

# Poetic Appraisal of State Custodians' Sins Against The State: Philip Umeh's 'Ambassadors of Poverty'

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**Abstract:** In his poem, 'Ambassadors of Poverty', Philip Umeh satirises the sins of corruption by the State agents against the state and the populace. Ambassadors of poverty are those leaders and their subjects, the elites and the masses, that pervert all kinds of ill-acts that erode the State unceasingly. The impoverished masses are forced by circumstances to indulge in corruption. The Nigerian (African) leaders also promote neo-colonialism, which under-develops the State. All ill-acts are sins, here, sins against the State – Nigeria. All hands must be on deck to achieve the transformation envisaged by the poet, now and later. Crimes against the State constitute the poet's burden in numerous ways. Besides Umeh's poem, several other secondary sources were employed for a qualitative-based content-analysis and review.

**Keywords:** Sins, State custodians, Ambassadors of poverty, Corruption, Westernisation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Poetry is to both oral and written forms of literature, in which poets economise words – using a few words to drive home unimaginable length of messages in and about their societies and people(s). It is the third genre of literature, which is as old as man. According to Onochie in Ude (2000:xi), poetry is said to have been defined in superlative terms as the 'best word in the best place'; 'the centre and circumference of knowledge'; 'what is often thought of but never so well expressed' and many others, all to the consternation of those who are scared stiff by poetry. Poetry is undertaken by the poet. Poems are to poets as plays are to playwrights and novels, novelettes, novellas, etc. are to authors or prose-writers. As Besong (2016:1) observes, poets are unique and special writers, who often worry about and cry over the ugly happenings in their environment that are precipitated by man and nature. In his words, 'every poet is a writer, but every writer is not a poet.' He further states,

This unique talented, artistic and economical writer [the poet] plays the role of activism, who champions the course of [a] people's liberation, change and development. The poet most times merely wears the shoes of the victims of circumstance, for which they often lament, weep, cry aloud— even more than the bereaved— satirise, clap... By singing aloud the ills or the good of their environments and people as well as others with theirs, the poet plays both the general and specific roles of the writer, the 'real writer', not the politicking cajoling pen that writes for fear or favour. Poetry, via the poet, helps in the life struggles of the society at all and different times.

Indeed, the poet is so unique because not every writer possesses poetic prowess, wisdom, knowledge and in-depth

understanding of poetry or encoded poetic messages. But every poet possesses the core skills of writing and literature. Writing is one of the four language skills: listening and reading, the primary/receptive skills, and speaking and writing, the secondary/or productive skills. The poet is a man of letter, but not every 'mere' writer is a man of letter. Stressing the place of the writer, the poet inclusive, in the society across ages, Wa Thiongo (1991:34-5) notes that the writer's role is that of helping in the community's struggle for a certain quality of life free from all harmful or infectious exploitative relations; adding that the extent to which the writer can and will help is not only by explaining the world but in changing it would depend on his appreciation of the classes and values that are struggling for a new order, a new society, a more human future, and which classes and values are hindering the birth of a new order/society and the hopeful. And of course, it depends on which side he is in these class struggles of his times.

In view of the foregoing, this paper rises to appraise the poet's contribution to the mixed struggles of the Nigerian society— the poet's socio-political, cultural, ethical and economic satire of the society's leaders, 'ambassadors of poverty', who impoverish their subjects and strip the Nigerian society naked, batter its prestigious image and make it faceless. Similarly, Uwatt (2015:1) has also affirmed the invaluable role of the writer in revolution and the creation of new world order viz:

From the earliest stage of the struggle for the evolution of democratic nation states, up to the more recent African and Arab springs, revolution has remained [an] effective weapon for changing the world order. Be it the American or French revolution, or the Kenyan and Tanzanian revolutions, or the Harlem renaissance or Negritude

movement, the writer has always been struggling side-by-side with the nationalists or Pan-Africanists against colonialism, slavery, tyranny, cultural aberration, psychological disorientations, etc. Literature itself is [a] representation of the struggle in society at human, spiritual, economic, social, cultural, religious and environmental levels and within the self. The writer's stand in these struggles is shaped by his vision of the world order and the role he elects to play in his envisioned world order.

## 2. PHILIP UMEH IN BRIEF

Philip Obioma Umeh, a former Director of the National Productive Centre, is an alumnus of the University of Lagos. Before joining the Federal Civil Service in 1988, he had worked as an editor with Nelson/Pitman Publishers Limited between 1979 and 1980. He moved to New York in 1981 and worked with Nok Publishers Limited as General Manager, which he occupied till 1985. Umeh is happily married and blessed with children. And, he is an active member of the Abuja Literary Community.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Since our keywords are rather poetic and contextual, there is need for clarification to enhance better understanding of the message encoded herein. Poetry refers, in totality, to the deployment of certain devices such as figures of speech, feelings (emotion), rhyme and rhythm, stanzaic, divisions, metre, and subject matter in a body of words so as to convey a message or information, and/or express an idea or one's impression in a literary stylistic manner characterised by economy of words. Often times, the ideas are juggled, words have their usual habitats changed and meaning is largely derived in a suggestive way (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al., 2011:17).

Poetry is one of the three genres and two forms of literature. It is both oral and written. It is the oldest of the three genres, which revolves around poems, oral and written, and entails using (a) few carefully and technically selected words (words economy or economy of words) to communicate vast piece of information. That is, in poetry, little is said, but much is communicated. As an artistic aspect (genre/form) of literature, it informs, educates, instructs, entertains, satirises and appreciates arts – any form, human, the society, the universe, nature and earthly embodiments. Of course, these, besides mirroring the society, are the basic functions of literature, the 'mother' of poetry, drama and prose.

The poet is a Ballard; a literary stylist, economist, artiste, pace-setter, trend-setter, analyst, columnist, researcher, sociologist, historian, philosopher and an all-rounder, who technically (poetically) says little but communicates little but communicates much (Besong, 2016). This sheds light on the above description of poetry. The poet is a unique, versatile and erudite writer. Poetic appraisal here refers to the art or literary appreciation of poetry, focusing on a given poem (or more) to highlight the poet's contribution to the struggles of

their society, expressed through poetic perspective. That is, a careful professional examination of a poet's work (poem), here, Umeh's poem: 'Ambassadors of Poverty', for critical judgment, consumption and application, is described as poetic appraisal in this work.

State custodians are all government (public) institutions functionaries or agents– leaders, particularly the political, intellectual, military and bourgeois elites– who are in-charge of these institutions and the masses whom they rule. Being the state prime actors or agents, leaders, they are poetically described here as 'state custodians'. They are the people to whom the teeming masses are entrusted upon, but who yet misrepresent them, the latter. As such, all ill-acts of these custodians against the people with the society entrusted on them constitute state custodians' sins against the state and its people(s) (Robert, 2015). Sins ordinarily denote evils, misdeed, broken/sour relationship between man and God, harmful deviant behaviour, guilt against others or the other part in a symmetric mutual relationship, or anti-social acts, whereby the either aggrieved party is hurt in several ways.

Corruption is one of the worst sins against the state, while others include treason, muting, insurgency, inciting ethnic and religious crises, ethno-religious hate, social vices, injustice, etc. Ndalian and Auwalu (2011:108) offer an encompassing conception of corruption as 'any act contrary to ethical, legal, legitimate, right, positive and moral standard expected by a society which one lives in.' Similarly, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 1999) has conceptualised corruption as the misuse of public power, office, or authority for private benefit through bribery, extortion, influence, drugs peddling, nepotism, fraud, speed money or embezzlement. For Otiite (2003),

Corruption means the pervasion of integrity or state of affairs through bribery, favour, or moral depravity; it involves the injection of additional but improper transactions aimed at changing the moral cause of events and altering judgments and position trust. It consists of the doers and [the] receivers of informal, extra-legal or illegal act to facilitate matters. It is in this sense that one sees corruption as a lubricator of the social system, a means by which to overcome economic obstacles and bureaucratic red-tapism...

Studies have shown that from 1960 to date, Nigeria has had the misfortune of being ruled by a number of corrupt political leaders. In the First Republic, corruption in the country assumed a number of dimensions ranging from massive rigging of elections, stuffing of ballot boxes, outright bribing of voters, etc. to collaborating with law enforcement agents to further the course of one party against the other (Dode (2007:7). As regretted by Adibe (2012) cited in Odo (2012), the politicians entrusted to protect the common patrimony of Nigerians steal the country blind; law enforcement officers see or hear no evil at a slight inducement; government workers drag their feet and refuse to give their best; organised labour, including lecturers of

public universities and other tertiary institutions, often embark on indefinite strikes at will; journalists, lawyers, academics, security personnel, etc. request and/or accept *brown envelopes* to manipulate truth, justice or merit for the otherwise. Unfortunately, this is how corruption commonly obtains in Nigeria.

This work considers ‘Ambassadors of poverty’ a compound word that refers to bad and corrupt leaders, usually imposed on the masses, who misrepresent their people and the nation, loot and empty the state treasury, leaving the people and the state impoverished, helpless, stagnant, confused and perpetually underdeveloped. Generally, ambassadors are regarded as renowned persons of noble character, diplomats, who represent their people and places (states) in foreign states/areas – in the Diaspora. They are expected to be honest, responsible, reliable, exemplary, and their people’s advocates /*the saviour of the people*/ (line 10, stanza 2). Unfortunately, the Nigerian elites and bourgeoisie, especially the chief state custodians, are the complete opposites of [real] ambassadors. Umeh describes them thus:

Ambassadors of poverty are  
The corrupt masters of the economy  
Patriots in reverse order  
Determined merchants of loot  
Who boost the economy of the colonial order  
To impoverish brothers and sisters at home  
Office loafers in the guise of workers  
Barons of incompetence  
Position occupants and enemies of service  
Locked in corrosive war of corruption  
With their peoples treasury /line 17/  
And killing their future  
The dubious-sit-tight ‘patriots’  
Frustrating the corporate will of their followers

Although politicians are the prime ambassadors of poverty, other elites and the any members of the masses who indulge in any forms of corruption are also ambassadors of poverty. According to Umeh, they are /the political elite/, /the rancorous elite/, /the elusive importers/, /those whose actions and in-action/ reduce their people’s expectations to nothingness/ and /all of us in-actions/. Stressing the particular set of leaders that are ambassadors of poverty in Nigeria, Umeh’s words read:

The political elite  
In air conditioned chambers  
And exotic cars  
Tucked away from  
Their impoverished constituencies  
The rancorous elite  
In battle of power  
And their peoples’ wealth  
The round trippers  
The elusive importers  
Of unseen goods and services  
Who trip the economy down

By tricking from M  
For harvest of dollars as import  
When their people see neither money nor food

Umeh also lashes /the able-bodied men on the streets/ who have no motive, vision and mission and misuse their body for worthless things, such as political thuggery, hired assassination, ritual killing, armed-robbery, theft, burglary, motor parks touting, hooliganism, cultism, criminality of all kinds, and what have you. He blames them for shying away from farming and other meaningful entrepreneurial ventures and often drifting from rural areas to urban areas. He also blames all for failing to do what they ought to do that they never do. Umeh informs that having been ridden by poverty, the ordinary citizens /bargain away/ their conscience in the marketplace to assuage their hunger and master’s will. Ambassadors of poverty also /steal our collective job/ and leave many youths, especially graduates, perpetually jobless– unemployed and underemployed.

#### 4. AMBASSADORS OF POVERTY: AN OVERVIEW

‘Ambassadors of Poverty’ is Philip Umeh’s satirical poem that ridicules the corrupt ruling class and followers– failed leadership and followership– and poetically offers several suggestions for change and betterment. It is a nine-stanza of unequal length, with the least stanza being seven lines and the longest, fourteen lines. It is richly styled with figures of speech, simple amidst complex language. Metaphor is used deeply and effectively.

It looks at Nigerian political leaders, depicted as symbols in inept and corrupt leadership in Africa. It centres mainly on Nigerian leaders, who are lampooned for turning the giant of Africa into one of the world’s most corrupt and poorest countries. The poetic tone is satirical and pungent, as Umeh discusses how the mismanagement of Nigeria amounts to impoverishment by the state custodians. He avers that poor leadership is the bane of Nigeria development, growth and democracy, which has manifested in the impoverishment of the people owing to self enrichment, the lack of basic social amenities and infrastructure, mismanagement, misappropriation, embezzlement, maladministration and ineptitude, and their enrichment of the West, who are already rich, developed and civilised.

The West is indicted by the poet for hypocrisy, which has helped in sustaining bad leaders in office in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. This is neo-colonialism, eroding our society. In stanza five, the Westerners are blamed for sponsoring and fuelling numerous African wars of attrition with sophisticated weapons and harmful technology (Nwachukwu-Agba et al., 2001:245). In the same vein, the Nigerian citizens are blamed by the poet for not having taken proactive and pragmatic measures [actions] to replace the irresponsible leaders— ambassadors of poverty— with responsible, credible real ambassadors (leaders). Nigeria constitutes the microcosmic representation of the ugly

development in Africa in particular and such other parts of the globe.

Satirising the African post-colonial era of Western mimicry by the leaders and the ruled alike, the former more, Umeh stylistically drives home his satiric message with several poetic techniques, such as simple yet sophisticated diction, wit, sarcasm, irony and humour, among others. With metaphor, the poem becomes interesting for its melancholic yet accessible discourse, which is also a serious one. Complex euphemism and paradox are the predominantly used techniques in the poem, which express the poet's sarcasm the more. The metaphoric title employed exemplifies this. At different points, the poet's tone moves from anger to defiance, to irony and finally to desperation and sarcasm. The blank unrhymed nature of the poem showcases the common trend in modern lyrical African poetry, which tends to employ elements of orality, song, lyricism and prosaic language for easy and accessible effects. This style has been popularised by African poets like Christ Okigbo, Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, and a host of others (Nwachukwu-Agbasa et al., 2011:249).

In the poem, the poet succinctly discloses why political analysts and social commentators have classified Nigeria and many other African countries as failed states, which is as a result of their inability to generate purely indigenous/self (African) culture, norms, values, governance/democracy and institutions different from the colonial ones; and the absence of credible, honest, virtuous, responsible and dedicated leaders who take decisions that are in the best interests of their citizens and states. Studies show that Nigeria has incessantly produced greed, egoistic and dubious political leaders, whose misrule— failed leadership/elitism, maladministration, mismanagement, embezzlement, misappropriation, etc.— has been plaguing the growth, development, politics, culture, social and economy of Nigeria (Besong, 2016) and thus blighting the nation's destiny (Nwachukwu-Agbasa et al., 2011:249). It is against this backdrop of bad leadership/misrule and mismanagement of Nigeria that Philip Umeh has written the poem: 'Ambassadors of Poverty.'

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopts the neo-Marxist political economy approach in its analysis. The central position of political economy is that production of material value is the basis of social life (Kulukov, 1886 and Nikitin, 1983). All other social activities, including culture and ethnicity revolve around the material condition of life. According to this perspective, the starting point for the analysis of society is that social life is determined, in the main, by economic production. That is, what is produced, how and who produces it and how the product is shared is of primary concern to the survival of humanity. This is the main source of social conflict, which might come in form of ethnic, political, or religious conflicts (Yecheo, 2006).

Magubane (1969:51) directs our attention to the role of social structures, maintaining that particular consideration should be given to: the material basis of society, the nature of the social system, the political organisation, the structure of social consciousness, the ideological and socio-psychological orientation of the members of the society, views of the ruling classes and various social groups, and the rivalry between the various groupings within the ruling circles. Neo-Marxist political economy approach operates alongside such social variables as economic, ideological, political, religious, ethnic, etc. factors. The major assumptions of this approach are why it is adopted for this study.

## 6. STATE CUSTODIANS' SINS OF CORRUPTION IN 'AMBASSADORS OF POVERTY'

The following are the kernel themes of *Ambassadors of Poverty*:

- (i) The corruption of political office holders and its adverse effects on the society;
- (ii) The hypocrisy and negative influence of the Western world on post-colonial Africa;
- (iii) Mediocrity and the incompetence of corrupt leaders and public office holders;
- (iv) The destruction of the collective psyche and morals of the citizens due to corruption;
- (v) The corruption of power;
- (vi) The stratification of society between the rich political class and the poor ignorant masses;
- (vii) The destruction of human values and hope and their replacement by social retrogression;
- (viii) The lack of direction and purpose due to poverty and listlessness of the youth;
- (ix) The collective malaise and lethargy imposed by bad leadership and poverty on the populace (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al., 2011:245-247).

The Nigerian state custodians, right from independence, have been grievously sinning against the state and the populace in various ways, manners, phases and rates. It began with political tension tied to and fuelled by elites' rhetoric's, ethnicity, religious fundamentalism, party factions, fractions and fraternities; power contestation; serial coups and the attendant military dictatorship, tensions, gross human rights abuse and deprivation, intimidation, loot, high assassination and wanton killings; rebellions and civil war; vandalism, mutiny, genocide, etc. to the current resurfaced past crimes in new dimension amidst freshly emerged ones, including westernisation, neo-colonialism, the wash-off of indigenous cultures, norms, values, ethics and aesthetics; racism and discrimination; bribery and corruption; partial justice; criminality, fraud and bankruptcy; failed leadership; *godfatherism*, electoral crimes, blood money ritual, human trafficking, drugs peddling, smuggling, inciting, sponsoring and fuelling ethno-religious crises and communal clashes, extra-judicial killing; to mention but a few, with corruption being the springboard of almost all others. Odo (2012:15)

lends credence to this thus: corruption is a key factor in every crisis that had rocked the Nigerian nation since independence. Worried by corruption rate in Nigeria since independence and the adverse effects, legion scholars have written on corruption. The disastrous impact and consequences of corruption on the Nigerian nation was attested to by Obasanjo (1999), in his presidential swearing in speech on 29 May, 1999, when he said, 'Corruption, the greatest single bane of our society today will be tackled head on; no society can achieve anything near its full potential if it allows corruption to become the blown cancer it has been in Nigeria.'

The above promise was never fulfilled as Obasanjo only led his fellow ambassadors of poverty to the extreme impoverishment of the Nigerian masses, the electorate, leaving them and the society helpless, in perpetual penury, retrogression, collective malaise, eroded human values and western mimicry, with its negative influence. Instances of corruption by Obasanjo along with his administration state custodians are too numerous to mention. In August 1999, members of the national legislature provoked public outrage with their decision to award themselves US \$30,000 each just to furnish their houses, which they actualised thereafter, not minding the counter position of the impoverished helpless masses. Obasanjo has often been described by many analysts and critics as one who lacks the credibility to condemn others (e.g. Goodluck Jonathan) for corruption and bad leadership. He [Obasanjo] over-perpetrated evils against the Nigerian state, including bidding to extend the established presidential tenure of four years. He has been accused of several genocide incidents (e.g. the Ziaki-Biam 2001 Tiv-Jukun crisis, the Ogidi, Bayelsa military invasion, among others) (Hagher, 2001). 'EFCC and ICPC, his anti-corruption agencies have failed the Nigerian society in combating corruption. All the so far exposed cases of corruption by those in authorities have not been duly judged and punished, as these cases are often manipulated, covered up and justice not delivered to the people. Resources have been siphoned by Nigerian politicians to foreign accounts, as they purchase numerous luxurious cars, and mansions in London, U.S., Dubai, South Africa, etc. (Jeje, 2012: 9-10). Umeh describes them as well as the situation thus:

The corruption masters of the economy  
With their head abroad  
And anus at home  
Patriots in reverse order [who patronise other  
countries at the expense of theirs]  
Determined merchants of loot  
The political elite  
In air exotic cars  
The rancorous elite  
In battle of supremacy  
For the control of power  
With white man's machine  
All of us whose in-actions  
Steal our collective job

As Uke (2009) notes, for a period of a regime in government, \$10 Billion may be borrowed; \$30 may be corrupt taken abroad by the leaders into their private accounts; and because of corruption, to carry out a project in Nigeria costs more than double the normal price elsewhere. In the 1960's, Nigeria's level of development was ranked the same with the 'Asian-Tiggars', but today, Nigeria is no way to compare with these countries that have gone far in development, technologically and otherwise, while Nigeria still battles with underdevelopment (Uke, 2009). Rather, Nigeria has grown deeper in poverty and underdevelopment, ranking as one of the most corrupt and poor nations of the world with a mono-culture economy based on oil and gas. Those are the consequences of the pervasive corruption that leaves the masses impoverished by the leaders and other elites. Philip Umeh describes the impoverishment of the masses and society along with the effects thus:

...impoverish brothers and sisters at home  
...killing their future  
Frustrating the corporate will of the followers  
The beleaguered, hungry and famished  
Owners of the land  
People priced out of their conscience and power  
Incapacitated by their destitution  
Of crispy mind and food aroma  
Their impoverished constituencies  
Lying prostrate  
With death traps for roads  
Mud for water, candle for light  
Underneath trees for schools  
Rats for protein  
Fasting as food  
And alibi as governance

The above aptly captures the misdeeds of and the ugly situation caused by ambassadors of poverty. As a result of the ugly situation, the impoverished poor resort to worthless and ill-living, yielding to the exclusive whims and caprices of the dubious inhuman leaders and elites. The poet informs viz:

Counterpoised by deprivations  
As the corpses of their able bodied men  
Women and children lie unmourned  
...their people see neither money nor food  
Hungry and desperate  
Constituting willing tools in the hands  
Of political overlords  
For mission of vendetta  
Against political foes  
In their fight for power  
While their people lie in surrender  
Having been defeated by poverty  
Under the weight of poverty  
To assuage our [their] hunger

The enemies of the poor masses are the political profiteers, the swindlers, those in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10% of this and/or that, those that seek the country's permanent division so that they could remain in offices as governors, law-makers or representatives, ministers, commissioners, etc. or VIPs, those who make this country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted the society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds, other dubious elites outside the political sphere, and all who impoverish and misrepresent Nigeria and the populace in one way or the other (Chigo, 2010). According to Wolfenshon (1999), corruption is a severe problem in some poor countries not because the people [as a whole] do not truly want integrity in public life; it rather flourishes because conditions are ripe for it. Corruption is why Nigeria that could be one of the most prosperous nations remains underdeveloped, as it has squandered oil and mineral wealth, generated horrendously, unfair income distribution and has become notorious as one of the world's most corrupt countries (Awojobi, 1982). Politicians are prime architects of Nigeria's woes. As Adibe (2012) cited in Odo (2012) notes, 'The politicians entrusted to protect the common patrimony of Nigerians steal the country blind.' Other state agents follow suit— law enforcement officers now see inducement as part of their professional ethics; civil servants are fond of truancy, laziness and charging for free services as well as adding extra-charges to government-set bills; incessant strikes have become the order of the day for organised labour, including lecturers of public institutions; most academia are now fond of extorting students and harassing the female students for sex, journalists and lawyers accept 'brown envelopes' to turn truth/justice on its head; police and military personnel harass, intimidate, molest, extort and kill civilians for no just cause; contra-banned goods, weapons, ammunitions, etc. are smuggled into the country unchecked because of the corruption in the Nigerian Customs Service; Immigration personnel, like Federal Road Safety Corps personnel and Vehicle Inspection Officers, engage in sharp practices of all kinds, including extra-charges for passports; and so on.

The foregoing cases of corruption are poetically captured by Umeh. In the poem, he highlights the harmful and destabilising effects of excessive or unlimited power. The poet talks about the corrupt leaders, who have planted themselves in office through political scheming and acts of violence, through which they subject the masses to abject poverty: /frustrating the corporate will of their followers/ (line 21). Umeh regrets that the quest for justice, accountability and good governance is usually abandoned by the oppressed followers, who are left with the capitalist struggle principle — survival of the fittest. Umeh further notes that the destruction and loss of collective psyche and morals due to corruption have left the masses psychological washed-off. The people are abused, used and abandoned, for which they have lost their self-esteem, dignity, zeal and

capability, since their consciences have been bought by /crispy mint and food aroma/ [l.27] (Nwachukwu-Agbada, et al., 2011:246).

Political criticism is central to the poem, as the poet emphatically criticises politicians whose corrupt practices as well as bad governance (leadership) incapacitate and impoverish the masses. With corruption personified, the poet, Umeh, satirises the political elite, stressing that their despicable irresponsibility has given birth to numerous socio-political problems that bedevil the nation and its people. These corrupt politicians loot the country's treasury via misappropriation and embezzlement of public funds meant for development, and stockpile in foreign accounts. They transact and establish businesses and build estates/houses overseas, and by so doing, enrich and develop the already rich/developed nations. It is in view of this that the poet blames the West for aiding Nigerian (and other developing nations') leaders in corruption. These state custodians' acts of impoverishing their homeland and people to enrich the alien— the West— is bitterly expressed in the whole of stanza one (lines 1-8). The extreme systemic corruption also results in frustration, listlessness and uncertain future for the youth. The people's hope is completely lost, having been eroded by the corrupt leaders, who plagued them, women, youth and children, to the extent of becoming forced by their predicaments and the prevalence of corruption to engage in crimes and social vices to solve their needs: /...defeated by poverty/ /...their people lie in surrender/ (ll.81-2).

## **7. SOCIAL CLASS STRATIFICATION EFFECTS**

The poet highlights the wide gap created between: the poor and the rich, women and men, youths and adults, such that Nigeria is ruled by only adult and aged oligarchs, the people's monsters, to the near complete exclusion of youths (and erstwhile, women), the literates and the illiterates, the masters (the state custodians/ leaders) and the servants (the poor Nigerian masses), the oppressors and the oppressed, the law makers and the law breakers, the colonisers and colonised, and the ambassadors and their people— the representatives and the constituencies. Stanzas four and five revolve around the stratification of the Nigerian society, with its attendant adverse effects on the lower class. The poet talks about /the political elite/ in air conditioned chambers/ /and exotic cars/ with tearful stories of rip-off/ tucked away from/ their impoverished constituencies/ (ll.29-34). These lines capture the superficial and mundane values treasured by the political elite. The lower class, on the other hand, are presented with /death traps for roads/ mud for water/ candle for light/ rats for protein/ (ll.36-41). Philip Umeh vilifies them—politicians, elites, bourgeoisies, oligarchs, and the other dubious public office-holders and civil servants— for proffering inept leadership that has left the people without a sense of focus and direction under the thrones of corrupt leadership. The applauded development status of England, Japan, China, America and the other developed nations is a

function of their elite's cohesion on national development exploit. This implies that their elites never misuse or loot their resources, unlike those of Nigeria and the like corrupt nations.

The above thus points to the fact that Nigerian elites constitute the kernel problem of the nation, as they misuse and loot its resources, as well as teach the masses bad ways of living, and thereby under-develop it perpetually. Nigeria is said to be paraded with elites who regard themselves as the canonical representatives of their personal, ethnic and religious interests. These days, elites organise their kinsmen to make various demands on the state. Rather than coming together to transform the nation economically, elites mobilise their tribal forces under sub-national organisations to threaten national survival (Kia and Vurasi, 2013:165). Elites' qualities are essential for national development, unity, peace, progress, and national integration, or the otherwise. The elites make or mar their societies, the systems therein and the development. Therefore, when the elites of any society fail in their responsibilities, they become 'ambassadors of poverty.' And, as Kia and Vurasi (2013:165) note, the failure or success of a nation's development depends to a very great extent on elite's effectiveness in knitting together political influence so that it responds to the national demands of the system. Against that backdrop, Umeh thus describes Nigerian elites as ambassadors of poverty. Although he solely focuses on the political elite, all other elites, in principle, are not left out. The political elite are a microcosmic poetic representation of the whole elites in Nigeria and those of such other parts of the world in general.

## 8. NEGATIVE WESTERN INFLUENCE ON POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICA

According to Nwachukwu-Agbada et al. (2011:245), the corrosive and negative influence of the West on Nigeria and other African leaders in post-colonial Africa is highlighted in different stanzas of 'Ambassadors of Poverty.' The poet reasons that Western nations encourage African leaders, especially those of Nigeria, to embezzle government funds, which when often deposited in foreign accounts and invested in foreign multi-national corporations/businesses, their economies get more developed while Africa's and Nigeria's get more deteriorated and much less developed, having been impoverished. This implies that and shows how Nigerian leaders and their likes develop the already developed West and impoverish and under-develop the underdeveloped/impoverished Nigeria (Africa), thereby sustaining the negative gestures, deeds and legacies (sins) of the colonialists, their yet better predecessors, in/against Nigeria (Africa). Post-colonial Nigerian (African) leaders chastise the ruled with sharp irons and rods worse than their predecessors' horsewhip chastisement.

The poet, Umeh, lampoons the West that claims to support the economic emancipation of the people of the so-called Third World African nations, a continent the same

Westerners had invaded, impoverished and failed (Bolton, 2007; Rodney, 1972), and then turn 'blind eyes' or deaf ears to the excesses of political leaders in Nigeria and other parts of Africa (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al., 2011:245). All their supports are fraught, dubious, profit-oriented, politically-masterminded, cajoling and a mirage. The poet maintains that the West consistently aids bad leadership in Africa (Nigeria), describing the dubious leaders as the *office loafers*, so that it could pry itself as a saviour to the continent (nation). It also fuels and sponsors numerous African wars (e.g. ethnic cleansing, culture attribution, etc.) with weapons and harmful technology. In view of the menace of culture attrition, neo-colonialism and westernisation of the West, Besong (2016:4) observes,

The extreme contemporary shift from everything Nigerian/African to Western ways, culture, values and norms is decried by the poet, [Odey] Robert, in what he entitled 'Who becomes the Owner of our Treasures?' He poetically laments on the trend of western mimicry as to westernising Nigerians and Africans in post-colonial times, most especially this 21st century, championed by the elites, leaders and social institutions led by the mass media and science and technology. ...Robert's 'Lawless Law House' satirises the gross misconduct of Nigerian law makers in several states and the National Chambers whose bad legacy (example) of often fighting in the legislative houses has made politics a wasteful venture to the younger generations.

The West tends to assume the 'supremacy of God' over developing nations, which had been/are impoverished, stripped naked, battered, raided, underdeveloped and cleansed by its powerful nations of Europe and America. They show unlimited authority anywhere anytime they like. The ageing and post-World War international unions of the West, such as Western Union, European Union, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc., are neo-colonialism agents to sustain European and American imperialist 'supremacy.' That is basically why the Blacks are only given menial positions and jobs in these bodies. They politick unquestioned through near-covert fancied racism and rhetoric, 'justified' by their development, advancement, civilisation, education, religion and politics (Besong, 2016:6) With Africa subjugated and dominated, Western culture and European mode of civilisation began to thrive and outgrow those of Africa, wiping out African cultural heritage. Traditional African cultural practices paved the way for foreign way of doing things as Africans became fully 'westernised.' Western culture now is regarded as frontline civilisation. African ways of doing things became primitive, archaic and regrettably unacceptable in public domain. Not only were certain aspects of the material culture in the colonies got lost or destroyed, colonial societies also lost the power and sense of cultural continuity, such that it became practically impossible to recover the ability to strive for

cultural process/progress on their own terms. As (Mimiko, 2010:641-42) observes,

The social fabric was completely devastated and a new culture of violence was implanted. Traditional African systems of conflict resolution were destroyed and, in their places, nothing was given, the democratic process, rudimentary thought, it was, but with great potential as accompanies every human institution, was brutally uprooted and replaced by the authoritarianism of colonialism. A new crop of elites was created, nurtured, and weaned on the altar of violence and colonialism, armed with the structures of the modern state to continue to carry out the art and act of subjugation of the mass of the people in the service of colonialism.

The above assertion is corroborated by Kasongo (2010:314), as he submits that one could infer that when westernisation was imported to African countries, the hidden side of modernism was materialist interest; adding that the colonial factor was essential to the understanding of the process of westernisation in Africa itself. In addition, the holistic distortions of the hitherto well-organised African societies in every sphere of life pointed to the depth and effectiveness of colonisation in the process of westernising African societies and their culture. The political effects include:

- Distortions of natural boundaries without due recourse to antecedent institutions and cultures.
- Submerged and dismantled indigenous institutions, including traditional institutions, and in its place, a foreign rule was established.
- The introduction of Westminster liberal democracy, which does not work [well] in Africa. Before the imposition of liberal democracy and the submergence of Africa's democratic processes by westernisation, there existed typical democracy that was inherent in Africa. It is rather feasible and appropriate to arrive at the principle of democracy using African forms, patterns and processes than to imitate Western liberal democracy that continuously remains a mirage in Africa. For instance, in 1993, Nigeria adopted the open-secret ballot [election] form in her general elections, which was largely acclaimed to be much more successful in terms of voting (Dare, 2010).
- Economically, local economies have been relegated, abused and dabbled. The economy is tailored by the tenets of Western economy. Nigeria's economy is exploited by the elites and the bourgeoisie—they plundered and still plunder all. The drastic shift from agriculture, production mode and entrepreneurship [local enterprises] results to food crisis, economic melt-down, hunger and starvation, and the change from communalism to capitalism and neo-liberalism.

- Socially, Nigeria's indigenous social systems have been grossly dabbled, abandoned and destroyed, e.g. family and marriage systems. Individualism [recluse living], which is not African/Nigerian has taken over the contemporary Nigerian (African) society (Kasongo, 2010; Dare, 2010).

More so, materialism quest effects of Western influence are also grave. Materialism has been identified by Ifeanacho (2010:152) as 'one enduring Nigerian value'. The quest for wealth accumulation is responsible for the high rate of corruption in Nigeria. Capitalism and flexible accumulation of wealth has influenced the age-long contentment for wealth. People acquire wealth enough for their lifetime, their children, grand children and great grand children. Materialism gives rise to 'conspicuous consumption' — an expensive lifestyle common with the upper class in the society. Similarly, Schaefer (2005:205) maintains,

Those at the top of the social hierarchy typically covert part of their wealth into 'conspicuous consumption', purchasing more automobiles than they can reasonably use and build houses with more rooms than they can possibly occupy. Or they may engage in 'conspicuous leisure', jetting to a remote destination and staying just long enough to have dinner or view a sunset over some historic locale.

Nigeria does not manufacture cars, but Nigerians, the elites and the bourgeoisie in particular, are among those who own and use the most expensive and flashy cars in the world, which they most times, acquire through dubious means. This class of people place order from foreign nations for everything they need. They hold their weddings in Five-Star Hotels and go for honeymoon abroad. The social structure of the Nigerian society is negatively impacted on by the West vis-à-vis westernisation and neo-colonialism.

Corruption is a negative value that militates against the development of the Nigerian society. The nation has not lived up to its expectation as the giant of Africa. There is a disconnection between leadership, the lead, and the positive values and attitudes consistent with national goals. Successive governments have made efforts at fighting corruption in Nigeria, but all to no avail, as the attempts have always been hampered by poor execution. Notable of these efforts is the 'War against Indiscipline' (WAI) programme of the Buhari/Idiagbon regime (December, 1983–August, 1985). This programme sought to re-orientate, inculcate and compel Nigerians to behave in ways consistent with established norms. In 2003, the Obasanjo administration established anti-graft agencies in the fight against corruption. They are Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent and Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). The National Orientation Agency is also a federal government agency charged with the function of teaching and enlightening the populace on the national goals and aspirations. Yet, amidst all these, corruption remains the same, and rather degenerates. It has even crept deep into



religious organisations, the supposed ideal fighters of corruption. For example, as Ifeanacho (2010:153) observes,

Most of the churches preach prosperity and emphasise giving to God. Many lecturers have perfected graft practices that enable them extort money from students. The Nigerian police have so institutionalized 'Egunje' [collection of money from members of the civil society, drives in particular], that it has become impossible to eradicate.

This greed for money and material things has worsened the social ills in the society. Everybody wants to get rich without any useful means of getting income. Armed robbery, kidnapping and militancy are the order of the day. Sophisticated weapons are used to disarm the security and facilitate loot. A new dimension of the get-rich-quick syndrome is in the use of information technology to defraud people. Cybercrime is now a popular crime, involving different age groups, mostly youth. The get-rich-quick syndrome has further been entrenched into the social system by the quest for titles. The more titles you have, the more you command respect. These days, it is very common for anyone, whether of a questionable or an impeccable character, to acquire and/or be honoured with several titles, including those that never existed in that area/kingdom before, so as for the monarchs to easily make quick-money and/or gain cheap favours from the dubious politicians and their like elites in other sectors, who quest for titles and more titles. The deadliest materialism effect on the education sector is the continuous erosion of the standards enshrined in this system/sector. Examination malpractice is extremely encouraged. Subsequently, mediocrity, as against merit, is institutionalised.

## 9. CONCLUSION

Philip Umeh's 'Ambassadors of Poverty' is a revolutionary poetic satire that calls for change from bad leadership/failed public representation to the supposed one. It awakens the impoverished Nigerian (African) masses of the need to fight against oppressive and despotic leadership rather than playing on with such leaders anyhow. He sympathises with the masses on the man-tailored undue predicaments, while informing the elites of their failure as well as the dire need to turn a new leaf, as all their current deeds are sins against the state and its people. He also upholds *Nigerianity/Africanity*— originality, advocating a retrace to the good abandoned indigenous ways/systems of life that obtained in classical times in Nigerian and Africa at large (see Robert, Besong & Dibia, 2016).

## 10. RECOMMENDATION

That which is right (indigenous or alien) must be done always. Sins are crimes; they hurt and are evil. It is high time everyone, leader or follower, home and abroad, stopped plaguing Nigeria [Africa]. Everyone must debase from sins, so they flee from them. To everyone and the leaders of all sectors/regards in particular, being a bad leader/follower

implies being an ambassador of poverty; thus, turn a new leaf henceforth and become a good ambassador, with worthwhile legacies. Never be a failed or incompetent representative. And, soil not thy pure hands! Wash off the stains and sin no more! Then, 'chastity' would take precedence.

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