

Reading Pan-Africanism through Biographical Narratives for Young Readers in Kenya

Dr. Colomba Kaburi Muriungi Ph.D.

Senior Lecturer

Department of Arts and Humanities

Chuka University

Kenya

Abstract

This paper examines the visibility of the discourse of Pan-Africanism in Kenya's children's literature through the Lion's series of biographies, whose original aim was to reclaim the historical voices in Kenya for young readers. Within this body of writing, there is a diversification of the history narrated by inclusion of African personalities who have played different roles in their own countries. This paper picks this strand of the biographies and argues that making such stories available for children is an important occurrence in the history of African children's literature because such biographies help children to understand the makers of African history. Specifically, the paper examines the biography of Kwame Nkrumah, by looking at styles superimposed in the text and the traits accorded to the character, which are useful in showing young readers the role Nkrumah played in pioneering the discourse of African unity. The paper concludes that like adult literature, contemporary children's literature is an important literary strand through which socio-political ideologies can be understood.

Key words: Children's literature, Biographies, Kenya, Pan-Africanism

1. Introduction

When the African continent in its independence is able to create the unity that's necessary to increase its strength and its position on this earth, so that Africa too becomes respected as other huge continents are respected, then, wherever people of African origin, African heritage or African blood go, they will be respected – but only when and because they have something much larger that looks like them behind them (Malcolm X, December 12, 1964; Quoted in Araia, 2006).

The above quotation captures the reasoning behind Pan-Africanism, a philosophy that was geared towards making Africans to first, believe in themselves, and then recognize their potential and unite to empower themselves. This paper is a study of how the discourse of Pan-Africanism has found its way into Kenya's children's literature. The paper is based on the Lion's series of biographies, introduced in Kenya by the *Sasa Sema* Publications. These biographies' main aim is that of telling narratives of Kenya's historical figures and heroes to children. The authors of these biographies claim the desire to reinvent Kenyan history, not through a historical project but through a literary intervention for the sake of young readers. This literary intervention is realized by the way the authors fictionalize history through the use of a variety of literary styles. For example, the use of dialogue, descriptions and allusions, resonate in almost all the texts. Within this body of writing, there is a diversification of the history narrated by inclusion of other African personalities who have played different roles in their own countries, especially towards achieving political independence and other important ventures. This paper picks this strand of the biographies and examines how characters from other African countries have had their stories retold to children through this literary avenue. While the series has recuperated stories of distinguished African figures and leaders like Haile Selassie, Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere and Nelson Mandela, this discussion concentrates on the biography of Kwame Nkrumah in order to understand how the ideology of pan-African is ingrained into children's texts. Other personalities, especially those that were part of the inception of the pan-Africanist agenda in Africa are mentioned in this article where necessary. The paper examines the traits accorded to the character and styles that are superimposed in the biography which are useful in showing children the role Nkrumah played in pioneering the discourse of African unity.

Specifically, the paper argues that the introduction of such stories into children's fiction thence demonstrate that philosophies of high magnitude like pan-Africanism do not have to wait for children to grow up so that they can be introduced to them in history; but that children can as well learn such ideas at a younger age through the literary intervention. Therefore recuperating such stories for children is read not just as a process of archiving them, but also as an expression of the Pan-African solidarity. Such biographies therefore not only present children with role models whom they can learn from but they are also useful tools in teaching children important historical lessons from Africa, and children can therefore understand the makers of African history in an interesting manner.

2. What is Pan-Africanism?

Many scholars view Pan-Africanism as an ideology that emphasizes African unity beyond identities confined by geography. It champions socio-political inclusiveness for all those who willingly claim or are compelled to identify with the Black race and Africa (Fanon 19967; Senghor 1977; Mkandawire 2005; Bah 2005; Biney 2011). It is a quest for a global Black or African community. Pan-Africanism is therefore an *aspirational* project towards a world informed by solidarities and identities shaped by a humanity of common predicaments. Therefore, far from promising a single identity, pan-Africanism is about offering a mental space for disparate identities to co-exist in freedom and dignity (Nyamnjoh & Katleho 2010). It also encompasses the ideas of total African independence (both political and economic), African agency, cooperation among African states, nationalist policies complementing continental and diasporic endeavors, active rediscovery of African history and past achievements (Poe 2003).

As a movement, Pan-Africanism did not originate in Africa, but in the West Indies, amid feelings of nostalgia about and occasional dreams of an eventual return to a lost home land – mother Africa. The term “Pan-Africanism” is credited to Henry Sylvestre-Williams, and Marcus Garvey, amongst others, renowned for organizing the largest Pan-African movement in history (Dieng 2005). The first pan-African conference took place in London in July 23-25 1900 and it was supported West Indians, West Africans, South Africans, and some White sympathizers. Subsequently, various pan-African conferences resulted in the formation of the Pan-African Federation in Manchester in 1944 by the International Service Bureau, and Jomo Kenyatta, Peter Abrahams and Kwame Nkrumah attended. This conference outlined its objectives as first, promoting the well-being and unity of African peoples and peoples of African descent throughout the world; secondly self-determination and independence of African peoples and other subject races from the domination of powers proclaiming sovereignty and trusteeship over them; and thirdly to secure equality of rights for African peoples and the total abolition of all forms of racial discrimination (Araia 2006)

Araia further notes that in March 1957 Ghana became independent and Nkrumah called the first pan-African conference of independent African in Accra from 15 to 22 April 1958. This first conference of independent African countries agreed to launch pan-Africanism in Africa; to promote economic cooperation; to appreciate one another's culture and above all, they agreed on the total independence of the continent and declared war on apartheid, which was then evident in South Africa. Nkrumah's slogan that “Africa must unite” underlines and provides foundation and scripting of pan-Africanism in Africa.

It is against this background and historical developments this paper explores scripting pan-Africanism in biographies written for young readers in Kenya. The paper seeks to establish the extent to which these biographies can be read as a basis to introduce young readers to the ideology. Hence the paper looks at how characterization and styles help readers to understand the motivation and resolve of Pan-Africanism.

3. What theory?

This paper utilizes postcolonial theory as a means to read the scripting of pan-Africanism in the biographies for children. According to Hall (2001) post-coloniality focuses on national and regional legacies of imperialism and colonialism. “It explores how images and issues of cultural identity can reveal some of the fundamental structures through which society makes meaning as well as how those structures must changes if culturally sanctioned oppression is ever to end” (267). Post-colonial theory therefore examines the cultural legacy of colonialism in colonized nations, African countries being some of them. Broadly speaking, post-colonialism is the study of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies. It is concerned with both how European nations conquered and controlled "Third World" cultures and how these groups have since responded to and resisted those encroachments. The ultimate goal of post-colonialism is combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures.

It is not simply concerned with salvaging past worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this period together, towards a place of mutual respect. This theory applies to the analysis done here because the personality whose narrative is under scrutiny makes effort to sensitize his fellow blacks on the importance of spurning the legacy of colonialism in Africa and the refusal of blacks to accept to be viewed as lesser beings than the white.

4. Demonstration of Pan-Africanism in the Text

The writing of biographies for young readers is read as a pedagogical device for children to learn complex aspects in a simpler manner. The incorporation of the Pan-Africanist ideology into children's texts is especially important as it helps to insurrect the original voices of the ideology in Africa at a time when some critics of the ideology see it has having lost its original purpose. For instance, Salma Maoulidi (2009) notes that the poll bearers of pan-Africanism in Africa were mainly early African leaders who have since died, been assassinated or deposed; and the current generation of leaders are not inheritors of this legacy. Maoulidi argues that the bulk of the adult population in Africa was born between 1985 and 1990, a period when the original objective of liberation and independence had been achieved, and therefore there is a challenge in substantiating the continued relevance of the ideology to this new generation of Africans.

Despite such arguments however, I reiterate that the very act of writing of biographies that help children understand the roots of pan-Africanism is an important literary intervention in the history of children's literature in Kenya. The styles, aspects of characterization and themes evident in the text, help children to decipher the pan-Africanist agenda.

In *Kwame Nkrumah: Passionate Pan-Africanist* by David Maillu, The idea of African solidarity is shown to have arisen from the common discrimination that Africans experienced in British colonies in Africa and as slaves in the Caribbean and the Americas. Nkrumah experienced some of these kind of discrimination while abroad (see page 25-26), the more reason he travelled back to Africa to help his people recognize their worth as Africans. The paratextual features are rather informative to the reader so that even before they start reading, they are aware that the text is about pan-Africanism. While most of the issues captured in this text are historical, the paratextual illustrations and explanations help to simplify them. Paratextual features refer to any additional text added to an author's published work, such as a book jacket, inside or back cover blurb, the title, author profile, and preface. For instance the title of the book is very telling; revealing that the person whose story you are about to read was a "passionate pan-Africanist". The blurb also gives further information:

Kwame Nkrumah was the first president of Ghana. He also became known and loved for his ceaseless advocacy of Pan-Africanism, the idea that Africa will become prosperous once all African nations unite into one great nation.

History texts feature the idea of unity of Africa being at the core of pan-Africanism. Thus as the as children begin to read, they are informed about the ideology from the cover, and therefore they will most likely seek to understand it by delving into the text. On the front cover of the book, there is the photograph of Nkwame Nkrumah wearing African attire and in his hand he carries a book with the title: *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, which is mentioned later in the text (see page 67).

While Pan-Africanism emphasized the idea of freedom from imperialism which is here notified by the title of the book, it also had a leaning towards negritude which emphasized the beauty of African culture, demonstrated by Nkrumah's regalia in the cover photo.

Another feature that makes the story friendly to the young readers is the fact that the author divides the story into different phases of life that Nkrumah went through. The narrative is divided into: Preface, Introduction, Young Kwame, America, The Roots of Pan-Africanism, Taking on the British Empire, Ghana, Unite or Perish and The Coup. Such divisions not only make it easy for children make meaning by reading the story bit by bit but they also help summarize the life of the personality whose narrative is told; from his young his age, studies abroad, his ideologies, his life as a president and his downfall.

In the preface the author also helps the reader to understand the kind of person whose story they are about to read:

Nkrumah saw it when others did not see it clearly. *New-colonialism* is eating the African heart and the way to combat it is for the whole continent to unite.... Nkrumah was the first modern African spirit to address Pan-Africanism passionately. Nkrumah lived ahead of time. What he said is, perhaps more important and relevant today in addressing the fate of Africa than it was during his time.... [He] created everlasting fires to warm the hearts of African fighters and liberators. And so I hope this book will help create many new young Nkrumahs who, with a dynamic spirit, realize the Pan-African dream [emphasis added] (ix-x).

From this quotation in the author's preface, the reader can already understand the meaning of pan-Africanism from the author's mouth; the ideology that enclaves freedom for Africans. The word new-colonialism is used here to help child readers understand the idea of neo-colonialism, implying colonial influence after political independence which is rather a "new" kind of it. Thus, as the reader starts reading the narrative they have a preliminary understanding not just about the figure of Nkrumah, but also his ideological standpoints.

In the introduction, we see a narrative that is told from a first person point of view which is a powerful voice that helps children to follow the story easily. In fact the narrator is presented as having already identified with Nkrumah and wanting to be named thus. This narrator notifies the reader that there was a man named Apronti from Nkrumah's land who was his father's greatest friend at the university in America. Presently he was visiting the narrator's father in Kenya who was on his way to South Africa and he is the one who narrates the story of Nkrumah to the narrator:

Every evening he would tell about Kwame Nkrumah. The name moved very much. It was the kind of man I would love to be. Apronti did not know that by the time we took him back to the airport to fly to South Africa, he had made me so fascinated with Nkrumah that I decided I should make the name mine (7).

This narrator entices the reader to identify with Nkrumah, just as he already has, making his character admirable and therefore forcing the readers to view him as a role model. The dialogue between the father and the narrator also helps the reader to have preliminary ideas on Nkrumah and his Pan-African ideology, as we see the father telling him:

Kwame Nkrumah was our hero. He was always in our mind, the only African hero we could show off with.... There were also Jomo Kenyatta and Haile Selassie, but they didn't have the great ideas about Africa that Nkrumah had.... It was Nkrumah's dream that one day Africa would become one nation called United States of Africa (3).

Thus at the very beginning of the text the reader is notified of what the Pan-Africanist ideology was all about and what remains thereafter is to read about the ideology through the personality's life. Nkrumah is presented here as a legend who readers should strive to imitate. The author therefore takes a careful consideration on the young readers' interests to entice them with a heroic personality that they can learn from. Subsequently, this narrative point of view changes to third person point of view, whereby the narrator tells the "story about Kwame Nkrumah as Apronti told it..." (7).

The third person point of view is a powerful, as it is all knowing and all seeing. The narrator is often aware of what the character feels and thinks. Through this point of view, the author reveals the various traits of Nkrumah in his endeavor to entrench the idea of pan-Africanism. First, he is presented as an inquisitive and clever boy:

[Nkrumah] was born with a curious mind. He wanted to know the place the white man came from.... He did not enjoy being in groups. But he liked to engage in discussions and ideas. He would listen more than speak. He spoke his mind when he felt it necessary, but he preferred being silent and listening, particularly listening to elders, who had a lot of knowledge. For that reason, the elders spoke well of him, saying, "Kwame has the spirit out of which great men are born" (10).

The writer therefore positions the personality as a gifted person who elders had a premonition about his success, so that even when readers witness his deeds later in life, they do not get surprised because he was born clever, curious and wise. Such traits are powerful in making the young readers identify with the character that is portrayed as a model for them. This demeanor is witnessed further when he joins school as he is represented as a bright pupil who became a pupil-teacher and later works hard and goes to study in the United States of America, with an aim of finding out why the whites felt superior to Africans as if they were older in the world than the blacks (17). Often, post-colonialist thinkers aim to expose and deconstruct the racist and imperialist nature of the assumptions which underlie the "logic" of colonialism of superiority.

Post-colonialism is a study of political and cultural change, and it involves, first, an initial awareness of the social, psychological, and cultural inferiority enforced by being in a colonized state, secondly, the struggle for ethnic, cultural, and political autonomy, and thirdly, a growing awareness of cultural overlap and hybridity, where the colonized being strives to find his/her identity.¹ Nkrumah's identification with the black person is shown to have developed early in Nkrumah's mind. While abroad we are told:

He did everything with the Gold Coast [Ghana] people in his mind. The ancestors seemed to always remind him, "Kwame Nkrumah, do it for us. Africa is your mother and she wants you to go and save her from economic slavery" (21).

Thus, although Nkrumah studies so hard and acquires so many degrees, he had a strong affinity for Africa and his country. This is contrasted with some of the black Americans, who claimed "the best a Negro can do is to forget all about Africa and become an American in every respect" (24). Such assertions, we are told, worried Nkrumah because he felt that "any black person anywhere in the world was his relative" (Ibid). The issues of identity with Africanism was therefore ingrained in Nkrumah's mind and the rest of his kind, which propels him later in life when he starts the Pan-Africanism campaigns abroad and in Africa.

However, the greatest influence and courage for Nkrumah concerning Pan-Africanism is shown to have come from some of the liberal black Americans. Maillu appropriates the history of Pan-Africanism and combines it with the narratives techniques to appeal to children:

It was during his last years in the United States when Nkrumah met some of the best brains he would ever meet in his life... who gave him great courage. One of those leading brains was William E. B. Du Bois, a great reformer and teacher at the time. Du Bois dreamed of a free and united Africa. He and his colleagues were saying: "Black people in America should be proud of Africa and African history. They should appreciate African values. They should try and help Africa develop and become modern" (27-28).

Subsequently, we are told, Nkrumah began embracing the whole of Africa as his heritage and claiming: "I'm a Pan-Africanist... this is because Africa will unite and become one nation one day... God is saying to us black people: you are black so that you may live in unity. There is great value in being black (28). The interaction between Du Bois and Nkrumah is shown to have marked the birth of pan-Africanism, with Du Bois, emphasizing to Nkrumah that there was nothing in color if one was responsible because "dogs respect each other according to the size of their fangs" (29). Seemingly it was time for Africa to sharpen their economic and military power fangs because that is what white use to enslave and colonize black people.

From the text therefore readers are made to understand that pan-Africanism called for responsibility of the black person all over the world to value their identity as blacks and to work hard to achieve unity, economic and military power that could match the whites or at least make blacks visible in the world and to strengthen the power of their defense. This is in line with Araia (2006) who argues that *Pan-Africanism* literally connotes a movement that embraces the ideology of liberation for continental and Diaspora Africans in the political, economic and cultural spheres. Above all, Pan-Africanism is shown to be a kind of preaching according to the gospel of being African; that whites defeated Africans not because of their skin color but because of lack of correct defense. Maillu shows that from the insights garnered abroad, Nkrumah was ready to go home "with an intellectual needle and use an African thread to sew" Africa up as it was torn into pieces due to colonial influence (32). Intellectualism therefore was at the centre of Pan-Africanism because its proponents had first acquired true knowledge about the alleged might of the white man before they would believe in themselves as blacks; and only then could these intellectuals start planting the seeds of pan-Africanism in their own African countries like Nkrumah did.

The writer further invokes history in his writing to demonstrate the stages through which the ideology developed:

In 1945... an important meeting [was organized] in the city of Manchester, England to discuss the future of Africa. It was called the pan-African Congress. Over 200 people were there. There were many African leaders, including Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya and Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi. Du Bois shared the meeting. By the end they all agreed that they would go and liberate their homes from colonialists. They also agreed to make way for the unification of Africa, as that was the way out of poverty. Pan-Africanism had become a world movement (38).

¹ <http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/postcold.htm>

The endeavor to free Africa from colonialist ideology which is central to postcolonial theory is evident in the above quotation. The mention of other leaders in the above quotation shows that the ideology of pan-Africanism was embraced not just by Nkrumah but by many other African leaders, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. It is also clear that the idea did not start from Africa but away from Africa pioneered by characters who had realized the black man was not “born to serve the white man” and who were ready to outgrow the idea that the “must always be advised by the Whiteman” (49). Pan-Africanism therefore featured people who needed to have faith in themselves and that is what Nkrumah and his cohorts preached to the black race especially in Africa.

While Nkrumah engineered independence for Ghana his biggest contribution on the pan-African spirit was to tie Ghana’s independence to the freedom of the rest of African countries. He is therefore presented as an ambitious selfless person whose dream was to unite and free Africa so that all countries would have political and economic freedom and subsequently be empowered to promote their values. The appropriation from history again develops the plot further because the narrator tell us that immediately after Ghana’s independence, Nkrumah organized the “All-Africa’s People’s Conference” in Ghana where he introduced the Pan-African idea in 1958, which was followed by Du Bois visiting Ghana in 1960 to strengthen the idea. This historical meeting is noted by (Araia, 2006) as noted earlier. The introduction of Nkrumah’s voice in the narrative helps capture the ideology clearly:

Pan-Africanism is the only answer to African misery. The salvation of Africa is the unity of African states. The disunity of African states is Africa’s destruction. We shall never be absolutely free until we’ve achieved the super economy that a united Africa would produce (71)

Such ideologies on unity, the author shows, led to the realization of Nkrumah’s dream by the birth Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 in Addis Ababa, which is the organ that ties African countries today.

5. Resistance to Pan-Africanism

From Nkrumah’s biography, the reader can also note that the introduction of the ideology by Nkrumah also met with resistance from critics which the author captures (see page 69-70).

According to Maoulidi (2009), if today’s Africans have heard about Pan-Africanism, it is only in the context of what it was and not what it is and what it could be because it remains an obscure rhetoric that informs an increasingly obsolete academic and activist culture. This implies that the original Pan-Africanist vigor and ideological standpoints seems to have shifted or reduced. Maoulidi further argues that at inception, pan-Africanism was tied to strong intellectual, labor and other social movements e.g. student movements, revolutionary movements and literary movements. Political agitation for the rights of black people was going on simultaneously both in America and in the continent calling for the end of oppression of black people. This shared purpose Maoulidi notes is no longer shared by the more recent crop of African Americans in power. African unity, he argues, is challenged by the language divide: Anglophone, Lusophone, Francophone or Arab speaking, meaning it lacks a language of integration.

6. Conclusion

From this study, it is possible to conclude that personal narratives are important in not only presenting the life story whose narrative is told, but these narratives are important avenues through which certain ideologies can be introduced in a relaxed and enjoyable manner to young readers. In Nkrumah’s narrative for example, the idea of racial discrimination which opened up the eyes of people of African origin is introduced through literary techniques. In addition, the narrative shows that this racial discrimination led to the birth of the realization that black people had potential which was suppressed by a color divide. This realization led to the birth of self-affirmation movements like the Pan-Africanism and the subsequent birth of OAU in Africa. Biographical narratives are therefore important as they not only help young readers in understanding the life and times of specific historical figures as makers of African history, but they also help them to understand certain ideologies ingrained in those people’s lives. I argue that the fact that these stories are made available for children is both an insurrection of pan-African voices and an important occurrence in the history of African children’s literature because the biographies help children to understand the makers of African history. These texts not only present children with role models whom they can learn from but they are also useful tools in teaching children important historical lessons from Africa. Therefore, like adult literature, contemporary children’s literature is an important literary strand through which specific socio-political ideologies can be understood.

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