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MECHTHILD NAGEL

The Case for Penal Abolition and Ludic  
Ubuntu in *Arrow of God*<sup>1</sup>



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MMG Working Paper 15-09

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MPI zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften  
MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen  
Hermann-Föge-Weg 11, 37073 Göttingen, Germany  
Tel.: +49 (551) 4956 - 0  
Fax: +49 (551) 4956 - 170

[www.mmg.mpg.de](http://www.mmg.mpg.de)

[info@mmg.mpg.de](mailto:info@mmg.mpg.de)

## Abstract

Chinua Achebe, the novelist and visionary critic, has given us a subtle critique of the function of prisons in the colonial context, and his trilogy refracts the haunting carceral-colonial reality for Igbo society in remarkable ways. And yet, commentators and critics have overlooked it. What I will argue is the following: 1) the prison within the context of colonial law is a key trope in Achebe's novels; 2) *Arrow of God* makes a case for the traumatic effects of a prison sentence; and 3) Achebe's sharp critique of the colonial practices not only invites a reading of penal abolitionism but also a strategy of resistance of a ludic Ubuntu. This paper argues that the prison is *the* central organizing tool of oppression, whereas most commentators focus on the "clash of cultures" engendered by the advent of Christianity. In fact, *Arrow of God* invites a reading of Christianity as an ambivalent good. The formidable clash of cultures is unveiled in the realm of traditional versus colonial juridical discourses.

**Keywords:** Colonial imprisonment, ludic Ubuntu, prison as social death, Igbo resistance

## Author

MECHTHILD NAGEL is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Gender and Intercultural Studies at the State University of New York, College at Cortland. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Religious Studies Department, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen (Spring 2015). She can be contacted at [Mecke.Nagel@cortland.edu](mailto:Mecke.Nagel@cortland.edu).



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The specter of prisons is haunting the Igbo village – and in fact, all of Africa. Chinua Achebe, the novelist and visionary critic, has given us a subtle critique of the function of prisons in the colonial context, and his trilogy refracts the haunting carceral-colonial reality for Igbo society in remarkable ways. And yet, commentators and critics have overlooked it. What I will argue is the following: 1) the prison within the context of colonial law is a key trope in Achebe’s novels; 2) *Arrow of God* makes a case for the traumatic effects of a prison sentence; and 3) Achebe’s sharp critique of the colonial practices not only invites a reading of penal abolitionism but also a strategy of resistance of a ludic Ubuntu. I want to highlight that the prison is *the* central organizing tool of oppression, whereas most commentators focus on the “clash of cultures” engendered by the advent of Christianity. In fact, *Arrow of God* invites a reading of Christianity as an ambivalent good. As I see it, the formidable clash of cultures is unveiled in the realm of traditional versus colonial juridical discourses.

Why should I then become aware of the central organizing role of the devastating prison regiment in Africa? After all, I knew very little about the deleterious consequences of “doing time” before entering central New York’s prison “school houses” as a volunteer teacher. As a white (German) academic and critic of state violence, I had attended political trials of white anti-racists and anti-imperialists in the U.S., and I was critical of the long-term solitary confinement exacted on members of the Red Army Faction in the infamous Stammheim prison in Germany. Furthermore, I was faintly aware of the role of Robben Island as *the* university of political prisoners, representing a harsh setting for a university nevertheless. Yet, I was not prepared for how the motherland and its famous political prisoners such as Steve Biko played a huge role in discussions of philosophy behind walls in the U.S.. Black prisoners encouraged me to study Africa’s imprisoned intellectuals, which then also led me to an analysis of the penal system in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Achebe’s work.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Thanks to Mĩcere Gĩthae Mũgo for inviting me to present this paper at the 50th anniversary of *Arrow of God* – Chinua Achebe, Symposium, Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University, Oct. 17, 2014. I also thank Naminata Diabete for her insightful comments and the audience at the African Literature Association conference, Bayreuth University, June 2015.

2 I am keenly aware of standpoint theory (cf. Patricia Hill Collins, 1990) and epistemic white solipsism as brilliantly explained by Linda Martin Alcoff in her classic essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others” (1991-2). I am also indebted to my mentors at SUNY

The imprisoned students were quite adamant claiming that the contemporary U.S. prison experience is the violent continuation of chattel slavery endured by their ancestors prior to 1865. So is the U.S. prison administration. When one of my students complained of being treated like a slave within earshot of a guard, he was promptly delivered to the “box” – solitary confinement for thirty days. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on torture has stated that being confined in such harsh conditions for longer than 15 days in solitary amounts to torture (Méndez, 2013, cited in CAIC, 2013). While it is a legal (and ontological) fact that prisoners are “slaves of the state,” they are not allowed to utter this inconvenient truth (cf. Nagel, 2008a). However, for the most part, there seems to exist a curious amnesia about the colonial and postcolonial experience of imprisonment on the African continent, as few scholars even comment on it (Nagel, 2008b; Konate, 2006, 2012; Bernault, 2003, 2007). Prisons seem to be ultimate haunting/haunted places that engender traumatic responses of “madness,” ill will, rage, and/or revenge among those who are ordered into such cages. Very little good comes out of prison, and the revolving door is a testament for the utter failure of the western (Quaker-inspired) ideology of penitence or corrections. How then has the carceral occupied (post)colonial African political and literary landscapes?

## I The Colonial Carceral

Samba Sangaré, a former political prisoner who has passed to the ancestors, began his interview with me by noting that prisons (*caso* in Portuguese) are an alien institution to Africa (Sangaré, 2001; Nagel, 2008c; Nagel, 2007). The first prisons were instituted in abandoned slave forts by the new colonial masters, eerily reminding us of the continuation of trauma and subjugation of African peoples. The prison cell is a place of social death/ trauma of separation. In *Things Fall Apart*, the elders confined for their anti-colonial resistance return home to the community speechless – the trauma left them without language for the impossible and unthinkable. The colonial imposition of penology and its concomitant destruction of “customary law” made use of the carceral regime as the centrifugal force of its civilizing

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Cortland Seth N. Asumah and Ibipo Johnston-Anumonwo, as well as Muna Ndulo at Cornell University, for encouraging me to engage in dialogical practice in African Studies. A special thanks goes to Kassim Kone of SUNY Cortland, who accompanied me to Mali, where I studied Indigenous justice and the effects of the colonial prison regime in 2002.



mission. Even though Christian missionizing tactics are foregrounded in Achebe's trilogy, especially in *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, Christian ideology eclipses the colonial biopolitics, the disciplining force of the carceral. The following will show that, in fact, colonial law has been (and continues to be) an instrument of terrorizing Indigenous peoples qua subjects, not citizens.

### *The prison cell as a place of disorientation and social death*

Achebe's *Arrow of God* chronicles the trials and tribulations of an Igbo village chief priest, Ezeulu. The British colonial administrator Winterbottom wants to enforce "indirect rule" and appoints Ezeulu as paramount chief. The white man is not prepared for Ezeulu's defiance and sends his charges to arrest him. Arriving on Government Hill, Ezeulu is shown to a "guesthouse" replete with a carpet that is supposed to disguise the fact that the "guest of honor" is, in fact, a political prisoner. When Ezeulu steps out at night, greedily trying to read the sky, he becomes frantic; he is faced with a strange sky that cannot be mapped and read – a travesty, for a chief priest who has been trained all of his life to look for signs of the new moon. The elder chief priest, who has never experienced social exclusion, undergoes a veritable psychic disorientation by experiencing viscerally the meaning of social death imposed by an alien colonial power. Such natal alienation has curiously been overlooked by postcolonial critics of Achebe's novels. Even those who studied Achebe while experiencing political imprisonment, such as Mumia Abu-Jamal (2015) or Nelson Mandela, make no mention of the ultimate sanction (solitary punishment) by the colonial master.<sup>3</sup>

Ezeulu's dream in his cage (p. 160) is suggestive of the compounded effects of being excised from his people. He dreams of becoming an outcast among his people, who no longer heeds the tradition. In his dream, which he interprets as a vision, people defied his grandfather – such a nightmare in a strange place leads Ezeulu astray: during his incarceration, he becomes increasingly paranoid and revengeful. His combative posture casts doubt about his abilities to continue to serve as chief priest. Experiencing extensive solitary confinement increases his suffering and foreshadows the suffering he will inflict upon his kin after his release from prison.

"Doing time" also serves as a collateral *collective* punishment for his people. Such effect may be accidental, as the colonial power means to teach the leaders of a vil-

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3 It is said that when Mandela read Achebe's novels, it helped him psychically escape prison walls (Nwangu, 2013).

lage that anticolonial resistance is futile and will be prosecuted harshly. Ezeulu's son Nwaka is tempted to act on his incarcerated father's behalf to carry out the chief priest's rites of the new moon, but in the end, he is overcome by fear. Ezeulu's summary and arbitrary punishment is extended to two months – provoking an unprecedented inability of fulfilling rites in preparation of the Harvest Festival, which, if delayed, would condemn his people to starvation. Prison, thus, not only foists social death upon the individual (Ezeulu), but it also leads to despair, confusion and “unintended” killing of his family and the Igbo village.

The criminal justice system in the colonial context is of a different nature altogether than the system of “corrections” envisioned for Euro-Americans (James, 1996). Joy James notes that it is deeply violent, and not simply about “doing time” to correct errant *socially* offending behavior. As Achebe hints at in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, prison is meant as a tool of *political* repression. The prison looms large upon a people who are also pressed into service.

### *The carceral tentacles beyond the prison walls*

The practice of *corvée*, or statute labor, imposed by the colonial state upon Obika's age group, is the second arm of the criminal justice system. Obika and his drinking buddy show up late to work and the colonial might comes down powerfully whipping Obika in public, again setting an example that anticolonial resistance even if only displayed as boisterous bravado is futile (p. 82).

After this brutal act of public shaming, Obika's age mates have a fervent discussion (cf. 84-5). How shall they respond to this act of violence? They are indignant and want to protest the unfairness, since they know too well that *corvée* remuneration had been given to other villages. At the same time, they feel powerless because if they resisted by striking, this act of insubordination would be severely punished by means of collective disciplining of yet another group! The white man would take all their village leaders to prison for failing to put their young ones to work for free. This deliberation by the youth marks the first occasion of the threat of imprisonment as a colonial weapon to “pacify the natives” is used in the novel (p. 85). The messenger of this veritable threat is Moses Unachukwu, an outsider and Christian convert, who adds more “ammunition” by explaining the imperial order of things: “The white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road – they are all part of the same thing. The white man has a gun, a matchet, a bow and carries fire in his mouth. He does not fight with one weapon alone” (ibid.). It is all part of the same arsenal (of submission).

So, clearly, Christian “voluntary” conversion is part of an empire-building mission in Igboland. Yet, it is curious that Achebe deploys Moses as the messenger of the colonial “gift.” Here, Achebe is later echoed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o who writes in *Petals of Blood*:

‘We went on a journey to the city to save Ilmorog from the drought. We brought back spiritual drought from the city!’ There was an element of truth in Munira’s interpretation. . . . An administrative office for a government chief and a police post were the first things to be set up in the area. Next had come the church built by an Alliance of Missions as part of their missionary evangelical thrust into heathenish interiors. Only that, for him, so many years later, this irony of history was just the manner in which God manifested himself. (wa Thiong’o, 1977, p. 195)

As a critical observer of the colonial ways, Achebe makes it clear that transgressions are doled out against a collective, even if only one person or another group of people entirely are resisting the colonial wrath. Such a collective, political punishment is out of step with the ideology of individual punishment as a “civilized/civilizing” measure (which sets the colonial master apart from the “native”). Below, I will show how Achebe sets up a resistant oppositional coupling, mocking the white ways as unsubtle and primitive and some of the Igbo cultural rites as a playful and reasonable response in order to reestablish harmony. Playfulness in the service of enhancing community relations is an expression of ludic Ubuntu. Briefly put, Ubuntu in Zulu means shared humanity, of prizing hospitality and friendship (Ramose, 1999). With ludic Ubuntu, I gesture at non-agonistic and agonistic ways of play of resistance and acceptance of the Otherness of the Other (Nagel, 2014). In the following, I focus on the colonial entanglement between those who are subjugated by colonial rule and those who enforce it.

### *Colonial Punishment of Resistance*

Achebe’s protagonist Ezeulu does not take the bait of becoming King (Paramount Chief); instead he is “making a fool of the British Administration in public!” (p. 174). Such an act of defiance is rewarded with further punishment of confinement. From the shameful role of the outcast, Ezeulu’s reputation rises again to hero status and he “had no parallel in Igboland” (p. 175). His great refusal (of a colonial award) leads to the colonizer’s own confusion and existential crisis: what to put down in the log for the cause of transgression? Due Process and rule of law demanded some rational response, not the inadequate folly of contempt: “For making an ass of the Admin-

istration? For refusing to be a chief?” (p. 177). In the end, the administrator has to set him free; Ezeulu comes home vindicated. No longer marked as traitor – for the proverbial transgression of testifying against his own brother and on behalf of the stranger, the colonial master Mr. Winterbottom. Mūkoma wa Ngūgĩ (2014) points out that by Africanizing English, Achebe does violence to language. I add that it is an ironic violence embedded in ludic Ubuntu, i.e., a playful affirmation of subjugated people’s humanity, agency, and frivolity. As Chinwe Christiana Okechekwu clarifies, Achebe presents T.K. Winterbottom replete with Igbo puns:

Winter ... has, in effect, intruded into the tropical climate of Africa. ... Bottom... has the connotation of stark stupidity in the Igbo language. ... Mr. Winterbottom’s initials also signify ignorance. “T.K.” bears the connotation of someone who thinks he knows when in fact he does not. Hence the initials “I.T.K.s” is, therefore, to represent the ultimate in delusion, arrogance, presumption, and ignorance. (Okechekwu, 2002 p. 576)

Wintabota, the Destroyer of Guns, now wants to anoint Ezeulu as Warrant Chief, but to his great surprise the Ulu Priest refuses, showing the colonial regime that Ezeulu dances to his own drum, and not to that of a dimwitted alien person who clearly fails to put him in awe.

## II Traumatic Effects of Prison

Traditionally, the priest is in charge of re-establishing harmony. Strife was also common in precolonial times. Thus, Achebe doesn’t romanticize the old ways of tradition (e.g., the politics of inheritance, jealousy amongst brothers in jostling for the position of priesthood and lack of cultural cohesion, Frank, 2011, p. 1098). Ezeulu scolds the batterer that there is no glory in beating up one’s wife, and that she is not ready to return to his compound (p. 64). And a priest “plays an important role in the making and execution of laws, becoming the direct connection between the gods and the elders. He guides the elders in their efforts to communicate with the gods in the maintenance of a harmonious society” (Kalu, 1994, p. 53). Yet, Anthonia Kalu also notes that Ezeulu oversteps his priesthood by becoming politically involved in Umuaro’s affairs: “Achebe uses Ezeulu’s interests in politics to explore the priest’s human attributes, the other aspect of his duality. He pushes him into a position where even though Ezeulu recognizes his duties to the people, he is forced to choose between them and their god” (p. 58). While Kalu suggests that Ezeulu chooses Ulu

over people, I would suggest that he does neither. Ulu would never favor his people's outright destruction, and this is what the elders who approach Ezeulu suggest: give us sanctions, we will take the blame, the punishment, but save the people (p. 208).

Ezeulu is ultimately driven by revenge, a shame response to punishment (cf. Thomas, 2006), bizarrely delighting in the destruction of his kin, only *after* he is released from prison. This is clearly the reaction of a mad person who utterly defies the tradition of measured, calm and caring leadership:

But Ezeulu's elation had an edge of bitterness to it. This rain was part of the suffering to which he had been exposed and for which he must exact the fullest redress. The more he suffered now the greater would be the joy of revenge. His mind sought out new grievances to pile upon all the others. (p. 182)

One might suggest that Ezeulu has gone mad here, an indication that he is acting on a congenital defect, as his mother plagued by mental illness committed suicide. This traumatic event certainly plays a role in triggering a response, irrespective of the fact of inheriting a disease pattern or being spiritually haunted. But the key trigger event of experiencing abandonment (again) has to do with the maddening confinement of long-term imprisonment in conjunction with the moral indignation of undeserved punishment. In fact, Ezeulu's symptoms betray a *posttraumatic stress syndrome*, a necessary malady that is produced by imprisonment. Returning citizens have a saying that one can walk out of prison, but one can never leave prison (in one's mind). The contrast of pre-prison and post-release Ezeulu is stark: the cosmopolitan, deliberative Ezeulu who sends his son Oduche to school in order to learn the ways of the white man; the reformist Ezeulu, who reminds his people that face marks are no longer necessary, now suddenly betrays a *paranoia*, listening to an Ulu that no longer has the service to his people in his heart.

### III Traditional Justice and Ludic Ubuntu

In her praise song published in a *Gedenkschrift* for Achebe (2014), Mĩcere Gĩthae Mũgo intimates that he was a "tireless champion of utu/ubuntu affirming the essence of being human" (p. 202). Indeed, in my analysis of pertinent passages of *Arrow of God*, I will echo Mũgo's fitting description of Achebe, as I argue that Achebe advocates a tradition that serves the people well and does not dwell in revenge. What is Utu or Ubuntu? A leading South African philosopher, Mogobe Ramose, has proclaimed

that African philosophy is always already committed to Ubuntu philosophy; in fact: “Ubuntu is the root of African philosophy” (p. 49). Poet-philosopher Achebe’s masterpiece is no exception to this rule. Ramose (1999) gives us a rich linguistic play of an Ubuntu way of being:

The word *umu-* shares an identical ontological feature with the word *ubu-*. Whereas the range of *ubu-* is the widest generality, *umu-* tends towards the more specific. *Umntu* means the emergence of homo-loquent who is simultaneously a *homo sapiens*. In common parlance it means the human being: the maker of politics, religion, and law. *Umntu* then is the specific concrete manifestation of *umu-*: it is a movement away from the generalized to the concrete specific.

... Without the speech of *umuntu*, *ubu-* is condemned to unbroken silence. The speech of *umuntu* is thus anchored in, revolves around, and is ineluctably oriented towards *ubu-*. This it does by the contemporaneous and indissoluble coupling of *ubu-* and *umuntu* through the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu* (*motho ke motho ka batho*). Although the English language does not exhaust the meaning of this maxim or aphorism, it may nonetheless be construed to mean that to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them. *Ubuntu*, understood as being human (human-ness); a humane respectful, and polite attitude towards others constitutes the core meaning of this aphorism. *Ubu-ntu* then not only describes a condition of being, insofar as it is indissolubly linked to *umuntu*, but it is also the recognition of being becoming and not, we wish to emphasize, being and becoming. (pp. 51-52)

Ramose insists on describing Being as well as Ubuntu as a gerund, not as a noun, as a being becoming; to become human is a never-ending process. The Zulu (or Sotho) maxim contains an imperative: *ngabantu* (*ka batho*). He notes being human is not enough. One is enjoined, yes, commanded as it were, to actually become a human being by recognizing the otherness of others, which includes the ancestors and the not-yet-born. One’s being is interconnected with all in the community (of humankind, the ancestors, the spiritual world, and the natural environment). It is important to make whole what has been harmed, and appeasing Ulu through sacrifices, as the elders request Ezeulu to negotiate on their behalf (p. 209).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe (2010) contrasts public patriarchal, colonial penology with Igbo customs. Okwonko lives amongst his maternal kin exploring his feminine aspects: “We are only his mother’s kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land” (p. 133). This punishment is contrasted with Ubuntu and care-based exhortation: “A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness



he finds refuge in this motherland. Your mother is there to protect you” (Achebe, 2010, p. 94). A mother would not imprison her son (or punish him otherwise), but instead she provides shelter and solace. Of course, it is shameful for a married man to return to his mother’s home, but in lieu of “doing empty time” in a prison cell, cut off from his family and relations, custom knows of the wisdom of “healing time” in a sociocentric communal setting. Even though Okwonko has committed a transgression and faces punishment of exile, he knows he still belongs. Belonging is constitutive of Ubuntu philosophy. When one has experienced belonging, one is able to recognize and respect others as others.

Prior to his imprisonment, Ezeulu also knows the ways of restorative justice. He is distressed by the lack of the proportionality of punishment and speculates that the white overseer could have fined Obiaka (or age group) for coming late to the road project instead of using the whip (p. 88). Conflicts are better resolved through restitution; not through cruel violence and public shaming (in addition to the draconian practice of pressing young men into service), when the state clearly has in mind road-building as a military “mission.” Thus, when Ezeulu forgets his proper function as care-taker and is blamed for “mis-reading” Ulu’s wishes in a vengeful way, I suggest that this is an understandable, rather than bewildering response determined by his frame of mind. Predictably, Ezeulu becomes “something of a public enemy in the eyes of all” (p. 211) for neglecting adherence to Ubuntu praxis.

It is perhaps easy to misread or ignore Ezeulu’s post-prison experience, since he has made unconventional decisions before. In a way, he commits a serious transgression for sending his own son (as sacrifice, as Ezeulu’s wife taunts him) to the Christian missionary; however, it seemed a prudent response, namely, for Oduche not to submit to the new, strange power, but to be his father’s eyes and ears. Oduche is also used “to maintain a balance in their lives” as the saying he uses to his wife Ugoye:

Do you not know that in a great man’s household there must be people who follow all kinds of strange ways? There must be good people and bad people, honest workers and thieves, peace-makers and destroyers; that is the mark of a great *Obi*. In such a place, whatever music you beat on your drum there is somebody who can dance to it. (p. 46)

This is one of the great passages that points to Achebe’s harnessing the broad span of ludic Ubuntu (Nagel, 2014). *Prima facie*, the description encourages a reading of moral relativism. However, I argue that it is a mindful description of human diversity. Precolonial society was also conflict-ridden. When there is strife and harmful interaction, harmony has to be restored, which could be encouraged through ges-

tures of forgiveness by the victim (cf. Tutu, 1999) or through general measures of harm reduction. A ludic Ubuntu spans across the entire spectrum of the grieving process, moving from the pain of revenge, to the recognition of harm, the attempt of restoring peace, by accepting or loving-what-is through reconciliation and laughter and thus ultimately going beyond punishment and resentment. Such vision of ludic Ubuntu is replete with satirical, healing, joyful and mourning expressions of the arts that Achebe so fondly depicts in his works, especially in *The Arrow of God*. The end of the novel, of course, presents fear and trembling, shock and trauma. Ezeulu's drum of peacemaker is short-circuited or silenced through the vengeful experience of carceral death: "But there was no more laughter left in the people" (p. 216). His bout with imprisonment has literally and emotionally cut him off from his kin, and he no longer feels that he belongs.

## Concluding Remarks

In critiquing the specter of western penology, I am not suggesting that Achebe downplays precolonial forms of sanctions, which may have been quite violent. But I do hold that the invention of the modern prison as the preferred method of exacting punishment is everything but humane. From an Indigenous *socio-centric* perspective that values Ubuntu, the western juridical system of isolation amounts to torture and terror. However, it has been "forgotten" in African Studies, since there seems to be no existing literary acknowledgment of its role in Achebe's novels. Imprisonment sanctioned by criminal law has become so normalized in the modern psyche, the world over, that it is not even worth commenting on as a despicable primitive practice. Yet, we have deluded ourselves by calling practices that endorse a tort perspective (e.g., restitution) as primitive. Oddly, it is this practice that is matter-of-factly used by pursuing corporate criminals. They tend not to go to prison in the United States and pay fines (if that), instead. And that is called civilized. Yet, when African villagers favor tort for crimes against persons in a non-corporate setting it is considered uncivilized.

More work needs to be done to interrogate the creative work from African imprisoned intellectuals, many of them considered political prisoners, in conversation with novels in order to problematize the prison as a central organizing form of repression in colonial and neo-colonial life across the continent.



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