

TITLE: Cowboy: The King's Palace

AUTHOR: Stephen Atalebe

YEAR: 2008

PUBLISHER: Atafa Publishers

PLACE: Bolgatanga, Ghana

ISBN: 978-9988-1-0901-6

PAGES: 208

REVIEWER: Agnes A. Atia Apusigah, Dept. of African and General Studies, University for Development Studies, P. O. Box 520, Wa, Ghana. Email: [awingura2008@yahoo.com](mailto:awingura2008@yahoo.com)

*Cowboy: The King's Palace* is the much awaited sequel to *Cowboy: The Genesis*. The author, Stephen Atalebe, after treating his audience to the complex socio-cultural world of cowboys in *The Genesis*, whetted their appetite for more in his pre-publication introduction and advertisement of the rest (*The King's Palace* and *The Return*) of the three-part serial on the adventures of cowboys. The promise of more adventure is finally delivered in *The King's Palace*, which also includes *The Return*. While audiences were expecting two separate volumes the author returns with a combined one. These much shorter narratives compared to *The Genesis* are better together than apart for economic and strategic reasons. Above all, *The palace* takes center stage in the unfolding of events in the communities of Datayeeta, Kongo and Atiburu where betrayal and vengeance but also deception, power and opulence loom large. *The Return* dices this up with an opening into unfamiliar terrain, where fulfillment, success and modernity stand in near contradiction to the humble beginnings of the cowboys.

*Cowboy: The King's Palace* opens at the palace of the chief of Datayeeta who sits in council to discuss the plight of the absconded cowboys: Bia, the protagonist; his girl (or sister-in-bed), Mmaa and loyal friends; Coobi, Abala and Alah. Naba Tarato Songa, the chief of Datayeeta, summons his elders, the parents of

the cowboys and community members on the tip of Apolala, the fifth cowboy whose traditional loyalties and cowardice betrays his more adventurous compatriots and offers sufficient search clues.

Atalebe, the author, treats his audience to not uncommon forms of traditional jurisprudence where African versions of governance are cast in royal opulence against a background of widespread poverty. In the palaces of Datayeeta, Kongo and Atiburu, traditional protocols and the breaking of them, the use and abuse of power and authority as well as the compromises and resistance of those who inhabit and/or relate to the sites of power, are beautifully told to keep the reader captivated. The author casts this in the planning and search for the absconded cowboys, the visit of the search party to Kongo and the life and struggles of Mmaa, the 51st wife of the King of Atiburu, as she holds on to her first love, Bia.

As if to complete the story, Atalebe moves his audience to the new world of the cowboys after much suspense. He treats his audience to the happy ending of the cowboys: their economic success, lush lifestyles and educational accomplishments. In spite of realizing their dreams, the cowboys did not seem to have found fulfillment. Their emotional worlds remain rocky. Bia, in particular remains in the romantic wilderness and in the bonds of the love of his life, Mmaa. Thus, *The Return* was not just a return to humble beginnings in Datayeeta but also to the long "lost" love of Bia.

Undoubtedly, the Cowboy series has matured. Atalebe, the author, matures as much as the cowboy characters in this sequel. The author demonstrates more sophistication and perfection in the rendering of the story by masterfully holding his audiences to ransom through uncertainty, intrigue and subtlety. He skillfully crafts the narrative and sub-narratives in suspense, soliloquy and irony. From start to finish the reader is constantly challenged to work with both author and characters as the story unfolds. The transition from *The Palace* to *The Return* is so masterfully done to hook

readers to the narrative to the end. Readers are lured to imagine a sad ending at the same time that they are teased to suspend judgment until the end. This stylistic improvement keeps readers captivated throughout the telling of the story.

The author also keeps faith with his critical social agenda. As the cowboy characters mature in *The King's Palace* and *The Return* they also migrate from childhood prangs and adolescent adventurism to calculated, decisive and confrontational actions. Along the way, the author engages readers in topical issues on politics/governance, health delivery, HIV/AIDS, cultural practices, gender, education, economics, ethics/morals and aesthetics that are not unfamiliar. Many students of deprived backgrounds will easily relate to the struggles of Bia and his cronies to put themselves through school as well as the struggles between supervisors and their students during thesis and dissertation writing. Many will not be unfamiliar with chiefs and their many wives, royal wives and their extra-marital affairs and, the insecurities and adventurism of royalty as well as the emotional deprivations and escapades of royal wives. The palace scenes also offer glimpses into the excesses and hypocrisies of traditionalism as much as the display of relative opulence in a sea of widespread deprivation. There are also surprises such as the King who paints and paints his women naked and, who perpetuates a lie in order to keep Mmaa, Bia's love, as his 51st wife. There are surprises like the common knowledge of royal children who are not blood children. Normally, such knowledge is top secret and at worse open secret. Such knowledge might be common to the people but hardly so to the royal children as portrayed in the text.

Moreover, Atalebe in his usual style of using indigenous proverbs, scenarios and expressions, paints vivid yet imaginative pictures of the Frafra socio-cultural world in ways that local audiences will find captivating. These realistic pictures make it possible for the insider to flow with the story. For the outsider, the vividness of the stylistic paintings should heighten imagination and arouse suffi-

cient curiosity for keeping faith with the author and following through the story.

Undoubtedly, the novel will be a useful addition to the collections of educational institutions, especially senior high schools. It will give students the reading excitement and context that they can relate to and easily investigate. Novel lovers and general readers will love *The King's Palace*. If you have read *The Genesis*, I say you cannot do without *The King's Palace*, including *The Return*. If you have not, pick both up. I can assure you that it will not make a difference which one you read first. The author's anticipation and skill offers the benefit of choice. For cultural analysts like me, *The Palace*, as a product of popular culture, like *The Genesis*; offers a space for the critical analysis of society and its representations of power, women, education and wealth.

However, the author needs to straighten up some grammatical and stylistic slips. Footnotes will be very handy for translations from Gurune to English. Italics will make non-English words stand out. There is also the need to edit grammar such as subject/verb combinations for proper match. These will help improve editorial quality.