



Literature and Politics in Alobwed'Epie's *The Day God Blinked*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the symbiotic relationship between literature and politics in post-colonial Cameroon. This is because literature reflects the ideology and expectations of society and also influences the way people think or act. Politics, on the other hand has to do with the form, organization and administration of a country. Political independence did not bring significant positive change in the lives of Africans. That explains why committed African writers are using their creative writing to inveigh against the lack of good governance and purposeful leadership in their countries. It is against this background therefore that this paper has selected Alobwed'Epie's novel, *The Day God Blinked* to analyze how the scandalously corrupt and despotic leaders of the fictional Ewawa, a metaphor for Cameroon have forgotten the people they govern, and how lack of good governance and purposeful leadership remain the bane of Cameroon. The paper adopts content analysis approach in this respect. Although Alobwed'Epie' exposes at length the flagrant abuse of power, pervasive corruption and overt and subtle manipulation and exploitation of the masses by the overbearing ruling government, he does not portray Ewawa as being in a state of bitter confrontation between the rulers and the ruled. As such, he does not overtly advocate for a social revolution. He does not also propose any means of sensitizing, empowering, and galvanizing the embittered masses so that they can eventually rise up against their oppressors. Rather he seems to imply that the possible release of Lucia from prison, like the birth of Elewa's child in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* may mark the beginning of the end of the corrupt regime.

Keywords: Politics, Literature, Good Governance, Purposeful Leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the relationship between literature and politics in post-colonial Cameroon. This is because literature reflects the ideology and expectations of society and also influences the way people think or act. As Fatin Najia Binti Omar and Sim Chee Cheang assert:

In general, fiction writers cannot escape the political, socio-economic environment of a country... The more political the situation of a country, the more political the literary works become as they are used as a voice for the community to support or protest the socio-economic administration of a government (p.906). Politics, on the other hand has been defined in the Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary as "The relationships within a group or organization which allow particular people to have power over others" (p.1182). But politics is an umbrella word that means different things to different people at different times. It also has its positive and negative sides. As Thomas P. Brockway (1965) puts it:

Politics has been bleakly defined as the theory and practice of the art and science of government. Actually, what gives politics its perennial fascination is the conflict and clash of ideas and ideologies, of candidates and interests, of regions and nations, to say nothing of constant tensions within politics itself. If one considers the role of power and of principle in the political process, he finds an area of compatibility but also an area of antagonism in which compromise and even deception may flourish. It is this that has given politics its bad name even without Machiavelli's striking assist. But politics at its best or at its worst relies heavily on the language of persuasion, and it is in the careful analysis of political discourse, written or spoken, that we can distinguish between the statesman and the demagogue (vii)

Since the attainment of political independence by several African countries in the nineteen sixties, African writers have been preoccupied in their works with the crisis of rule and the administration of justice. This is because political independence did not bring significant positive change in the lives of

the people. The eminent Kenyan writer and literary critic, Ngugi wa Thiong'o succinctly captures the mood of the people when he posits that:

To the majority of African people in the new states, independence did not bring about fundamental changes. It was independence with the ruler holding a begging bowl and the ruled holding a shrinking belly. It was independence with a question mark (p.157).

The main problem in many independent African countries including Cameroon therefore is that the politicians have harnessed the resources and potentials of the nation for personal gains and self-aggrandizement instead of satisfying the needs and aspirations of the people who have conceded power to them as their representatives. These politicians are not only self-serving, but are also ready to eliminate anyone who constitute a threat to them. Above all, the politicians have a tendency to cling to power indefinitely and at whatever cost. These issues have been variously discussed by African writers in attempts to portray and expose them. One such excellent attempt is Alobwed'Epie's novel, *The Day God Blinked* (2012).

2. "CHOP BROKE POT" POLITICS IN ALOBWED'EPIE'S *THE DAY GOD BLINKED*

"Chop Broke Pot" is a Pidgin English coinage used popularly in Cameroon to refer to leadership that is excessively selfish, greedy, corrupt, oppressive and dictatorial. This paper will therefore focus mainly on this kind of politics. That is, the politics of the "demagogue" based on the "chop-make-I-chop" philosophy. Alobwed'Epie himself highlights this underlying theme in the Prologue of *The Day God Blinked* thus:

In Ewawa, and Africa as a whole, the lives of rulers slip into fatigueosimiasis, a mysterious disease akin to 'aboulia' that kills them because for one reason or another, they prefer to stay in power forever. It is an incurable ailment that devastates their brains and impairs their judgment.

It attacks the frontal lobe of the brain which is the seat of judgment, reasoning, intellect and the will. The frontal lobe of the brain is responsible for spirituality and morality and therefore the seat of character and personality.

2.1. He goes further to explain that

A patient of fatigueosimiasis may not show physical abnormality. But though he may be bustling with life, he, on keen observation, shows signs of impaired morality, loss of love for the nation, loss of imagination and loss of restraint. The loss of restraint is seen in self-aggrandizement, boasting about imaginary achievement, hostility towards criticism and unfounded aggression toward intellectuals and potential rivals. The patient becomes restless, takes pleasure in travel to foreign lands, becomes manic, obsessed with foreign drinks and cigarettes and finally becomes a victim of poor judgment. All these culminate in his making wrong choices and decisions of the politico-economic and socio-religious life of the nation. The few citizens who benefit from his blunder, become his praise singers...

Fatigueosimiasis has an incubation period of five to ten years. It is full-fledged in leaders who take or remain in power at the age of seventy. It becomes schizophrenic when five to seven year terms of office are renewed several times – the curse of Africa (pp.1-2)

The above excerpt from the Prologue has been quoted at length for several reasons. To begin with, a Prologue is usually a part that comes at the beginning of a long poem, a play or a novel. It usually gives information about events that happened before the time when the literary work begins. But, in *The Day God Blinked*, Alobwed'Epie uses the literary device to portend what is going to happen in the story. In other words, the Prologue has been used to foreshadow and to lay emphasis on the nefarious activities of kleptocratic politicians who wield absolute power over the lives of the people and who would do anything to perpetuate themselves in power.

Superficially, however, *The Day God Blinked* is the harrowing story of the main character and narrator, Lucia Ntang, a presumably naïve and simplistic university graduate. Thus, the novel is both a pathetic autobiography and a scathing critique of what the people of Ewawa (a metaphor for Cameroon) are making of their political independence. Put in slightly different terms, the author sets out in this insightful novel to scrutinize how lack of good governance and purposeful leadership has led to the imbroglio that is now Ewawa. He indicts the politicians in power for their isolationist parasitical power use, and the masses for their apathy and cynic acquiescence in the fiasco.

The narrative is in two parts. Part one opens with an unnamed woman who throws the corpse of her baby into the Municipal Lake and is caught in the act by the police. She is arrested and taken to the Police station where she is interrogated, tortured and locked up for a crime she did not actually commit. She is later taken to court where she is judged and sentenced to death for the murder of her son on the strength of spurious evidence concocted by the police.

Alobwed'Epie uses Lucia's unjust incarceration to fulminate against the failure of the police and the judicial system in ensuring justice and also to probe into the squalid, putrid and fetid conditions in the overcrowded police cells and prisons of Ewawa which have become evil labyrinths. Finally, he uses her ordeal to criticize religious, social, economic and political institutions of Ewawa.

While in prison, Lucia meets and befriends a high profile inmate Setania. Lucia is attracted to Setania not because she has a predilection for criminal activities but because Setania treats her kindly and provides her with the basic necessities that make life in prison tolerable. But Setania, as her name implies is also the devil incarnate. She masterminds the assassination of her husband on the promise of his detractors that they will appoint her to replace him as the Assistant Director General of the Central Bank. Unfortunately, nemesis catches up with her. The assassins that she hired are caught, tried and executed for murder. She herself is arrested, judged and imprisoned for the same crime. While in prison, Setania engages in smuggling narcotics into the maximum security prison and selling them to the inmates at cutthroat price. She eventually lures Lucia into the flourishing illicit trade. On one of the smuggling operations, she inadvertently delayed in removing the capsules from her vagina. The capsules melt because of heat and presumably caused her death. Since the inmates and the prison guards know of the business relationship between Lucia and Setania, She is easily accused of having a hand in Setania's death. Once more, Lucia is taken to court, judged and sentenced to death by hanging without fair hearing. With two death sentences hanging on her neck for crimes she did not commit, she is transferred to Death Row where she is held incommunicado to await her execution.

Part two of the narrative opens on the Death Row of the maximum security prison. Since Lucia is a Catholic Christian, the Reverend Parson is called in to come and hear Lucia's final confession and prepare her spiritually to meet her creator. It is in the course of her confession that Lucia narrates her biography and also gives a sobering insight into the social, political, economic and cultural wasteland that is Ewawa. Since Lucia is the narrator of the story and the events are seen through her eyes, it may be necessary to begin with her.

Specifically then, *The Day God Blinked* is the story of Lucia. That may explain why she is the only character presented in any depth. It may also explain why she is the only character in the novel who defies death and other threats to defend her principles. On the surface, she is presented as naïve and gullible. She is also seen as a victim of circumstances who is more acted upon than acting. But, beneath this apparent veneer of artlessness, Lucia is a very astute and discerning woman. Her profile indicates that she has the courage to stand up for her principles even if it means her standing alone. She is shown to be willing to undergo suffering, deprivation, humiliation and even death rather than forsake her principles. Throughout the story, she does not allow anyone, not even the Parson to walk or ride over her. In that respect, she represents the quality of endurance that resists the assault and fierceness of power. Furthermore, in spite of all the atrocities committed against her, she does not appear to harbor any thought of guilt, bitterness, self-condemnation or regrets for her unwanted pregnancy because she knows that she has not done anything wrong.

We gather from her confession to the Parson that she is called Lucia Ntang, a brilliant but cloistered daughter of a devout Catholic Catechist. As such, she is raised in strict Christian tradition. She does very well at school and is able to write and pass three papers at the G.C.E. Advanced Level examinations in one sitting, a rare feat in her days. She enters the famous University of Ewawa in 1981 and graduates in 1984. Those were the good old days when the Old Man was still in power. The politicians under him were well-meaning, people-oriented and follower-focused individuals whose involvement in politics was not for self-aggrandizement but to serve the needs and aspirations of their electorate. Then a momentous event in the politics of Ewawa occurs:

In 1982, the Old Man of Ewawa died suddenly of fatiguesimiasis. Succession to his chair was apparently easy and smooth. For, he had, so to speak, groomed an energetic young man to succeed him in case he died in his sleep. The young Saul Kileam, took to the podium with confidence – he was more educated, more charismatic, and of course, a new broom. Yes, a new broom with great expectations.

Within a few weeks he eclipsed the Old Man in popularity. His pronouncements generated hope. The economy was skyrocketing, so to speak. The citizens of neighboring countries sought refuge in Ewawa. There was a shortage of manpower especially skilled manpower. Graduates were in high demand (p.58).

But, within a few years, the euphoria which accompanied the coming to power of the new leader died down and the bubble burst. As the narrator explains:

By the time I came back to look for employment, the nation was convulsing in economic, moral and other crises. My papa's land was moving from the slogan of 'strictness and uprightness', to a creed of laissez faire and debasement. Our artists were moving from graceful dancing to skips, hops, and jumps. Our musicians were abandoning rhythm for tattoos. Our lakes were exploding in anger and killing thousands. Our mountains were spitting venom. Ministerial buildings and banks were picking fire at will. School buildings were 'collapsing standing' to be later dynamited. Fortune seekers from neighboring countries were fleeing from my papa's land. The children of my papa's land were fleeing from their papa's land. A mysterious gloom was settling on Ewawa. It seemed as if the gods had dammed the stream of prosperity that had once flowed and watered her gardens. There was total desolation (p.59).

The new political leaders unlike their predecessors have not been adequately socialized to appreciate the dialectics that make democratic government meaningful. They enter politics specifically because of the prestige and power that it gives them. That explains why they cannot resist the temptations of privilege and positions of power. Even those politicians who profess to be Christians or Muslim do not bring their religious principles to bear on their politics. That is why they are unable to rise above corruption, embezzlement and falsehood. As one of the pseudo-politicians explains during one of their sham rallies:

Politics is a bolobolo game, a give and take game. If you give me, I give you. If you don't give me, I don't give you. These nine villages can only benefit from the Head of State's development projects if they solidly ally themselves behind him (p.131).

The logic in the above excerpt is based on an African ethical principle of give and take. Unfortunately, it has been reduced to a general ethic of profiteering. That explains why despite their poor performance, the politicians are determined to hold on to power at all costs. They use all kinds of subterfuge including falsehood and election rigging to perpetuate themselves in power. They blatantly use their positions to intimidate the electorate. And, in order to safeguard their self-interests, they become intolerant of any dissenting voice and are ready to silence and, if possible eliminate any person or group of persons that may constitute a threat to their political well-being. In that respect, they are quick to single out the educated unemployed as enemy number one. As Jeanne Olembe, Lucia's friend declares:

Politicians accuse us of fomenting rebellion in the villages. When the ruling party started losing grounds in these villages they invited the District Officer to warn us. They tell the villagers not to listen to unsuccessful 'book people' – those of us who had returned to the villages after university studies (p.130).

2.2. During one of the Development meetings, the Chairman reiterated the warning more forcefully

I am sure that the detractors, the rebels amongst us have heard this. And here and now, I pray that they should limit their diabolic activities within these villages. And today, today I implore all of you to denounce them once and for all. You see the enemy is in the house. Those who could not cope with university education have returned to the villages to cause confusion. But let me warn them. The wand of justice will fall heavily on any person found disturbing the peace and tranquility of our dear fatherland (pp.131-132).

The politicians who are anxious to remain in power have all the reasons to fear the harm that the educated unemployed can do to their political ambitions. That is why they are intolerant of any dissenting voice or action that can rob them of their political offices. But, Alobwed'Epie sees these very educated unemployed as the only group in the country that has the potential to criticize the lack of democratic and participatory governance in the country. In fact, he sees them as perhaps, the only instruments of change that can dislodge the sit-tight politicians.

Alobwed'Epie also indicts another group of educated elite, those who align and ingratiate themselves with the corrupt politicians. These pseudo-intellectuals turn a blind eye to the corruption around them, condone the abuses and excesses they see, and go even further than the politicians to pillage the scarce resources of the nation. Two examples will suffice to make the point. The first case is that of Mvondokabi, the kleptomaniac Rector of the once flourishing University of Ewawa. Within a remarkably short time, he vandalized, pillaged, ravaged and despoiled the once renowned citadel of learning. For his embezzlement, swindling, looting and other atrocities committed, he is rewarded with a ministerial appointment.

2.3. The next group of brigands is made up of the Minister of Finance and the Director General of the Central Bank. As one of the inmates recounts

My sister, see, last week, when I was doing laundry for the wife of the Minister of Justice, the wife of the Minister of Territorial Administration came in to gossip with her. They said that the Minister of Finance and the Director General of the Central Bank had wanted to introduce false currency into the economy of the country. This was to be done by way of the Central Bank acquiring billions of false Ewawian currency from Hong Kong and putting the money in circulation in different commercial banks in Ewawa. Since Madam Setania's husband was the Assistant Director General of the Central Bank any such transaction had to pass through him. When the Minister and the Director General suggested that to him, he refused to participate in their diabolic bid to dupe the country (pp.29-30).

After a series of failed attempts on the life of the Assistant Director of the Central Bank, the two plunderers succeed in eliminating him for refusing to collaborate with them. Alobwed'Epie believes that in a country where the people's basic needs are of food clothing and shelter it is this officially sanctioned corruption that accounts for the perpetuation of the country's economic woes. Thus it is under the new dispensation that the morass of crime became a veritable canker worm in the society. As the narrator expounds:

There seemed to be a vacuum in leadership. Every aspect of Ewawian life looked questionable. Governing Ewawa became akin to eating spaghetti; wrap or scoop, neither the fork nor the spoon could bring things to the point of cohesion. The so-called top brass of Ewawian society did things with impunity. Ministers, Secretary Generals, Directors of Parastatals, Rectors of Universities, Director Generals of Commercial Institutions especially the banks, Governors, Divisional Officers, Treasurers and contractors who denuded budgets or swindled funds entrusted in their hands, and siphoned the money to Europe or America, set their infrastructures on fire and blamed poor electrical installations. Individuals became richer than the state (p.69).

This officially sanctioned thieving not only accounts for the collapse of the economy, but also transforms Ewawa into a shadow of itself. But Lucia is the only character in the novel who is able to raise an eyebrow over how Ewawa is faring:

Two things that have been bothering me ever since are: can human imbecility ever end with regard to the greed for money? How can the Minister of Finance and the Director of the Central Bank of a country, people entrusted with the most revered confidence of the country to handle its financial life-wire connive to ruin a recovering economy? How can people swimming in money want more through trickery? Can any of them sleep on two beds at the same time? Can anyone of them eat the food of four people at the same time? What was really wrong? Secondly, if the leaders of a country could be so heartless in dealing with each other, can any one stroke of magic change their attitude towards us the lowly? No doubt our police force is trained to brutalize us the way it does, our hospitals are death traps and our prisons are simply meant to execute what the police and hospitals leave undone (pp.31-32).

Lucia's gloomy introspection revolves around how the degeneration of the police force, the judicial system, the health services and other vital institutions of the country contributed in disenfranchising the masses.

Power, it is said corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This adage becomes true of the depraved and masochistic politicians in power who become so power drunk and full of self-confidence that they call for early Presidential elections: Yet, at the peak of that moral decadence, that insensitivity to the suffering of the masses, the looters precipitated Presidential elections. They were under the spell of Krudi, a daring and fiery opposition leader who had cropped up from nowhere to challenge the status quo. Krudi's inroads and popularity of avalanche proportions in the political arena of Ewawa frightened

the looters. If they were to perpetrate their diabolic system indefinitely, they had to stop Krudi at all cost. They had to maintain in power the incumbent who had, perhaps without thought, legalized the embezzlement of public funds by asking the population to prove the allegation that his Ministers and close associates were swindlers of state funds (p.69).

The elections take place as expected. The rigging machinery is put in place with the connivance of France. The politicians use the “politics of the belly” to lure the voters. They also use subtle intimidation and even violence to force those who are reluctant to toe the party line. And the foreign observers are misled into believing that the elections are free and fair. At the same time, the law enforcement agents are bribed to rig the ruling party back to power and then use brutal force to crush any public manifestation about election rigging in polling stations. In spite of the political chicanery and blatant gerrymandering, Krudi still wins the elections comfortably. As the narrator notes:

The elections were a foregone conclusion. Though Krudi would win with a landslide, the Kleptocrats with the backing of France would rig and deprive him of his victory. So, something had to be done to camouflage the rigging. To make the results look credible, they carried out a whitewashed campaign to impress on election observers mostly Americans and Europeans who come a day or two before the elections as if elections in Africa are rigged only in polling booths. After watching the ruling party members line up peacefully to vote their man back in power, the observers dash back home the same day or next, with the conclusion that the elections were free, fair and peaceful. But the reality is that only the members of the ruling party are registered. Only they vote. And only they count the votes and declare results (pp.70-71).

The intricate web of politics in Ewawa (Cameroon) is similar to that in Nigeria. Anne Gagiano (2000) describes the situation in Nigeria thus: “Power is conferred upon (usually) the few (usually) by the many in a social-political context, and overt manifestations of power are themselves immersed in intricate contexts: in webs of personal, familial, social, and political relationships” (92). Seen in the light of the above excerpt, the flawed national morality and the national failures in political and economic matters in Ewawa can be attributed to the lack of a clear distinction between ethnic or tribal loyalty and national loyalty.

Alobwed'Epie does not limit his scathing attacks on the politicians alone. He also accuses the masses of encouraging maladministration and for their unwillingness to demand for good governance. But, the author also makes it clear that if the masses support the corrupt politicians, it is not because they believe in their political rhetoric which is banal, hypocritical and irrelevant. Rather, it is because they have been consistently sidelined by their rulers and reduced to passive onlookers of the politics of their country. That explains why the masses have become so insensitive that they adopt the: “I don't care. It is not my business attitude”. That is, they adopt a philosophy born of despair. It is this apparent unconcern which typifies the people's attitude to national politics that irks the author and accounts for why he indicts them for their general lack of interest which has helped to create conducive atmosphere for corrupt and inept leaders to thrive.

The picture of Ewawa which emerges at the end of the novel is one of a failed state. While the politicians cynically use their positions to enrich themselves, the people lie down tamely under the imposition for fear of losing their own share of the national cake. This unfortunate situation however is not limited to Ewawa alone. In fact, it has become the trouble with Africa. As Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart (2008) assert:

The hundreds of millions of people who are not currently enfranchised by the economic and political system want in, not out. The globalized media beam the benefits of the good life into their homes daily. They see a world on the move and full of opportunity, innovation, and prosperity, and this defines their expectations. They simply want their states, economies, and societies to function. But their daily encounters with the state produce frustration and humiliation. They know that it is the dysfunctional state that stands between them and a better life. The yearning for civil order and enfranchisement in the system is the overwhelming desire of ordinary men and women around the world (p3).

2.4. The good news is that failed states can be fixed. As Ghani et al. state

Solutions to our current problems of insecurity, poverty, and lack of growth all converge on the need for a state-building project. Just as the firm is the most effective unit of organization in the economy, the state is the most effective form of organization of the polity. Only the state can organize power so

as to harness flows of information, people, money, force, and decisions necessary to regulate human behavior (p.4).

Several frameworks for fixing failed states have been proposed by political scientists, economists, sociologists and literary writers and critics. All the scholars have approached the problem from the perspective of their various disciplines. Since this paper is examining the problem from the perspective of literature, our emphasis will be on the solutions proposed by creative African writers with special focus on Alobwed'Epie.

The novel is the literary genre most preferred by African writers to criticize their political and social institutions in order to eventually bring about desirable changes in their society. As Edebor (2014) states, "Undoubtedly, prose fiction has come a long way to imprint its relevance on the literary history of Africa as a literary mode for expressing the worldview of Africans, their hopes, as well as their multi-faceted challenges, even in the 21st century" (p.135). Seen from that perspective the writers have used and continue to use their novels as creative platforms to express their thoughts and feelings about the political, social, economic and cultural issues that plague their nations. For example, Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters* (1965), and *Season of Anomy* (1973); Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987); Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* (1977), Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1968) and *Fragments* (1971); T.M.Aluko in *Chief the Honourable Minister*(1973); and Alobwed'Epie in *The Day God Blinked* (2012) have criticized the politics of their countries and have suggested proposals on how to salvage the situation. For instance, Soyinka proposes a one man act of courage in *Season of Anomy*; Achebe in *A Man of the People* and Armah in *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* propose a military coup while Adamu Usman in *Sieged* (2011) proposes a violent uprising of the masses.

3. CONCLUSION

We gather from our reading of *The Day God Blinked* that Alobwed'Epie like the other African writers cited above, is fully conscious of the power of the people to say no to the unscrupulous politicians who are exploiting and oppressing them. But unlike them, he does not propose any concrete strategy which may usher in a better society. Seen in this light *The day God Blinked* can be said to be a pessimistic novel. But, if we examine the novel closely, we are likely to find that Lucia is perhaps the only focus of the author's proffered solution to the imbroglio that is Ewawa. For example, like the anthills in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* which are indicative of stubborn earth, Lucia represents the quality of endurance that resists the assault of power.

She is the only character in the novel who is audacious enough to question, and even challenge the reckless activities of the power hungry leaders. Furthermore, her confession to the Reverend Parson can be seen as a way of telling truth to power. Thus, like Achebe who uses Beatrice to invoke the female principle in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Alobwed'Epie uses Lucia to represent the power of hope needed to counter the horror and despair caused by the depredation of oppressive power. Her imprisonment can be seen as the imprisonment of what is left of the forces of life in Ewawa. It is also the imprisonment of the human values of her society. But, it is only as imprisonment and not death. The opening of chapter sixteen attest to this ray of hope:

The Parson came the next day much more relaxed than ever. He greeted me cheerfully and told me that the appeal was holding. He added that the lawyers without borders were doing everything in their power to stop the secret killings in Ewawa. He said he was confident with the new evidence I was giving, I would be discharged and acquitted (p.106)

The possibility of Lucia's eventual acquittal is also a vivid symbol of the potential to achieve the possible transformation of Ewawa.

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Citation: Kashim Ibrahim Tala , Langue Nkwendje Amelie Patricia, " Literature and Politics in Alobwed'Epie's The Day God Blinked". *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 12, no. 11, 2025, pp. 143-150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.1211014>

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