



Cultural Tension and Artistic Mediation in Uwemedimo Atakpo's *Return to the Sun-god*.

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Abstract: This paper examines cultural tension as pervasive thematic thrust in Uwemedimo Atakpo's *Return to the Sun-god* and also extrapolates the playwright's creative tool for conciliation of the socio-cultural crisis that pervades the sphere of this enactment. The paper notes that religious and other socio-political upheaval are inevitable in almost every society that witnesses cross-cultural influences. This usually arises when there is a deliberate intention to downplay an extant culture of a particular community in preference for the cultural values of a predatory power, thereby causing fundamental modifications of natural condition that lends a valid identity to a particular community. This development, most times, impinges on the socio-political and religious wellbeing of the people whose culture is being suppressed. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines some threads of cultural tension in the play under examination. Through the analysis of the text, this paper does not only isolate instances of cultural tension in the text, but also explores some possible avenues through which the playwright diffuses the unwarranted consequences of the inter-cultural contact. The paper concludes that change and other social eruptions are natural imperatives of man and should not be viewed as destructive but should rather be harnessed towards meeting the myriad challenges of life.

Keywords: Culture, Tension, Playwright, Change, Mediation.

Review Paper

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INTRODUCTION

As the world shrinks daily into a global village through cultural confluences and technological innovations, fundamental changes and other social eruptions become inevitable. This is largely because man is a transient being on planet earth and remains highly susceptible to the mutative forces of nature which compel him to occasionally make adjustment in his social conditions. According to Ime Ikiddeh, "The whole history of man can be seen as visible and invisible record of his response to the continuous pull between what has been and what is and is likely to be...it is a catalogue of his existential and social struggles to resist or adjust to the flux of changing conditions" (448). This manifests both at the individual and at the society's level, leaving in its wake new ideas, values and condition of living. The aforementioned realities have been and continue to be one of the central issues in African literature. African writers, using various approaches and in all genres, have continued to explore, in their critical enterprises, these travesties of change and its socio-political and religious

consequences in contemporary African society. Thus, this paper takes a cursory look at the tension arising from the vicissitude of change brought about by the influence of Western culture on African culture and how the playwright deploys creative strategies as a means of mediation in the conflicting situations of cultural contact.

It is indisputable that the European colonisation of some African states brought about fundamental changes of some social, religious and traditional values, as modern Western culture was not only introduced but imposed on affected societies. This was reinforced by the unfortunate racist perception of Africans, not only as lazy and indolent but also as people without history or culture. By the time some African states gained independence in the 1960s, Kimberly Parkash reveals that "institutions of western culture, such as education, Christian missions and modern industries had been set in place and, thus, already contributed to transforming traditional African culture" (1). Therefore, African countries, apart from

grappling with the realities of the newly-won independence, also had to renegotiate their existence in the new cultural arrangement. They pathetically watched the past, though imperceptibly but certainly, receding; as the old order yielded its place to a new one. Gradually, the transportation and importation of western cultural values and the implantation of same in African societies became overwhelming and almost completely eclipsed the African cultural values. This has created negative socio-political and religious consequences on the psyche of African people.

It is also noted that the above travesties are now being consolidated and build up into a way of life and pursued with utmost vigour in the name of a misunderstood modernity (Ikidde, 450). Almost every African now goes to a ridiculous extent in aping foreign cultural values, even to the detriment of self-respect and in a false notion of modernity. The result is that those things which were viewed as anathema to African cultural values have now supplanted the traditional conservatism of the African people. For instance, the use of English language in place of the indigenous languages as a medium of instruction even in an unofficial context with no foreigners around, abortion as a means of birth control, free premarital and extramarital sexual relationships, homosexuality and gay practices are all some of the clear evidences of cultural eruption in African society (Adam & Adam, 1). In fact, in the area of sexuality, James Okpiliya and Kufre Akpan argue that: “queer sexual preferences stem from the cleavages of imperialism and is also part of the inglorious and continuous domination of values by the West”.

This could also be seen in the choice of delicacies. It is a common place to find many Africans, in order to conform to the Western modernity, feel ashamed eating their traditional food in public, not to talk of outside the continent. For example, an acclaimed “civilised” Nigerian will always place an order for a cold salad and other leafy things in a restaurant even when he or she is savouring the aroma of a pounded yam and white soup from somebody next to him or her. In fact, it is not uncommon to find some young people going for *shawama*, because they feel the traditional cuisine is local. Yet the Chinese do not eat outside the Chinese restaurant wherever they find themselves. David Udoinwang and Kufre Akpan aver that: “The strangeness of the moment is defined by the new gibberish that passes for language of modernity being propagated through social media space, thus pointed at skewed identities of the present generation that seems to have lost sense of cultural belongingness, have lost that natal tongue and origins” (187). The above scenario forms the basis of the hyperbolic satire in Okot P’ Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*:

... the tasteless
Bloodless meat of cows
That were killed many years ago

And left in the ice to rot

Tinned beef, tinned fish,
Tinned frogs, tinned snakes,
Tinned peas, tinned beans
Big broad beans
Tasteless like the *cooro* (Quoted from Ikidde, 452)

Too often, Africans themselves make African culture look like something very primitive like museum pieces, arrested and fossilised in time. According to Kwesi Prah: “They invariably are displayed more in response to Western tastes for African exotica than a revival, renewal or reaffirmation of the African heritage” (17). One can attest to how these developments have negatively impacted on the Africa’s socio-political and religious life.

However, it has been noted that despite this corrosive influence of the Western culture on African culture, there’s hardly a clean break from the Africa’s past. Emmanuel Obiechina reveals that, “even urban dwellers are strongly rooted in traditional African culture, despite being ‘cosmopolitanized’ intellectuals” (36). Former President Sekou Toure had once affirmed, against the genocidal project of the West, “the immortality of African people is explained by the conservation of their culture, of their arts, in spite of long-drawn and painful years of inveterate cultural aggression by the West” (quoted in Obafemi,6). Now and again, the past returns as the present and assert itself within modernity in an act of real or apparent renewal (Ikidde, 449). In this process, what is certain is that something will certainly be lost and gained. Thus, it is expedient, in drifting into a new cultural reality, to strike a healthy balance between tradition and change. The expediency arises from the disturbing and unverifiable belief that change destroys tradition and damages the psyche of those whom it is supposed to serve. One of this controversial opinion is evidenced in Frantz Fanon’s argument on how culture is always in motion against tradition:

Culture has never the translucidity of custom; it abhors all simplifications. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attache oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one’s own people (15).

Prah echoes this when he submits that “there is invariably a selective approach to cultural adaptations from outside which in the process of adaptation does not emasculate or efface the original culture” (17). It is against the backdrop of these cultural realities that sundry communities oppose change and modernity, and would rather suffocate in the cauldron of tradition.

Faced with these cultural realities, literature becomes a rallying point and a platform through which

the cultural tension could be moderated. This is largely because literature remains a predominant means of investigating the complexities, apprehensions and contradictions that plague humanity. This agrees with Emeka Nwabueze's opinion that "literature constitutes the best and brightest expressions of all humanity. It helps us to solve real problems, the problem of existence, the problem of being human" (5). In lines with Nwabueze's views, this paper does not only extrapolate cultural tension in Atakpo's *Return to the Sun-god* but also interrogates the playwright's deployment of his critical ingenuity in resolving the tension. Through some characters in the play, Atakpo seems to say that change is a natural imperative of man and should be harnessed to satisfy man's needs and aspiration at the moment of history they consider as modern. This is in line with Ikidde's position which views modernisation as "functional change, a process of renewal whose ideal aim is a refurbished quality, a transformation that does not destroy the essence, a birth and rebirth that preserve the creative womb" (449). Thus, it may be posited that all societies which develop do so on the basis of their cultural heritage and their ability to adapt new inputs from outside into their culture.

Cultural Tension, the Artist and Reconciliation in *Return to the Sun-god*

Return to the Sun-god is about a young man, Ekeg who has been barraged by the Western idea of modernity. He returns home after completing his university programme abroad and begins to fight his people's tradition and condemn it as fetish and primitive. He demonstrates this hatred by destroying sacrificial items in the shrine of the chief priest, while on picnic with his fiancée. On getting home, he suddenly begins to show signs of lunacy, raving at people incoherently and talking to imaginary beings. It is later learnt that he is responsible for the desecration of the village shrine. Following this, the chief is fetched and after some incantations and sacrifices, the situation returns to normalcy. Ekeg later agrees that both old and modern practices should exist side by side.

The historical context about which Atakpo couched this play seems to be a period when African states, arising from their contact with colonial masters and the consolidation of institutions of Western culture in African soil, became vastly brainwashed and disoriented by the lures of the new cultural realities. In this short play, Atakpo uses dialogue and actions of his characters to depict a society that is drifting into cultural chaos in a false notion of embracing modernity. This seems to be the major thrust of the playwright. Thus, this essay identifies instances of cultural tension in the play under examination and its attendant socio-political and religious crises, and also interrogates ways of diluting and diffusing the cultural impasse as one of the solutions through which myriads of socio-political crises could be mitigated.

In this play, Atakpo captures a succinct scenario of cultural tension when his culturally-brainwashed and imperially-lackey protagonist goes berserk and kicks over a basket of sacrifices in the village shrine and crush the items, describing it as fetish and idol worshipping. He feels so ashamed that his people are still very primitive and takes consolation on the fact that "... no foreigner was around to see that rubbish" (30). His senses are too beclouded by the forces of his new culture that he fails to know that there are certain values every community keeps intact, irrespective of the force of modernity. Olu Obafemi posits that "From all times, it is man's attempt to come to terms and grips with nature and his environment; to understand it and survive in it, that he/she socialises, humanises and spiritualises. So, there are no people without a culture and a civilisation, as long as there is social life, social interactions and relationships" (4-5). Obafemi's position is validated in this play through Affiong's insightful and revealing posers:

Affiong: And if I may ask, why do we see all those Brazilian rituals on our television screens? We think they look splendid. But many of them originated from Africa centuries ago. And our own rituals here and now? "Primitive and uncivilised", you call them" (30).

The above situation reminiscences a scenario in Chimamandi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. During a visit of Eugene and family to the Igwe of his village, his wife curtsies to greet the king as tradition demands and this attracts a revulsion and stern reprimand from Eugene who sees this as a breach of God's commandment for bowing to a mere human. At another occasion, when Kambili, who had witnessed how her mother was reprimanded for bowing to greet the king, refuses to bow and kiss the ring of the Bishop, she is shocked at her father who angrily yanks her ear for disgracing him and dishonouring God by not bowing to the Bishop. One wonders if the Bishop is not a man like the Igwe. This paper sees this as some of the contradictions and hypocrisies that characterise the attitude of those who are deeply blown by the wind of Western culture.

It therefore amounts to cultural imperialism and a misunderstood modernity when what is cherished by a particular community is described as fetish and uncivilisation. It should be noted that the concept of 'civilisation' is elusive and fluid. It is just a period tag with no standards and fixed boundaries "except for the shaky pegs erected and pushed aside by man's own whims" (Ikidde, 449). Thus, what is seen today as primitive, perhaps, was once seen as modern and those ones cherished as modern today may be described as primitive in the future. Like a tide, modernity flows in and out of time in the course of history.

In this play, Ekeng and his fiancée Nkoyo seem to be ignorant of the dynamics of modernity as demonstrated in the ensuing conversation:

Ekeng...I am shocked! I never knew my fellow countrymen were still so primitive.

Nkoyo: I too never thought of that. It means that we are not really civilised. (30).

To these characters, their people are primitive and uncivilised because, they still offer sacrifices to their gods at the age when the world has become scientific. Having been socialised in Western culture through further studies abroad, their estimation of civilisation here points to the Western civilisation and anything short of that is primitive. That is why it becomes an issue when they frantically deploy the Western culture as a yardstick for judging the way of life of their community, which leads to a negative evaluation of the peoples' values, norms, and behaviour.

It also becomes worse when it is noted that the existing educational curricula in many African countries divorce the people and alienate them the more from African cultural realities. The result of this, according to Sule Bello, is that they do not transmit to the younger ones "the habits of doing, thinking and feeling from their own environment and experience but a culture which is foreign in nature" (25). And so, it becomes difficult for young Africans to link up the knowledge acquired in school to the society outside it or, indeed, introduce alternatives in response to changes in the society. Emmanuel Ayandele had earlier noted thus:

The truth that should ring incessantly in the ears of would-be education reformers is that without their knowing it, to date, the greatest disservice of the misleaders and misbuilders of the African edifice is their lack of the discerning intellect to recognise the cornerstone status of Africa's cultural heritage (16).

This informs Barbara Tuchman's position that "...curious vacuum of understanding came from what may be called cultural ignorance- a frequent component of folly" (17). The above, to a greater extent, has been responsible for the stagnation of African countries.

Affiong whose character delineation signifies a voice of conciliation in the cultural matrix points to the fact that there are certain values every society cannot break away from, in the light diversities of cultural influence. She recognises the uniqueness of every society and advises Ekeng thus: "it is not only the European standards that you must use in judging our people" (31). Thus, Affiong's tolerance, when juxtaposed with Ekeng's brashness, justifies the position of this paper that the protagonist may not be necessarily and intentionally advancing the sophistry of Western cultural values. He could also be viewed as a victim of the cultural contact that results when a foreign

culture forcefully replaces an indigenous culture as is the case in Nigeria and most African countries. According to Bello:

Our attitude today is largely influenced by the perception and viewpoints cultivated as a result of slavery as well as colonial and post-colonial education. As a result of this, we tend not to appreciate ourselves or our cultures and, therefore, disregard or undervalue the potential contributions this heritage can make to our contemporary development efforts (8).

In fact, there are Africans like Ekeng who become psychopathic, directly suffering from psychological crisis on account of the invasion of the original, indigenous cultural values by foreign cultural forms.

There is also a tensed atmosphere in this play during a heated argument on what approach to farming could guarantee food sufficiency in the community. Ekeng, who represents the dominant tunes of the Western culture harps on a complete overhaul of what is described as primitive approach of farming to Western mechanisation, if food sufficiency is to be achieved. He wonders at a newspaper report which states that "80 percent of our population are rural, full-time or part-time farmers, but that they barely produce enough for just their own families, while only five percent of Americans are farmers, but they provide surplus food after feeding over 200 million people. (18). The solution, to him, lies in the acquisition of sophisticated machineries and their accessories. According to him, "...no matter what the evils are in the use of modern technology and machinery...you cannot be saying that, just because this country doesn't manufacture combine harvesters and irrigation materials, we have to stick to primitive methods until we reach that industrial goal" (22).

Papa Ekeng, who represents the aging and fast receding African cultural values expresses pessimism and sees nothing good in abandoning the 'primitive' farming methods for the Western scientific farming system. His pessimism arises from the fear of what might become the peasant farmers in the face of mechanisation. "And what does our peasant farmer do with his 'primitive' tools in the face of this foreign invasion? He's simply blown away in the rush to mechanize" (20-21). Ikidde also shares in the fear of papa Ekeng using an analogy from the Scandinavian situation:

If then the Laplanders of Scandinavia, in a bid to modernize, were to abandon their skis for tropical sandals, instead of seeking ways to make their traditional footwear more durable and more efficient...the result...would not only be incongruous and ridiculous, but also a fanciful way of fulfilling a death-wish (450).

To papa Ekeng, a call to abandon the African farming approach will not only lead to a disregard of the local and indigenous initiative or innovations but will also lead to emasculation of indigenous technical and other creative resources. This informs Bello's submission that "Africa as a whole needs science and technology to develop. Such 'science' and 'technology' however, need to be rooted in our cultures as much as this culture needs to be tailored to produce a conducive atmosphere for modern development" (16).

The premises of the argument above arises from the biting effects of famine that has ravaged Ekeng's community. Ekeng sees the situation as a result of the primitive farming method and obsolete farming equipment his community has clung to. On the other hand, his people see it as a result of the craze for Western civilisation with its emphasis on modernity which has caused the young people to abandon farming and migrate to city centres. The chief priest reveals: "The children have forsaken the earth and famine is coming fast" (7). He sees this as responsible for the wrath of the sun-god and the only remedy is for the people to return, otherwise all will perish. The sun-god here metaphorises the tradition and the old culture of the people.

1st Priest: The problem is that, here, our young ones have lost their sense of reasoning. What is old is now "old fashioned". It is only the new things that are valid. But, unless they think clearly and return to the land, nothing, absolutely nothing will save us.

2nd Priest: Go, then, and tell the people who were not here that the wrath of the sun-god will descend and many will be swept away unless they heed the call and return to old ways, old values and old happiness (10)

The above summon looks very ambitious and at the same time unfeasible. This is because the history of man has been replete with his existential and social struggles to resist change but at the end finds himself adjusting to the flux of the changing conditions. Thus, instead of calling for resistance, as suggested by the above statement, change could be seen as an index of a progressive society. This is where Atakpo launches his artistic mediation. Through one of the elders in this play, the playwright seems to argue that African literature should contribute in redefining African culture in the face of modern demands placed on traditional culture. To this playwright, African writers should not write to portray themselves as champions of African culture but should contribute towards creating what could be described as a neo-African culture. Janheinz Jahn reveals that:

...African intelligence wants to integrate into modern life only what seems valuable from the past. The goal is neither the traditional African nor the black European but the modern African. This means that a tradition seen rationally, whose values

are made explicit and renewed, must assimilate those European elements which modern times demand; and in this process the European elements are so transformed and adapted that a modern, viable African culture arises out of the whole. It is a question, therefore, of a genuine Renaissance, which does not remain a merely formal renewal and imitation of the past, but permits something new to emerge. This something new is already at hand; we call it neo-African culture. (16).

One of the elders in this play captures this argument vividly: "They should grow together. What is good in the new should be allowed to grow with old" (9). In other words, the seeming invasion of African culture by Western culture could be a huge blessing in disguise. It could be harnessed to meet the purpose of satisfying individual and society's needs and aspirations at the moment in history which they consider as modern.

CONCLUSION

Despite the corrosive invasion of the Western cultural values on significant aspects of African culture, African writers have continued to stress the need for the two cultures to exist side by side. Through their creative visions, they have argued that every society which launches itself on the path of development must not only be tolerant of changes, arising from contact with other cultures, but must also develop mechanisms of borrowing positive aspects of other cultures. Although it has been noted that African customs and traditional values have significantly altered due to this cultural contact, the development could as well afford Africans the opportunity to evolve a modern African culture that may improve the lot of Africans. As stated earlier, change is inevitable and by that very token, not without a purpose.

The new cultural realities could also inspire greater confidence in Africans and help them generate new attitudes and policies that will pay due attention to the enormous contributions that indigenous creative heritage could make to the overall development of Africa. The task lies on the onus of writers and literature remains a viable tool. It is against this backdrop that this study has attempted an extrapolation of cultural crises in Uwemedimo Atakpo's *Return to the Sun-god* and how the playwright develops his art as a tool of mediation in the crisis.

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