

The Trial of
Cecil John Rhodes

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Adekeye Adebajo



For my sister and spiritual guide

Adefemi Mofolorunso Adebajo (1969–2016)

In Memoriam

Until we meet again in After Africa.

Acknowledgements

My own personal association with the legacy of Cecil Rhodes began in 1990 on winning the single Rhodes Scholarship from Nigeria to study at Oxford University in England. An alarmed uncle – a radical historian –exclaimed at the time: “That thing is dripping with blood. Cecil Rhodes was a brutal imperialist!” My thoughts at the time were more practical: to get a good education at a world-class institution, and if the money of a robber-baron who had plundered Africa’s wealth was paying for it, then at least a slice of the treasure was returning to the continent. I felt that I should accept even the crumbs from the great imperialist’s gluttonous feast, but promised myself that, having completed my studies, I would bite the hand that fed me by pursuing anti-imperial causes and eventually “trying” the self-styled “Colossus”: Cecil John Rhodes.

This political novella is thus the fulfilment of that promise I made to myself 30 years ago.

I remember my stomach churning at dinners at Rhodes House in Oxford when the assembled dignitaries would turn to a large portrait of the imperialist and raise their glasses to “The Founder”. My own silent protest involved refusing to partake in this strange ritual of the most secret of societies. Having obtained the doctoral Golden Fleece from the city of “dreaming spires” and “lost causes” in 1999, I have had two decades to contribute in a small way to anti-colonial initiatives. I have sought to promote Pan-African knowledge-production, the quest for Pax Africana, and a more integrated continent: pursuits that were the very anti-thesis of Cecil Rhodes’s vision of an imperial Pax Britannica, which resulted in spreading death and destruction from the Cape to Cairo.

Moving to South Africa to head the Centre for Conflict Resolution (CCR) in Cape Town in 2003, I was shocked to discover the creation of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation in the same year as my arrival in the province where Cecil Rhodes had been prime minister for five years. The Rhodes Trust in Oxford contributed £10 million, in the first decade of the Mandela Rhodes Foundation, for African scholars to study at South African universities; to support child healthcare; and to provide sporting facilities

for disadvantaged communities. But despite the positive impact that these funds have doubtless had, I persistently wondered about the wisdom of this monstrous marriage between the nineteenth century's greatest imperialist and one of the twentieth century's greatest moral figures. These are some of the issues that motivated me to write this book.

This work of creative non-fiction owes a debt of gratitude to four African literary ancestors. Set in an African "Hereafter" called After Africa, the novella is inspired by similar works by Kenya's Ali Mazrui's *The Trial of Christopher Okigbo* (1971), Zimbabwe's Stanlake Samkange's *On Trial for My Country* (1966), and Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz's short story *The Seventh Heaven* (2005): all political tales set in an imaginary after-life. South African author Olive Schreiner's 1897 novella, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, which dealt with the excesses of Cecil Rhodes's marauding mercenaries in contemporary Zimbabwe, was also an important influence. I was further spurred on by legendary South African actors John Kani and Robert Whitehead's imaginative play *Congo: The Trial of King Leopold II*, which I saw at Johannesburg's Market Theatre in October 2018.

This allegorical tale contextualises contemporary debates around the removal of the statue of the arch-imperialist Cecil John Rhodes from the

University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015 that spawned the “Fallist” movement across the globe. It also contextualises the 2020 decision by Oxford University’s Oriel College to remove Rhodes’s statue from the front of its college on the High Street, following five years of student-led protests.

I would like, in closing, to express my gratitude to two external reviewers who took the time to provide extremely useful comments that helped to strengthen the work. I was enormously fortunate to have had three of South Africa’s best editors working on the novella. Award-winning writer Ken Barris took the lead in smoothing out the rough edges. Russell Martin wielded his editorial pen as only a Cambridge-trained historian can, while Helen Moffett added stylistic flourishes to the early chapters. I would particularly like to thank Bridget Impey and Maggie Davey at Jacana Media, who believed in this unusual project from the start, and supported it consistently until the very end. I would also like to thank my colleagues at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa and its Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) which I direct. Last but not least, it is important to acknowledge that I could not have travelled this road without the great sacrifices of my mother, Adunni Adebajo.

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I

After Africa

Cecil John Rhodes had been asleep. Still wearing a crumpled tweed jacket and white flannel trousers, he got to his feet slowly, and tried to look around, oppressed by the absolute darkness that surrounded him. He imagined vividly that he was in a tomb, with a colossal weight of stone above, threatening to bury him. He groped around until he stumbled painfully into a staircase that was as rough and cold to the touch as stone. He began to make his way upwards, feeling his way in the dark. He made a decision and began to grope his way. It was not long before light glowed dimly on the clammy walls, and then he heard distant screams that grew louder. Swift leathery shapes darted past his head, sending his heart racing – only bats, he tried to reassure himself.

Cecil turned a corner of the rocky winding stairway, and saw throngs of naked, wailing bodies being consumed by flames along the edges of a lake of fire that burned with greater intensity than any flame he had ever seen before. The air stank of sulphur and brimstone, and the wailing grew louder. He saw shuddering bodies being eaten alive by rats and lizards, while figures with horns and hooves, darkly visible within the swarms of fiery serpents and dragons that swirled around them, poked burning spikes into the mass. Some had their skin flayed off their backs, and salt poured on their raw skin. Some had the soles of their feet dipped in burning sulphur. Others were disembowelled. The horned figures wielded a variety of torture implements: iron spikes, heated kettles, sharpened pangas and assegais, bloodied knobkerries. More frightening screams could be heard from condemned souls being skewered in a giant barbecue. Others were hoisted on spits and basted by taunting figures.

Creeping upwards, he recoiled in horror as he saw, without understanding how he knew what he saw, gluttons wallowing in filth amidst a hailstorm; carnal sinners being swept around by furious winds; traitors being cased in ice; the greedy endlessly stealing great stone weights from each other; spendthrifts torn apart by three-headed dogs; heretics burned in tombs; soothsayers condemned

to walk backwards; hypocrites wandering aimlessly; adulterers tormented by a stream flowing with blood; alchemists struck with deadly plagues; suicides transformed into baobab and acacia trees; and flakes of fire raining down incessantly on the homicidal. Birds of prey gorged on raw flesh, even as a huge dragon with four large horns and blazing eyes was thrown into a lake of burning sulphur.

Cecil skirted the fringes of a more open space, in which even more hideous attention was given to a small number of victims. He could not know that among the most notable was Uganda's Idi Amin, whose regime had killed an estimated 300 000 people. Another was Emperor Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the Central African Republic who had squandered a quarter of his country's national income on a grandiose coronation. There was Nigeria's General Sani Abacha, the brutal ruler of Africa's most populous state, who infamously hanged nine environmental campaigners, and launched military operations that killed thousands of innocent people. Alongside were leaders of the genocidal militias in Rwanda who had murdered 800 000 people in three months.

Cecil struggled past these horrific sights, climbing ever upwards, until light broke through at the end of the rocky steps. Reaching the top, he stumbled out, gasping for air and bewildered. He lay down to

catch his breath and did not know when he passed out, drifting into a deep slumber.

When he awoke, Cecil saw a forest in front of him, a dense swathe of green and yellow trees that stretched for miles. He climbed painfully to his feet, and began walking towards it. He spotted a long row of fever trees with green and yellow leaves, cracking bark and foliage in which flocks of black hawks and brown-and-white eagles with yellow beaks nested. Towering above them were hundreds of ancient baobab trees with their gigantic trunks and slender tangled branches, on which vultures perched, alongside brown owls with glowing eyes. Mingled with them were vast numbers of mopane trees. He remembered the Shona word for them, meaning “butterfly,” after the shape of the leaves which protect the tree from heat. He touched the tough termite-resistant mopane wood, and stared above at the green pigeons and green Cape weavers, which he also recognised.

Out of nowhere appeared a group of *Abiku*, child-ghosts who die in infancy and continue to be reborn with the same birthmarks. These ghost-children had a penchant for mischief, and this particular group followed Cecil through the forest chanting “*Oyinbo* pepper, leave the Bush of Ghosts! *Muzungu*, go back to England!” They tugged at his clothing and leaped up to pull his hair, and trailed him singing the same

tune. Frightened, Cecil broke into a run, and only left them behind when he exited the forest and staggered onto the muddy verge of a wide vlei (or shallow lake), along which foraged flocks of sacred ibis, blue cranes, and brown-and-white storks with long orange beaks.

Eventually he passed around it and reached the other side, exhausted. He lay down to dry out his muddy clothes in the hot sun, wondering at the nature of this strange place. After a couple of hours, three bizarre human figures materialised, each covered in gold, silver, and bronze. One had no arms. The other hopped along on one leg, and the third had only one eye in the middle of her head. They did not speak, but beckoned him to follow them down a long trail through the grassland on the other side of the vlei, and into a large house. Inside, he was handed some Ethiopian *injera* bread and *wat* stew with assorted meats, which he devoured ravenously as the ghosts sat round a large marble table with him. He was also served West African palm wine from a brown gourd. As the friendly ghosts drifted to sleep, Cecil made for the door and escaped into the burning orange dusk. He walked as far as he could, until he lay down in a thicket of long grass, as it was getting dark, and slept.

Cecil rose at first light, and walked on steadily, until he reached a large clear body of water shrouded

in mist. He saw, floating clear of the mist, a hooded figure in a giant canoe. It reached the shore, and the ferryman beached it. He stood up in the canoe, and approached. The ferryman pulled back the hood of his long black *djellaba* to reveal a mound of thick black hair, a handsome clean-shaven face, and glistening white teeth.

“I know you, Mr Rhodes. My name is Ahmed Ben Bella. You won’t have heard of me. My task is to transport you across the river, where a guide will take you on further.”

He helped Cecil into the canoe, saw him seated, and pushed the craft skilfully off the mud with his oar. Then he leaned forward and shook Cecil’s hand.

“I was Algeria’s founding head of state in the Herebefore, you know. I was instrumental in creating the Liberation Committee of the Organisation of African Unity at its inaugural summit in 1963, in Addis Ababa. Have you ever been there?”

Cecil shook his head.

“What liberation, you might be asking yourself, Mr Rhodes. It was nothing less than to complete the liberation of African countries from the various imperial powers that had oppressed us for so long.”

A wave of shock passed through Cecil. What had happened while he slept?

“I famously implored my fellow leaders during the summit – yes, famously! – to let us agree to die a little

or even completely, so that the peoples still under colonial domination might be free, and African unity might not be a vain word. The first part of my wish has now been fulfilled, but rather more literally than I intended at the time.”

He picked up his oar, turned the craft away from the shore, and began to paddle.

The huge River Africa which Cecil and his ferryman proceeded to cross was made up of four large streams: the Nile, the Niger, the Congo, and the Zambezi, Africa’s four greatest waterways. The flowing waters contained the tears of the multitude of sinners that Cecil had seen in the abyss out of which he had climbed. As Ben Bella paddled, Cecil sat terrified in the canoe, awed by the enormous river they were crossing with its violent turbulence that he was sure would tip the boat over.

Seeing Cecil’s fear, the ferryman reached into his pocket, and passed him a can of cigarettes and a box of matches.

“Take it all,” he said. “I’m trying to give up. They’re Egyptian, you know.”

Cecil thanked him, and lit one with some difficulty in the bouncing craft.

“Let me tell you a bit more about my background, Mr Rhodes. I actually fought for colonial France during the Second World War against Nazi Germany. I first fought in a French Alpine Infantry unit, in

their defence against German air attacks – for which I won the Croix de Guerre – and subsequently was part of the Allied force that liberated Rome – for which I won the Médaille Militaire.

“I was thus a loyal subject of the Mother Country until radicalised by the French massacre of 20 000 Algerian civilians. They attacked them from land, sea, and air in the cities of Setif, Guelma, and Kherrata. This happened on my return from service in Europe in May 1945. It was French General Charles de Gaulle himself who personally ordered these cowardly executions and lynchings of defenceless villagers. It was a response to the deaths of 102 *pieds-noirs*, European citizens born in Algeria. That in turn happened after the French army had killed thousands of peaceful Algerian demonstrators. Their crime? To demand their independence from recently liberated France.”

Cecil was so tired that he struggled to follow. It was enough to relish his cigarette.

“So many people were killed in this massacre that French soldiers dumped their bodies into ravines and wells. Even by France’s sordid colonial record, this was one of the worst massacres in its history. It was on this day that I decided to join the Algerian national resistance, and became a founding member of the armed struggle in 1954.

“I survived two assassination attempts by French

security personnel two years later, before being imprisoned in France for the rest of the eight-year liberation war in which one million of my compatriots shed their blood to gain our freedom. I had been captured in 1956 after Paris treacherously forced my plane – having previously guaranteed safe passage – to be diverted to France, following a meeting with my liberation comrades in Rome. I was freed from jail at the end of the war, becoming the first president of Algeria. As earlier noted, I strongly supported Southern African liberation movements from Zimbabwe, South Africa, Angola, and Namibia, who were all given offices and training facilities in Algiers. We also contributed 100 million francs to the OAU – that’s the Organisation of African Unity – to their nine-member Liberation Committee, of which Algeria was a founding member.”

Cecil looked at him blankly.

“I can see you’re exhausted,” said the ferryman. “You can sleep over there, on that mattress. We’re only going to get to the other side tomorrow morning.”

Cecil seized this offer and soon fell into a deep sleep, despite the turbulence.

He awoke to a misty morning, live with the call of birds. They had crossed the mighty river. As they approached the bank, Cecil sighted a figure waiting for them in the mist. It resolved into a woman of regal

demeanour who waited for them to disembark, then held out her hand to greet Cecil and the ferryman. She was strikingly elegant, with proud brown eyes and high cheekbones. She was dressed in a garment made of beautiful red, orange, and green Ghanaian *kente* cloth with matching headgear, ornate earrings and a gold chain around her neck.

“Mr Rhodes, I presume? Welcome to After Africa. This is where all the departed souls from Africa and its diaspora end up. It is often said here that ‘death is an exercise in Pan-Africanism.’ As the Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui noted, death is the most horizontal form of Pan-Africanism. My name is Efua Sutherland. I was from Ghana – the Gold Coast in your day – in the Herebefore, and have been in After Africa for about three decades. I have been assigned to be your guide. It is time for your trial in After Africa. But before this happens, I must first take you on a journey to five of After Africa’s heavens. Your trial will take place in the fifth heaven, and there the decision will be made as to whether you can ascend to the sixth and seventh heavens.”

Cecil was astonished by this revelation, but was not surprised that this woman knew his name. After some hesitation, he said, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Sutherland, and thank you for—”

“Please call me Efua,” interrupted the woman.

“I have wandered through the most terrifying

scenes, first in a hellish underground cave, then in a forest and grassland full of dangers. Finally, I had to cross a vast perilous river in a canoe. What are all these places?”

“You have been dead for 120 years, Mr Rhodes, asleep in Limbo. You woke up in After Africa’s Dungeon of Departed Souls, and wandered through the Bush of Ghosts, and crossed the River Africa. All new arrivals in our Hereafter experience this before their trial.”

“What trial, and who presumes to judge me?”

His normally high voice cracked into an even higher falsetto whenever he was anxious or indignant. He was unused to being powerless, and it was a very uncomfortable experience.

“What will I be judged on during this trial, and who will be the judges? Will any of the judges be white?”

“What has this to do with the matter?”

“I fear my imperial achievements might not be impartially viewed by those who suffered their consequences,” he responded drily.

“Anyone living in Africa beyond the grave can be a judge. In fact, we’ve had several white judges in the past. But you will have to be patient to discover their identity. You will have to wait to learn the nature of the crimes for which you will be tried. We have to wander through the four heavens before arriving

at the fifth. Truth is revealed only slowly in *After Africa*, and much patience is required to discover its mysteries.”

She took a hip flask from her bag, and handed it to him.

“It’s Scotch,” she said. “You’ll probably need it.”

There were many things that Cecil could not know. Among them was that Efua Sutherland had been a pioneer of African theatre during Ghana’s heady post-independence days in the Herebefore. Using techniques such as traditional oratory and praise poetry, she had sought to use theatre to liberate Africans from the trauma of five centuries of slavery and colonialism. She had created a drama studio in Accra for experimental theatre, interacting closely with the communities in which she worked to create an authentically indigenous theatre. Her Kusum Agoromba theatre group had travelled through many of Ghana’s local communities, performing traditional theatre.

The artistic compound in which Efua lived in the Herebefore had been named Araba Mansa (after her grandmother), and had become a site of pilgrimage for artists like Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Kenya’s Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ghana’s Ama Ata Aidoo, and the African American Maya Angelou. She had lived even her personal life as if she were playing it out on stage. Each festive season, she

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would construct a large hut with palm fronds, tinsel, and flowers and an outdoor bonfire around which her children would gather under the moonlight to hear traditional tales. Efua had famously prepared the body of one of the pioneers of contemporary Pan-Africanism, W.E.B. Du Bois – who had lived out his last years in Ghana – for burial. This had created a close and enduring bond between them, which continued in After Africa.

