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**An Examination of Brenhoma Cultural Heritage in Asare
Konadu's *A Woman In Her Prime***

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Abstract

Literature is an important field of study in which the learner develops taste for good writing, expression, creativity and the likes. The learner also develops ability to read independently through literature. His outlook to life is broadened by the study of literature as he is exposed to the philosophies and experiences of different authors and to different cultures. One of the goals of the teaching of literature in English according

to Uwaifo (1979) is to help students appreciate their own culture and those of others. Uwaifo's view succinctly captures the essence of this paper which examines Brenhoma cultural heritage exposed by Asare Konadu in *A woman in Her Prime*. The paper specifically beams its searchlight on Brenhoma cultural heritage paying particular attention to their sacrifices, omen, purifications, beliefs and funeral rites among others. The study aims to heighten the reader's consciousness that literature is not only an instrument that provides insights about life but also mirrors the society in its entirety.

Introduction

Literature preserves people's culture in the sense that it (literature) helps to keep the record of cultural heritage of a people. It must be pointed out that literature; language and culture are inseparable (Adegbite, 2005). Literature is language in use in real life situations. It expresses the hopes, fears, doubts, joy, love, problems and conflicts that human beings experience in everyday life activities. These are written down. It is language in action employed to exploit the resources of the time and place in which it is written. It portrays the totality of a way of life of a people, their customs, beliefs, traditions and philosophies expressed through creative means. It also involves the continued reflection of human life and all the complexities and conflicts some of which vary from one situation to another and from individual to individual.

The goals of teaching literature in English according to Uwaifo (1979) should be:

- To help students appreciate their own culture and those of others.
- To develop the readers' creative ability.
- To develop the ability to think critically leading to adequate judgment.
- To help the learning of language in which the literary work is composed.
- To inculcate in the learner, the love for extensive and continued pleasurable reading.
- To expose the learners varied valuable experience which may contribute to their emotional, social and moral judgment.

Culture on the hand is simply a way of life and is a very important phenomenon in the society that provides us with the ethics, respect and honour in both thought and practice. It is culture that makes humans distinct from other creatures. Culture regulates man's conduct as it provides him with rules and regulations. Culture outlives humans as it is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture regulates and conditions our attitude on issues such as religion, morality, marriage, science, family planning, status etc.

Cultural heritage has a role in historical as well as economic development. A great number of people and organizations see cultural resources as critical to the nation's economic development especially when considered from the point of view of tourism as the vehicle. A people's cultural heritage can be a source of sustenance to individuals and even a nation as whole. This underscores need to study to understand, analyze, and promote it through proper research and reviews. Cultural heritage is rooted in the past yet people cherish and want to keep and pass on to future generation because of its importance.

In view of the importance of culture vis-a-vis the agreement with Uwaifo (1979) that this paper focuses on using literature to teach and to also learn other people's culture. Consequent upon this the paper explores the culture of the people of Brenhoma from the eye of Asare Konadu.

Plot

Konadu discusses the quest for child by Adwoa Pokuwaa a middle-aged Ashanti (Ghanaian) woman. In her community, childlessness or barrenness is considered a grave misfortune because a barren woman is doomed to loneliness in her old age. She will have no child to care for her, no grandchild (ren) to enliven the compound, as well as no child of her blood to mourn her death. This is the fate Pokuwaa does not want to suffer. Being barren in Brenhoma is "the worst that could happen to a woman" (p34). She is a hardworking woman who has acquired wealth through her farms, but struggles to have a child of her own.

As tradition demands, Pokuwaa resorts to consulting herbalists for guidance. She believes in the powers of the great *Tano* who is the giver of children. In her lamentation, she calls on the god "assist me in my plight" "you are powerful and nobody can thwart your will " (p12). She struggles to meet the demands made on her at *Tanofie*, the domain of *Tano* when she is told that she will have a child after three months of the sacrifices. After six months, Pokuwaa does not see any positive result and decides to try the second time as she did not observe the conditions given to her not to look back. She looked back when she was not supposed to do in the first time. However, there is loss of confidence and disenchantment when she discovers that in spite of this religious devotion through sacrifices to the gods, her ambition is far from being realized.

Pokuwaa had earlier divorced two husbands Kofi Daafo and Kwaku Fosu with on the advice/counsel of her mother. Her mother complains of the inability of these men to impregnate Pokuwaa. She got married to her third husband; Kwado Fordwuo cares for her and helps her in obeying the directive of the priest to carry out the sacrifices. All these were fruitless thus frustration set in. In her frustration, Pokuwaa confides in her friend Koramoa of her intention to discontinue her sacrifices that would get the gods to bless her with a child. Koramoa is rational in her approach and reveals this in her pleas with Pokuwaa not to give up hope. Pokuwaa also tells her husband and

her mother about her decisions to quit the sacrifices and purifications as directed by the priest. Her husband and her mother were not happy about her decision but could not help the matter. Shortly after her decision, she notices some signs of pregnancy. Her loved ones are happy to hear that she is pregnant. They all prepare for the arrival of the child.

Brenhoma Cultural Heritage

Some of the cultural heritages of Brenhoma that Asare Konadu has brought to the fore include:

Matrilineal Society: The author portrays Brenhoma as a matrilineal society. A matrilineal society is one in whose children belong to their mothers. In most African traditions, children belong to their fathers or the sons of the land. In Brenhoma's society however, the reverse is the case. The mothers or daughters own the children. Mothers therefore suffer the ripple effects of their daughters' fate when they are barren. Pokuwaa's mother will bear the brunt of Pokuwaa's fate because Pokuwaa is her only daughter. Although she has five sons, she makes all her efforts to see that Pokuwaa bears a child. She tells her daughter: "my five sons will have children for their wives' families: but the child that you will bear will be my own grandchild" (p 32). She insists that Pokuwaa should bear her own grandchildren. Unless Pokuwaa has a child, their lives will not be complete as they will end in misery. This is the reason why Pokuwaa's mother is angry and frustrated when Pokuwaa stopped the sacrifice of seeking favour from *Tano* for the blessing of a child. She also counsels her daughter "you must conserve your strength for the child" (p38). It is little wonder that happiness overwhelmed her when she notices that Pokuwaa is pregnant.

Religious beliefs and practices: The people of Brenhoma believe in and worship deities. The most popular one is *Tano* whom they regard as a great god. The people set a day *Fofie* aside for the worship of this god. *Fofie* is a festive day and coincides with Friday which is observed every six weeks.

The people go to the shrine, *Tanofie*, to worship and consult the ancestors for solution to their problems. On *Fofie*, it is held that the "gods and goddesses move among men to feast and grant people's requests:" (p.9). Consequently, the plot begins with Pokuwaa preparing to go to *Fofie* to present the items that she was asked to bring as a sacrifice to the gods so that her ancestors and the gods would bless her efforts to get a child. The author says that what people take there for sacrifices depends on their requirements. They offer items like yams, sheep, goats, eggs, cowries and sometimes cows (p 6). Pokuwaa's friend Koramoa is also there to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for a blessing of a child.

The people also consult the deities and ask them to intervene on behalf of anyone who may have done wrong or where the punishment of the sins of the parents

or ancestors are being placed on their children or lineage. Pokuwaa is mandated by the priest at *Tanofie* to get a black hen so that the deities could be sought to spare her the pain of not having a child of her own in case “she herself had wronged anyone or if the sins of her parents or ancestors were being applied on her” (p.9).

The people of Brenhoma also believe in the power of evil spirits who inhabit tree tops and wreak all sorts of havoc on people. This is exemplified in some of the stories Kanodu has weaved in the novel. For instance, there are stories of an evil spirit turning a child into a chicken and slaughtering her, and turning himself into a crocodile and devouring a girl who jilted him. Pokuwaa is firm believer in these cultural ideas. When Pokuwaa’s jet black hen meant for sacrifice gets missing, she concludes that it is perhaps the work of evil spirits.

Belief in bad omen is another cultural artifact that pervades/rules the life of the people of Kanodu’s Brenhoma. There are certain occurrences that the people regard as bad omen and whenever they occur in the land, purification is done to cleanse the land of their sins. The lightning that strikes the *wawa* tree in chapter 5 is considered as a bad omen. According to them, it is a sign that the gods are angry. Pokuwaa and Kwadwo affirm this by reporting the matter thus: “Hei that is a bad omen”. “A rare thing; Kwadwo agrees. Perhaps, the gods are angry” (p 50). To pacify these angry gods, the women are expected to cook for the ceremony which attains the proportions of a feast. Pokuwaa expressing surprise during the feast wonders “why was food for the departed always placed on the ground (p 51). The people also offer prayers to appease the seventy-seven gods of the land. They also prayed for Brenhoma women to bear children so that when the gods pay visits, “you will always find someone here to give you something to eat” (p 51).

Going to Ananse stream on *Akwasideae* to fetch water is also regarded as a bad omen. When Pokuwaa was at the river to fetch water on *Akwasideae*, an eagle nearly slapped her. During her visit to the stream, she kills the hornbill, wraps it with leaves and takes it home as the women of the community stare at her and wonder what she is doing with the hornbill. When she shows her mother the hornbill, her mother is horrified knowing that the day is *Akwasideae* (a Sunday) when nobody has the right to go to *Ananse* stream. Because a hornbill is believed to be food of the gods, her mother orders her to return it and Pokuwaa obeys. Upon her return, she says “mother, I have returned the bird” (p 107). A purification rite had to be carried out on heart. Her mother quickly smashes boiled yam with *adwera* herbs and puts the mixture in a calabash, places six boiled eggs around it and sets it before a high white stool and orders Pokuwaa to sit on it. She further orders Pokuwaa to chant this saying repeatedly:

“Kra Adwoa, my soul
Feed on this purification food.
You saw this day’s encounter,

Good soul of mine
 You deserve the purifying egg,
 Come and feed” (p. 109).

Pokuwaa later ate the whole food in the calabash. Her mother “bought out white threads of newly spun cotton into which a cowrie and other small shells had been knotted. She tied this round Pokuwaa’s left wrist and dabbed her face with white clay” (p 110). Pokuwaa remains indoor for the rest of the day as part of the sacrifice.

The observance of *Odwira* Festival meant to mourn the dead is central to the peoples’ belief in the continuity of their existence. This is marked by loud breaking of drums such as “*Fontonfrom*” “*Kete*” “*Odensew*” and “*Adowa*”, (p 63). Night vigils are also kept for the celebration. Pokuwaa dances as the drummers help her to perfect her dancing steps. *Odiwira* festival is used for several purposes some of which including to mourn the dead, for lovers to meet and as an outing day among others. Old people are seen singing in croaking voices and “doing their game through the streets” (p 64) which they call *Nsamangro* pass by.

Another cultural practice that is of great value to the Brenhoma community is funeral/ burial rites. Funeral rites are seen as avenues for lavish celebration by the people. The burial rites of Yaw Boakye readily illustrate this belief. On the day of the burial, Yaw Boakye’s favorite dishes were prepared by his wives and sisters. They were placed in a wooden trays and earthenware bowls for him to eat “for the journey to the new world, let Yaw Boakye take comfort from this feast” (p 95). There is also drumming and dancing by his people. His age group presents a special dance for him. Cowries are presented by his widows. This will enable him to pass into the spirit world.

In Brenhoma community, corpse is buried at sunset. The people believe that at this time, there is no longer the fear that the coffin may fall across anybody which may result to the person’s untimely death. As they were carrying his corpse to the cemetery, some forces held the coffin and its bearers could not move. The priest pours some libation before they could move on. He says:

“Oh, Odomankoma, Amoakye Baafuo,
 Boakye is due to join you
 Let him enter.
 Permit his remains to be laid to rest.
 Be gracious. Have sympathy.
 Oh, Apeafo, we appeal to you” (p 97).

The most notable rites are performed by his wives. Each of them throws a pot ahead of her, turns and walks away without looking back. This is used to mark their parting with their dead husband on earth.

Songs: Songs are used at different occasions to serve different purposes. They also used to portray Brenhoma cultural heritage. Examples are:

“Men of Brenhoma, men of ancient dynasty,
Men of brave ancestry!
Tano Kofi’s sons,
We are not afraid” (p 94).

This song was sung during the search for Yaw Boakye.

1. “Yaw Boakye akikodoo “Yaw Boakye who has completely departed,
Wadi akokoduru akowu: He pursed games of bravery to his death.
Wamu ako a momma: if he is dead, let him no onna sleep,
Momma onna.” Let him sleep” (p. 100).

This song was sung during Yaw Boakye’s burial.

2. “Bird, take of my water and drink,
Drink till you are full,
Then do not sleep or wander far,
For when you are full
There is a task I have to set you
The task of watching over my lover” (p. 128).

This is sung by Pokuwaa when she discovers that she is pregnant.

Conclusion

Konadu’s *A woman in her prime* has succeeded in exposing some of the cultural practices Brenhoma community as a microcosm to African cultural heritage. The African appeal lies in fact that many other African communities still hold fast to and practice some, if not all these beliefs. For this reason, the reader sees some aspects of African cultural practices through Brenhoma. Brenhoma society emphasizes having children as it ensures the continuity of a family lineage thus the protagonist, Pokuwaa is worried because without a child of her own, her old age will be a very lonely one. Some events unite the people of Brenhoma. One of such events is burial, festivals, worship of gods among other. Burial as a unifying occasion is typified by the search for and burial of Yaw Boakye. *Odiwira* festival is rich cultural heritage of the community during which they sing songs and dance, pray, worship gods and also unite the people.

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