



The 21st Century Macbeths in Nigerian Politics

Jan Cyprian Dayop

B.A Theatre and Film Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.1224.0240>

Introduction

From ambition, evil, assassination, and disorder in *Macbeth*, Love and hate, youth against age in *Romeo and Juliet*, Imprisonment and Freedom in *The Tempest*, Procrastination, Revenge, and Corruption in *Hamlet*, Sight, and Blindness, the Tortured and The Broken Body in King Lear, Jealousy, and Self-Deception in Othello to Betrayal and Power-play in *Julius Caesar*, Shakespearean themes have continued to resurface in Nigerian societies unendingly.

Delving into the profound influence of Shakespeare's time on contemporary societies unveils a dynamic interplay between the past and present. Shakespeare's thematic resonance, linguistic prowess, and timeless characters have cast an enduring shadow over many contemporary societies, Nigeria specifically. The relevance of Shakespearean literature in Nigeria cannot be downplayed.

For instance, Kramsch and Kramsch (2002) strongly believe that Shakespearean literature not only develops one's reading strategies, it also improves one's vocabulary and reflects, strongly, one's society. Buttressing the importance of the works of Shakespeare in the intellectual development of readers, O'Hanlon (2008) says no one can argue the fact that Shakespeare's language is extraordinary; with its monosyllabic culture and the rich use of pun that challenge one's intellect.

Shakespeare's linguistic artistry, universal and boundless themes, and archetypal characters continue to serve as templates for the nuanced portrayal of human nature across societies of the world. In essence, the presence of the works of Shakespeare in contemporary Nigerian society; unfolds as unmatched reflections, where Shakespeare's legacy emerges not as a relic of the past, but as a vibrant force impacting, describing, and shaping the narratives of the present and even near future of Nigeria.

According to Danner et al. (2019), "Shakespeare continues to take pride of place in the teaching of classical Literature in English as a second language classroom, (1). Metzger (2002) affirms the place of the plays of William Shakespeare in the overall literacy of students, stating that Shakespeare's plays provide avenues for students to explore ways in which languages and the context in which they are used, help improve students' literacy immensely.

Aside from Shakespeare's relevance and dominance in Nigeria's education system, even far more conspicuously, are Shakespeare's reverberating messages in Nigerian politics. One would not be out of place, to say that Shakespeare's muse must have been Nigeria, or better still, Shakespeare wrote with Nigeria in mind. The ultimate questions have always been, what happens when a man is faced with the dagger of ambition? What crosses man's mind when the sword of power stares at man in the face? Between morality, conscience, and ambition, which is man likely to navigate towards? Can man overcome the urge to be lord over his fellow men? What do men do when they get praised? These and many more are the questions that Macbeth must answer with balance and precision. Shakespeare's tragic hero Macbeth, a man of virtue, is corrupted by greed, ambition, and power. The 21st century Nigeria has in excess, the likes of Macbeth. In Nigeria, virtuous men have taken over the toga of evil as a result of power, ambition, and greed.

For paying deaf ears to the echoes of his psyche, the rhythm of his conscience, and the melody of his heart, Macbeth came face to face with his tribulations. For failing to heed the advice of many, and pay attention to their consciences, Nigerian politicians have visited their catastrophes.

Having realized the evil inherent in the idea of assassinating King Duncan, Macbeth said "We will proceed no further in this business..." (Act 1, Scene 7, Line 34). However, after a peg from Lady Macbeth, he recanted saying "I am settled and bent up corporal agent to this terrible feat". Nigeria is possessed of politicians whose words are as empty as empty vessels. On Sundays, they are seen in churches and before prophets, proclaiming the name of the Lord, just to get into offices on Monday and turn their backs against their words. This paper, the 21st Century Macbeths in Nigerian Politics, aptly identifies and locates if not all, the various characteristics and aspects of Shakespeare's Macbeth in the lives of the 21st century Nigerian politician.

Shakespeare's Macbeth: Plot Summary

William Shakespeare in his tragic play Macbeth, narrates the story of Norwegians, who are being helped by the Scottish rebels, who invaded Scotland. The Scots fiercely fight in uncompromising defense of their homeland and country and their beloved king Duncan. They indeed successfully achieved

victory in the defense. In the fierce battle to defend their country, one of the warrior soldiers stands out as the most distinguishable of them all. And his name is Macbeth. Macbeth, Thane of Glamis distinguishes himself in fighting off the invaders. After the battle, Macbeth and his friend Banquo come upon the weird sisters, three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become 'Thane of Cawdor', and one day King. They further prophesy that Banquo's descendants will be kings. The men don't at first believe the witches, but then learn that the old 'Thane of Cawdor' was a traitor helping the Norwegians and that Duncan has rewarded Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield by making him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth immediately fantasizes about murdering Duncan and becoming king, but he instantly rebukes the thoughts in his heart. The same day, Duncan announces that his eldest son, Malcolm will be heir to his throne. As Macbeth begins to succumb to his ambition, Duncan decides to spend the night in celebration at Macbeth's castle of Inverness.

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy of the three witches and King Duncan's imminent arrival. Lady Macbeth recalls that Macbeth's heart is filled with kindness, hence would not seize the opportunity to murder King Duncan and ascend Duncan's throne; then vows never to relent in pushing him to do so. Macbeth at first resists his wife's plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan, then pin it on the guards guarding King Duncan's room as scapegoats. The next morning, Macduff, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbeth murders the guardsmen of Duncan's room to keep them silent but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan's sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan's sons become the prime suspects in their father's murder.

However, because Banquo is aware of the prophetic message of the witches, his belly is filled with suspicion for Macbeth. And because of the prophecy that Banquo's line will reign as king, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat. Macbeth gives a feast, inviting many thanes, including Banquo. Macbeth hires two assassins to assassinate Banquo and his son as they ride to attend the feast. The men kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the feast, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, though no one else does. Macbeth's behavior and the death of Banquo make all the thanes suspicious. They begin to think of Macbeth as a tyrant. Macduff refuses to appear at the royal court at all and goes to England to support Malcolm in his effort to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth visits the three witches to learn more about his fate. They show him three apparitions who tell Macbeth to beware of Macduff, but also that no "man born of woman" can defeat him and that he will rule until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane (a castle). Since all men are born of women and trees can't move, Macbeth takes this to mean he's invincible. Yet the witches also confirm the prophecy that Banquo's line will one day rule Scotland. To strengthen his hold on the crown, Macbeth sends men to Macduff's castle to murder Macduff's family. Meanwhile, in England, Macduff and Malcolm prepare to invade Scotland. When news comes to England of the murder of Macduff's family, Macduff, weeping, vows revenge.

While the English and Scottish under Malcolm march toward Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking and imagining blood on her hands that can't be washed off. Macbeth has become manic, cruel, and haughty—many of his men desert Malcolm's side. In Birnam Wood, Malcolm and his generals devise a strategy to hide their numbers—they cut branches to hold up in front of them. As Macbeth prepares for the siege, Lady Macbeth dies, perhaps of suicide. Macbeth can barely feel anything anymore, and her death only makes him give a speech about the absurdity of life. Malcolm's forces appear looking like a forest marching toward the castle. Malcolm's forces quickly capture Dunsinane, but Macbeth himself fights on, mocking all who dare to face him as "men born of woman." But Macduff reveals that he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb (a cesarean section). Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is crowned as King of Scotland.

21st Century Macbeths in Nigerian Politics

As a tragic classic laced with unsavory, raw, crude, and brutal ambition, thirst, and insatiable rage for power, an ambition that does not hesitate to eliminate anyone and everything else that stands in its way, leading to spates of assassinations and endless episodes of murder, Shakespeare's Macbeth is the perfect mirror that depicts without mincing words, the uncontrolled ambition of Nigerian politicians.

Africa and in particular, Nigeria's political class eliminates anything that serves as an obstacle on his ladder to the throne or seat of power. This ugly thirst can be traceable to history. Nigeria's democracy has been and is still characterized by mindless political killings. There is hardly any election year that a politician is either not gunned down or brutally assassinated. Political assassination is murder (a usually prominent person) by a sudden and or secret attack, often for political reasons. It is usually a planned murder of who occupies or wants to occupy a position of public reckoning (Embu and Sam 2). Additionally, political assassination is the act of deliberately killing someone especially a public figure, for hire or political reasons (Joel, 78). Oladele submitted that, not long after the return of democratic rule in 1999 following fifteen years of uninterrupted military rule, Nigeria witnessed a troubling and massive wave of political assassinations. Political assassination became and is still today, an instrument of settling political scores in Nigeria (235).

History reveals that there have been disturbing accounts of politically motivated killings over the years in different parts of not only Nigeria but Africa at large. Painfully so, African independence, thus far, has been a record of tragedies in which the African leadership has played a delirious part. The leaders have largely contributed to political repression, assassinations, coups, and the pauperization of the masses in Africa (Thomas, 32).

To establish a broader background to this study, there is the need to draw attention to a handful of high-profile political assassinations recorded over the years in some African countries with emphasis on Nigeria as the main focus of this study. According to Embu and Samuel, one of the most talked about political assassinations of the 20th century was the killing of the hero of Congolese independence, Patrice Emeric Lumumba. As the first legally

elected minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Lumumba was assassinated on January 17th, in the year 1961, less than seven months after independence, (on the 30th of June, 1960).

Lumumba was killed for political reasons, according to various reports, both the US and Belgium were complicit in his murder (2). Another assassination in Africa that deserves mention is that of the Tunisian politician, Mohammed Brahmi, founder of the movement of the People's Party. He was murdered on the 25th of July 2013. After Brahmi's murder, all fingers were swiftly pointing at the governing "Islamist Ennahda party"(Embu and Samuel 2).

In Nigeria, one of the most horrific deaths that brought the terror of political assassination to limelight in the country was the murder of renowned crusading journalist, and founding editor of the NewsWatch magazine, Dele Giwa. He was killed by a mail parcel bomb in his Lagos home on the 19th of October, 1986 (Newswatch,3). Before his murder, Giwa was accused by a senior official of the directorate of military intelligence of illegally importing and stockpiling arms and ammunition to be used in staging a socialist revolution in Nigeria. Following, the allegation, he was later told it was a mere allegation, which he later received a parcel from the then head of state General Ibrahim Babangida, he opened it, and the package exploded leading to his death (The Nation Newspaper 2011).

In Nigeria still, on June 14th, 1996, Alhaja Kudirat Abiola, wife of the acclaimed winner of the presidential election held (on the iconic) June 12th, 1993, Chief MKO, Abiola was gruesomely murdered along Lagos-Ibadan express road. At the time of her assassination, her husband MKO Abiola was in detention (charged with false publication). Also, on December 3rd, 2001, the minister of justice and attorney General of the Federation, Chief Bola Ige was dastardly murdered in his bedroom at Ibadan Oyo state. The People's Democratic Party (PDP), which Nigeria's literary icon, Wole Soyinka referred to as a "nest of killers", was highly accused (Embu and Samuel 3).

The Guardian Newspaper of 2nd August 2003 quoted Soyinka in a press conference in Lagos reiterating "I repeat indeed, insist that there is a nest of killers within the PDP...it is evident that the vipers in the nest do not strike only outwards, but inwards". Shehu submitted that: "Of course, the murder case of Ige was muddled up and trial of suspects took several

twists and turns and severally, Judges stepped down from the case after realising the assassination was fueled by high Federal political set up" (Sani 54). Against the backdrop of these and many more, not to mention the well-known murder of MKO Abiola after the June 12th, election, and individuals and politicians across Africa that have been brutally murdered. Wole Soyinka in his first Intervention series laments thus:

We are a nation that kills our best. Generosity is a tainted word. The largeness of the heart is regarded as a medical condition, like an enlarged heart, requiring drastic intervention. Tolerance is ridiculed as a mark of weakness. And so, we kill the generous the large of heart, the tolerant. Even the symbols that should heal and bind the nation together are turned into agencies of death including those of faith, piety, and religion (Soyinka 6).

Soyinka's submission tells us that we have a history as a nation of seeing individuals cum politicians as threats to the status quo of authorities that must be eliminated at all costs or victimized instead of glorified. However, according to Offiong et al, "on a heartbreaking note, the democratic system of a society like Nigeria has been crippled and afflicted by sociopolitical malaise and political assassinations"(16). They went further to say "No country in the world can thrive in an atmosphere that is riddled with tension, apprehension, brutality, serial or targeted killings and assassinations. Nigeria, a nation that is yet to attain the status of a developed state can neither survive nor grow in such a brutality-ridden environment" (Offiong et al 16).

Describing the phantasy of a typical Nigerian politician that can lead him into doing everything and anything to hold a firm grip on power, the Nigerian dramatist, Ahmed Yerima in his play titled "The Angel, stated, in Nigeria, "Politics is one big game... a gamble... a serious game... the desire to have... to possess, the beauty of the office, the smell of the leather seats. The fast black fleet of siren cars, the fat-bottomed women, the greed, and the insatiable lust... the sweet smell of the crispy banknotes... all mingled (29). When a Nigerian politician thinks of all the aesthetics and ambiance of his office and the need to retain the same perpetually, he sees the need to crush any weapon fashioned against his ambition.

Nigerian politics violence, and or assassinations are like Siamese twins—glued to each other, and connected at the chest, abdomen, and pelvis. To support this position, Ahmed Yerima again in *The Angel*, posited "Violence from politics. Can one separate it? No. It is like separating rigging from elections. Life from death. A man from a woman. Unless of course, there is an attempt at a reversal of morality. It is the brother to politics... I say can one separate it? Hum? (29).

There is a dire need for morality to be brought back from the abyss of perversion where what is right and good has been made wrong and bad, and vice versa. The circle of political assassinations in the country is not a strange development. The list of (unresolved) politically motivated killings has now swelled and is non-exhaustive. Nowadays, it is safe to say the country Nigeria has witnessed the birth of modern Nigerian Macbeths who are perfectly succeeding Shakespeare's Macbeth in the execution of untamed human ambition and quest for power control.

Interestingly, like most over-ambitious wives of over-ambitious Nigerian politicians, lady Macbeth's ambition and thirst for queenship stubbornly outweigh her desire to see Macbeth become King. Hosting King Duncan, Lady Macbeth goaded Macbeth to kill the King so Macbeth could be king.

As it is in Nigeria, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth succeed in launching a killing spray to ascend the throne. But because the victory of evil is temporal, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth could not enjoy peace and quietness, with their proceeds of assassinations and murder. In Nigeria, we have had politicians who buried morality, massacred civility, and embraced impunity, evil, and conspiracy to ascend to different political seats, just to end up not living long enough to enjoy their poisoned chalice. Their post-traumatic stress disorder creeps in with hallucinations, violent flashbacks, and nightmares that end beautifully terrible.

To lure his perceived enemies into grave traps, Macbeth organizes elaborate and flamboyant political carnivals. This is a trick akin to the typical Nigerian politicians who plan banquets, dinners, and last suppers for their enemies with minced chicken, Italian wines, Chinese Cuisines, sumptuous meals, and imported beverages; just to fatten their opponents for slaughter.

Opening the play with the appearance of the three witches, chanting and addressing Macbeth in glowing, elitist, embellished terms "All hail Macbeth! Hail to Thee, Thane of Cawdor!" a title which even Macbeth was unaware he had been awarded, is truly admittedly strange. The presence of the witches and their flowery renditions can be interpreted in the Nigerian context in two folds: first, as the eulogies of political court jesters, all praising and singing hypocrites and yes men who often surround Nigerian politicians, cheering them into doom; professing and massaging the ego of the political nitwits, assuring them they will serve two terms in office and even get elevated to higher positions, whether the masses like it or not. Secondly, the witches can be viewed as unceremoniously corrupt and self-serving acclaimed religious prophets, who give politicians high hopes saying God has destined even clueless characters and village clowns for topmost leadership positions in the country. These high hopes by prophets of Baal is one of the many reasons Nigerian politicians approach political contests as a do-or-die affair; believing that their prophets already prophesied that they would occupy such positions of leadership.

In fact, according to... "Another school of thought thinks that the witches' pronouncement of Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor was an imposition on the Cawdorians and a threat to their sovereignty as a nation. Again, the witches' prophetic project had also relegated the people's franchise to choose their king, the king whose heroism was not only popular on the war fields, but also with the leadership qualities that would put smiles on the faces of many. This is branded imposition.

In an unwrapped view of an ideal world, imposition could be defined as the type of government where the most powerful in the society use their resources to forcefully place someone in an authority against the wish of the masses, to use it as a conduit for siphoning or looting the treasury for their selfish interests and personal aggrandizements. Or simply, it is government by the incumbent, of the incumbent, and for the incumbent."

For this school of thought, it is believed that if the three witches in Macbeth, sought the consent of the people of Cawdor before proclaiming Macbeth their king, their collective prayers and wishes would probably have brought a way out, for Macbeth, to ascend the throne bloodlessly. In Nigeria, the doctrine of imposition has been engraved in and adopted as the potent means of assuming power. Since the country returned to democracy in 1999, at the presidency, no president in Nigeria has ever been democratically elected by the people, for the people, and of the people. Instead, the country has been having presidents anointed by cabals and power brokers. At the National Assembly, Governorship, even at the local government level, the whole business has been that of imposition by a few power brokers who constitute themselves as Cabals, a 21st-century concept of dark fraternity.

Nigerian cabals, unlike the Shakespearean witches, are inordinately bent on committing all levels of atrocities to ensure that somebody who would shield them and act according to their instructions, is imposed on the people, but the witches only announced their prophecies and left Macbeth to his conscience for eventual determination and actions. Macbeth battles with his conscience, lady Macbeth, and his thirst for power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, indeed, on all fronts and shades of textual, metaphorical, contextual, and conceptual analysis of Shakespeare's Classic tragedy, Macbeth, Nigeria flashes through all the play's acts and pages; justifying this paper's depiction of Nigerian politicians being 21st century Shakespeare's Macbeths. The assassinations in the play and the untamed quest for power depict Nigerian politics in which political assassinations have eaten deep into its fabric and polity. Politically motivated killings in Nigeria have been in existence since pre-independent days. The inter and intra-political violence, war, and intrigues do the country no good at all, rather help to cripple the nation's democracy, politics, economy, and peace. Worthy of note is the fact that it becomes extremely difficult for a country riddled with brutality, hostility, tension, oppression, apprehension, wanton termination of lives/properties, and/or targeted assassination to thrive economically, socially, politically, and otherwise.

Therefore, to even re-echo Soyinka's exploration in the face of Nigeria fast transmuting into a battlefield of political killings: The killers among us must pause and reflect. The route to the mind is not the path of bullets nor the path of the blade, but the invisible, yet palpable paths of discourse that may be arduous but ultimately guarantee the enlargement of our private and social beings. Let the killings stop and the intercourse of minds begin. Let these killers understand that we do not simply lament this death, we are resolved to extinguish the impulse that lies behind it. We are bound in a common cause to terminate the impulse that takes our best, our brightest (Interventions I 11).

The ill wind of political violence blows no one any good as both the perpetrators and victims all get to feel and bear its devastating brunt somehow, somehow, and sometimes. Violence, in the form of assassination and any other, is not a normal element in politics and, therefore, must not be taken for granted. Sadly, the habit of youth formation as thugs and militia of political parties and politicians through the growing trend of violence in the political sphere to attain selfish goals has left quite several youths socialized as extremists and fierce in society in the face of even the slightest less sinister provocations.

The inability of the security and law enforcement agencies to unravel and resolve political killings is also a threat to the democracy and political climate of the country. The absence of judicial repercussion to serve as a deterrent to others and to thwart any recidivists' tendencies has given rise to the habit of impunity about politically motivated assassinations. This has been the bane for most playwrights. Many playwrights have taken time to address these issues either directly or indirectly. The country must put an end to 21st-century Macbeths in Nigeria.

References

Florman, Ben. "Macbeth Plot Summary." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 22 Jul 2013. Web. 11 Dec 2024.

Florman, Ben. "Macbeth: A Shakespeare Translation." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 11 May 2014. Web. 11 Dec 2024.

Embu and Igomu. The Politics of Assassination in Democratic Nigerian Society: An

Appraisal of Ahmed Yerima's Play, *The Angel*. Department of Theatre & Film

Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria. *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 4(10):

876-886, 2016 <http://www.hrpub.org>

Soyinka, Wole. *Interventions I*. Ibadan: Bookcraft Ltd., 2010. Print.

Kramsch, C. & Kramsch, O. (2002). The avatars of Literature in language study. *The Modern Language Journal* 84(1),553-573.

Metzger, M. J. (2002). The Villainy you teach me..." Shakespeare and AP English Literature. *English Journal*, 92(1),22-28.

O'Hanlon, J. (2008). Shakespeare's labour must not be lost in schools. Retrieved 9th September, 2024 from: <https://www.guardian.co.uk>.