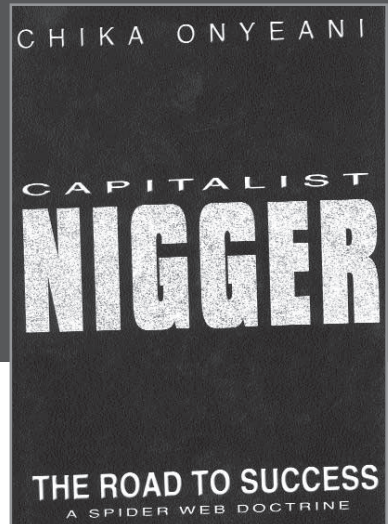


Review

Capitalist Nigger

Chika Onyeani (Timbuktu)



Capitalist Nigger is authored by Chika Onyeani a former diplomat, journalist of international acclaim and editor of *African Sun Times* the largest weekly African newspaper distributed nation-wide in the USA. The book was published in South Africa late last year and was an immediate best seller.

Thebe Morake reviews this controversial book.

Beginning with the title, *Capitalist Nigger*, the book is racism at its worst. It is built on an assumption that blacks have predictable behavioural patterns. Chika Onyeani tells blacks to shed their image of a sacrificial lamb and instead develop the 'killer instinct' of the white Western World (Caucasian) which is necessary to sustain them in this harsh and difficult world.

Onyeani's *Capitalist Nigger* is an attempt to redress past wrongs by engaging in the same invidious practices that engendered these

very wrongs. The hurt and suffering Africans endured under repressive colonial rule, led Onyeani to a conclusion: to face the truth of their pain and to search for its relief in the methods that caused it. He labels such methods 'Niggerist'.

Onyeani's polemical reductions, if believed and acted upon, are capable of draining away all complexities and ignoring cultural miscegenation on the African continent. He seems convinced that acceding to or emulating 'western' and 'eastern' style business leadership and adopting their economic policies in the hope of sharing the benefits accruing from its power, is essential, if not imperative. He argues that the moral breaches that greed allows do not constitute a dereliction of moral duty. Such breaches simply reflect the world as it is – the world of hard knocks.

Onyeani is keen to document the 'truth' about African political culture and economic patterns, a motivation that led him to write this book. He argues that a 'Niggerist' approach should be used to justify the acquisition of power and upward mobility amongst Africans. Hence, 'whatever the Caucasian does, the Capitalist Nigger must follow him.' In short, become that which you opposed.

Onyeani embodies a perspective of economic nationalism. He pushes the interests of blacks away from their political and economic preoccupations with the apartheid and colonialist era because "black

dependency on the rest of the world to continue to solve its problems cannot continue" and that "Capitalist Nigger understands that failure is never an option." His proposals and insights are instructive but not desirable. "A Capitalist Nigger wears the badge of being called a Nigger as a badge of success." He reduces the intricacies of African problems to a set of dull but catchy romantic ideas about the need for blacks to rise above mediocrity. He seems to blame the victims of poverty and racism for its existence.

Onyeani needs first to acknowledge the fact that structure and behaviour are inseparable. How people act and live is shaped by the larger institutions under which they find themselves. Self congratulatory postures of elites, like Onyeani, pay little attention to the structural factors that undermine even the most willing to work. Chika is rightly at war with mediocrity. Understandably, his argument is informed in large part by Western, and others, condescension to Africans.

Perhaps some readers may be dazzled by Onyeani's gladiatorial spirit and his uncompromising assault on the poor. His prejudice seemingly knows no bounds as he tars other ethnic groups with the

same brush. "Chinese Americans understand that knowledge is power. They have carved a niche for themselves where they can exercise power – in the highly classified field of nuclear warheads and missiles."

In sum, he believes racist social barriers have perpetuated black social misery and upward mobility in Africa. But it would be naïve to ignore other factors that have triggered social misery on this continent. Listing of abject poverty on the African continent does not prove anything automatic about race and progress or, indeed, culture and progress. I find it irresponsible to simply revel in greed, using black skin politics or the underside of the so called 'West', to justify gaining power and visibility. Onyeani's argument submits to the most irresponsible

tendency – the worship of the means to achieve greed whatever the methods. Seneca, the Greek philosopher, once taught that greed can never be satisfied. There is no prosthetic for such a disease.

Some black middle class South Africans have bought into this 'Capitalist Nigger' philosophy for practical reasons. Access to power and profit is more important than the injuries they inflict, indifference they support. Class interests have trumped and suspended the moral call to arms and sustained selective privilege amongst the emerging black middle class. Like a mirage, this privilege lies in the future which is near, yet so far. The suspension of morality to achieve greater economic and cultural goals supports Thomas Jefferson's vicious notion that "the tree of liberty must be periodically watered with

blood." The morally indifferent have found their redeemer in Onyeani.

Onyeani is a race merchant like many who invest in it for profit. In this instance, racial memory of the past or the history of strife inevitably colours his argument because race was the visible catalyst. But by failing to consider the complex historical context for this history, Onyeani gives the false impression that Africans are dispassionate observers in a game of survival. The book is a shrewdly written pop historical analysis. Generalisations take precedence over subtlety.

LB

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