



**Theatre and Social Criticism in African Literature: Socio-Cultural
Consciousness in Alachi's "Dilemma of Oko"**

Queen O. Ayeni and Veronica E. Odey

Department of Modern Languages and Translation Studies

University of Calabar

buckyayeni@yahoo.com

odeyveronica@gmail.com

Abstract

Since literature is a creative work that mirrors society, Alachi in *The Dilemma of Oko*, observes aspects of the social, political, cultural and moral degeneration of contemporary society. He presents them in this play with thorough detachment and clinical dispassion. The play presents the image of a society, whose moral order provides a set of meaning, by which members of society understand their experiences and make sound judgments about what is valuable and important. Deeply influenced by real life experiences, the author portrays the physical suffering and mental agonies which arise from man's conflict with the hostile surroundings in which he lives. He depicts not only the confrontation between the society and the individual, but also modern man's total failure to understand either himself or others in the society. The play combines social criticism with the tragedy of an individual victimized by society.

Key Words: Social Criticism, Moral degeneration, Convergence of cultures, foreign phenomena, societal norms, Traditional ethics, Traditional institutions.

Introduction

Literature in Africa has basically played a transformative role in our societies. This obligation dates as far back as the pre-colonial era, when oral literature was almost the only medium of sensitizing (educating) the masses on pressing issues affecting the society. These issues ranged from checking the excesses of individuals, by indirectly insulting violators, to praising those that have excelled in the exhibition of certain virtues, thereby, stirring others to tow the path of rectitude. These were done through the popularization of folktales with moral lessons, epics depicting courage and reward for honesty and hard work and praise singing in honour of virtuous men and women who

had once lived. Modern literature has imbibed many of these qualities as it can be witnessed in all forms of literary creation (drama, poetry and prose). The African concept of what makes literature has gone beyond its Western counterpart to be all inclusive, treating issues of politics, philosophy, divination, mysticism etc. It is on this backdrop that Ayebanoa attempts to distinguish African literature from its Western counterpart, when he describes African drama as:

“. . . the kind of drama that is influenced by European models, with a diluted language pregnant with local colouration encapsulating the African experience using African imageries with African characters situated in African soil by an African . . . , concentrated on African culture, reflecting its thematic preoccupation and focus. In other words, modern African drama is a new form of drama composed in the tradition of Europe but with African colouration in terms of theme, language, setting, authorship, culture, audience etc.”(1)

For this reason, many literary works in all their genres, criticize and ridicule political corruption, excessive materialism, social injustice etc., in the African society, thus, striving to eliminate the negative habits of society. This brings to fore the role of the writer as one committed to influence society through his works. Sartre in Elaho notes that “The writer in contemporary society, with its numerous problems, must sensitize the people on the nature of the problems they are faced with, thereby, awakening them to think solutions to these problems (196). Obadiogwu (112) in Okeke opines that “. . . as the watchdog of society, [the writer] uses drama as a tool to affect changes in his environment through his works, the dramatist aims at showing how things stand in his own society through his re-creation of events (1)

The Dramaturge:

U. James Alachi is a professor of Theatre Arts in the Benue State University Markurdi. He has published a number of plays which have been performed on the Nigerian stage and abroad. Among his collections include: Enekele (1997), Learning about HIV AIDS through Drama (2001) and Participatory

family living: A Recipe for HIV AIDS Education (2002); The Gods are to Blame and other Plays (2002). Alachi is also a consultant in the area of development and health promotion. His plays are geared towards the exposure of moral anomalies which over time have constituted a destructive force, breaking down the stone walls of the just and upright African society. His use of language sets on stage a world of rich cultural heritage. The simplistic nature, with which his plays create moral lessons for the young African child, makes them easily adaptable to schools and colleges. Alachi's plays are usually set within the context of the everyday life of the African community: Family, community, village, etc., with each drawing its theme from incidents arising within these circles. Alachi endears his readers to his works with his stylistic use of language, proverbs peculiar to the culture of the people where the play is set and his realistic depiction of imagery, symbolism, metaphor and the profound lessons about community life and the convergence of cultures.

Theatre and Social Criticism

In the past fifty years, theatre has been increasingly important as a social factor. Today, fewer institutions have a wider influence in determining the conduct of man than does the theatre. As the appeal for the church has lessened, so has the appeal for theatre increased, and it has more and more come to be a "prompter of conscience" and "an elucidator of social conduct" (Williams, 3). The playwright using theatre as his tool penetrates the society which it reflects, exploring its depths in search of abnormalities and bringing them to limelight. By so doing, he creates a microcosm of the state of things in his society. In his quest to deal with contemporary situations, his predictive ability comes into play. In this capacity, he makes extensive use of his experiences to extrapolate on the present and the future. This affirms Okeke's view on the use of theatre ". . . in using [theatre] as a tool for social [criticism], the artist is making an objective evaluation, exposition or a critical assessment of the socio-political conditions in society"(1). It is on this basis that Alachi presents the changing reality of contemporary society, authentically and honestly, in his play. His real and genuine concern for the oppressed and his awareness of social evil originates from his true understanding of society. He does not, of a truth approve of the recalcitrance of Oko in the face of tradition, but he tends to sympathize with him. Alachi does not offer any solution to the multiple problems of the protagonist; rather, he leaves it to the discretion of the readers. Hence, the artist's recourse to social criticism is born out of the need to correct the ills of society with a view to righting them. With this, we see through the glen and dell of our behaviours, thus, reflecting our inadequacies. Social criticism is

known to have treated themes pertaining to every aspect of human and societal living ranging from issues of general concern such as corruption, domination, social decadence, racism, to issues of insignificant standing such as marital squabbles, family issues, juvenile delinquencies etc.

The Dilemma of Oko: A Synopsis

The Dilemma of Oko is one in a collection of three plays titled "*The Gods are to Blame and Other Plays*", by Atu James Alachi. The drama portrays the plight faced by a young man, Oko, who having travelled out in search of the golden fleece (education), comes back home to a society bedeviled by deceitful, greedy and materialistic citizens. A society where blackmail has become the order of the day and deceit is a means to quick money. In *the dilemma of Oko*, Alachi tells the story of a young lawyer, Oko, who has just come back home with his British wife, Ada. Having unknowingly shot his cousin, Agada, whom he assumed to be a thief in the early hours of the morning, Oko narrates the event to his friend, Innocent, who discourages him from alerting the police, on the grounds that justice of the land is not free and fair. This, Oko agrees to, only to be blackmailed into joining the cult and ceding a piece of land in a strategic position in town, to a wrong owner (The Society) or be jailed for the murder of his cousin (with whom he had a land dispute previously). In part, this play depicts how a foreign phenomenon permeates/ breaks through the African society and gives itself the pride of place among indigenous evils.

The play portrays the upheaval of a man betrayed by those he called his people and denied by the one he trusted the most and called friend. Oko is pushed to precipice of despair and frustration by these excruciating social pressures and is forced to make a hard choice against his personal conviction and ethical principles and even natural justice by the same society he came back to with high hopes to salvage. (Yina, 61) His turbulent experience finally forms the basis for his strength to accept his faults and to continue on the path of equity and truth.

Thematic Thrust

In the play, *The Dilemma of Oko*, Alachi deals with the themes of injustice, rejection, betrayal, clash of values, blackmail, social and ethical problems in a typical Nigerian community. While exploring the depths of human life and its complexities, the author does not fail to expose the hypocrisy, promiscuity and emptiness of value system in the traditional society.

Exploring this one act drama with seven scenes, one finds an eruption of conflicts in which a Nigerian in Diaspora comes back home and tries to redefine himself in a system he considers corrupt. This establishes a conflict between man and society which eventually brings down nemesis.

The play mostly set in the living room of Oko, an overseas-trained lawyer, who comes back home to face his worst nightmares. His living room paints a depiction of his poverty, dejection, hopelessness and agony resulting from his unbending principles and naivety of the double standard on which the society is founded. In spite of all the big law books that adorn the room, portraying the home of a well-schooled, academic learned gentleman of the bar, he seems to be living in a world where all his hopes are dashed and where poverty's grip on him is so strong, thus, preventing him from realizing his dreams and contributing his quota to society - the very reason for his return. Contrary to the secure life he had lived abroad, back home, he discovers a world where blackmail, injustice and phony solidarity with evil missions, are the driving force that propels the penchant for materialism and fame as the order of the day. In a bid to protect his home from an impending danger, he supposedly guns down an assumed thief in the early hours of the morning. This is the beginning of his dilemma. His problems become compounded when the corpse is identified as that of his cousin, Agada, with whom he has been having issues over a certain piece of land. As he makes up his mind to turn himself in to the police, since the killing was not intended and which would have been the right thing to do in a situation like the one he has found himself; he is discouraged by a treacherous friend, Innocent, who warns him of the dangers of going to the police and promises to fix the situation using his connections.

“I suggest you keep it from the police. Oko, you don't know this country. This is why you have failed woefully since you returned from abroad. Bring in the police and you are done for. Oko, leave everything to me. I have connections and can fix it”. (43)

Innocent also promises to inform Agada's father and the home people of his death. Again he reassures Oko of his capabilities in handling such situations.

“Relax; connections solve all problems of this land. We all learn to be Timbers,

Calibre and Institutions. Oko, do you know why I am called Innocent? You wouldn't, you are too alienated and too far away from our culture to know. Oko, you are just an African by colour. Education and marriage have changed you. You don't belong to us; neither do you know our ways."(44)

In the traditional African society, ancestors are vested with mystical powers and authority. They retain a functional role in the world of the living, specifically, in the lives of their living kinsmen. Etta & Asukwo (2012), affirm that:

"In Africa, ancestors or departed elders are not ordinary humans, they are those who lived a good moral and honourable life and who were regarded as custodians of knowledge and wisdom within their families and communities. They are seen as the guardians of traditional ethics and morality."(5)

In fact, African kin-groups are often described as communities of both the living and the dead. In the case of Oko, his kinsmen decide that before any decision can be taken on the matter, he has to come for a traditional cleansing, "The Purification". The reason for this being that, he had taken the life of his own flesh and blood and for this reason, the gods of the land had to be appeased. Oko refuses to go for the purification and rather opts to go to the police, then to court. "We shall call the police and go to court later on. But, go for traditional purification, count me out. I am a full born-again Christian" (62). The playwright's vision is split between two worldviews; the Christian worldview, from which he x-rays secular issues and the traditional worldview which forms the bases for his criticism. He is undecidedly torn between these views on which he lasses his theme of rejection and acceptance.

Esi, an old man from Orokam, Oko's village, differentiates between the old and the new generations. He refers to the new generation of educated elites as "them", "one of them" and thus does not see them as part of the traditional community, whose members are identified by their adherence to the laid down rules and traditions of the land. For him, it is unimaginable how one could commit murder and yet refuse to be purified.

“The world has really turned inside out. The only way is to leave them out. If they feel so strong, let them face the wrath of the society. Killing your own brother and refusing to come for purification. The small boy in ignorance calls fire flower. He doesn’t know that all that glitters is not gold. He is just one of them” (63).

Esi goes on to compare orthodox medical practice and the efficacy of the traditional native medicine. He cites an instance where the traditional native doctor (Obochi), makes a barren woman pregnant where orthodox medicine failed. He claims that by referring to the potency of traditional medicine as black magic, barbaric and pagan practice, their elite sons reject home. *“All is black magic, barbaric and pagan practice, they say. Even our sons, they say so. Why reject home”* (64). Esi goes on to sing the praise of the good old days, when a distance of five hundred miles could be covered in just a minutes and the fathers could heal the sick by just staring at them. For him, their learned sons should learn the good things in the white man’s culture which of course is the reason for their being sent to school, and not reject the good things in their own tradition. This he attributes to their inability to differentiate between culture and tradition, which is, according to him, the difference between the old and the new generation.

“They have the education but we have the wisdom. They don’t know the difference between culture and religion. . . . We had more peace in our time because we understood what culture was, respected ours and respected those of the other people . . .” (64).

In other words, the black man’s contact with the white world has regrettably eroded some of the importance attached to certain African values. His exposure to education and other apparently more refined religious practices has even more, diminished the importance attached to most beliefs and practices in the traditional African society. It is on this backdrop that, in Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *The River Between*, the father enjoins his son thus: “Go to the mission place, learn all the wisdom and all the secrets of the white man. But do not follow his vices; Be true to your people and the ancient rites.”(20).

Taboos and Traditional Purification

In every traditional African community, there are norms and values to be upheld and observed. These norms or codes of conduct are considered important for their moral values in societies, by this, such things that are forbidden in the community, must not be done by any bona fide member of that particular community. These are referred to as taboos. Taboos are a set of cultural and religious prohibited actions instituted by traditional religious authorities, as instruments of social control for protecting the sanctity and wellbeing of their communities. Alade, views them as *"Something that contravenes the norms and values of the traditional institution and the society . . . that the divinity abhors or abomination"* (24). Breaking such taboos could be followed by supernatural penalties which could bring disaster, not only on the particular person or community, but also on the people of the generation yet unborn. In a bid to avert the occurrence of such doom on a people, Idowu and Idopamu cautions with this Yoruba adage that *"If our neighbour eats the inedible and we do not warn him, his difficulty in breathing at night will not allow us to sleep"*(44).

Societal norms can be trespassed willfully or unintentionally. Whichever the case, a person or a people (a community), can avert the anticipated consequence of such an ill by carrying out the purification ceremony to cleanse the offender and/ or to purify the land, hence appeasing the gods of the land and securing the future of the unborn members of the community. Arifola (2010) affirms that: *"Those found guilty of moral or legal violations were made to undergo ritual cleansing as a means of moral purification and transformation"*(22). Purification rite in the traditional African society, thus, refers to a ceremonial act or custom performed in an attempt to reestablish or retain lost purity by the removal of blemishes and impurities through a symbolic moral and spiritual process implying the elimination of faults, sins, errors and other undesirable elements, thereby, restoring healing and wholeness to the repentant perpetrator in particular and to the community at large.

In an attempt to scare off an unidentified person approaching his house in the early hours of the morning, Oko releases a gun shot into the air which unfortunately kills his cousin, Agada, a man with whom he has for some time been struggling over a piece of land. This act, in the land of Orokam constitutes an abomination or a taboo, ". . . killing your own brother and refusing to come for purification" (63). Oko's refusal to turn up for the purification causes the gods of the land to come out from their resting place:

“His refusing to come has forced the gods, the great ancestors out of their resting place at this odd time. When the Ancestors come out like this, a traditional cow, white, must go. If this is not done, a human head will follow – just sudden death, no illness. This means that the poor people of this community will contribute again. That is the gain the son we sent to learn the white man’s way is bringing to us.” (65).

In a case of a grave abomination, such as the killing of a blood relative, the land has been desecrated and the gods of the land offended. The implication for the community is the destabilization of the fundamental peace, balance and harmony that should prevail between the visible and invincible world of spiritual beings and forces. This could incur the wrath of the supernatural custodians of the community.

By his refusal to come for the purification, Oko demonstrates a rejection of his own people and a denial of his own tradition. Owing to this, sanctions and penalties were placed on him by the ancestors and gods of the land:

“We only asked him to come for purification. He refused. That means that he has denied us . . . Oko has to pay for refusing to listen to the voice of tradition . . . that we are not trying him for murder . . . till he fulfils the traditional rites. For refusing to respect traditional, Oko is . . . exiled, ostracized and excommunicated . . . he is never to set his foot on the land of Orokam, he is never to interact with any free born of Orokam The land in dispute has for the time been confiscated by the community . . . neither Orokam nor her land will have anything to do with his dead body. Since he is our son, we however will forgive him with conditions, if he changes his mind.”(68-69).

Cultural identity and a sense of community are highly cherished values in the traditional African community. Culture involves a shared experience of belief systems, worldviews, traditions and aesthetic standards, while community is basically sacred and surrounded by religious forms and symbols. For Ellwood cited in Amponsah (2010), culture is *"a collective name for all behavioural patterns socially acquired and socially transmitted The essential part of culture is to be found in the pattern embodied in the social traditions of groups, that is, in knowledge, ideas, belief, values, standards and sentiments prevalent in a group"*(597). In traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone. He owes his existence to his community, which includes the past and present generations. Booth (1977) in Etta & Asukwo (2012), observes that; *"Man in Africa . . . finds fulfilment not as a separate individual but as a participant in a family or a community"*(2). Whatever happens to the individual, happens to the whole community and whatever happens to the community happens to the individual. Hence, Mbiti (1990) captures this sense of communal existence in the African setting, when he says; *"I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man."*(106).

Oko's recalcitrant attitude towards his people drives the ancestors to remind him that he is a part of one inseparable whole with his people. "Because the palm tree has grown very tall, it insults the ground, forgetting that it still stands on the ground and that it is the ground which will eventually welcome it when it dies"(68). Even though societies are made up of single human beings who can be looked at as individuals, in the traditional African community, a man is an individual only in the sense that he is a member of his community. Community in this sense is much more than a social grouping of people bound together by reason of natural origin and/or deep common interests and values. It is a society as well as a unity of the visible and the invisible world of the physically living, ancestors, divinities and souls of unborn individuals. Community in the African sense comprises the totality of African experience, which includes the physical environment as well as all spirit beings acknowledged by the community.

For Africans, the belief and ideas about ancestors form an essential part of the effort to inculcate and promote the community ideal of harmonious living in society. It is an essential article of faith that a fundamental delicate balance and equilibrium exist between the visible and the invisible world.

Innocent, Oko's trusted friend, comes back with the news of the decision of the elders and ancestors of Orokam. He is unable to give Oko the news as he

claims the words are too heavy. He suggests an alternative to Oko's problems:

“Oko, your problems are multiplying. It's time for you to join the society. Your problems can easily be solved through connections if you join. Ever heard of solidarity or better still parapoism?”(71).

Innocent, further stresses on the decision of the community as it concerns Oko, and the destructive consequence of his refusal to go for the purification. Oko vehemently refuses to join the society. “I won't. I will never join the secret society.”(71). Oko's problems become compounded especially when his younger brother and mother are forced to leave the village as a result of the rejection, insult and shame brought on them by his refusal to undergo the purification rite.

“I can't go anywhere again. They point their fingers at me, and the most painful one, in the stream, they won't help me with my pot. They all throw their faces the opposite way. I can't buy nor sell in the market. Oh son! It's horrible” (75).

Finally, Innocent presents a document before Oko. As the chairman of the Land Allocation Committee and sole signatory to the Certificate of Occupancy of a piece of land in a strategic position in the centre of the town, Innocent tries to coerce Oko into giving the right of ownership of that land to the 'Organization' or better still 'The Society'. First, Okois surprised that Innocent was able to get hold of such a classified secret document from his office, but then he refuses to do the wrong thing by turning down Innocent's request. At this point, Innocent threatens to destroy him with his connections.

“You are in no position to bargain with me. I spell the terms and you swallow them raw. You know I have you in my hands. A word from me and you are a goner. Remember I have connections and on top of that, things can be made quite unbearable for you.”(81).

Innocent threatens to talk to the police if Oko refuses to sign the document. He even insists that Oko joins the secret society.

“Choose between signing that document and joining the society so that you will be free and my going to the police to confess what I know. It's now left for you Oko. It's a matter of choice”(82).

In the Dilemma of Oko, we see two camps: Those who perpetrate corruption and those who want to extirpate it. The protagonist, Oko, tries to deracinate corruption but his best friend Innocent who permits it, is against his effort. Such is still a serious problem in contemporary African society.

Conclusion

Alachi in *The Dilemma of Oko* strives to change the psyche of his audience by prodding their consciousness in a bid to make them aware of certain moral and ethical situations and issues, thereby, letting them understand certain truths about their culture, society and individual well-being. In a creative way, he has tried to demonstrate how the love for excessive materialism in a society bedeviled by the excruciating urge for acquisition of wealth can mar the image and personality of a people as well as taint their psyche. *The Dilemma of Oko* thus proposes a soul searching discourse on the menace of corruption, cultism, social injustice and standards entrenchment, for the penchant for greed, avarice and lust.

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