



The Clash of Titans—Tradition Versus Modernity: A Review of Ongogo Evelyne's *Dichol and Other Poems*

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Abstract

Conflict between marginal and dominant cultures is typical of cosmopolitan communities the world over. Although traditional African communities were dominantly homogeneous, the advent of colonialism precipitated cultural mix between Western and African ways of life. The awareness of differences between the two cultures brought tensions which are the major concern of post-colonialism. Ashcroft B. (1995) et al defines it as a theory that studies the cultural, intellectual realities and tensions that occurred in many nations from the beginning of colonial contact” (p.1). It emerged when the colonized started to reflect and express tension which followed after disruption by the mixture of imperial culture and native ways. This disruption continues after colonialism through urbanization, information technology and formal education. This paper examines the clash of African and Western culture in Ongogo Evelyne’s *Dichol and Other Poems*. Using the postcolonial theory, the author reviews Ongogo’s poetry analysing elements of resistance against domination by western culture. The ideas of Frantz Fanon will form a theoretical basis of interpretation.

Ongogo E. (2017) is an anthology of poetry that depicts the clash of dominant African culture with infiltrating western culture. In spite of the fast spread of western culture via urbanization and formal education, Ongogo takes cue from postcolonial scholars like Frantz Fanon and Okot p'Bitek and Chinua Achebe to resist foreign influences. Fanon (1961) observes that African Literature should restore the dented dignity of a colonized people. In his chapter "On National culture" in *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that colonialism destroys national culture and disrupts the cultural life of a conquered people: "cultural obliteration is enabled by negation of national reality, banishment of natives, their customs and systematically enslaving of men and women" (166- 199). In Fanon's perspective therefore, African literature should not only have nationalistic themes but be literature of combat –to fight for the existence of a nation. Ongogo's *Dichol and Other Poems* is in Fanon's view, literature of combat to fight for the existence of African ways of life.

The poems are set in rural areas and towns in modern Kenya to depict clash of African and western cultures. Western culture infiltrates Kenyan society via urbanization, mass media, formal education and tourism and those who adopt it challenge the traditions of African people. Ongogo uses characters from towns and cities or those in the rural areas but affected by westernization to depict cultural clash. Dichol, for instance is a woman in the rural areas, but has imbibed western liberalism in matters appertaining sexuality. She goes against the African traditions by being a mistress to many men in the village. "Ondigo has a Wife" is set in a rural area with characters that have lived in urban areas. Whereas the persona appreciates Anyango as a true African wife, some villagers with western influence view her as unexposed and worthless. The two contrasting settings set stage for clash of cultures that traverses the poetry from the beginning to the end.

The major characters in the poems are either fanatics of western culture or ardent believers in African traditions and braced for a duel with the other culture. The woman Dichol, in the first poem from which the title is derived is absolutely estranged from the ways of her people. The African moral code encourages young women to marry on time to curb promiscuity. With the advent of western values, young women today keep many boyfriends, which the persona attacks in the poem. Like Lawino and his co-wife, Clementine, the persona in "Dichol" attacks Dichol's lasciviousness. First, the persona attacks her vanity. Most African cultures (especially in western Kenya) despise vanity- the emphasis on physical beauty at the expense of character. The persona says:

Dichol my beautiful sister, listen to me
 Yes, I know of your beauty
 Today, you have scrubbed your feet for hours
 With the black rugged pumice from the frican riverbeds... (Ongogo, 2017, 10)

The persona's repetition of beauty in the first stanza is unrelenting attack on the modern woman's obsession with physical beauty at the expense of character attributes typical of responsible motherhood. Dichol spends a lot of time scrubbing her feet; as a consequence, she becomes lazy. In the proceeding stanza, the persona says, "You have rejected the oil of your age/ but smeared the alien sap" to suggest that Dichol applies cosmetics and other Western synthetic chemicals to conceal aging. The

persona attacks her synthetic beauty by likening her to a leopard. Her attempt to look like white people flops and Dichol ends up with a speckled pattern of a leopard. The persona derides Dichol's sexual licentiousness, which she attributes to modern or western influence. The twigs *ochol* and *Sangia* know the number of Dichol's teeth. The image is probably a snide reference to Dichol's amorous nature; many male lovers kiss her and thereby know the number of her teeth. The bushes are personified as complainants against Dichol's bent on plucking them. The image possibly suggests the numerous time he is seduced by men in the village. The housewives are aware of the scent of Dichol's perhaps because she makes love with their husbands more often. The persona advises Dichol to go for her own perfume- husband- as prescribed by the morals of her people. Dichol is a product of new cultures in the community that do not cherish marriage and the persona views her as immoral and misfit of sorts.

In the poem "African Queen," Ongogo uses an anonymous conservative character to celebrate the beauty of the African woman. The poet romanticizes African beauty and culture. She suggests that African women ought not like Dichol yearn to resemble white women in looks. They already are beautiful icon(s) of creation (p.13). Their beauty is not just in looks but in diligence and wisdom. They are diligent because they are the "strength and backbone of Africa" and "unlazy lot of humanity". They are wise because even the cosmos "listens to your wisdom'. The poet suggests that African beauty, unlike the vanity of western culture, lies in looks and above all character attributes like diligence and wisdom.

The character Ondigo also depicts the clash of African and Western culture. In the poem "Ondigo has a wife" the persona who is an African traditionalist is used to contrast the expectations of marriage in African and western or modern culture. In Western (modern) way of thinking, singleness is allowed in men. Celibacy is an option and men can forego marriage for career pursuits or religious reasons. Ondigo possibly inspired by one of the aforesaid reasons is single to a late age.

They said you bored their young wives
 With your unending odes,
 That to them the word *shemeji*
 No longer made any sense but insult
 ...
 They said your own mother prayed night and day
 To see smoke bellow from the left corner of your roof (p.22)

Ondigo bows to the pressure of his people and eventually gets married to a simple girl called Anyango. It is at this point that traditional African attitudes and modern (western) attitudes come in conflict. The persona defends Anyango against Western thinking. For the western way of thinking, a wife should have smooth feet, brown as the city girl, have formal education, know diverse soaps, and cook diverse dishes with a recipe. African culture on the contrary does not entertain strident demands on a wife appertaining physical appearance. The persona says, "even though they say Anyango's cracked feet are size four/ that her legs are the size of *oboroi* weed/ and her buttocks are flat as the indian *chapatti*/ ondigo you have a wife" (p.22-23). Moreover, the persona defends Ondigo that a wife need not have Western (formal) education:

Even if they say
 Anyango did not see the front page of a book
 That she does not know the size of a pencil
 And the colour of a blackboard
 Ondigo, you have a wife! (p. 23)

In the African perspective, a wife need not know how to use a recipe to prepare exotic meals like a chef. As long as Anyango knows how to make porridge for all elders and her in-laws then she is a wife to be accepted by all. The persona adds more attributes of the African wife to deal western culture a blow: Anyango knows how to dig the farm (she can stay still sunset on the farm), she knows the roles of motherhood (Anyango can breastfed as she bends fetching vegetables; she can bear children (she bore the most lads in the village).

The character Ogilo in the poems "Ogilo Part I: This thing you call Valentine" and Ogilo Part II: After Valentine," is alienated from the ways of his people. Ogilo is a diehard laity of Valentine day but the wife (who is African traditionist) reprimands him for showing her love on Valentine's Day only. On this day, Ogilo insists that she should not call him Ogilo Titus but Valentine or Valentino. And not just that, she should add "MY" owing to the nature of the day. The meals should be served on red and not white plate and the bed should not have blue pair of sheets but red. (p.30). But after Valentine's Day, Ogilo does not express any love at all. He almost sneezes when she calls him "My Valentine" (p.34). He spits when she complains about his tendency to love once in a year. When she asks to be loved, Ogilo replies that she should stop being an immature village adolescent. The persona suggests that modern (western) culture encourages people to love only once in a year unlike traditional times when anytime was Valentine.

Ongogo E. (2017) is about the clash of African tradition with Western ways that infiltrate society years after colonialism. The cultural conflict manifests through marriage, love, African tradition, widow inheritance, modernity and other themes through which the poet underscores the superiority of African culture over foreign influences. In the first poem, "Dichol" Ongogo portrays modernity (westernisation) as the root cause of moral decadence. Dichol's exposure to modernity makes her promiscuous and unable to settle down with a husband. Obala's embrace of western education makes him proud and flouts societal morals. Obala inherits widows without consulting elders because he feels he is too knowledgeable to. Since he had been a rich man possibly because of his high level of education, he does not heed advice from elders in the village. Persona says:

Obala when society spoke
 You said they were young and knew nothing
 And that you were experiences enough
 You ate porridge in Atiga's house
 Even after seeing the size of the corpse
 Even when you saw the red lips
 You said all colours were equal
 And drank from her pot
 Where other men like you
 Only stared from far (p. 46-47)

Obala's obsession with western culture inculcates in him stubbornness and insensitivity to morals that paves way for his destruction. In the poet's perspective, it is not African culture that makes people vulnerable to demerits of widow inheritance; it is the arrogance from western influence that makes people exposed to such perils. Ongogo suggests that traditionally, elders were involved in widow inheritance and a widow who had a dreadful disease from a husband would not be inherited. The inheritor had to be an in-law or related to the departed and elders had to assess the situation before sanctioning it. But Obala, the offshoot of modernity, flouts all this. The persona in the "inheritor" says:

Obala you are not related to the late
 Yet you camp for a fortnight
 Consoling a widow many years below your age
 You did not even create space for your in-laws
 And mother to whisper words in her ears. (P. 40)

The clash also manifests itself via marriage, pitting modern marriage against traditional ones. In the poem "My husband", the persona is a modern wife influenced by western novelties. She reveals that her husband complains that she does not give him true love as she is alienated by media. She sends love messages, but the husband wants traditional love expression- person to person. The husband asks, "[w]hat are full stops! What are commas!" (p.56). The communication technology and studying have desensitized her; the smartphones, televisions, computers have drained her emotions and cannot connect with her husband. The husband complains that she "pours all the emotions intended for him on paper and screen," (56). She is probably a writer. The poet suggests that traditional African marriages were better than western skewed modern marriages because the spouses were untainted by modern devices like mobile phones and computers. The husband romanticizes the simplicity of traditional marriages where communication was person to person and brought more happiness in marriage.

Towards the end of the anthology, Ongogo openly elevates African tradition and demeans modernity (western influence). In the poem "The African woman," she romanticizes African culture and continent:

A strong woman
 The beautiful one from the dark clay o'
 African richness
 You creature of substance
 With richness of love
 With golden tears
 Elevelened on her cheeks (p. 81)

Unlike Okot p'Bitek who presents the African woman in the negative, Ongogo gives a positive view of the African woman because she signifies African culture. She suggests that in spite of the struggles Africans experience, their ways are not objectionable. The physical environment too is blessed with flowing rivers, green vegetation and others. The poet follows this with the poem, "I will not go to Town" in which she derides western influences:

I say I will not go to town
 Where all spaces are co-owned
 I will not go to a place where
 Even the patio-
 The opposite neighbor claims;
 Where will I dry my corn?
 I ask where? (P. 83)

Towns, which represent western culture, are portrayed as poverty stricken places where there is no space for daily chores like drying clothes, corn, sneezing and even breathing. They are overpopulated and people compete for essentials of life with dogs. The hygienic standards are low with heaps of rotting rubbish. At a deeper level, the poet uses the decadent imagery to suggest the moral decadence in western culture. The persona describes the women of the city as “fat city women” and men in the city as “hungry vultures” of the city. Gluttony is therefore a feature of western culture that manifests via urbanization. As the poem comes to a close, the persona opts for African culture:

I will not divorce my language
 And speak those exotic city languages
 With rules and regulations
 I will talk the indigenous language
 That *nyopija*- my mama taught me (p. 29)

The poet then proceeds to invite alienated Africans to African ways in “I Beckon you to the Village” (p. 86). The rural area, which is representative of traditional African culture, is surfeited with fresh fruit unlike urban areas where stale fruits are sold. The fruits are not defiled with the touch of many hands like those in towns and cities. The rural areas have fresh chicken unlike towns where people eat broilers conserved in fridges for months. This poem signifies the worth of African food in contrast with western diets that have made people vulnerable to illnesses such as cancer, heart diseases and infertility.

Ogongo employs a number of stylistic devices to express the cultural clash and superiority of African traditional ways to western culture. First is the free verse style as opposed to metric verse that is dominantly used in modern poetry. Free verse is prose masquerading as poetry because the poet defies the metric patterns in which there is regular distribution of stressed and unstressed syllables in stanzas. Such poets also use rhyme and alliteration to create rhythmic units. Instead, Ogongo chooses images from the local environment and extravagant repetition typical of African songs as a kind of defiance against western style of writing poetry. Let us analyse the following example:

To you Son of my in-laws
 I warn you!
 Do not say I did not warn you
 When the parrot perches on your roof!
 I have talked

When the kestrel still smiles on the cow's back!

If you only give me the kind of love
 Where you clutch a pen between your teeth
 Erasing words from a paper
 To the umpteenth time to make things right (p. 18)

It is evident from the above example that the poet uses prose, the common language of speech, in poetry. Verse is usually more compact than the above lines; however the images in the stanzas make them poetic. The images of the parrot and kestrel have a symbolic significance; they portend evil in the life of persona's husband. Pen and paper are derived from the persona's environment and represent modernity. Like P' Bitek, Ongogo rejects the western metric verse to imply that Africans too had poetry, which they expressed via repetition and imagery from the local environment. The poet also uses African words side by side with English to suggest that some meanings could be lost when these words are translated into English. Such words include *abuu* (traditional musical instrument) that is better understood by the native community: *Achego*, a type of sandy soil (that foreigners may not know) and *Akala*- traditional locally made shoes. The poet also employs burlesque, a type of satire that trivializes esteemed subjects and glorifies what is considered low. Ongogo trivializes western and urban ways of life, which are held in esteem in African societies. Urban ways are considered as symbols of exposure and knowledge; however, the poet trivializes them and elevates rural life and tradition. The style plays a pertinent role in expressing the poet's attitude towards the African and western cultures.

Ongogo (2017) is therefore an anthology about the clash of African and western cultures with rural and urban areas as the battlefields in the contemporary society. Unlike the colonial period when western culture directly made incursion on African values by colonialism and Christianity, westernization spreads via urbanization, the media, formal education and information and communication technology. In the contest of cultures, the poet takes a side to castigate western culture by creation of personas and characters that symbolize the cultures. Although the poet comes to a passionate defense of African culture, she partly portrays the culture as ancient, characterized by poverty, but has to be appreciated. True African women like Anyango stand out as unattractive, illiterate, and unexposed and only know how to cook porridge. While those that embrace western culture such as Dichol, though immoral, are pretty, assertive and exposed. Can African culture not borrow some elements from the West and still survive? Do we have stick to the ignorance of cooking only porridge to be true Africans? Can men like Ogilo not marry more knowledgeable wives who still embrace Africa culture? Is a wife just but a woman who can only bear children? African culture can accommodate new ideas via a process referred to as hybridity and still remain relevant. The more Africans embrace new cultures, the better they can resist western culture from the point of information.

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