

THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE IN HOPE EGHAGHA'S *DEATH NOT A REDEEMER*

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Abstract

The synthesis or dichotomy between 'traditional ways' and 'new ways' in African societies continue to agitate the minds of Contemporary African Writers. Hope Eghagha for example brings to the fore cross currents in the interpretation of culture as a way of life in his play Death Not A Redeemer. The dynamics of the cultural formation in the play is informed by the prevailing cultural politics. It conveys a counter-action that reverses the tragic sequence in Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman which portrays death as a redeeming force. Eghagha's radical approach raises the question of motive, the considerations of human values and the role of Western education, religion and the judiciary in the dynamic interplay which culminates in the abdication of a profound traditional responsibility. The play reveals the opportunism of the abdicator, the principle of the son who supports abdication, and the self interests of the wife, the custodian of tradition.

Introduction

Culture is a pervasive phenomenon which encompasses the language, belief, customs, institutions, codes and any other capability and habits acquired by man in his environment. Man is central to the issue of culture because the cultural process is an activity of man in society. Man's ability to rationalize and give expression to his thoughts and feelings in varied forms, makes culture a dynamic process. The dynamic component of

culture is further revealed in man's inherent capacity to initiate and execute an idea that will bring about a desired change in his condition and his environment.

Also, man as a physical and spiritual being, is conscious of the influence of cosmic powers on his existence. He therefore, recognizes the need

to fraternize with deities through the ritual of prayers, libations and offerings of sacrifice. By so doing, they assure their own self adjustment to the superior powers, and to cosmic harmony. Ritual, therefore, guarantees, and promotes constant reactivation of the divine in man.(B.Ibitokun,1993:22-23).

Ritual may be understood as some kind of subjectivity which constituted a type or methodology within the framework of culture (Dele Layiwola 2008:220) . Although ritual is not designed as an art, it is an art of sorts, because it is difficult to distinguish between elements of ritual and the theatre. Song, dance, action, mime and dialogue commingle to create a total experience in both ritual and theatre. Turner (1982:81) finds that:

Ritual is, in most typical cross-cultural expressions a synchronization of many performative genre, and often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot, frequently involving sacrifice or self-sacrifice, which energizes and gives emotional colouring to the interdependent communicative codes... in so far, it is dramatic, ritual contains a distanced generalized reduplication of the agnostic process of the social drama.

Schechner views ritual as performative actions or process, an experience that are not safe deposits vaults of

accepted ideas, but in many cases dynamic performative systems generating new materials and recombining traditional actions in new ways.(1993:228). Tambiah (1979:119). definition of ritual sums up the views of Schechner and Turner. For him, “ritual is culturally constructed system of symbolic communication”.

Ritual, as a cultural element, has become a potent source material for African dramatists in portraying the African sensibility with all its contradictions. Nigerian playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Femi Osofisan, Sam Ukala and Esiaba Irobi have used ritual archetype in expressing their socio-spiritual vision of Africa and humanity. Functionally ,ritual serves the purpose of socio-spiritual liberation whether from the perspective of animist metaphysics or of the radical socio-political philosophy. However, what Hope Eghagha attempts to reveal in *Death, Not a Redeemer*, is the seeming irrationality of the ritual archetype .

Synopsis of the play

The plot is built around chief Karia, horseman to the king of Ijigboland who has just passed on. Tradition demands that the horseman terminate his life by committing ritual suicide in order to accompany the king on his way to the land of the ancestors. Chief Karia decides to abdicate this responsibility claiming that his new faith Christianity is opposed to such traditional practices. Kaira wife and the traditional council insist that Karia must perform this ritual act and save the community from the wrath of the gods. Beside, he has enjoyed all the benefits of the horseman and is aware of the finality of his assigned role.

Chief Karia’s son returns from England to support his father against the forces of tradition. He complicates the issues by introducing the legal dimension. The matter is eventually

brought before the judiciary, even though against wish of some members of the community, particularly the youth who was it as a mockery of tradition.

The judge rules that chief Karia cannot be compelled to terminate his life because another man has died. He condemn the act as barbaric and against natural justice. Thus, chief Karia succeeds in abdicating his traditional responsibility. However , after about a year, chief karia takes ill and dies in a holiday resort outside his community. Was it the will of God as those of Karia's new faith claim or the hands of the ancestors as the custodian of tradition believe? The play ends in a rather contentions note, deliberately perhaps, to continue the dialectics on ritual sacrifice as a basis for communal sustainability.

Textual Analysis:

The play revolves around chief Karia, his son Sankaria and his wife Avbero. The other characters are incidental to re-enforcing the dialectical/ideological divide. The traditional council which consist of the chiefs serve as the bastion of tradition and provide a support base for Avbero who is pitched against her husband. The pastor and Christian faithful on the other hand, are prepared to defend chief Karia who they believe is on trial because of his faith. Karia draws strength from this bond of brotherhood. Thus two dialectically opposed forces are established. A third force emerges with Sankaria, Chief Karia's son, bearing in the revolutionary ideological perspective into the configuration.

There is a sharp contrast between the actions of the characters in the play and those of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Particularly as they relate to the concept of *Abobaku* (one who dies with the king). The contrast between Sankaria and Olude, son of Elesin Oba, the kings horseman in

Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is well established. Their actions are reflective of the revolutionary philosophy of the two playwrights. In Soyinka's world view, as we see in *Death and the King's Horseman*, harmony in the community can only be achieved through ritual observance as accepted by the people. The Elesin Oba (king's horseman) is therefore expected to perform ritual suicide in order to bridge the gulf of transition between the living and the dead. Although he is mentally prepared for the final rite, his will is sapped, perhaps, by his passion for the mundane and material things of the world. He hesitates, and therefore, he is unable to die by an act of choice. It is possible that Elesin's momentary hesitation may have sprung from his realization that life is sweet and therefore, an irony for one to terminate his own life at the peak of his pleasure. It is also difficult to say whether it was the white man's interruption, which Soyinka calls a mere incident, that prevented Elesin's follow through or that he could not bring himself to commit the act. According to Obafemi (2008:129)

Elesin allows his sensuality to weaken his spiritual resolution. The result is a tragedy for the community. Olunde renounces his father and chooses to die so as to restore harmony in the community.

Elesin's action was not deliberate because, he eventually commits suicide when confronted with the body of his son. By his death, he performs a more significant role of transition by linking the dead, the living and the unborn, through the bride that whom he impregnated. Olunde's death is therefore out of turn, though revolutionary.

In *Death Not A Redeemer*, Eghagha adapts a more humanistic approach in his play. In contrast to Soyinka's fatalism, he situates societal redemption in the life force of the youth. Unlike Elesin Oba, Chief Karia's act was premeditated, he

was never committed to the idea of ritual suicide. He is projected as a man obviously influenced by modernity and by his new found religion whose teaching is at variance with those of tradition. He labours to convince his wife of his new thinking when confronted with the burden that he must bear as horseman.

Chief Karia: It's change that I talk about. My horsemanship is of the new generation. A testament with new ethics and principles. In life we serve humanity ... the blood of Jesus has redeemed all of us (p. 4)

The argument that the blood of Jesus did not prevent him from enjoying the pleasure reserved for the King's horseman, does not sway him. He ask his wife who is vehemently oppose to him:

Chief Karia: Has it occurred to you that your father arranged this marriage in order to stop this senseless human sacrifice?

This statement clearly shows Karia's attempt to make the late King an accomplice to his decision to end an obnoxious tradition.

"It's a sin for a man to take his own life... I enjoyed the pleasures of the horseman only before my spiritual rebirth..." (pg 7)

Avbero's vehement insistence that her husband must die according to tradition raises some doubt about her true intention. It is revealed later in the play, that she wants her husband to die so that she would be free to marry her secret lover. This most vocal spokesperson for tradition is portrayed as an adultress, deliberately, perhaps, to show the hypocrisy of a degenerate society.

Karia's suggesting that Avbero accompany him to the land beyond is stoutly rejected

AVBERO: Taboo! Taboo!! Such tasks are meant for men. Not women. Besides, no woman has ever done it.

KARIA: Then become the number one horse woman who out of love for husband and father, stopped her life mid-stream.

AVBERO: My life, no not my life!

KARIA: So your life is special to u, eh!

AVBERO: It's not my role. It's not my duty. It's yours. You have been sanctified unto death through the wish of the people.

Avbero's action here contradicts the idea of a new image of womanhood as characterized by Moremi for example, in Femi Osofisan's play *Morountodun* - that of an articulate, defiant woman, prepared to take upon herself a mission which even men dreaded, in order to save her people. This superior courage can only manifest from selfless compassion which Avbero lacks.

Sankaria, presents another dimension which perhaps, represents the playwright's ideological position. Eghagha wonders how death can redeem a degenerate modern society or serve as a tool for societal cohesion. He queries in the preface to the play.

Need we burn our prophets on alters of anarchy or tradition in order to gain wisdom? What informs the decision of a young man to commit suicide in place of his father if youth itself re-affirms the beauty of life... (vi)

Andrew Gurr's (1976:138) rejection of Soyinka's attempt to project a tragic vision of art and society in a third world situation where 'change is axiomatic', and Femi Osofisan's

(1976:10) position that the African experience from the colonial to the modern era has rendered the metaphysical vision of art and society obsolete, also support Eghagha's position. Osofisan reiterates that

the ancient modes of life must dissolve and yield place to an empiric mastery of life... There seems an alternative in a world dominated by the West's Capitalist Philosophy.

Sankaria, therefore, serve this purpose in *Death, Not a Redeemer* by openly confronting the forces of tradition, rejecting the fatalistic philosophy and reinforcing the position of his father to discontinue the ritual act of sacrificial death. In Radical Theatre In Nigeria, Saint Gblilekaa observed that

theatre since the advent of Marx and Engels has taken a definite idealogical position in the on-going class struggle.

In African theatre today, Marxist analysis of society has been employed both in the conventional and popular theatre to release the people from the claws of, and even to urge them to revolt against the decadent social order that oppress them.

The conflict between Sankaria and Abvero in the dialogue on pp. 43-49, underscores the playwright's social vision on the issues of life and death as they affect the communal psyche.

SANKARIA: You have elevated death to the status of heroism?

AVBERO: Who talks about death? We speak of sacrifice. Death is only a vehicle.

SANKARIA: Sacrifice my foot! I condemn any sacrifice that must include death. No man's life

can replace another!

AVBERO: What about soldiers who lay down their lives for their country?...

AVBERO: What about the Colonel, the host in the land of the sunset who lost his life protecting his guest, the General? Was it not an act of gallantry?

SANKARIA: Sheer waste of human resources.

AVBERO: The people do not think so!

SANJARIA: Which people? His sons? His wife? Dependants? Or do you refer to the writers of history and their media prostitutes?

AVBERO: But he has immortalized his name!

SANKARIA: Did his death change anything? Did it improve the life of his country? Did it stop the descent into anarchy and war.

AVBERO: That's a lie. What about the other General? The one who came as a reformer and dispensed with personal security. Was his death not beneficial to the nation?

SANKARIA: In what way? If the General had lived on and completed his reforms, would his Khaki successors have messed up the country?

AVBERO: So it does not matter to you that his name lives on as a testimony to his great deeds?

SANKARIA: His life and reform would have been more relevant if the forces of retrogression had not mowed it down at the time we needed him most. Let us not encourage our courageous men to die in the name of martyrdom. They should struggle to live and transform lives. If death is the prerequisite to heroism, I'd rather not be a hero. I would rather remain an ordinary man. No more.

Perhaps we do not need heroes anymore, at least, not dead ones.

In Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman*, Olude dies in the place of his father in order to accompany the late king to the land of the ancestors. Olubumi Julius Adeoye (2008:13) sees the act as revolutionary

Olude represents the younger generation with revolutionary attitude towards life. But he decides to uphold tradition by offering himself for ritual suicide which also is a revolutionary concept. This means that although we are in a changing environment, tradition must be upheld.

There seem to be some contradiction in Olubumi's assertion, particularly when he concludes with a quotation from Ogundeji (1996:11), that "the responsibility and hope of the redemption of our descendant society, *which the elders have caused* rest solely on the shoulders of the youth". Is he referring to the ancestors or the living old men/women? How would the youth uphold a tradition that has be desecrated by the elders from whom they are expected to learn the cultural values of the people. This indeed, makes Olude's docile acceptance of tradition, antithetical to the revolutionary spirit. What is the value of Olude's death? As Obafemi (2001:128) points out, "Olude's death is out of turn" because Elesin's eventual death, though not sacrificial, more significantly bridges the gulf of transition.

In contrast to Olude, Sankaria's open questioning of inherited mythologies help to expand one's mental and spiritual horizons. It supports the doctrine of humanism based on the premise that man is a rational being who posses within himself

a capacity for self-realization through reasoning. This is the view espoused by the playwright through the characters of Chief Karia and his son Sankaria. The canon of probability which implies an appeal to human reason as the supreme authority became a critical weapon for attacking myths and other traditional concept of the gods. Bernard Knox points out that

“the distinction between ‘nature’ and ‘convention’ is the source of the doctrine of the superman, who breaks free of the conventional restraints of society and acts according to his own ‘nature’. At the root was a supreme confidence in the human intelligence that is best expressed in the statement of Protagoras, the most famous of the sophists – man is the measure of all things. Thus began an atmosphere of critical re-evaluation of accepted standards”.

The role of the judiciary, though incidental in the play, is significant as a catalyst of change. Again, the recourse to a conventional court of justice is perhaps, deliberate. The customary court of justice could have been a more appropriate arm of the judiciary to adjudicate on such matters that relate to tradition. The judgement in this case may have been different since the customary courts are not bound by the letters of the law alone, but also by other considerations of culture and tradition. For example, a customary court judge, may not have ruled, as the judge in the play did, that “practices which had been sacred are being brought before the eyes of the world for scrutiny.... Whatever practice falls short of the required standard for human existence must be cast into the dung hill of history”. Who determine practices that fall short of the standard for human existence? Is it the law court or by legislation? It is clear however, that in another dimension of the spirit of

Man flows like a stream
gushing into new channels
when storms shake the earth,
when earthquakes shake the earth
man changes, bends, adapts
else the stem will snap (x).

The invasion of modernity, through the instrumentality of neo-colonialism has left the African in dilemma, whether to continue to hold on to the old ways or accept the new ways that threaten to annihilate the traditions of the people, or adapt a synthesis of both as the narrator in the play suggest

The new generation gave us
New lessons on progress...
yesterday's stream has
flowed into today's rivers
and the mixture
would remain a pathway.

It is not clear however, whether Eghagha is writing from a purely dialectical-materialist perspective or from a relativist perspective. This is because the play ends in a rather ambiguous note, even eerie. Also, one observes that some vital aspects of culture are not integrated in the play. Although the play is opposed to the ritual of self-sacrifice, the concept of ritual as a system of symbolic communication is not given proper treatment. There are some ritual observances which help to preserve the mentality of the people. Music and dance for example, which are very powerful mediums of cultural expression are sparsely deployed in the play. Apart from sustaining the interest of the audience, music and dance help to convey dramatic intentions that connects the audience easily with the actions in the play. The paucity of such cultural

elements denies the reader an encounter with the robust tradition of African theatre which synthesizes drama, music and dance in a total theatre experience. Also, the language oscillates between rich poetry and simple prose, but the speech is rather verbose. However, the play would be a delight on stage, particularly the scene where tradition confronts Christianity for the soul of Chief Karia.

Conclusion

The history of Africa and its collision with the Whiteman's ways continue to dominate every aspects of study in the humanities. African dramatic writers, for instance, have consistently engaged the issues of culture and change since the beginning of the 20th century. The concept of negritude espoused by Leopold Senghor and rejected by Wole Soyinka, has prompted profuse writings on the dynamics of culture as a developmental process in Africa's heterogeneous societies. Inherent in the African experiences are all the socio-political, and religious contradictions of colonial and post colonial Africa, which became the basis for new writings. A characteristics feature of the new drama of modern Africa is that they are ideological and conveys values which seek to support or question those prevailing in society.

The theatre has thus become a laboratory for radical writers to open up seemingly immutable political and religious hegemonies to revision. For the dramatists such as Eghagha, the theatre is a veritable medium to engage in the mental re-orientation and re-interpretation of inherited myths, expose ill-motives and create alternatives in the light of contemporary socio-cultural polity.

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