

Destructive Ethnic Consciousness and the Search for National Unity in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Iska*

by

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Abstract

This paper scrutinizes Cyprian Ekwensi's delineation of ethnic consciousness and the quest for national unity in *Iska*. The paper explores how destructive ethnic conscious politicians use politics and even their political thugs to instill more destructive ethnic consciousness in people. It deploys sociological theory of literature, especially Priscilla Clark's theory of place or function of society in literature, and Terry Eagleton's theory of the writer and commitment to analyze the text. Apart from demonstrating that destructive consciousness creates hatred and divisions in the society, the paper also demonstrates that socio-political change is possible. The paper, however, recommends among others, that education should be made a (top) priority for people in Nigeria. In all, the paper concludes that politics and politicians are responsible for destructive ethnic consciousness in Nigeria.

Keywords: Ethnic consciousness, Nigeria, society, politics, politicians

Introduction

Cyprian Ekwensi is one of the early Nigerian creative writers who has been brought to limelight in Africa and beyond through his writings. His novels are eight in number, namely, *People of the City* (1954), *Jagua Nana* (1961), *Burning Grass* (1962), *Beautiful Feathers* (1963), *Iska* (1966), *Survive the Peace* (1976), *Divided we Stand* (1980) and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* (1986). Some of these novels have been translated into other languages. For instance, *Burning Grass* and *Jagua Nana* have been "translated into French language under the titles: *La Brousse Ardente* and *Jagua Nana* respectively" (Dogondaji 57).

Almost all Ekwensi's novels deal with life in the cities; and it is because of this, some critics of African literature have described him as an urban novelist. Like every other novel by Ekwensi, *Iska* has not attracted much criticism. Critics who have looked at *Iska* seem not to have paid full attention to it. While E.N. Emenyonu and B.E.C. Oguzie state (in passing) that *Iska* is one of the novels of the city (42), Umar Muhammad Dogondaji comments that "*Iska* reflects on the life of Hausa people of Northern Nigeria in Kano and Kaduna towns respectively" (58).

In his essay captioned "The African Politician's Changing Image", Bernth Lindfors examines the picture of African politicians in literary works produced by African writers in the 1950's and 1960's. Among the works examined by Lindfors is Ekwensi's *Iska* (1966). Lindfors' argument is that "the image of the fictional African politician in African literature changes drastically once independence is achieved" (103). He points out that Ekwensi's *Iska* "contains a brief sketch" of a politician who "thrives on lies and is willing to throw the country into chaos to make his own position secure" (114). Even though this comment is significant in this study, Lindfors' line of thought is different. Whereas the attention of Lindfors' essay is how African Politician in literary works by Africans shifts from nationalistic stance to individualistic position as soon as independence is achieved, the focus of this article is how politics and politicians create destructive ethnic consciousness in Nigerian people in Ekwensi's *Iska*.

To make out Ekwensi's expression of destructive ethnic consciousness and the quest for national unity in *Iska*, the researcher will adopt sociological criticism. Abiola Irele has argued that "sociological approach [...] presents itself as the most apt to render a full account of modern African literature" (37). Ruth Finnegan also affirms that "it is obvious that any analysis of African literature must take account of the social and historical context" (48). Both Irele and Finnegan are not alone in this stance. There are many other scholars and critics who believe that literature is a sociological phenomenon and should be approached as such. One of these scholars and critics is David Daiches. Daiches, in *Literature and Society*, asserts that:

Literature is a practical activity in any adequate sense of the phrase. Far from being a concern only of the specialist and the academician, it has been, in all healthy societies, a real part of the life of the people... To study the relations of literature and society is to see how one of the most important products of the human mind has been moulded by social conditions and has itself helped to mould those conditions; how men have interpreted the life of their age; how they have criticized it and commented on it and how at times they have been at its mercy; how the state of society can sometimes compel the literary artist to be false to his mission and sometimes it can give to his work a richness and universality and cogency that springs from contact with the most elemental facts of life – and death (12 – 13).

Furthermore, Daiches observes that the study of literature and society can enable us to determine the real function of literature as well as perceive literature as one of many human activities. Of course, the implication of Daiches' assertion is that the writer uses his writing to reflect social realities, whether good or bad, so as to help promote understanding and preserve society's values and norms, or change them. On the critic's part, he cannot interpret literature outside the life of the writer's age. This is the reason why one of the early proponents of literature and society, Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), sees literature as "documents for the analysis of an age and a people" (Adams 608).

Supportive of this postulation by Taine is Richard D. Altick who contends in *The Art of Literary Research* that since the writer of a work of art comes from a given society and writing at a particular given period of time, his/her work – a product of his/her mind - is made possible by social influences. "To understand his book we must also understand the manifold socially-derived attitudes – the myths, assumptions, the prejudices – which the writer brought to it" (5). Also, Wilbur Scott is another upholder of sociological approach to the study of literature. He posits that "art is not created in a vacuum, it is the work not simply of a person but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate part" (123). Given this fact, the critic is "interested in understanding the social milieu and the extent to which and manner in which the artist responds to it" (123).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the sociological approach to the study of literature, among other things, studies the representation of a given society in a work of literature. And since the literary sociologist literature presents social reality and reflects social life, a literary work is inevitably conditioned and influenced by social and historical forces. Although Scott has argued that the disadvantage of the sociological approach may lie in the critics' over dependence on history and sociology, he however maintains that:

It is clear that as long as literature maintains its bond with society – and cannot help but be forever – the sociological approach with or without the persuasion of a particular theory, will continue to be a vigorous force in criticism (126).

While Priscilla P. Clark agrees with other literary sociologists, she adds that literature can be examined from any of the following theoretical constructs: (1) the place and the roles of literature in society, (2) the effect of literature on society, (3) the place or function of society in literature, and (4) the influence of society on literature. Clark's theory of place or function of society in literature, which is good for this discussion, "describes the social space of a literary work, a genre, a period, a writer" (7). Besides, for us to understand Ekwensi's work, we will also consider Terry Eagleton's theory of the writer and commitment. Eagleton contends that the writer should serve as a social enlightener; and the work of art should become an instrument of social development (43).

Going by Clark and Eagleton, it is contended that literature can be used to discuss the big social challenges, and at same time, be used to bring development in the society. This article as mentioned above, examines destructive ethnic consciousness and the quest for national unity in *Iska* to argue that politics and politicians are responsible for ethnic consciousness in Nigeria.

Ethnic Consciousness in *Iska*

Iska, a novel by Cyprian Ekwensi, has three settings, one in Kaduna, the other two in Ogbu and Lagos, respectively. These settings (in the above order) are representations of the three major ethnic groups – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – in Nigeria. The novel is a story of a young beautiful Ibo girl, Filia Enu, whose parents, Uzodike Enu and Iloma Enu, lived in Jos Plateau, Nigeria for over thirty years, yet, they were regarded as strangers. Unfortunately too, Filia discontinues her schooling at St. Monica's Convent in Kaduna as a result of her father's sudden death. Like her father, she is treated as a stranger in Kaduna and Lagos respectively.

In the novel, Nigeria is portrayed as a multi-ethnic nation without nationalism. Ibo, Hausa, Yoruba, Edo and Efik are the names of ethnic groups highlighted in the text. However, Edo and Efik are mentioned in passing –suggesting that they are minority ethnic groups. Characters whose words and actions reflect the real people of Igbo ethnic group, Hausa ethnic group and Yoruba ethnic group are portrayed in the novel. Nafotim, Filia Enu and her parents represent the Igbo ethnic group, Dan Kaybi, Nida and Musa Kaybi represents the Hausa ethnic group and Yusuf Alabi represents the Yoruba ethnic group. Among these ethnic groups' representatives, Nafotim, Musa and Yusuf are portrayed as divisive politicians. In other words, they are agents of xenophobia. Theirs is to create destructive ethnic consciousness in people, and dividing a people through their political activities.

Ekwensi lays blames on politics and politicians as the cause of destructive ethnic consciousness in the country in *Iska*. This is captured in the following excerpt:

She was Ibo, he was Hausa. Between Ibo and Hausa at that particular time the gulf was wide. Normally the Ibo man worked like a steam engine, multiplied like the guinea-pig and effervesced with honesty. The Hausa man was tolerant, philosophical, accommodating, believing that whatever would be would be. Both had lived peacefully together for a hundred years. Then came politics – the vulture's foot that spoils the stew (14).

The implication of this is that before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, Igbo and Hausa ethnic groups, though different, had respect for each other and never had any quarrels. The Igbo man displayed sincerity while the Hausa man exhibited liberality. But as soon as colonialism came, and even after independence was achieved, politics created destructive ethnic consciousness. This destructive ethnic consciousness gave room to hatred and divisions in the society.

It created fear of whether an Igbo person and an Hausa person could marry as shown in the case of the two major characters - Filia and Dan - in the novel. The level of destructive ethnic consciousness is so high that Filia, the novel's central character, who could not find life easy after her father's death and her husband's (Dan's) death, asks: "How can my progress depend on where I come from? Wherever one goes it is there" (200).

In the novel politicians are portrayed as individuals who present not their party interests first, but their ethnic/personal interests. For instance, an American investor who comes to establish an industry worth five million pounds in Ogabu (a community representing Igbo ethnic group) is not allowed to do so despite the fact that "the survey team's report" has indicated that "Ogabu is the right place to site the industry because of natural resources" (197). Because of the ethnic contention over where to site a project in Nigeria and what politicians stand to gain individually from, the proposed national project, if sited at where they come from or where suits them, politicians like Nafotim, Yusuf and Musa Kaybi caused them to break away from the G.N.P. and form the Reformed People's Party – R.P.P. As soon as they form R.P.P., they manage to convince the American investor to do his investment, with their own political support. To show how reckless and self-centered these politicians are, Yusuf defects from R.P.P. to his former G.N.P. for his selfish interest. He says: "I have to go where the wind blows...The G.N.P. had their crisis, we broke away. We formed the Reformed People's Party. When I looked, I saw no hope. So I returned to the former party. Is that bad? The leader accepted me back" (206).

The deduction of this is that Nigerian politicians cannot be trusted. Ekwensi's politicians resound the selfish and wicked politicians – Marcus Ibe and Rufus Okeke in Chinua Achebe's "The Voter", Chief, the honourable M.A. Nanga, MP and minister of culture in Achebe's *A Man of the People*, Nderi wa Riera in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, Otigba in Chukwuma Ibezute's *The Wisdom of the Chameleon*, to name only a few, who are unpatriotic to their fictional society. Even though *Iska* was published in the 1960s, its subject still reflects certain elements of socio-political reality in the present day Nigeria.

In the world of the novel, politicians are not after the yearnings of the masses, but after their own personal gains. For instance, Nafotim who is "a councilor and a wealthy man" (65) plays politics of self-regard. He joins N.G.P. not because he wants to represent his people, but because of what he would gain. It is demonstrated that any time the leader of the party is coming to Ogabu, Nafotim will "go from house to house organizing and mobilizing. In the evening" there will "be speeches and presentations". He does these things "so as to swing contracts to his favour" (64).

In the novel, ethnic consciousness is made manifest through the activities of political thugs. A male character, Rayimi, represents thugs used by politicians to ensure that politicians from a particular ethnic group win elections. Of course his job is "to see that no harm" comes "to Nafotim" and whenever there is a gathering his duty is "to shout NAF!" He also organizes "groups of people to wreak havoc and escape" (107). Rayimi's role in politics reverberates Emmanuel Obiechina's assertion that Ekwensi's politicians' "campaign methods do not ensure respect for politics or for politicians.

Their agents seek votes by bribery, intimidation, and violence. The spirit of democracy is shown to be annulled by the general intolerance of political opponents, mob action, the recruitment of private bodyguards, promotion of illegal violence through what has been called thuggery” (99). It is indicated in *Iska* that political thugs who are Hausa boys stab Dan Kaybi to death, not just for marrying a non-Hausa girl (Filia), but for intervening in a clash between them and other thugs from Ibo over stopping a barmaid from serving *burukutu* (corn beer) to the Ibo boys in the same beer parlour.

The most pathetic side of it is that the politicians whom these thugs work for do not suffer any pains. Instead they continue “to flourish, to live in big houses, to send their children abroad to be educated” (116). This apart, “when people sow evil seeds they may not be there to reap the fruits and the innocent ones suffer. So it is with hate. Who will remember now where the evil” comes “from – evil of tribe?”(69). It is indicated that as soon as Dan is murdered, all the thugs forget their fight and flee. Later, Filia, in company of Nida, visits the killer of her husband, Dan, in prison, she confronts him, thus:

Why do you young men go about, spreading hate, allowing politicians to use you? They are in their mansions...you are here in gaol. They are with their wives and children; you are sleeping in your own excrement (74).

Despite the fact that the murderer suffers in jail, he still exercises confidence that his political masters will use their influence and affluence to secure his freedom, and that of his co-thugs. But Filia assures him punishment as she says:

Sorry for you. Deceiving yourself! You have lived in hate. You’re trained to hate the innocent. What was Dan Kaybi to you? Did you know him? Did he offend you? You killed him. God will punish you! You must die in the gall-bladder of your own hate; you and all of your own kind Pssha! (75, italics mine).

The implication of these pronouncements is that those who propagate the message of hate in the name of politics will never escape judgment. Both the wicked politicians and their thugs who perpetrate evil against the innocent people of Nigeria in particular and Africa in general will not only suffer in prison, but also suffer God’s punishment or wrath. In addition, the use of disjointed syntax in the form of short phrases (as italicized in the above excerpt) to address a man or men ‘trained to hate the innocent’ is not only a way of representing dramatically the haphazard nature of speech in writing, but also, a way of showing emotionally the disorderly character of people who are hateful to others, because of where they come from.

There is a show of quiet order to Ibos by Hausas in Kaduna in the novel. This is illustrated in the conversation between Ibos and Hausas in a bar where Dan usually goes for a quiet drink. It is indicated that even though the conversation is jovial initially, it later turns into a fight when “the Hausas who outnumber the Ibos two to one, decide the Ibos must leave the bar”(43). As Dan tries to probe into the matter because he hates “to see injustice against anybody” (44), he is snubbed and subsequently beaten up by his fellow Hausa men. In this scene, it is the Hausas who dispense injustice against the Ibos. To show how bad this social injustice is, it is also depicted that while Filia leaves Kaduna for Ogabu, she is burdened with the bad psyche of her society: In Ogabu, she is seen as a stranger (because she did not grow up there), and in Kaduna her people are “engaged in a struggle for acceptance” (45).

In the world of the novel, some of the characters representing different ethnic groups, especially Ibo and Hausa, believe that they cannot co-exist. For instance, during the colonial regime, Ogabu people avoided migrating to northern Nigeria to live. In this instance, Uzodike Enu who is from Ogabu is considered a lost man by his people for going to live in Jos, Plateau. Even though Uzodike succeeds in Jos and provides help to some of his people who later join him in Jos, he is too conscious of his origin. Throughout his working period in the mining industry and his time of importing goods from U.K. and Spain, he is desirous of building a house in Ogabu, holding a chieftaincy title to give a voice in the affairs of Ogabu and owning a farm, people working for him. He does “not tend to die in Northern Nigeria” where he is a “stranger, and unaccepted” (55) because of politics. For him, “the people of the Plateau did not like strangers and when night came you never knew if you could see the next dawn” (54). This show of hatred for other ethnic groups does not only exist in Hausaland but also exists in Yorubaland and Iboland, respectively. In Ogabu, for example, the police are prevented from settling a land dispute of two families based on the fact that Ogabuland do not allow any interference from outside. It is said that “the two families joined together and shot down two policemen”, who perhaps were of Hausa origin. Immediately they kill the two police officers they reconcile (50), pointing out that their case is an internal family affair. What is derived from this is that the people of Ogabu are conscious of the fact that they belong to one ethnic group and one family, though they quarrel over land ownership. In Lagos, it is where a person comes from and who a person knows that determines whether or not a person will secure a good job. Remi does not get a job because of this, hence she resorts to prostitution.

In *Iska* some characters representing Nigerian youth are dissuaded by their parents to cherish people from other ethnic groups. Dan’s father, Musa Kaybi, who represents the northern Nigerian fathers and politicians, and Filia’s father, Uzodike Enu, who represents the eastern Nigerian fathers, misinform their children based on ethnic sentiments. For Musa, the politician, it is incredible for his son, Dan, to marry Filia who is of Ibo origin. This is captured in the following excerpt:

What madness is that? Are there no more Northern women left? What has happened to you? [...] You were born a Northern. You would not study your Koran. You would not go to mosque. You went to school. You would not wear robes and sandals, only English dress. You speak English all the time. You associate with other tribes. Now this is the result (30).

From this passage it is apparent that there is the use of local colour to show us the setting, religion, religious attire, and ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of the northern region of Nigeria. Besides this, the deduction here is that for the Musas of this world to respect and cherish other ethnic groups, they need education. Dan thinks and acts in the way he does because he is educated. That is why he considers marrying an educated girl like Filia – because he believes that education plays a very vital role in changing the lives of individuals, and of a people. Through education people will be able to hold healthy interactions with one another, and live together without being overly concerned about ethnicity.

Despite the fact that Dan does not oblige to his father's (Musa's) philosophy of life, his father continues to reprove him, thus: "So one must forsake his origin because things are changing. Whatever you do, wherever you go, you are still a Northerner. You are my son; and we come from Nupe land. Our kingdom was founded by Tsoede. We are masters of the River Niger" (31). Musa is not only against the fact that Dan, a symbol of nationalism, is advocating change and national unity, but also considers Dan's steps to be detrimental by his political aspiration. This is because the chairman of the local council has promised him "a directorship" (31).

In the novel, hatred for other ethnic groups is revealed through dialogue. Through the use of this dialogue, Ekwensi presents the real life situation of Nigerians in his work. This is evident in the dialogue among Musa, Dan and the chairman of the local council:

'Is it true, what I hear? Is it true?'

'Baba – so that's the first thing you want to ask? You are visiting me for the first time and what you ask is – is it true? Is what true? You don't care whether I die!'

'That you got married to that- that girl?'

'Whom are you referring to as that girl? My wife Filia Dan Kaybi?'

'We heard right!*Gaskiya* it is. By Allah! What has gone into young men of today?'

'Can he not see that the Southerners hate us?' (30-31).

This dialogue lays bare how some northern politicians blame the northern youth who reject their hate ideas. Obviously, the dialogue gives the text dramatic quality and realism. Ekwensi uses the technique to present typical people in typical circumstances. He uses it to make the reader have the feeling that he has personal access to the scene.

Embracing National Unity

In *Iska*, Ekwensi seems to be proffering solutions to destructive ethnic consciousness in the Nigerian society. One instance of solution is social integration. This is demonstrated in the story of one Ibo man named *Hankuri*, a chemist who opens a drug store in Zaria, Kaduna. In Zaria “Ibos are having it rough right now” and yet *Hankuri* confesses that “business is good” (39). He prospers simply because he jettisons his religion and embraces the religion of Islam. In his confession:

Northern Nigeria is a Muslim country! How many eastern Nigerians have embraced the religion of Islam? When I came here I immediately set about learning Arabic and reading the Koran. I found in it a new way of understanding the Northerner. It was good for me, and good for business. Then I went to Mecca, became a Hajj, returned, married four wives [...] I’m a Northern Nigerian. Fully integrated [...] Nobody thinks of me as an Eastern Nigerian ((40).

Hankuri here identifies the fact that religion plays a divisive role in his society. And for him, to stay safe and do business successfully in northern Nigeria is quickly convert to Muslim. This is one form of integration. Another form of integration is seen when he says “the way out is integration [...] Ibos to marry Hausas. Hausas to marry Yorubas, Yorubas to marry Efiks. Eat one another’s food, dance one another’s dance and learn one another’s ways” (4). What Ekwensi seems to be emphasizing here is that disunity between ethnic groups in Nigeria can be erased through inter-ethnic marriages and inter-culture exchanges. This proposed answer is even effected by some male and female characters in the novel. Nida, the sister of Dan who is a northerner, marries Yusuf Alabi (a southerner who is a politician). Jewel, the senior sister of Filia, marries Harding Okere from mid-western Nigeria, and she is happy with him” (76). Nafotim’s father who is from Ogbu also marries a wife from Yoruba. In addition, Nafotim marries a Yoruba woman from Abeokuta.

Another instance of solution to destructive ethnic consciousness is shunning greed and hatred; and dispensing justice. This is expressed in the following passage:

Doom...awaits you... you all... until... you repent... shun greed... live together, not as tribes full of hatred for other tribes... give employment to the qualified... not to the mediocre... let all politicians think first of country... let no one be greater than the party that made him.... Until prayers return to Africa, until black imperialism becomes black harmonious living, there shall be no peace in Africa (153).

From the foregoing, it can easily be said that every citizen of Africa generally, and Nigeria particularly, regardless of where he or she comes from, his or her religion, his or her political/apolitical affiliation, deserves respect and recognition. People's ethnic and cultural differences must be respected, hence peaceful co-existence for all remains.

As earlier stated in this essay, education is proposed as a panacea for lining up Nigerian people in the direction of love, justice, unity and progress. Characters like Filia, Dan and Nida reason and act in the manner that depict love and togetherness in the world of the novel because they are educated. Even Dan's father, Musa, testifies to this fact when he says that it is schooling that has made Dan to behave differently.

In the novel, Ekwensi also seems to be saying that the press has a role to play in the building of the nation. It is in the domain of the press to disseminate information that will either unite or disunite Nigeria. Dapo Ladele, political correspondent of the *West African Sensation*, for example, is a journalist who lives a double standard life. On the one hand, he rethinks and appears to have detached himself from being used by politicians to satisfy their selfish interests. On the other hand, he fully betrays the trust bestowed on him by the masses. He says:

I have a thousand enemies, absolutely no friends. When a politician wants to rise he uses me. When he gets to the top, he kicks me off. I'm used to it, I even expect it. But when, having reached the top, he expects me to let him alone, that's what gets me. Some of them think they can silence you with the gift of a few pounds. *I try to tell them that in my profession some of us still have conscience.* They can't understand it. To them, I work for money. So if they give me money – perhaps more than I can earn in a month, why bother to write – I mean to expose? They can't seem to see that there's some pride in practicing one's profession [...] *I just follow my instincts, keep on the right side of the law and let them be damned.* They can't have it both ways (176-177, italics mine).

From this excerpt (especially in the italicized places), one may conclude that Dapo Ladele is a good and trustworthy journalist who uses his profession to serve his country well. But the reverse is the case. Ladele lacks integrity. He shifts from his initial neutral position of using the *West African Sensation* to expose politicians to partisan position. For the sake of making money very quick he resigns from *West African Sensation* and becomes the chief editor of *The Reformer* owned by Nafotim, a member of the Reformed People's Party. By his role, Ladele is a representation of archetypal Judas who loses his soul for money. His own now is "not to show conscience" (191):

He was writing for his pay, allowing himself to be used by Nafotim as a tool for inciting person against person, group against group, tribe against tribe. Throughout the pages of *The Reformer*, Nafotim, above all, emerged as a saint. The R.P.P. was glorified as the strongest uniting force in the country (199).

The way Ladele is described here shows that he is a traitor, while his master, Nafotim, is a devil. Obviously both are nothing but hypocrites, enemies of social development.

Conclusion

Ekwensi's *Iska* illuminates the society, and depicts a picture of politics and politicians that are ruinous to a nation. We are shown political parties that have no political ideologies, and destructive ethnic conscious politicians who use their thugs to create and instill more destructive ethnic consciousness in people, who defect from one party to another in order to satisfy their personal interests, and not that of the larger society. Thus, intolerance and hatred, injustice, killing, discrimination, greed and individualism are shown as the consequences of being ethnic conscious.

This study has demonstrated that Ekwensi has not just depicted destructive ethnic consciousness and its consequences, but he has also proffered solutions to it. As a people, Nigerians should clamour for a socio-political change, as exemplified by Dan Kaybi in the novel. They should integrate with one another through inter-ethnic marriages and culture exchanges, as displayed by *Hankuri*, the chemists in the novel. Besides, education (as also revealed), if taken serious, will go a long way to ordering people's mind, correcting the wrongs and fostering love, unity and development in the country. It is further demonstrated in here that the press has a very important role to play in uniting the country. The masses must be told the truth through press publications. While justice must be dispensed to all members of the society, a people's ethnic and cultural or religious differences must be respected; hence harmonious living will then be enjoyed by all.

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