

The Representation of Conquest and Colonialism in Ahmed Yerima's *Attahiru*

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Abstract

This paper assesses the depiction of conquests and colonialism in Yerima's *Attahiru* using a new historicist lens. It attempts to examine the notion of a colonial state as well as the arguments surrounding the legalities or otherwise of such practices and through that examines the main factors that led to the conquest and domination of the Sokoto Caliphate which forms part of Northern Nigeria and present-day Niger. It utilises the play as well as historical records on the events leading to the fall of Attahiru I of Sokoto to gauge what really ensued in the encounter. There are some attempts (based on the play and historical records) in the paper to falsify some of the colonial claims that there were justifications for the conquests and annihilation of the fleeing jihadists as well as the crimes perpetrated against the people in the guise of empire building. Attahiru I's case is used in the paper as an example of the Crown's deposition and imposition method of ensuring compliance as utilised by Lord Lugard, as a symbol of Britain's brute colonial administration policy in the play. The paper concludes that, this brute force led to a backlash in Sokoto, forcing Attahiru I to pick up arms in order to defend his position as well as the legacy of the Fulani jihad. New Historicism is utilised in the paper as the frame of analysis of the play; and through references to some historical and political works, the paper attempts to establish the historicity of the play.

Keywords: Sokoto Caliphate, new historicism, colonialism, Attahiru

Introduction

The reasons for colonisation were economic, political and religious. This cuts across all former colonies. History reveals that, 'colonisation' was informed by the need to expand frontiers and garner resources at a time when the west was going through economic downturn. The economic depression in Europe for example forced nations such as Germany, France and Great Britain into venturing out, leading to quests for scarce resources and of course resultant conflicts between them. In discussing the period (from 1880s) in Africa, historians term it as period of 'scramble for Africa'. By 1914, all of what is today known as Africa, apart from Ethiopia and Liberia, were under the control of one European country or the other. This era (1880s to 1914) is known as 'age of imperialism'. King Leopold II of Belgium initiated the rush for the imperial conquest of the continent, and by 1885, after the Berlin conference, all of Africa had been neatly divided amongst European powers.

Africa was of interest to these imperial powers for many reasons, one of which was its abundance of raw materials that could be used to fire-up industries in European

countries. Products like oil, ivory, rubber, palm oil, wood, cotton, and gum that were found in Africa were of immense significance during the 'industrial revolution' from 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. In addition to the scarce resources, the African continent was also a centre of cheap labour. The race to acquire resources, manpower, and more territory (colonies) was a heated one. Africa's wealth and land were targets for exploitation, plunder and theft by colonial powers. Attempts were made by historians, anthropologists, and literary writers to justify the exploits (to some degree). Some laws were promulgated to defend the illegalities of imperialism and to further entrench the narratives of explorers, missionaries and early colonial authorities. As against the colonial narratives, Yerima's *Attahiru* attempts to offer an alternative story of what actually led to the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate. It also tries to examine some of the arguments for, and against, the colonial domination of Northern Nigeria, allowing readers to assess what really ensued in the encounter.

Theoretical framework

New Historicism is selected to serve as a mirror through which historical issues in the play can be viewed and analysed. Montrose argues that, the writing and reading of texts as well as the process by which they are circulated, categorised, analysed and taught should be accorded attention in a new historicist reading, because such texts are part of a culture. This kind (historicist) of reading considers the linkages between individual subjectivities/history and collective structures/historical works as mutually determining (Montrose). Hence, this paper attempts to recount events in *Attahiru* in relation to relevant historical works, from which it creates the 'social network' between the dramatist's accounts and that of other historical works.

Thus, new historicism is a literary theory based on the premise that a literary work should be regarded as a product of the time, place, and historical circumstances of its production, rather than an isolated work of art (Montrose). It is in view of this that this theory is utilised in this paper, because it provides the yardstick that can be used to gauge the connection between the playwright's ideology and belief in the play and the histories of the related ideas and events that provided 'materials' for its composition. The 'historicity' of the play, as a fictional work, is given attention vis-a-vis the 'textuality' of the historical works on the same events. The attempt is to understand 'fictional' works through their historical contexts and to understand intellectual history through literature. This cultural practice of reading offers the window through which *Attahiru*'s representation of events can be viewed.

Understanding the colonial state

It is pertinent to understand the working definition of 'colonialism' in order to best appreciate the notion of a colonial state. Dibia in his *Essential Government* defines colonialism as an imposition of a more developed culture over a less developed one, usually backed up by 'expansionist and economic adventurism' (176). Colonialism was the method by which the 'metropolitan capitalist class controlled and exploited the colony' (Lorenzo 92). This can be seen in the manner European 'capitalist' countries established political, economic, military, and cultural hegemony over other parts of the

world; in this case Africa, which was colonised due to lack scientific knowledge and civilization, leading to its inability to resist domination (Dibie). A colonial state can be defined as an integral part of a mother country (e.g. France or England) that serves the interest of the colonizer in a colonized territory (Lorenzo). The colonial domination of territories was resisted in some areas by both the 'peasant' class, as in the case of the Mau-mau of Kenya, as well as the 'upper-class', as can be seen in resistance of Attahiru I of Sokoto to colonial rule. In both instances, the interests of contending parties do not align.

In order to plant their foothold colonial states usually enact laws and take over the security apparatus of colonies. There is also the attempt to defend the 'status-quo' against dissention. Narrations are utilised to sell the legalities of the colonial state to the world. As part of a larger strategy also, the economic policies of the colonial state that do not align with the metropolitan state's interests are changed to allow for a seamless exploitation (Lorenzo). Colonizers also attempt to change the social, cultural, and organisational framework of colonies. Colonialism can best be viewed in terms of coercion and exploitation whereby colonies are ruled through containment of discontent and fear rather than consent and legitimate leadership (Lorenzo). In *Attahiru* Yerima recounts the containment strategies employed by Lord Lugard and his defense of the 'illegalities' in the play as well as the resistance of Attahiru I to playing second fiddle in his own Caliphate.

The colonial processes leading to the domination of Northern Nigeria (Sokoto Caliphate)

There are various historical works on the colonial process that led to the conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate – known today as Northern Nigeria. Usman states that, the Caliphate was established in the late 18th to early 19th century, which was a period of unceasing turmoil and political upheaval and transformation in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa, the Caribbean, North America, Europe, and the Middle East. The Sokoto jihad, also known as the Fulani war of 1804-1808, was a military conflict in present day Nigeria and Cameroun. It was led by Usman Dan Fodio, who assembled an army to lead a jihad against the Hausa Kingdoms of Northern Nigeria. The war ended in 1808, with the capture of Gobir and the execution of King Yunfa, resulting in the creation of the Sokoto Caliphate/Empire. Headed by Dan Fodio the Empire became one of the largest states in Africa in the 19th century. The success of the war inspired similar jihads in the continent, most especially in West Africa. The 19th century provided the fertile ground for such exploit as can be seen in the way social and political forces emerged in many continents to challenge the existing political order, eventually overthrowing and transforming many established systems (Usman).

Hamza in Yandaki narrated that the direct contact between the Sokoto Empire and Europe began in the 1820s when Hugh Clapperton visited Sokoto (1824). Clapperton was warmly received by Muhammad Bello (1781-1837), the son-cum-primary aide to Dan Fodio and the second Sultan (1817-1837), who after a long discussion on some issues of interest agreed to establish a commercial relation with

Britain to such an extent that he was willing to accept a British consul in Sokoto. Clapperton's second visit (1826), which was meant to cement this relationship, was, however, marred by suspicions; he was considered as a spy and his desire to proceed to Borno after the visit further severed the ties because of the strained relationship between Sokoto and Borno (Hamza). Clapperton eventually fell ill and died in 1827 without achieving anything in concrete terms. There was no further contact between Sokoto and the European powers for several years until the visit of Henry Barth in 1853 during the reign of Ali Ibn Muhammad Bello (1804-1859).

Like Clapperton, Barth wanted to conclude and sign a treaty which would have given British traders virtual monopoly over foreign trade in the area to the detriment of other European traders (Hamza). Despite these overtures, the Empire was careful in its relation with the western powers throughout the 19th century, and so did not grant commercial concessions to the colonialists. The Sultans jealously guarded the independence of the Empire in an attempt not to overstep the bounds set by *sharia* in relations with Europeans, regarded as Christians by the people (Adeleye). Britain launched its first assault on the Empire in January 1897 with the attack of Bida by the Royal Niger Company; the fall of Bida emboldened the Royal Company to attack Ilorin on the southern fringes (Hamza). This unprovoked aggression confirmed age-old suspicions that the British had ulterior motive, exacerbated the already tensed situation, and sealed any hope of a peaceful relation. The fears of Muhammad Bello and Al-Amin El-Kanemi (1776-1837), founder of Kanem-Borno Empire, came to pass with the proclamation of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria. The occupations of some Emirates under Lord Lugard evoked a serious reaction from Sokoto (Hamza).

Understanding this history is important in appreciating the source of the tension in Yerima's *Attahiru* between Lugard and Attahiru I, twelfth Sultan of Sokoto (1902-1903). A series of events precipitated this tension. The age-old rivalry for example between the British and French led to the British conquest of Kano in 1903 (Fika). The defeat of the Fulani rulers by the West African Frontier Force and the taking over of Kano was a watershed in the history of the fall of the Sokoto Empire. This ultimately led to the imposition of British colonial rule over what came to be known as Northern Nigeria (Fika). Colonial rule was resisted in many Emirates on the basis of the Islamic concept of international relations that opposes the governance of an Islamic state by non-Islamic authorities (Fika). Despite stiff resistance, the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) finally captured Sokoto on March 15, 1903 because the Muslim army, under Attahiru I, could not match the guns and artillery power of the British (Ameh; Risto). Attahiru I's major undoing was adherence to the precept of Islamic order and rule and his reluctance to "adapt to changing circumstances" (Risto, 217).

The dominance of the British rule is depicted in *Attahiru* through Lord Lugard, who in the play recounts the colonial process that led to the conquest and domination of the Sokoto Caliphate, as well the Northern region as a whole, through the letter he sent to Caliph Attahiru I, as read by the Waziri:

Waziri: Since the Emirs of Kontagora and Bida have been oppressing the people, engaging in slave trade, attacking traders, organizing stealing parties, I have because of these evils of theirs, taken their crowns from them and banished them... I therefore request that you select new and better Muslim leaders... and persons in the place of deposed leaders to rule these territories... may I warn that if men are not good Muslims, I shall not hesitate to remove them once again from their throne... our soldiers have already established British rule over Muslim lands all over the world. Your co-operation will be highly appreciated in these circumstances... (*Attahiru*, 27)

The above letter is an example of the various correspondences between Lugard and Attahiru's predecessor, Abdurrahman bn Abi Bakar, either to assure him of British friendship or to announce the establishment of a British administration in the area. It emphasised that, the Queen, whom Lugard represented, ruled over many Muslim nations. It also warned against the perpetration of slavery in the Caliphate, which was an important topic at that time, even though Islam's position on it differs. In view of this, Kabiru points out that within the context of the jihad, those captured (non-Muslims) qualify as slaves and that someone whose mother was a slave can also become one by virtue of birth. Principles of sharia prescribe humane treatment of slaves, who should be encouraged to integrate into the community through kinship relations (Kabir). In fact, prior to the establishment of the Caliphate, jihad leaders had criticised the selling of people as slaves, which explains why it sought to stamp out the practices. These leaders were critical of the use of all shades of labour by the pre-jihad rulers. They thus abolished some forced labour forms such as *gayyar sarki* (forced labour on royal farms) and *gargadi* (conscription) when they took over power and instead formed labour units for the purpose of undertaking projects like roads, schools, and mosques constructions (Kabir).

The Caliphate's potential for resistance was greatly hampered with the conquest of the southern Emirates (Gwandu, Ilorin, Kwantagora, Patigi and Gombe, with Gwandu as the capital) by the British (Adeleye). Lugard sustained this drive by persuading the Sultan to surrender his sovereign powers to the British (Adeleye). From about 1900 to 1902, while the occupation of the southern Emirates was ongoing, he tried to diplomatically allay the fear of the Sultan by presenting the British in a friendly light, and even ensured that his troops did not engage in serious military operations close to Sokoto. Lugard's letter above reveals his penchant to win Attahiru's heart; he overreached himself by going out of his way to paint the Queen's might in a bid to cow the Caliphate into submission (Adeleye). The promise of non-interference in the practice of Islam was also meant to assuage the fear of the people. Attahiru I refused to give in to the overtures by not replying Lugard's letter, which soiled any hope of future negotiation. Similar letters from Wallace to the Sultan and Emir of Gwandu were also not answered; the anticipated replies of proclamation never came (Adeleye). Besides these correspondences, Lugard's administration made no further attempts to contact Sokoto. Lugard resorted to brute force, such that by 1902, with the fall of Yola,

Bauchi and Zaria, the reality of the threat of conquest dawned on Attahiru I (Adeleye). In all the conquered emirates, with the exception of Ilorin, where the Emir co-operated with the British, the Emirs were declared deposed ostensibly on the grounds of oppression and slave-raiding, but in reality for opposing British rule, and new Emirs were appointed on the authority of the British, and often as against the will of the people. This highhandedness is presented in Yerima's *Attahiru* with a declaration of the substitution and appointment of Abbas by Lugard:

Lugard: ... I have approved Abbas as the new Emir of Kano. (*Attahiru*, 53)

The emergence of Abbas followed the conquest of Kano, which was about 250 miles south-east of Sokoto. Lugard's forces encountered resistance during the conquest, especially at a walled town named Bebeji, but overcame the mud-wall defenses with cannon-fire and moved on to take Kano in January 1903 (Olaniyi). The Emir of Kano, who was in Sokoto at that time, was arrested as he tried to return and later exiled to Lokoja (British capital of Northern Nigeria) where he died in 1927, for refusing to acknowledge British rule. Britain secured allegiance through depositions, exile of defiant Emirs from their domains, and imposition of submissive monarchs (Olaniyi). This military campaign, which started in 1900, came to a near-close with the fall of Kano in 1903, and ultimately with the defeat of Sokoto in that same year. *Attahiru* revisits this history (fall of Sokoto) by examining the events and gauging the views of the coloniser and colonised during the encounter.

Representation of conquest in *Attahiru*

Attahiru I emerged as the 12th Sultan of Sokoto after the death of Abdurrahman dan Abi Bakar in 1902, while the British forces had already taken over parts of the Caliphate, which was made, particularly, possible because Lugard exploited existing rivalries between the Emirs (Falola). This affected the unity of the army, thereby crippling the defence of the Caliphate. This divide-and-rule tactic not only pitched the Emirs against each other but also allowed the British troops to gain unhindered access into the very heart of Sokoto during the last year (1902) of Abdurrahman's reign (Falola). Not long after Attahiru I took over in October 1902, the British and its allied forces began to march to the city of Sokoto, with clear directives to take it over. Despite the disarray of the armies, and the apparent superior firepower of Britain, Attahiru I rallied the remnant of his troops to defend the city against the advancing troops. He however lost the battle and fled, together with his followers, in order to avoid capture and to re-strategise.

The Caliphate was finally annexed after three years of sustained military campaign and reorganised to form the Northern Nigeria Protectorate; despite the new order (Britain), Lugard retained the symbolic title of Sultan and appointed Attahiru II as the new leader (Paden). Lugard is depicted in *Attahiru* as a wheel of colonialism and domination, a colonial administrator who uses brute force to conquer and annex the

whole of Northern Nigeria. Despite his victory over Attahiru I in the drama Lugard nurses the fear of reprisals, especially since Attahiru and his followers had fled:

Lugard: I warned against this, now he has turned it into a bloody holy war. Holy wars never end. The Muslims are fanatics when it comes to jihads. We must stop this nonsense now. (*Attahiru*, 52)

As an accomplished General who had participated in the conquests of other Muslim lands, Lugard understands how conscious Muslims are when it comes to jihad. Watt views jihad as any effort towards the moral betterment of the *umma* (Muslims), or efforts to make personal/social life to conform to God's guidance, normally through war. It was this lofty ideal that led to the Fulani war and eventual establishment of the Caliphate which was built on the premise of reform and protection of the *umma* against unjust rule. The desire to reform the practice of Islam oiled the wheels of the jihad. It has been argued that, Dan Fodio was influenced by the revolutionary ideals of his teacher, Jibril bin Umar, who campaigned against heretical and pagan practices in Hausaland and even initially attempted to launch a similar jihad in parts of present-day Niger Republic but was expelled from the area (Olaniyi). Aware that the war had not been won with the defeat of the city of Sokoto, therefore, Lugard directed his men to pursue Attahiru and his supporters who were already gathering more supporters, in their thousands, in the rural regions of the Caliphate. He could not afford to make mistakes because the French also had its eyes on the area.

Historical records and the play, *Attahiru*, reveal that Lugard was actually in a hurry to march on Sokoto in order to stall attempts by the French to usurp the area. The same fear moved him into chasing the so-called rebels – Attahiru and his men – and attacking them at mbormi battle ground in Burmi in 1903, near present-day Gombe, where Attahiru I was killed in the encounter. The fear is apparent in Lugard's voice in the drama:

Lugard: then flush out the rebels and have some peace before the French still seeking a piece of the pie here comes to their rescue... (*Attahiru*, 52)

Although the Colonial Office in London was opposed to such action, Lugard pressed on, aware that France in particular had its plans on the region. Lugard also justified his actions on the basis of stopping slavery and avoiding a repeat of the shame that Britain had to bear at the infamous Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, where the British and colonial forces lost to the Zulus, thus leaving the British forces with a casualty of about 1,300 and preventing the first British invasion of Zululand (Bello). A reference to this war is made in the play by Lugard in a frantic effort to avert possible defeat:

Lugard: I have also instructed Captain Wallace Wright who commands the Mounted Infantry Brigade in Zaria to join our men in pursuing the

Caliph. London won't want another Zulu defeat in their hand. (*Attahiru*, 53)

Lugard considered the conquest of Sokoto and the annihilation of the rebellion led by Attahiru I as a top priority. Another Zulu defeat must be avoided at all cost. On the part of Attahiru I also, the preservation of the Caliphate was topmost (Pachai). The play reveals that, Attahiru's (avoidable) mistake was facing the British head-on in the open. It was a suicidal undertaking, because no amount of charms, prayer and courage could overturn the catastrophe waiting to happen (Pachai). Unlike Attahiru, Lugard did not throw caution to the wind. As an experienced imperialist who served in the Imperial British East Africa Company in 1890, the Royal Niger Company from 1894-95, the British West Charterland Company in 1896, and then in West African Frontier Force, he understood the odds at stake.

As representative of British/colonial interest, Lugard tried his utmost to quell any form of dissent and rebellion and the suppression of Attahiru's power was one step in that direction. This kind of suppression was recorded in Kenya with the British's all-out war on the Mau-mau and the eventual arrest and execution of Dedan Kimathi in 1957. Unlike the case of Kimathi, who was a peasant and fighting for the right of the downtrodden, Attahiru was by implication resisting colonisation in a bid to first retain his status/powers as Sultan before anything else. Both Attahiru and Lugard, therefore, fought to uphold the status-quo in their own right. It was a means to an end. Britain was known for both overt (often violent) and covert containment styles throughout its imperialist history; the atrocities of apartheid represent some of its inhumane outings. In all these settings the proponents of colonisation attempted to defend the right to colonise and the powers that be whipped dissenters into line.

Historical and literary works are replete with these events. In Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's *The Island* and in Ngugi wa Thiongo and Micere Githae Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, for example, the dramatists depict how colonial masters legalised colonialism. The dramas in the same vein document the resistance put up by the protagonists. In *The Island*, John and Winston uphold their individual rights to resist and defend the land against those who seek to rape it (represented by Hodoshe), and in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Kimathi fought tooth and nail, even at the point of death, to assert his rights to the land and its resources. *Attahiru* is an example of these resistance plays because Attahiru I also expresses such views. John, Winston, Kimathi and Attahiru are obliged in the plays to resist domination in the same way that Hodoshe, Henderson, and Lugard attempt to defend the status-quo. Lugard's expression of right of conquest and annexation cannot be mistaken in *Attahiru* and in the colonial history of the same events.

Britain worked on its interests over and above the interests of its former colonies. The essence as highlighted earlier was to get materials that will fuel its industries, manpower that will drive its machines and the expansion of the empire; nothing was wrong in this venture. In Northern Nigeria, the indirect rule system allowed Britain to rule through its proxies, the traditional rulers, a system that finally led to clash of interest and resistance. Legalities of colonisation such as civilization and

reform were forced down the throats of the traditional leaders, who were to sell the ideas in order to avoid protest or breakdown of law and order. Imposed traditional rulers were more compliant in that regard. The likes of Attahiru I, Abubakar in Katsina, Alu Maisango in Kano, Aliyu dan Sidi in Zaria, Muhammadu Aliu in Gwandu, Abubakar in Gumel, Nagwamutse in Kwantagora and Masaba in Bida were deposed for refusing to cooperate. Rulers like Attahiru I paid the ultimate price, like jihadists, because they died fighting for a cause they believed in.

Conclusion

Using a new historicist lens, the paper discussed the colonial process leading to the domination of the Sokoto Caliphate, through an examination of the drama as well as historical records on the same events. It assessed how the play *Attahiru* represent and undermine some submissions by historians on the justification of illegalities of imperialism. The analysis revealed that, as against the colonial narratives, *Attahiru* falsifies the notion that the Sultanate promoted slavery. Historical records reveal that as against such claim, the Caliphate even abolished age-old slave practices like *gayyar sarki* (forced labour on royal farms). In addition, this paper revealed that, Lugard used brute force to depose many traditional rulers, such as Attahiru I, and replaced them with more compliant rulers on the excuse of oppression and practice of slavery. The play showed that, these leaders were, in fact, deposed for opposing British rule. The play, in particular, revisits the fall of Attahiru I, and through that gauged the views of the coloniser and the colonised during the encounter.

Lord Lugard is depicted in the drama *Attahiru* as a wheel of colonialism and a brute colonial administrator, who ensured the Crown's annexation of the Sokoto Caliphate at all cost. Historical records and the drama reveal that, despite Lugard's apparent stealth and courage during the conquest, he nursed the fear of losing the Caliphate to the French. He was also wary of reprisals by the jihadists they dislodged from Sokoto and other Emirates, who were being rallied by Attahiru I. The fears pushed him to the edge, culminating in more brutal assaults and massacre of rebels and the fleeing jihadists. His target was to quell all shades of dissent and rebellion through any means necessary. The paper equally revealed that, this rebellion was necessary considering Attahiru's right to protect, first, his privileged status as a Sultan, and, second, the Caliphate against aggressors such as Lugard, who represented a larger capitalist and colonial interests that was of no benefit to his people. It concluded that, unlike heroes such as Dedan Kimathi, who as a peasant fighter fought, mainly, for the underdog, Attahiru, as a noble man, puts his position and the legacy of the Dan Fodio jihad first before any other thing.

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