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Abstract

The business of this paper is to explore the various traditional elements discernible in modern African Drama. It is proposed to use, J. P. Clark's *Ozidi* and Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* as bases of extraction and to draw examples from other relevant sources as we go along. The paper will also show how the traditional elements have been integrated through the medium of English to produce powerful works of art which give the character and strength to African writing.

Introduction

African literature arises from and mirrors the African community and the historical experiences of Africa ... like other artifacts of a culture, the literary work is not an island into itself, and to study it in isolation can be misleading. Knowledge of the society avoids provincialism in the making of judgements - Shelton quoted by Akyea (1977: 117).

There is no doubt that for most successful African writers oral tradition is the inspiration for much of their work. In turning to the literary traditions of their ancestors, African writers, have sought to show its worth and to give it a role which far transcends a simple curiosity for things of the past.

Despite using a foreign medium, the spirit of the native languages has been carried over in the peculiarities of style to create a new branch of literature which adds up to the growing body of work which is often referred to as African Literature. Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark, Ola Rotimi and Esua Sutherland are some of the African writers who are usually associated with the use of African traditional expressions in their works. But this paper is however, concerned with the traditional content of the plays of J. P. Clark and Wole Soyinka.

J. P. Clark's *Ozidi* is based on oral tradition, the *Ijaw Saga*. The ingredients of the story grow out of the native soil of the writer. In the play, *Ozidi* of the royal house of Orua, is involved in the power struggle of the town and is soon treacherously murdered by ambitious rivals led by Ofe, The Short. But he is survived by a son who falls under the guardianship of the witch Oreame, the paternal grand-mother. Junior *Ozidi* is brought up systematically on the single principle of avenging the father and he achieves this after a long epic battle with men and spirits. But power, which *Ozidi* achieves after this feat, has in itself the germ of self-destruction, partly because power corrupts and partly because *Ozidi*'s education has been so narrow and biased towards revenge that he is bound to come to grief. *Ozidi* becomes ruler of the land, but is tyrannical and far more unpopular than his arrogant father. He is finally brought down by the Small pox King, which is a kind of ritual dispatch of evil. *Ozidi*, then is a play in the revenge tradition, but it is given a traditional African twist. It is a work

which shows J. P. Clark at his artistic best as a dramatist. He evokes characters and situations with skill and understanding and in doing this he uses traditional means to a great effect.

First, the play opens in a traditional manner, introducing elements of African religious rites. A story-teller comes to humour the crowd and to win seven maidens who will carry the sacrifice to the grave. He begins:

Attention please, all you who have come to see our show, will
you please give me your ears? I am afraid there's a hitch.

The explanation of the hitch sets the tone of the play:

We need seven young women right now ... Trouble is that, before we
can perform for your pleasure and benefit tonight, we must first have a
sacrifice to placate our hosts from the sea ... And the seven girls we ask
of you, all virgins mind you, alone can bear offerings to our guests
from the sea and so establish between us a bridge (Ozidi, 1)

Mystery, magic and witchcraft are also part of the conception of the plot of *Ozidi*. For instance, this passage with Bonakarakarabiri, the old man of the west, of whom Ozidi asks: -

But what manner
of going to sleep is this, planting
your head
On the ground like this, your anus
in the sky?
No Wonder one is bald and the other
All infected with flies (42).

Then the old man grips Ozidi with his legs and cries out:

This is
A civilized country, and I won't let you
Feed on me like a chicken (43)

Ozidi does not question his powers; in much the same way, he accepts the witchcraft of his grandmother Oreame. Everyone else from Ododama to Orua accepted Oreame as a witch and that was that. All these practices are part and parcel of Africa traditional religion.

Another important African traditional element is the re-creation on the stage the creation myths of African cultures, including their moralities, allegories, and folk stories, and to render arcane and dying rituals in a renovated popular story form acted out on stage. J. P. Clark's *Ozidi*, is the re-creation of the Ijaw festival.

Wise sayings and proverbs are common features of African traditional expressions. For instance, in *Ozidi*, the men in Orua are worried about their lack of a king, which situation is dangerous for the safety of the state. So a character, Azazabife, says:

All tree fallen is free booty for all Women in Long Skirts.
May even walk over it, that is if they
Don't Cart it off for firewood right away (6)

Again in an angry exchange between Oreame, the witch, and Temugedege, the idiot King, the witch is irked about Temugedege's softness and lack of comprehension that the murderers of Ozidi are to be paid back in their own coin in blood. And when she reaches the height of her anger she could not but exclaim:

Who sickens at blood must

Stay on diet of palm oil

We are also introduced to the conspirators plotting to kill Ozidi. True to such meeting there is a Cassius who is the moving spirit of evil. In this case, it is Azezabife. When he realizes that the fear of Ozidi makes some of the men waver in their resolution to kill him he very subtly comments:

Indeed, are we houseflies

That cannot assemble a session of Court?

They say whatever their crowd,

Those creatures cannot knock,

Over a cow.

J. P. Clark makes the life an Ijaw man leads come alive by his use of imagery. A point to note in this connection is that all the characters are traditional people who live their lives nowhere but where they are born. They indulge in banter of a kind which is typical among Africans. For instance, when men gather to drink they give each other praise names. So when Ozidi, the elder, wishes to harangue his fellow men on the need to have a king he begins in a clever rhetorical fashion by asking each one in turn

Ozidi (rises): Ofe, your praise name?

Ofe (beating his chest): I am Ofe-begbulamane,

Ofe the Short, so they call me.

Ozidi: Ofe the Short, I greet you.

Ofe: That is my name, And yours?

Ozidi: Ozidi

Ofe: Ozidi, then I greet you

The images of farming, fishing and hunting are all abound in Ozidi. The pride the yam farmers take in the size of their yam is well known among the Ijaws. The same sentiment is expressed in terms of cattle by herdsmen or fishing by people who live by the sea.

The whole of the local picture is brightened when the Small pox king appears at the end of the afflictions of cold, headache and fever. He brings the play to a conclusion by killing off the killer Ozidi.

In *A Dance of the Forest and Kongi's Harvest*, Wole Soyinka is concerned with a public theme—the idea of independence and the emergence and making of the African dictator. In *A Dance of the Forest*, people are gathered to rejoice at the attainment of independence with pomp and revelry. But there is really nothing to rejoice at except past crimes and present treachery. The absurdity of the situation comes to light when one realizes that amidst the apparent jollity the shadow of death establishes itself unmistakably. In this play,

then the author is not only being satirical; he is being prophetic as well. He prophesied darkness and this darkness descends in **Kongi's Harvest**. This play is a study of one aspect of contemporary African statesmanship. Kongi, the dictator, the Messiah of pain (instead of plenitude) is going to rule the land with an iron-hand, remove and detain advocates of tradition like Oba Danlola, and transform the community into an ultramodern state, a giant machine with the citizens as raw materials.

The questions, however, is how "modern" Kongi's ideas and regime are. Is the Reformed Aweri Fraternity not the same thing as the Ogbo Aweri masquerading in uniform? Are the high sounding philosophical ideas of members of the new fraternity not as much dogged with inanities as the roundabout, tortuous pronouncements of the Ogbo Aweri? Is the consuming passion for deification in Kongi not the same old trick of the King's immortality in tradition? And is the Carpenters' Brigade not the same as the other "brigade" of palace officials in tradition who give physical realization to the immortality idea?

The whole purpose of the play according to Oyin (1977), is to demonstrate the lie that is at the root of the whole idea of modernism in contemporary Africa. It is to laugh at this giant illusion which is merely tradition white-washed.

Kong's harvest is quite replete with traditional expressions. The very opening lines of the play reads:

The pot that will eat fat
Its bottom must be scorched
The squirrel that will long crack nuts
Its foot pad must be sore (1).

Which is a Yoruba traditional, poetic way of expressing Kong's self-imposed Herculean assignment. In the same way when Sarumi tries later in the play to intervene between Oba Danlola and the Superintendent he finds himself saying:

Oba Danlola, don't be angry
With your son. If the baobab shakes
Her head in anger, what chance
Has the rodent when
An ear-ring falls
And hits the earth with thunder?

This is a way of saying that the King's words carry a divine efficacy and that Oba Danlola should be restrained in his anger lest he pours doom on the world. In another typical traditional expression Oba Sarumi says:

Let the dandy's wardrobe
Be as lavish as the shop
Of the dealer in brocades
It cannot match an elder's rags.

This too is a way of emphasizing the inscrutable dignity of the elder or the king whom age or divine association has given a supernatural aura. All the

traditional expressions quoted above are translations of common place sayings of the Yoruba. They are put in the plays for various reasons and with differing significance. In some of them, like the pot on fire, the idea is to demonstrate the truth of the saying as transcending time and place; in others, like the importance of the elder's rags, the idea is to ridicule the illusion of the naivety of conservative tradition.

Songs and chants are also common features of African drama. These can be found in the second part of *Kongi's harvest*. Daodu's attempt on Kogi has failed and the latter is well on the road to his "inevitable apotheosis." Meanwhile, there is a "real feast, a genuine harvest orgy of food and drink that permits no spectators, only celebrants." The dance song that Yollow is substantially traditional especially the second section.

Mo ti d' ade egun

Pere gungun maja gungun pere (82)

translated

I have borne the thorned crown

Rashly, enthusiastically, thoughtlessly.

But in the other two stanzas of the song (that is, stanzas one and three) the author has woven in an important contrast. The first stanza deals with the first coming of a messiah:

Ijo mo ko w' aiye o

I pasan ni

Igi lehin were o

Kumo lehin were o (82)

translated

At my first coming

Scourges all the way

Whips to my skin

Cudgels on the madman's back

The Messiah wanted to redeem mankind through his own personal sacrifice by demonstrating to man a magnificent altruism - giving himself up to torture and death. But how can this work when all that man seems to understand is a fierce opportunism and self-interest? In the second coming (stanza three) he is going to change his tactics - no self-immolation, no high ideals, rather, he is going to forget all noble principles and turn Epicurean.

Adeyin wa o

Igba ikore ni

Aiye erinkeji

Iyan no mo wa je

Ayo a b' ori

Aiya ni mo wa fe

Ayo ni mo wa fe

Ayo a b' ori

Aiye erin no mo wa

Ayo a b' ori
Emu ni mo wa mu (83)
Translated
Now this second coming
Is time for harvest
This second coming
Is for pounding of yams
Peace is triumphant
I have come wife-seeking
Peace is triumphant
I am borne on laughter
Peace is triumphant
I have come palm-wine thirsting

In *Kongi's Harvest*, the design is that of a King's festival. Thus when the play opens with a roll of drums and the traditional characters, led by Oba Danlola, break into their special "anthem", they are in effect uttering a version of the presacrifice invocatory chant to the founder and past executors of the royal tradition. This is an indispensable opening to such celebrations as the characters chant:

.... Who but a lunatic
Will bandy words with boxes
With Government rediffusion sets
Which talk and talk and never
Take a lone word in reply.

In conclusion, I have tried to explore the link between African drama and African traditional elements and to demonstrate that even though the vehicle for communication may be English, the components of that efficient vehicle could be African traditional elements.

References

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