly impossible for anyone to "exit" the system and stand outside this hegemonic process." This strategy highlights the importance of the perception the ruling party has in regards to the people. In "The Ceremony," it is evident that the worker adores the Party and believes his nation to be benefitting from its rule. This adoration is a result of the Party using group identity to make personal ramifications irrelevant, just as Mugabe justified his power under the guise of unified patriotism after years of colonial oppression.

In addition to Zimbabwe, Sékou Touré in Guinea emphasized the importance of the party in order to promote and justify his dictatorial status within the country. In his speech, "The Role of the Party," Touré claims, "no responsible political man whatever the authority he represents… could substitute himself for the Party. If he emanates from it, if he is the speaker, he can but act as a reflecting instrument, not of his own personality, but of the Party, which alone can express the will, the aspirations, the needs and the hopes of our people."[10] This excerpt precisely mirrors

[8] Dorman, "The End of the Mugabe Era in Zimbabwe.", 165.
[9] Ibid., 165.
[10] Rupert Emerson and Martin Kilson, "The Role of the Party." *The Political Awakening of Africa*, (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1965), 132.

the self-distancing and party preeminence displayed in “the Ceremony.” Although the President of the Republic is revered in the story, it is out of his status as the leader of the party and revolution that he enjoys such reverence, not out of his personal qualities or abilities. Similarly, in his speech, Touré essentially justifies that anything he does is not a result of his decisions or beliefs, but those of the party. This allows him to rule the people without any personal consequence because they believe that he is not personally responsible for the outcomes.

Touré’s public distancing from his dictatorship also devalues the self-identity of the people. Since he states that responsible men should only express the will of the party, the brainwashed citizens believe that they should merely emanate from the party as well, not knowing that Touré is actually controlling the party’s beliefs and actions. The devious crafting of the perception of the party cements Touré’s power; by claiming that he is merely emanating from the party, he effectively establishes a perceived group identity and intense loyalty to ideology. Further deceiving the people into party loyalty, Touré’s party is named the Democratic Party of Guinea, presumably making the people feel as if their collective interests are represented, although the party never holds legitimate elections. By commanding that “the individual… must withdraw himself for the benefit of the political, human social personality of our people”, Touré is able to persuade his citizens to ignore their personal identities or considerations of well-being due to the preeminence of the benefit of the collective people.[11] However, since individual citizens cannot evaluate the degree to which the people are benefitting in a dictatorial state, Touré is able to act as he wishes for the benefit of himself and fellow autocrats as long as the perception of his working for the people is maintained.

[11] Emerson and Kilson, “The Role of the Party.”, 132.

This concept is demonstrated from the citizen's perspective in "the Ceremony." When explaining why he makes sure to pose for a photograph with the President, the protagonist says, "I didn't do it for myself, but rather in the interest of the Revolution, so that people could clearly see that our Comrade Secretary General… did not hesitate to mingle, converse, and live with the masses."[12] In fact, the protagonist is so brainwashed by party ideology that he not only believes the party leader to be doing a good service to him, but also attempts to convince other members of the proletariat to believe the same. Thus, it is evident, as in the case of Guinea, that in the aftermath of decolonization, political leaders took advantage of the people's eagerness to build the state. They consequently used their initial popularity to promote deep-rooted party ideology to prevent political opposition by eroding self-identity and explaining that only loyalty to the party would benefit their newly founded state. Through this process, political leaders managed to rule unchecked and take advantage of their positions and their people, causing widespread political corruption on the continent.

Deeply intertwined into the story's deep progression of ideological obsession is the casual acceptance of political corruption, clearly a result of the aforementioned blind loyalty. These instances of corruption emphasize the obsessive loyalty since corruption is not hidden from the protagonist's view. When recognizing corruption, he accepts or excuses its existence, even when it seems to harm the majority of the people, clearly a sign that his deep loyalty to the Party and its ideology has infiltrated his personal perception. The protagonist mentions the "convertible two-door Triumph… like the one the Comrade Minister for Propaganda and Ideology drove."[13] However, instead of allowing this gross inequality to bother him, he strives for that status and

[12] Dongala and Thomas, "The Ceremony.", 75.
[13] Ibid., 71.

glorifies the ones who obtain it. Further, he mentions that all "members of our glorious Party's Central Committee, had luxury air-conditioned cars… (and) celebrated with champagne."[14] Again he responds, "of course I wanted to be a part of it too."[15] The protagonist even goes so far as to create distinctions between two people that have the aforementioned luxuries, with the determining factor for justness being party membership. In turn, partisan and ideological loyalty infuses him so much that he begins justifying gross inequality that results from corruption on the basis of membership in the Party that stripped him of self-identity and practical perception in the first place. In fact, the protagonist fuels the corruption even in attempts to serve the Party. He mentions he "had to slip him a thousand-franc note, not to grease his palm, but quite simply to thank him for having taken up his time" when referring to the means in which he secured the duty to change the microphone height at the ceremony. In the justification itself, he decries the idea of bribery, displaying the utter corruption of his perception at the hands of partisan propaganda.

The analysis of corruption from the individual citizen's perspective in the story helps explain the continued prevalence of political corruption in postcolonial Africa, even after the fall of single-party autocracies, such as the government demonstrated in the story. According to 2017 Afrobarometer results, only "54% (of survey takers) say ordinary citizens can make a difference in fighting corruption."[16] These results demonstrate the quite common idea of accepting corruption, just as the protagonist in the story does. This is a dangerous precedent not only because it allows governments to take advantage of citizens, but also because corruption is occurring in democratic states where ordinary citizens have control over who is in power. The

[14] Dongala and Thomas, "The Ceremony.", 73.
[15] Ibid., 73.
[16] *Afrobarometer Round 6*. Report. (Afrobarometer, 2017), 14.

casual acceptance of continual corruption in democratic states poses a real threat to active citizenship and the rights of those people who are not in power. In these cases, deep partisan obsession as a result of a totalitarian state is not corrupting the opinions of the people; the citizenry simply feels powerless to change their own government. “55% of Africans say corruption has increased over the previous year,” and thus if citizens continue to accept corrupt governments, democracy may go backward as unaccountable leaders seize more power, ending up with a state similar to that in “The Ceremony.”[17] At that point, powerlessness will translate to blind loyalty, paving the grounds for the return of aristocratic rule in Africa, with dominant parties again infiltrating the minds of its citizens, stripping each one of their self-identity.

While demonstrating the interplay of loyalty to party ideology and the acceptance of corruption in an extreme and almost comical fashion, “The Ceremony” provides an exploration of the themes’ relationship from the perspective of a single citizen. Combining this narrative focus with the overall concepts demonstrated in contemporary African politics allows for a greater understanding of how dominating parties and their ideologies are able to coerce support, even without the use of outward oppression. The psychological oppression alone can help justify the continued victories of dominant political parties even in countries with free and fair multiparty elections. The dominant parties’ abilities to ingrain their ideologies into the fabric of society provides them with the utmost power to continue their rule. Widespread corruption becomes viewed as irrelevant and is accepted because the ruling party has already defeated the opposition from within their own minds.

[17] *Afrobarometer Round 6*. Report. (Afrobarometer, 2017), 14.

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