

Unmasking the Avian Symbols of Power, Wisdom and Discord in African Leadership: A Case Study of *Parliament of Owls*

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Abstract

The paper analyses avian symbols of power, wisdom and dissension in African leadership delving into Adipo Sidang's play; *Parliament of Owls*. The aim of this investigation is to discuss how African leadership has been adulterated symbolically anchored on a postcolonial approach. Adipo Sidang' in his play he reveals African leadership discourse using avian symbolism to examine the complex roles of leadership, wisdom and discord within African governance. This study focuses on how different bird species such as; the owls, hornbills, parrots and grain-eaters, embody varied aspects of leadership and citizenship. Each of these birds offer insight into the tensions and responsibilities inherent in societal roles. The investigation was anchored on Postcolonial Theory. Two main tenets that guided the analysis are neocolonialism and poor leadership. The research was descriptive, explorative and qualitative in nature. Findings reveal a nuanced portrayal of leadership in conflict with ethical governance as well as a call for societal rebalance. This work will contribute to African literature especially to the canon of postcolonial studies.

Key Words: *African Leadership, Avian Symbols, Neocolonialism, Parliament of Owls, Post colonialism, Symbolism.*

Introduction

Parliament of Owls by Adipo Sidang' is a contemporary Kenyan play that uses allegory and satire to comment on socio-political issues. The play is set in the animal kingdom, where the parliament is made up of owls and other animals, reflecting the political landscape of a fictional society. Through its characters the writer critiques corruption, power struggles, and leadership failures. In a broader social and cultural context the play explores themes of governance, democracy, and social justice, resonating with many African countries, including Kenya, where political instability, corruption, and poor leadership are recurring issues (Amutabi et al., 2024). The work holds a mirror to the dynamics of power and the consequences of moral decay in leadership, making it relevant in discussions about political reform and civic responsibility. Culturally, it draws on the symbolism of animals in African folklore, using them to explore deeper truths about human society.

Distinct scholars argue that, in literature, birds often serve as powerful symbols, representing a wide range of qualities such as freedom, transcendence, and spirituality (Madanipour, 2013; Adolf & Stehr, 2016; Meja and Stehr, 2016; Carrillo et al., 2018; Mamukwa, 2023). In *Parliament of Owls*, where night and day birds symbolize power dynamics, leadership and the common *wananchi*, the use of birds has conveyed deep allegorical definitions. In African leadership and governance discourse, symbolism is often interwoven with cultural wisdom and critique, reflecting the delicate balance of power and social harmony. Via a literary analysis anchored on Postcolonial Theory and cultural symbolism, this work unveils how present avian representations serve not only as character allegories but as commentaries on contemporary governance issues in Africa.

Ordinarily, owls are associated with wisdom and knowledge. They are often seen as the elite or ruling class in literary works. They are birds of the night, creatures that can see in the dark, which symbolize insight, foresight, and a level of authority (Madanipour, 2013; Adolf & Stehr, 2016; Meja and Stehr, 2016; Carrillo et al., 2018; Mamukwa, 2023). In *Parliament of Owls*, owls represent leadership and specifically for the purpose of this study; African leadership. Although owls stand for leaders who claim to have the ability to see what others cannot, navigating complex or hidden truths (Kajsiu, 2015; Andersson & Anechiarico, 2019; Gottschalk & Stanislas, 2020; Johnston & Fritzen, 2021; Spector, 2021; Rotberg & Hampson, 2024), in this analysis they symbolize greedy, corrupt,

selfish and filthy leaders in Africa. Indeed, owls are nocturnal, suggesting that most African leaders operate in secrecy and occasionally their power is derived from knowledge that is inaccessible or mysterious (Madanipour, 2013; Adolf & Stehr, 2016; Mamukwa, 2023) to the electorate. In this study it emerged that owls reflect African leaders who are dictatorial and applies manipulative forces in their leadership and governance.

On one hand owls represent corrupt, greedy, and selfish leaders who use fear, politics of poverty, plagues and manipulation to maintain power (Makoelle et al., 2023; Ozerdem, 2023; Galperin & Scheepers, 2025); while on the other grain-eaters symbolize the oppressed common *wananchi* (Amis & Lloyd, 2020; Worley, 2024). Day birds led by Oyundi, the fire-finch have hatched a plan to overthrow the malevolent rule of the night birds. In this research day birds symbolize the collective body of common *wananchi*, the ones who live by routine and depend on visible, straightforward leadership. They embody transparency, simplicity, desire for change and are fighting for a free, fair and equitable society as we shall see in the discussion on this paper. Will they succeed?

Theoretical Perspectives

This work is anchored on Postcolonial Theory. Ahluwalia (2001: 1 – 2) avers that: ... Edward Said's pioneering work, in his now celebrated *Orientalism*, inaugurated the field of colonial discourse analysis which ultimately led to the development of post-colonial theory. Modernity is the mother of colonialism and particularly in Africa it is actually colonial modernity (Nayar, 2010) whereby by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries native African cultures were dominated by European cultures. As a result new cultures were born. Further, this theory emerged in a discriminative, hateful and hostile environment where Africans were humiliated and oppressed regularly by their puppet leaders (Waithiru, 2019). Through a complex dynamic of representation and discourse colonial structures have continued being sustained by corrupt, greedy and selfish leaders in Africa (Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2019; Waithiru, 2022). This has been nourished faithfully through the education system, skewed religion and colonizing constitutions in African nations (Murithi, 2017; Hamill, 2018; Marah, 2020). According to Nayar (2010: 213):

Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representation.

Owls of Power: Unveiling the Nocturnal Mystique of African Leadership

Red String who is a male sycophant owl in Royal Trees is a true symbol of African leaders. Like many African leaders he believes that power will forever remain in the hands of the night birds. This selfish quality is a common trait among African leaders. Once they clench power, they possess it with all their might and breath (Maathai, 2009; 2011). According to Red String in *Parliament of Owls*, owls have the largest eyes, which makes them vision bearers and the sole leaders of the Kingdom. Most African leaders tend to imagine to be the sole vision bearers as well as keepers of knowledge (Riggio, 2019; Barker, 2024) and torch bearers for their respective countries (Aberbach, 2019). Ironically, they are full of filthy morals, corruption, greed, nepotism, tribalism and are the sole agents of neocolonialism in Africa. An axiomatic fact has been stated by Adipo Sidang' via his character Osogo that:

... the omnivores and night birds ... continue killing and murdering grain-eaters and day birds for the sake of protecting the kingdom, and Parliament of Owls does nothing about it. All they do is pass bad laws that favour owls (pg. 3).

The late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere contends that, Kenya is a “man-eat-man society” because of its adoption of capitalism. The reality of these words echoes and reverberates across Africa like a new song. Poverty, ruthless aggression from leaders, selfishness, immorality, corruption and super greed guarantees most African nations a trodden down society. For instance, countries like Kenya keep on languishing in politics of poverty, diseases, corruption and hemorrhaging economy as a result of

punitive tax laws (Cohen, 1994; Ajulu, 2002; Murunga, 2003; Amutabi, 2009) meant to sustain the lofty lives of the greedy leaders (Awly & Schech, 2004; Falola, 2022).

Most African leaders who perpetuate colonialism, corruption, selfishness and politics of poverty use propaganda as a tool of controlling people, manipulating them with side shows (Gikandi, 2000; Glassman, 2004) while bending law to their favor. As a result, most people die from the infestation of their blood-thirsty leaders (Mandela, 2019) who are literally puppets of the rich Western Nations. Red String is using propaganda to instill fear among other birds in the Kingdom. Symbolically, this is a real image of African leadership. Owls have manipulated other birds into believing that because of them, the Kingdom is safe while in cahoot with carnivores they feast on the flesh of fellow birds.

The relationship between the Birds' Kingdom and the Lion Kingdom symbolizes the relationship of ruling parties and opposition coalitions and parties in African nations. In most African countries, the ruling party and the opposition usually make deals to oppress the common *mwanauchi* while pretending to be two opposing sides. The honorable Parliament of Owls is just like many parliaments in Africa is deplorable. Most Members of Parliament partake in the most unethical, crooked, selfish, and corrupt activities rather than fulfilling their sole mandate of representing the will of the people and enacting legislation in accordance with their respective constitution. Chiefly, they act as brokers who get bribes from various organizations, parastatals, leaders and institutions of power for their own selfish gain. Osogo lays this bare when he aptly puts it to Tel Tel that: ... he makes rules and breaks them because he can make and break, break and make as he wishes ... he is the broker! (pg. 5).

As a King's advisor, Red String is a symbol of most members of parliament who are part of committee members of advisory role to an African President. Unfortunately, rather than serving their noble duties they serve their insatiable greed for wealth and richness. Red String confirms and affirms this when he tenaciously attempts to bribe Tel Tel so that Tel Tel can backstab and neglect other birds. But Tel Tel firmly upholds her allegiance to the birds. She tells him that the birds are aware that the owls are hooting and looting tax payers' hard earned money; screaming and squawking after filling their stomachs; boasting and belching to a watchful, hunger-stricken people.

Tel Tel and Little P not only symbolizes some human rights activist, groups, NGO's and people of goodwill but also symbolizes honest and genuine broadcasting media houses that broadcast the evil of governments to their people in Africa. They are truly a symbol of a courageous, honest and strong warrior against corruption, greed and politics of poverty. Despite the fact that the grain-eaters nourish the nation, their sweat and fruits of their labor nourishes the night birds who are the embodiments of leadership and poor on that matter. The grain-eaters symbolize common *wanauchi* in African nations who brace and bare the huge burden of over taxation, diseases, unemployment, starvation, drought and death faithfully. The leadership that is expected to protect them from harm such as the Parliament of Owls keeps passing punitive laws that deter the livelihood of common citizens while favoring the elite – symbolized by Owls.

Red String like any other African leader is promoting impunity in dictatorship through curtailing of basic human right to free movement and freedom of expression. Owls' leadership in the Birds Kingdom – which symbolizes African countries – have banned moonlight twittering past 6 p.m. They have banned flying from one tree to another in the night and all unauthorized movement past 6 p.m. This is pure denial of already provided for rights and freedoms by the Parliament of Owls to other birds. Nevertheless, owls are immune to their own new laws. Red String proudly affirms that: We make and break them. Above the law! (pg. 7).

Satirically, Red String symbolizing African leaders informs Tel Tel – symbol of common Citizens – of their intention to impose a new daily 'moonlight tax'. This tax symbolizes the various draconic tax laws. Members of Parliament of Owls represent greedy and selfish flip-flopper MP's, Governors, Senators among other puppets of Presidents in African countries. In the same manner, African leaders use the church to launder their filthy blood earned proceeds of corrupt dealings (Omolo, 2002; Aberbach, 2019), which they eventually use to bribe poor country men and women to vote them back; Red String and other Royal Owls are doing the same. This cycle of corruption is maintained and guaranteed by politics of poverty and tribalism in Africa.

Nevertheless, religious leaders represented by Pastor Owl play a big role in promoting poor leadership and governance in African countries by misleading their followers. This aligns with what Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his work *Decolonizing the Mind* (1987) says that: despite the fact that the slogan of the missionary in Africa was full of honor, forgiveness, kindness and loving one another, he held a Bible on the left hand and a gun on the right hand. When a people share an impoverished mind the nation suffers in every way (Mandela, 1995; Ngunjiri & Ong'aro, 2003). Thus, religion was not only used as a tool to deny Africans freedoms and rights but also culture and identity (Scribano et al., 2021; Waithiru, 2022). The colonizers did not just use religion and his language to break the African epistemology of self-definition but also adulterated it to an extent that the new epistemology is fremd and bethrall (Atia & Houlden, 2020; Blouinn & Akrigg, 2025). This is the reason African leaders introduce bills such as Moonlight Bill and excuse punitive tax laws on welfare state. Consequently, it's the cause of many *wananchi* voting in leaders who oppress them while disguising as caring, visionary leaders such as Red String and Money Bags.

The African education system that was inherited from the colonizer has faithfully continued to imbue a colonized mind into Africans' minds (Gikandi, 2000; Awy & Schech, 2004; Hopkins & Sriprakash, 2019; Falola, 2022; Albrecht, 2024) courtesy of the missionary. Thiong'o (1987: 102) argues that:

The missionaries committed their lives in saving the indigenous peoples from the barbarism of their own languages. However, to do this, they themselves became masters of African languages, reducing them to writing and authoring the first ever dictionaries and grammars in these languages. They talked of the colonies being oral cultures and yet put the Christian Bible in unlimited quantities in even the tiniest African language.

Given the nourished seed of a colonized mind among Africans, rotten leaders sprout and flourish via use of effective media houses and journalists represented by Tel Tel to mislead common citizens via propaganda and dressed lies. Tel Tel calls it a Parliament of scams that keeps on blackmailing her to spread lies.

Darkness is a symbol of evil, mystery or fear (Spurrell, 2020; Angosto-Ferrandez & Gill, 2021). The king of the birds, Royal Owl, Tula Nyongoro associates himself with darkness. This shows that African leaders are good agents of fear. In the words of the king, Red String utters blatantly to Tel Tel that: ... "Darkness and I are one. If you cannot see the darkness, you cannot see me." Those are ... the words of the king, Royal Owl, Tula Nyongoro (pg. 13). African leaders are manipulative, secretive and elusive. Red String confirms this when he manipulates Tel Tel and blackmails her into doing his bidding.

He threatens Tel Tel with charges of treason if she doesn't convince the grain-eaters to circumscribe and support Moonlight Bill. Character assassination is a common activity among African leaders to those who oppose their policies, unconventional bills and draconian tax laws. Tel Tel cannot believe the blackmail from Red String in the company of Arum Tidi. These kinds of leaders are very common in most African nations. They use people for their own selfish gain (Murunga & Nasong'o, 2006; Goodin & Grand, 2020). For instance, the Parliament of Owls usually use Tel Tel to reach out to all birds due to her ability to appeal to the emotions of day birds and they tend to listen to her.

Most African leaders are bloodsucking maniacs that have zero care for their electorate. They use propaganda effectively and efficiently to manipulate their electorate into giving the nothing they have in form of taxes. Aru Tidi proposes to Red String to introduce a fee to be imposed on every bird that hammers at trees and makes noise yet the same birds cannot afford sustenance. Arum Tidi says that: ... if you want to succeed at propagating propaganda (pg. 16). This shows that the Royal Owl and his government were using propaganda to control every narrative in a manipulative manner. For instance, the Moonlight Bill is being changed to Money Bags Law within one day.

The Parliament of Owls uses religion as a tool of propagating propaganda. Similarly, African leaders uses religion and churches as well as mosques in particular to confuse, control and manipulate

congregants as well as electorate at large. Red String asserts that for a propaganda to be effective is has to be anchored on religious faith. He advises Arum Tidi to always add a rider that drives their propaganda. For example, he contends that: ... and as always, it is a revelation ... a revelation from the gods. That is what drives your propaganda ... (pg. 19). Big eyes symbolize the vast network of African governments controlled by a body and head which symbolize leaders of rich First World Countries. They manipulate African leaders like puppets.

Vultures symbolize greedy and exploitative (Cummings, 2012; Chadwick, 2019; Smadja, 2019; Green, 2024) leaders in African countries. In *Parliament of Owls* Committee of Vultures represent various parliamentary and senate committees in Africa that not only pass draconic and malevolent laws which oppressed the poor more and more; but are used like puppets by the leadership to root out patriotic leaders who don't support them. All that African leaders think of is their own interest and self political preservation (Andersson & Anechiarico, 2019; Gottschalk & Stanislas, 2020; Rotberg & Hampson, 2024). This is symbolized by Mr. Speaker when he asserts that: ... the Moonlight Bill has been passed and shall protect the kingdom and our Parliament from imminent danger (pg. 33).

Feathered Beak affirms that owls are selfish and greedy. He blatantly tells Money Bags that all birds are aware that critical positions in courts are held by the least qualified birds – vultures. This is a common trait among African leaders who appoint people in critical offices based on tribalism, nepotism and corruption in the spirit of self-preservation. As a result these appointed are usually either least qualified or totally unqualified. In addition, Feathered Beak glaringly puts it that Money Bags via his faithful puppets hired the services of Arum Tidi to spread cheap lies and propaganda and confuse night birds and omnivores with innuendo. Consequently, Arum Tidi through use of propaganda portrays patriotic, honest and hardworking owls as corrupt and calamitous.

Most African leaders assassinate opponents and patriotic leaders to ensure a continuous malevolent governance and leadership for their own selfish gain. Straight-Eyed confirms this after complaining firmly that: ... Mr. Speaker we are aware of plans to kill some birds, including myself, because of the stand we have taken to ensure there is good governance in the kingdom (pg. 34). Killing of patriotic citizens who fight for good leadership and governance is a common practice though not publicly accepted in many African countries. They are usually eliminated to hide corruption and other major economic crimes (Cohen, 1994). Most African leaders not only thrive in corruption, greed and nepotism but emerge from ethnic-based political processes and are thus loyal to their political fathers rather than loyal to their political fathers rather than the electorate. They use public resources for the purpose of self-aggrandizing deals and cartels formation. This makes the political processes in Africa a zero-sum game. This aligns with Murunga & Nasong'o (2006: 10) argument that:

This reality has promoted the culture of patronage politics, cronyism, personal rule, and the concomitant malaise of corruption and kleptocracy that have characterized Kenyan politics since independence.

Almost all new laws enacted in African countries aim at impoverishing further the already poor electorate. Iron Lady affirms this when she boldly tells Mr. Speaker that, the new law is a hidden means of plundering funds by Money Bags from the coffers of birds and direct them to their owned companies, own charity organizations and shell self-help groups as well as off-shore accounts. Iron Lady states that: By passing this law, you have inaugurated theft and robbery with violence, because that is actually what will happen (pg. 34). This is symbolic of the reality in most African countries where Parliaments and Houses of Senate pass draconian laws and make malevolent amendments to feed their insatiable greed and power and wealth.

Most African leaders are puppets and clowns used and manipulated at will by leaders of rich Western, European and Asian countries. They are easily manipulated, primarily because of poverty, drought, calamities such as plagues, diseases, enslaving loans and drug and substance abuse (Waithiru, 2019; Waithiru et al., 2023). Normally these are occasioned by the colonial education system in most African countries that fosters dependence rather than independence; borrowing rather than self-production and manufacturing in a self-sustaining economy (Waithiru et al., 2021; Waithiru, 2022; Waithiru et al., 2023); and poor duplicating mentality rather than creative, original, innovative

and productive mind set (Loomba, 2015; Jazeel, 2019; Scribano et al., 2021). Thiong'o (1987), Falola, (2022) and Waithiru (2022) reiterates that, Africa will be unrivalled economically in the global view the day it will use its great potential and immense resources to develop itself rather than relying on enslaving loans and handouts from the colonial masters. Money Bags confirms the frustration and hunger of African electorates symbolically when he tells Red String to use Arum Tidi – who will take anything due to constant hunger – in propagating propaganda. Red String insists that: He is very desperate, Money Bags. He really does everything to impress (pg. 36).

Land grabbing in African nations by leaders is a common activity. Most African leaders incite violence among common citizens for the sole purpose of displacing a group or a tribe. Black String says that:

We short-changed the vultures and grabbed the sacred tree from the
crows and converted it into our secret surveillance tower ... we
displaced ten families of crows. Ten! They have always been bitter!
(pg. 45 – 6).

The ten families of crows represent various groups of people occasionally displaced within their own country where tribalism, corruption, greed and misinformation thrive. Even in face of such injustice African leaders care less or none. Money Bags confirms this when he affirms that he doesn't care whether crows were displaced or not. Black String reiterates that owls do not care. Corruption has become a tool of trade in African leadership, a habitual trait inseparable from their charisma (Kajsiu, 2015; Andersson & Anechiarico, 2019; Spector, 2021; Rotberg & Hampson, 2024). In addition, they use threats to govern electorates. Money Bags directs that: ... Tell Tel Tel it is a directive from my seat or Tel Tel will not live to tell this tale to other Tel Tels (pg. 46).

The use of Olik Tiga and bat army symbolizes use of security organs by African leaders in African nations to oppress common citizens. The teeth of bat army represent weapons used by security organs in Africa. The blindness of bats to sympathy, whining of the birds and to the moonlight symbolizes how African leaders are not sympathetic to their common citizens. It symbolizes how African leaders ignore the cry and screams of *wananchi*. They ignore the screams of hungry, sick and suffering common citizens. Whenever a citizen criticizes a leader such as a President in an African nation, he/she is declared an enemy of the state. Money Bags confirms this when he echoes that Oyundi is a wanted bird, dead or alive. This is primarily because, on a number of occasions, Oyundi has embarrassed the king. The king represents a president in African nations.

Though Money Bags says there is an unwritten law that states that survival favors the fittest and prepared, it is a common practice in most African countries. Most African leaders believe that they are chosen to oppress; chosen to grab public resources at will; chosen to be priests of corruption; chosen to be efficiently gluttonous (Cohen, 1994; Ajulu, 2002; Ngunjiri & Ong'aro, 2003; Alwy & Schech, 2004; Amutabi, 2009). According to Adipo Sidang' via character Money Bags, African leaders make appointments to the cabinet as an exercise of gratitude to their political rejects who are loyal to them even if unqualified. Money Bags reiterates that: ... Royal Owl was chosen by the gods to lead the birds. ... Control the birds! Seize the minds of the ordinary owls and make them believe the vultures and the crows and other birds are against them! (pg. 49).

Owls symbolize corrupt African leaders. Veteran P exclaims that Money Bags was once spotted bribing a pandemonium of parrots. Due to poverty levels in most African countries corruption tends to be a habitual trait among Africans (Kajsiu, 2015; Andersson & Anechiarico, 2019; Gottschalk & Stanislas, 2020; Spector, 2021; Johnston & Fritzen 2021; Rotberg & Hampson, 2024). As a result a number of Africans and most African leaders lack integrity and betray their fellow country men and women. Veteran P states that, "... Some parrots lack integrity and have betrayed the birds many times." (pg. 106). Puppet Owls symbolize African leaders who are puppets of leaders from First World Countries. According to the writer Adipo Sidang' truth in African countries imprisons people rather than set them free.

Daylight Custodians: The Grain-Eaters Who Nourish the Nation

Grain-Eaters such as Osogo, Oyundi, Tel Tel, among other birds symbolize common hardworking *wananchi* who are the backbone of the African society. Grain-Eaters symbolize common citizens who

keep the society such as African nations' societies afloat, through their connection to grain. For instance, Tel Tel indicates that after long period of oppression and suffering the birds – common citizens or *wananchi* – form a coalition to save their Kingdom – symbol of an African nation. This is after witnessing and experiencing the negative outcome of Owls' – symbol of African leaders – arrogance and greed of Parliament of Owls. Common citizens usually get betrayed by leaders after being used by the corrupt leaders to spread propaganda. Tel Tel refers to the leaders such as Parliament of Owls as wicked. Leaders make media houses and some journalists spread lies about common *wananchi* for their malicious and malevolent deeds (Kasinska & Gajewski, 2023; Newstead & Riggio, 2023).

The writer is giving the intended audience a glimmer of hope that positive change can be birthed by the most trodden on and despised poor though charismatic common citizen. Otundi, the fire-finch, a small female bird and the de facto leader of day birds makes Owls look headless and often makes the leaders from the Royal Owl a fool out of them. Oyundi represents common patriotic citizens in most African countries. She symbolizes hope of a revolution, a better, honest, free and just Africa to live in. Oyundi represents a symbol of a hopeful victory over the beneficiaries of neocolonialism in Africa such as the Red String Puppet Owl and the Royal Owl. Although the Royal Owl and his battalion of the so called 'leaders' of the birds as Oyundi puts it thrive in convincing birds through intimidation, lies, killing and successful confusion of common citizens, the *wananchi* are determined to change the leadership hence are rehearsing freedom songs.

Iron Lady, a female rebel owl and Oyundi's ally joins forces with grain-eaters to fight against the agents of backwardness and dictatorship in the kingdom. This union represents the union of common citizens and few patriotic leaders in African countries in the fight against selfish, greedy, corrupt and murderers leaders; who perpetuate tribal hatred and violence, animosity and division among *wananchi*. In most African countries, people who attempt to change and improve leadership and governance is labeled rebels and criminals. When innocent common citizens hold peaceful demonstrations against punitive tax laws and dictatorial rule, respective governments regard them as criminals. Consequently, Money Bags – a male owl who is the King's right-hand owl and gate-keeper of Royal Trees – terms what Iron Lady and her fellow revolutionary agitators as profusely criminal.

Straight-Eyed who is a rebel owl and Oyundi's ally asserts that, not only do they have greater thinking capacity than the entire advisory office to the King but they are willing to protect all other birds devoid of discrimination. Feathered Beak firmly confronts Money Bags double personality. At one point, Money Bags is speaking on behalf of Money Bags, another he is speaking on behalf of Royal Owl and other times he is speaking on behalf of those beaks that keep hooting and looting from the most remote areas to the King's palace. This is a common trait among African leaders who wear different coats depending on what benefits them and where the bribe is hefty. They rob both the power and the rich alike but with a special focus on resources meant to build the nation such as hospitals, medicine, building schools, roads, dams, bridges among many others.

Due to corruption, nepotism and often tribalism in Africa, most elected and appointed leaders are usually not qualified to handle the offices they hold. Iron Lady confirms this when she plainly puts it that, corruption is perpetuated by appointment of mere cooks into high office. She insists that this is the reason Money Bags is such a huge embarrassment and Red String is a perfect puppet. Most African leaders are puppets of the West (Falola, 2022). They take advantage of the enslaving and colonizing education systems that was inherited from the colonizers. In Africa, common citizens are dependent on farming and thrive in community-based activities and self-help groups. This is the reason agriculture is the backbone of African economies (Ozerdem et al., 2023) in most nations due to the vast farming practices by common people in sustaining society and their economy.

Common citizens in most African countries use demonstrations as means of expressing their disappointments, frustrations and hopelessness. They use demonstrations as a platform for airing their grievances (Ajulu, 2002; Maathai, 2009). In *Parliament of Owls*, birds which represent common *wananchi* globally are demonstrating outside the Parliament of Owls protesting against the Moonlight Bill. Leadership in African nations use their influence and power to pass bills that deny basic human rights to common citizens (Hogan, 2024). Straight-Eyed asserts that the Moonlight Bill will

undermine the rights of birds and omnivores that hunt in the night. Further, Straight-Eyed argues that the introduction of an illegal tax at a time when birds are starving with hunger is malevolent.

The Ironic Symbolism of the Hornbill: When Wisdom, Protection and Vision Falter in African Leadership and Governance

Hornbills such as Arum Tidi, the ground hornbill in *Parliament of Owls* are expected to often represent crucial themes in Africa, such as wisdom, communication, visionary leadership and communal governance as well as protection. However, this is not the case in *Parliament of Owls*. In this play, Arum Tidi – a male propagandist for Royal Trees - symbolizes a puppet leader with cheap mentality controlled by poverty and desperation as a result of poor leadership structure, policies and laws that not only benefit the political elite. Forth (2013) and Green (2024) asserts that, hornbills are often viewed as messengers between humans and the divine, symbolizing the need for clear and wise communication in leadership. Ironically, this is not the case for Arum Tidi. Arum Tidi uses his communication ability to convince other birds by confusing them into thinking that the Moonlight Bill is good for them yet it's meant to inaugurate theft and robbery with violence.

Hornbills' distinctive enormous beaks and their cooperative social behavior often parallel the qualities of a good leader-one who speaks with authority and protects the community while fostering unity. Ironically, Arum Tidi spreads misinformation and propaganda with the aim of confusing birds. Instead of protecting the birds and promoting cooperation, Arum Tidi fosters killing of other birds, disarray and division in the birds' kingdom. Godfrey (2025) avers that, hornbills' ability to see far and act with foresight makes it a symbol of vision and long-term planning, which are crucial for effective governance. In addition, it symbolizes the importance of balanced, protective and wise leadership, one that ensures the well-being of the people (Brods kaya, 2012; Forth, 2013; Angosto-Ferrandez & Gill, 2021). Unfortunately, in *Parliament of Owls*, Arum Tidi is a hopeless clown who does everything to impress the Royal Owl. This is a true symbol of most African leaders presently.

Arum Tidi as a symbolic figure in African leadership actually resonates with the African leadership today. Instead of attributes such as wisdom, effective communication, protective governance and foresight being mirrored in African leadership; enslaving education goals, misleading communication, impoverishing governance and lack of foresight are experienced in present African leadership (Waithiru et al., 2023). Rather than collective responsibility and long-term planning, African societies experience collective corruption and long-term high interest loans from rich countries, IMF, World Bank among others (Thiong'o, 1987; Waithiru, 2019). Arum Tidi attributes juxtaposes the hornbills' symbolic attributes. This is the reason Money Bags – symbol of the colonizer in Africa – insists on using Arum Tidi and later dump him. Instead of Arum Tidi fostering harmony he fosters dissonance and imbalance in the society. Just like in most African countries where corrupt, greedy and selfish leaders use popular politicians to control electorates and are later killed politically and literally. Money Bags states that:

... In fact, once we confirm he has been able to control the birds, we will quietly cut links with him and then use the Moonlight Law to gag him and finally send him to the gallows. He already knows too much (pg. 36).

This shows that corrupt, greedy and tribal African leaders are cowed and threatened by their own puppets who know about their corrupt deals, tribal appointments to government positions (Maathai, 2011; Riggio, 2019; Marah, 2020) and evil schemes. Red String echoes that, despite Arum Tidi assisting in enacting of punitive and draconian laws eventually he would face the wrath of the guillotine. Most African leaders use their fellow political cronies as bridges and ladders to enrich themselves and ascend to power and later annihilate them. Arum Tidi lies to the other hornbills that Moonlight Law will protect them when in actual sense it will impoverish them, deny them their basic rights and enslave them via curfew and limited working hours. This is the reason Money Bags rhetorically tells Socialite Owl that: Of course, Arum Tidi can only be crazy. What kind of bird sees its own reflection in the water and attacks it? (pg. 37).

Water Stone point symbolizes a region, county or constituency in a given country in Africa whereas the river symbolizes an African nation which is rich of resources but just like a river they

benefit other rich countries instead of themselves. They have enough resources to be food sustaining and economic giants but are depleted by the rich First World Countries. The reflection of Arum Tidi symbolizes common citizens in most African nations. Thus the act of Arum Tidi viciously attacking his own reflection like a clown symbolizes how Africans are used to fight themselves as a result of tribalism, greedy and selfish leaders (Brydon, 2000; Falola, 2022; Albrecht, 2024) who only care about themselves instead of the electorate (Ajulu, 2002; Omolo, 2002).

Youths in African countries are usually used by the elite political class as a means to an end rather than as co-leaders and important stakeholders in leadership and governance processes (Murunga & Nasong'o, 2006; Amutabi, 2009). Red String rhetorically inquires from Money Bags whether he should identify youthful birds who shall sing songs to the King and his Parliament. In most African countries such as Kenya, leaders use the youth to promote their campaign agenda plus fuel ethnic hatred and violence. African leaders use the youth successfully due to the fact that African youths languish in poverty and unemployment perpetuated by poor leadership and governance (Murunga, 2003; Alwy & Schech, 2004).

Arum Tidi is using misleading words in his confusing song disguised as a call to patriotism and unity. Arum Tidi symbolizes how African leaders use music as a tool of propaganda and spreading lies. Money Bags confirms that: ... You know music is very powerful. It soothes; it smoothenes; it ignites; it empowers minds (pg. 41). Equally, African leaders use music to ignite ethnic hatred and division with the sole purpose of dividing and conquering the electorate without opposition.

Harmony or Dissonance? The Birds' Call to Rebalance Society

The noblest responsibility for any real leader is to unite, reconcile and protect his/her fellow citizens. This is made possible by leaders characterized by humility, integrity and steadfast devotion to the well-being of his/her fellow electorate (Mandela, 1995). Unfortunately, what happens in most African countries is the direct opposite of this. Leaders bask in the suffering and death of common citizens. Those upon whom the responsibility of legislating and enacting laws is bestowed on their own interests. Black String states it clearly that, night birds are joining other birds in planning a demonstration at Parliament or Royal Trees against the Moonlight Law and other draconian laws passed before.

Selfish, greedy and corrupt African leaders are rigid and do not accommodate criticism (Omolo, 2002; Ngunjiri & Ong'aro, 2003). Rather than embracing tolerance, forgiveness and peace with a united front-forged call for progress they beat drums of ethnic wars, hatred and division. Money Bags represents such leaders. He admits that African leaders normally create an impression that they are ready to listen to the common citizens when actually, they are waiting to maim them (Sidang', 2023). Though electorates may appear small to the political elite they have the ability to change leaders via free, fair and democratic elections. Despite being crashed by their lenders and their children destroyed via drug and substance abuse; impoverishing and enslaving education systems; lack of employment (Brydon, 2000; Mandela, 2019) and being used by politicians for the wrong reasons; they can air their voice via demonstrations.

The little birds symbolize common citizens determined to end tyranny, corruption and environmental destruction and pollution. Oyundi who is a symbol of revolutionist in Africa gives hope of a better Africa. African nations free of evil. Africa that has functional institutions, which believes in the rights of all citizens across the continent; rich or poor; devoid of religious, race nor any other form of discrimination. She gives hope of a future great African continent with rich countries.

Man is viewed and represents an agent of environmental destruction and pollution in this play. Even the birds do not want to be associated nor compared with man. According to Royal Owl man brings destruction on earth by cutting down trees and polluting rivers. Birds are calling for man to stop his filthy habit of polluting and destroying the environment. Adipo Sidang' through Feathered Beak echoes the words of a great man – the late Prof. George Saitoti – that: Our kingdom is greater than any one of us (pg. 87). In his words and I quote, "There comes a time when the nation is more important than an individual."

The writer via Oyundi proposes brains ability to work rather than physical appearance as a great trait to consider when electing or appointing virtuous leaders. Sacrifice is another issue that is

paramount in the walk towards a better Africa. Mandela (2019) avers that sacrifice in the walk towards freedom especially from the chains of hatred, corruption, greed and selfishness is a prerequisite. Oyundi emphasizes that, “We must sacrifice today for a better tomorrow.” (pg. 88). Indeed there is no a bright future without sacrifice and principles.

Further, Adipo Sidang’ via Feathered Beak who represents patriotic Africans in Africa, urges African leaders to avoid fighting over everything among themselves. Consequently, the writer impels African leaders at large to build nations where all people feel comfortable; safe and secure; with an awareness of belonging and identity. To achieve this, it’s imperative that Africa builds Africa with the right material, legislate new laws and have fair representation in Senate and Parliament where applicable. Oyundi insists on the need for Africa to unite with a common purpose. By all means, African leaders need to shed off greed and prevarications if any progress is to be realized. Money Bags tells Socialite Owl that: Abang’ Chieth. He is greedy and ready to betray his leader anytime as long as you give him something for his belly (pg.100). Greed, corruption and ethnicity have hampered development in African countries way before independence (Omolo, 2002; Glassman, 2004; Murunga & Nasong’o, 2006).

Moreover, Adipo Sidang’ through the stage in Act 5 instigates African leaders to avoid environmental destruction and pollution as well as opulence and flamboyancy in the face of starving and dying citizens. He is persuading African leaders to avoid policies that guarantees plundered forests characterized by fallen trees. He is condemning the habit of African leaders nourishing dilapidated slums where makeshift homes are densely packed, with limited sanitation, poor ventilation and drainage, amid persistent poverty. He is warning of the dangers of dying rivers which are symbolic of dying nations since water is life (Antony et al., 2024). The stage is a symbol of African nations where plunder, starvation, diseases, floods and deaths manifest faithfully.

The birds who symbolize patriots in African nations have been used by the writer to provoke African patriots to rise up and bring positive societal change by changing the already ugly era of dictatorship. Through Oyundi the birds are calling for nations governed with truth and justice. Nations where all birds – symbol of Africans – unite together devoid of discrimination and bias. Eventually, the writer is offering use of democracy as a tool of bringing change to African leadership instead of violence, division, hatred and blood. Though the birds such as Arum Tidi, Osogo’s kin and many more were killed during the cruel and oppressive rule of the owls, Oyundi requests them to love each other, unite and seek peace rather than revenge. She offers the kingdom a chance to vote on her name as a new leader in a new dawn. The dawn in the Birds Kingdom symbolize a new era in African leadership at a future time. Oyundi concludes that: it is called democracy. DE-MO-CRA-CY! (pg. 129).

Conclusion

Adipo Sidang’ has successfully sewed masterfully the rich tapestry of avian symbolism in his play – *Parliament of Owls*. It has emerged that there are profound realities about African leadership and societal dynamics that require the attention of every patriotic African. Through the interplay of night birds and daylight custodians in this analysis, the discussions have converged at a singular point that demands African leaders in most African nations to shed off their insatiable greed, corruption, selfishness, tribalism, nepotism, killing the electorates, destroying and polluting environment among other vices. Equally, the paper has proposed unity among Africans in the quest for free, fairer and just nations. The discussions have questioned the integrity and wisdom of African leaders as well as celebrated the resilience and contribution of the common *wananchi* – grain-eaters – who sustain the economy. This work has examined African leadership in general as both a privilege and a burden. Thus, it has called for a reawakening of ethical leadership and governance anchored in societal values and communal justice. Symbolically, birds such as owls, falcons, hornbills and parrots have exhibited a huge potential in literary work to convey intended message to the intended audience effectively. After analyzing them, it has emerged that, there is an urgent need for African societies to reexamine the balance of power, collective responsibility and harmony rather than dissonance. The writer has successfully gone beyond critique of African leadership and focused on a future where Africans thrive on mutual respect and shared vision via a process he calls DE-MO-CRA-CY.!

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