



CIEA7 #38:

DILEMMAS OF AFRICAN MODERNITY AND THEIR THEORETICAL  
CHALLENGES.

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### **Re-imaging the Modernity of Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea (Africa past and Africa present)**

*This paper engages the concept of the imposed Modernity of Europe upon the African republics of Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea. Evidence of the encroachment of a 'false' Modernity upon Africa's Sierra Leone and Equatorial Guinea are chronicled in the works of Donato Ndongo (Shadows of Your Black Memory) and Syl Cheney Coker (The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar).*

Middle Passage, Postcolonialism, Modernity.

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Modernity aim[s] towards "a progressive force promising to liberate humankind from ignorance and irrationality  
(Rosenau: 5)

Modernity is a relative term by inception. The 'coinage' of the term 'Modern-ity' implies the advent or harkening of modernization. If one considers the historical research conducted by Dr. Henri Clarke, J.A. Rogers, Martin Bernal, and Richard Poe, you know that there were several, epic periods of African Modernity which preceded and prompted the current European 'Modern'<sup>1</sup>. Africa's mineral and intellectual wealth has always been at the epicenter of global change for good and bad. Only recently have Europeans become cognizant of the impact of social and economic change in terms of power and dominance in world affairs<sup>2</sup>. Africa's great empires realized and capitalized upon the notions of such long ago. The contemporary, European concepts of Modernity and Postcolonialism were coined, fabricated, and disseminated for academic consumption in order to establish a New World Order, exclusive to those of British and Aryan heritage<sup>3</sup>. The University of Gottingen, in Germany, was established by George II, Elector of Hanover and the King of England. And...

It is not surprising, therefore, that the first 'academic' work on human racial classification-which naturally puts Whites, or to use the term, 'Caucasian', at the head of the hierarchy - was written in the 1770's by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a professor at Gottingen.

(Bernal: 28)

Postcolonialism is the most current mode of perpetuating the myth of Aryan dominance. It is a product of the British academia. The fabricated concept is rooted in the archaic term Commonwealth Literatures<sup>4</sup>. The concept of 'Commonwealth' entities and literatures was 'modernized' and replaced with the term 'Postcolonial' to de-stigmatize the inherently, obvious racial overtones associated with the former term. John McLeod's treatise

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. John Henri Clarke was a well noted Diasporic scholar of African World history. He was self-taught, but served as a full professor at Hunter College of the City University system of New York. J. A. Rogers was a self-taught scholar and historian of African World history. One of his works *Superman to Man* (1917) chronicled the range of the impact of the African experience upon the modern world. Martin Bernal is the author of the famed *Black Athena* series (1987) which chronicles the influence of Africa upon the ancient Greeks. Richard Poe's *Black Spark, White Fire: Did African Explorers Civilize Ancient Europe* (1997) is a vital resource into the role of African cultural assimilation into European society.

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Egyptians and residents of the Mali and Timbuktu realized the vast resources of gold and intellectualism as wealth. The Egyptians had (perhaps) the greatest library of all, the library of ancient Alexandria which stored some of the original writings of Plato. The University of Timbuktu had the first 'free' or 'open' center of undergraduate and graduate learning for the general and international public. The libraries of Timbuktu and Mali also stored some of the original manuscripts of the Socratic writings after the fall of the Roman Empire.

<sup>3</sup> Postcolonialism, as a practice, raises British literature and/or 'White' literatures (universal) to the topic of the literary hierarchy and reduces indigenous literatures to secondary status.

<sup>4</sup> Postcolonialism is a nouveau term. The term characterizes literatures of former colonies that were previously known to be Commonwealth literatures.

*Beginning Postcolonialism* (2000) is widely regarded as a primer in the British ‘literary apartheid system’ which places British literature and linguistics first and ‘Colored’ literatures second. In support of this contrived theory, the text *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) attempts to authenticate literary racism through feigned indigenous reinforcement. In accordance with the Eurocentric perceptions presented, literary Modernity, for Africa, did not commence until the post period of colonial enlightenment.

Syl Cheney-Coker, the author of *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), is a Sierra Leonean novelist and poet. His novel serves as a means to breach colonial historical, canonical, and literary stereotypes. Firstly, Cheney-Coker is able to creatively bridge the gap between the African and the African-American novel. Previously, the genres of African and African-American novel were deemed separate by scholars. *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* deems theories of separation of Black Atlantic literatures genres passé. The brilliance of this novel is that Black Atlantic history, inclusive of African and the Middle Passage history, become ‘one’ historical text in his work. A true union of literary and Modernity canons of the African and the African-American literatures is facilitated in the format of this discourse.

Specifically, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990) is a novel which harkens the realization that a new era of joint Modernity for Africans and African-Americans is at hand. Cheney-Coker, as an author, creates an illusive, nomadic protagonist named the Nubian, Sulaiman of Khartoum, who is a time travel through Africa’s past and most current period of Modernity in the Americas. The Nubian possesses the consciousness of Africa and critiques the events which impact upon Africans in Africa and in America. Cheney-Coker’s incorporates the literary elements of representation and symbolism into his text well. The Nubian is from Khartoum, the Capital of Sudan and the Khartoum State. Khartoum is the city where the two ‘Niles’ converge. The White Nile and the Blue Nile split from this locale. The ‘singular’ domain of Africa, within Cheney-Coker’s novel, splits as a result of the Middle Passage. Africans in the Americas and Africa share a communal link to the Motherland. The Nubian representative and link to the glorious past of Africa and he acts as a gateway for African wisdom to ascend to the present. He foresaw “kings and emperors and the little men who ride on fine horses and plunder and take slaves and hostages” (Cheney-Coker: 20). This was an indirect reference to the Europeans and the Portuguese, in particular. The Portuguese, during their period of Modernity, entered Sierra Leone in the 14<sup>th</sup> century plundering and enslaving. As a result, one begins to find validity in the concept of Modernity as a ‘relative’ term. Within Pauline Rosenau’s definition of Modernity, one may ask: “Did the plundering and enslaving of the Africans factor as progressive movements to liberate man from ignorance and irrationality?” African had other notions of these acts. The main

character, of Choker-Cheney's novel, the Nubian, states that: 'Men...have moved centuries from the age of the stone, but they are still centuries away from the age of the "the great book of age" where everything is written and preserved.' (Coker-Cheney:20)

The word 'man,' within the context of the Nubian's assessment, included both the colonial Master and the African. The Nubian observes and chronicles the emergence of the Black man from Africa to America. As a man, the Nubian fathers a child (by a mere, mortal woman) and discovers that the child becomes a better clairvoyant than he. The concept of clairvoyance is more abstract in this text. It does not refer merely to the psychic. The term is also refers to the logical ability to foreshadow Modernity based upon social and historical climates. For the Nubian:

Everything had been mirrored: first, the daughter with the keys of a scorpion, who would torment a dozen slave masters and make them impotent for ever...he had known when the people from America would come....Nothing had escaped the glare of the looking-glass eyes...

(Coker-Cheney: 396)

Everything was predicted. The daughter of the Nubian would defy those who attempted to subjugate her. The coming of the new peoples from America to Africa was foretold too. Indeed, Coker-Cheney's work refers here to the repatriation of former slaves coming from America to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Africa's Modernity, due to the slave trade, was but a phase or a cycle in an on-going 'Modernal' loss<sup>5</sup>.

Donato Ndongo's work *Shadows of Your Black Memory* (2007) is a work written in retrospect to a hallowed phase of Modernity in the history of Equatorial Guinea. The Portuguese first 'discovered' Equatorial Guinea in 1474. The country was later 'ceded' to Spain in 1778. Spanish culture and Spanish religion were thrust upon the peoples of Equatorial Guinea. Similar to the British canon of thought and ethos, Spain worked in consort with the edict of the Catholic Church to subvert and repress any and all indigenous canons and thoughts. With the intrusion of Catholicism and insulation of Spaniard culture, indigenous religions and Equatorial Guinean culture were nearly eradicated for future generations<sup>6</sup>. The Spaniards invoked a false Modernity upon the people. And Donato Ndongo became a casualty of the cultural war waged against his people. The main character, of Ndongo's novel, his own pseudo –persona, recalls:

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<sup>5</sup> Modernity's early lot to Africa was the depreciation of human resources.

<sup>6</sup> Previously many African and African-American novelists have engaged independent treatises on the subject of African and African-American history. Syl Cheney-Coker focuses upon African and Middle Passage history as facets of the same genre.

When I was eight, I knew father Claret's catechism by heart, and my favorite book was his *Straight and Sure Path to Heaven*. The horror of eternal condemnation didn't allow me to be a child. I didn't go to the Wele River with Ba any more, I couldn't learn how to make those bamboo cars that I loved so much even though cousin Asumu offered to teach me many times. I didn't carve arrows to shoot at birds any more, I didn't go swimming in the Nganga River with my friend Otunga or my cousins Anton and \*Mbo. Even today I don't know how to swim. I didn't have a hunting dog, and I didn't know how to make a cage for trapping fish. All this was for other children...the ones who weren't fortunate enough to be touched by the grace of God.

(Ndongo: 56)

The intrusion of the false Modernity of Catholicism hampered the protagonist of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* from consorting with his indigenous peers. In the Christian or Catholic doctrine, one does not judge or suffer sentiments of superiority over another. Rarely did Catholic Christian practice this premise when they repressed the indigenous. The false Modernity of Catholicism rendered Donato Ndongo's unable to acquire the necessary skills to survive in his environment and culture. He felt he was one of the 'fortunate' ones to be graced by God and destined for better things. All feelings of alienation and detachment and the reality of his indigenous position were owed to the false Modernity of a European religion.

Only in retrospect did the protagonist realize what he had lost. The lament of the protagonist reads:

And you took your last look back, remember? As if to confirm to yourself that you had left your dear motherland behind for good, or for as a desire to preserve the face of your mother, my poor mother, but they had already disappeared from your view and your life.

(Ndongo: 155)

The protagonist of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* can only reflect in hindsight. He looked back upon the moment of departure. This moment sealed his fate. For, his mother and mother had disappeared from his memory into darkness long before he (physically) left his home. Was this Modernity for Equatorial Guinea?

The Nubian of Cheney-Coker's work possessed the ability to reflect forward upon the state of Sierra Leone's Africa. He was able to clairvoyantly look into the looking glass and foresee and the perils of the African man's 'imposed' European Modernity by a colonial world. The anonymous protagonist of Donato Ndongo's work can only reflect back upon the

state of Equatorial Guinea's Africa and the subsequent loss of the Modernity of his people in a colonial world.

*The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* and *The Shadows of Your Black Memory* communicate different, indigenous perspectives of the propagandized Modernity so graciously fostered upon African past and present. We owe the writers for having granted us the opportunity to look upon the concept of Modernity uncompromised by a Eurocentric lens.

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