

Contextualizing the Trado-Afro Cultural Contents in Gloria Ernest-Samuel's The Beautiful Masquerade

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the contextual depth of traditional and cultural elements that reflect the lived realities of African people and society, as creatively represented in Gloria Ernest-Samuel's The Beautiful Masquerade. The text is examined as a cultural mirror that encapsulates the complexities of African traditional life, revealing not only enduring customs but also the ideological structures that govern communal existence. The Beautiful Masquerade thus functions beyond mere storytelling; it operates as a socio-cultural commentary that interrogates the conditions shaping traditional African communities and their modes of existence. The study focuses primarily on a close textual analysis of the narrative, paying particular attention to the depiction of the traditional and cultural universe embedded within the text. Through its portrayal of rituals, festivals, belief systems, and social hierarchies, the work foregrounds the continuity of African cultural practices across generations. Central to this cultural framework is the figure of the traditional ruler, whose authority and governance reflect the entrenched mentality of despotism often associated with patriarchal and autocratic leadership structures in traditional societies. The ruler's actions and symbolic presence illuminate the power dynamics that shape social order and communal identity. Furthermore, the article critically examines how cultural practices such as ancestral worship, religious ideology, and customary laws function as instruments for maintaining social cohesion as well as reinforcing authority. In summation, the paper offers a nuanced critique of the uniqueness of African society by foregrounding its traditional and cultural practices, which encapsulate deeply rooted customs, belief systems, religious consciousness, norms, and values. Through this analysis, the study underscores the literary text's role in preserving cultural memory while simultaneously questioning the sustainability of certain traditional power structures in contemporary African society.

Keywords: African, Cultural Value, Leadership, Society, Traditional Practice.

Introduction

The African society has its unique ways and methods in terms of tradition and culture. Generally speaking, Africa as a continent is known for its rich cultural background and heritage. The different countries of Africa can be identified by their rich and unique styles of traditional values practices, activities, norms, beliefs and values system. However, it is pertinent to observe that African culture is synonymous with African traditional ways of life and hence the Nigerian culture can be likened to its core traditional values. According to Eric Bentley, "culture means that the individual possesses himself; culture is made part of a man by training and habit and will" (250). Here, culture is seen to be learned as well as inherent and as noted by Bassey Ekpe "culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind" (111). Similarly, Effiong Johnson adds that "culture is the totality of

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experiences of humanity in the cosmos” (3). Explaining further, Mario Llosa submits that despite these variations and right up to the present, culture has always “signified a combination of factors and disciplines that, according to a broad social consensus, are what defines it; a recognition of a shared heritage of ideas, values, work of art, a store of historical, religious and philosophical knowledge in constant evolution, and the exploration of new artistic and literary forms and of research in all areas of knowledge (97)

From the above perspectives, culture can be viewed as the totality of the way of life of a people, in a definite place or region that distinguish them from others. It is a way of life carefully fashioned out by the people with time to get acquainted with their environment. Similarly, Ekpe and Thompson submit that “culture is a fundamental concept within the framework of historical discourse and value treatment” (50). Implicitly, culture is a collective endeavour in living, learning, developing and coming to terms with natural phenomena by a group of people through time, season, location and place. In culture, conventional education is not necessary although the process is educative because it involves spiritual, material, emotional and intellectual study. In talking about culture, all areas and aspects of life associated with the people are counted upon. Culture comprises material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect and the unique African traditional and cultural flavour can be seen from artifacts and relics in its broadest form such as tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils and housing. The traditional ideals with political, economic, social and legal structures created to help achieve material and spiritual objectives; while the cultural aspect is concerned with ideas, beliefs and values; the creative aspect concerns a people’s literature (oral or written) as well as visual and performing arts which normally mould as other aspects of culture. This agrees with the position of Solomon Unoh that, “the term culture subsumes the totality of the materials, spiritual, artistic, intellectual and other accomplishments of a people, which give some indication of their way of life, their mode of existence and the by-products of their type or level of civilization” (3).

The contextualization of the inherent trado-cultural contents in the Nigerian traditional society in this paper will be analysed with reference to Gloria Ernest-Samuel’s *The Beautiful Masquerade*. The play captures the position of cultural elements such as customs and practices that can be traceable to a typical African traditional society.

Literature Review

William Shakespeare wrote plays like *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet* amongst others as a reflection of the traditional, cultural, political and social situations of his time. His plays whimsically draw people into understanding the traditional and cultural climate and

practices of the time. Ola Rotimi in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* offers a replication and adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex to reflect the African traditional and cultural practice. Wole Soyinka uses *The Trials of Brother Jero* to expose the African people's attitudes just as Effiong Johnson uses *Install the Princess* to ventilate the inherent traditional and cultural situation of some African communities. Playwrights are seen as revolutionaries in the context of their creative writings to help revolutionize and reposition society.

This creative and literal revolution according to Bassey Bassey, "... can arise from any type of class system, including capitalist, feudal, and ancient societies. Given these facts and realities, revolution is inevitable inhuman civilization. Revolution is undoubtedly possible as long as class exploitation and oppression divide humanity" (93). By implication, such revolutionary theatre has the potential to positively affect the people and can be used to "research, analyze and solve critical issues in the community, empowering indigenous people to enhance or make change toward positive behaviours, knowledge and attitudes regarding vital social issues challenging their lives" (Nnanake Ekeke 146). To this end, many creative works of African playwrights are revolutionary in content as can be observed in the approach of Gloria Ernest-Samuel on African tradition and culture in the political perspective of *The Beautiful Masquerade*.

Okon Jacob notes that "playwrights all over the world are influenced in one way or the other by the occurrences surrounding their day to day existence" (146). Collectively, African playwrights are in essence the conscience of the society, tackling trado-cultural problems in the African society through creative exposure in their plays for the theatre to indirectly help in repositioning and developing the people. Such positions the theatre as "engaging the attention of the people through a dramatic presentation of social problems, thus making the people to see their problems as well as dramatically proffering solutions in critical ways" and also "addressing problems affecting the society ranging from socio-political and cultural conflicts, to development problems, including exploitation, corruption, oppression, superstition, social vices and other societal anomalies" (Ekeke 90). In seeming tandem, Ekpe assert that the "theatre has a lot more to offer than mere movements in a physical space" (1), even as Ekpe and Thompson argue that "drama – as an art – is culture itself" (50).

It is pertinent that as playwrights remain true to their cause and write about the challenges facing African traditional and cultural communities. This seems to suggest Ekpe's remark about telling of African stories and "articulations that could contribute to the realization of a global stance for the African voice" (109). A playwright's mission includes seeing and thinking of the best way to convey the message of the play, stimulating questions of cultural choices and the resulting consequences of the choices made while conveying the target or

intended emotions of the play. Writing plays is a discipline with passion, it goes “beyond a mere representation to add relevance to humanity; to explain to man the nature of himself” (Iyorza and Iseyen 40). Jacob adds that “performance and performing arts are concepts that share same etymological foundation because they have to do with the process of doing something that is essentially useful” (128). A playwright therefore probes into the societal situation and creatively showcase the perceived challenges and mystery of life to inform and reposition the society in their plays as in the case of *The Beautiful Masquerade*. Beside the reflection of traditional and cultural practice in the society in creative/literary works, Jacob and Effiong consider “the utilization of literary work as an important medium of social criticism, national integration and moral regeneration” (136).

The Beautiful Masquerade: Synopsis

The play is centred on a major character, Amauche, an exposed, educated, and intelligent orphan whose personal history and intellectual disposition set him apart within the traditional social structure. Having relocated to his maternal community, Amauche emerges as a figure of hope and transformation, using his courage and strategic insight to liberate the people from prolonged victimization and oppression. His heroic intervention earns him widespread admiration, culminating in his acceptance by the community as a temporary regent, entrusted with leadership until the rightful heir to the traditional head-stool comes of age. The autonomous community of Amato, within which the narrative unfolds, is made up of three distinct sub-communities—Amaoji, Umuika, and Alaike—each contributing to the cultural and political fabric of the society. Amauche, hailed particularly as the celebrated warrior of Alaike, initially embodies ideals of bravery, justice, and communal responsibility. However, as the narrative progresses, his elevation to power becomes a catalyst for moral degeneration. Overwhelmed by pride and intoxicated by his newly acquired authority, Amauche gradually abandons the ethical principles that once defined him.

His descent into tyranny is marked by a series of reprehensible actions that desecrate the land and undermine the moral foundations of the community. Most notably, he forcefully takes the wife of his close ally, Nwabueze, an act that violates both social and cultural codes. In his quest to silence opposition and consolidate power, Amauche murders Nwabueze, further intensifying the moral and spiritual pollution of the land. These transgressions ultimately provoke cosmic and communal retribution, leading to the tragic deaths of Amauche and the woman he unjustly claimed.

The play thus serves as a reflective commentary on contemporary realities within traditional African societies, particularly highlighting the dangers of unchecked power and moral

corruption. Through its strong grounding in Igbo cultural values, beliefs, and communal ethics, the text underscores the consequences of leadership divorced from accountability and tradition.

Contextual Analysis of The Beautiful Masquerade:

Language: Culture cannot be retained or effectively transmitted without language. The traditional, political, social, economic or religious culture of a people can be expressed and appreciated through the most potent medium being language. In this play, Igbo language is being explored in terms of greetings (Alaike Kwenu! Kwezuonu!!) as well in the names of characters (Amauche, Okute, Mazi Ibekwe, Akwaeke, etc.) and songs (Okorobia dim ma, Amauche nwa ijeka Olebara, Okrorobia dim ma, Anyi sokwa gi n'azu ooo!).

Proverbs and Idioms: Traditionally, African are known for the employment of proverbs and idiomatic expressions to garnish the impact of communication and interaction. These aspects are reflected in the play's dialogue by different characters; all geared towards the desired effect. For example, in the lines of Ichie Onugha : “Our ancestors say that a child is not flogged the day he throws away palm oil, it is the day he throws the liquid waste from the oil” (64). Although the playwright tries as much to translate them into English language for clearer understanding, African idioms and proverbs are better expressed in the local languages and dialect.

Communalism: Africans are blessed and known for the culture of villages and communities' formation with the people's commitment to living together under common tradition for easy administration and development. Within the confines of community structures and with established authority vested on traditional heads, the people respond to call for community works, gatherings, emergencies and projects. In *The Beautiful Masquerade*, the people from different villages of Amaoji, Umuika and Alaike, converge and live as a family under Amato Autonomous Community, guided by a traditionally defined leadership.

Communal Education Sponsorship and Benefits: Due to increasing desire to have communities produce educated people, it has become a regular occurrence for communities to jointly raise money and sponsor intelligent candidates to be educated and finally become an asset to the community. This gesture is replicated in *The Beautiful Masquerade* where the people of Alaike sponsored Amauche despite being a grandson (not from Alaike) with the hope that he will be of help to them. The educational investment on Amauche paid off as he became educated and successful. It benefited the people when he helped save them from victimization and being elevated to a great warrior. The chant went thus: “Behold, behold the great warrior of our time, people of Alaike” (*The Beautiful Masquerade* 4).

The Culture of Community and Social Gathering: There are unique traditional ways of gathering people in a typical African community. One such way is through the use of gong by the community's town crier to pass information on scheduled meetings. In *The Beautiful Masquerade*, the town crier announced the day for men and women to turn up for work "on Nkwo market day" (15). In the beginning of the play the replication of culture in gathering the people for celebration can be seen in the sounds of the piper from the village square. It is also pertinent to observe that some Africans (especially in some parts of Nigeria) are culturally attached to drinking palm-wine. Wherever palm-wine is found in a community, people are bound to gather and also use the opportunity to discuss various issues bothering them and the community. This was established in Act 1: Scene 2 of *The Beautiful Masquerade*

Traditional Headship: The chieftaincy tradition in some African (specifically Nigeria) setting is well captured in the play's community of Amato where leadership lies on the title of Nze or Nzo. (10). The Nze or Nzo has his cabinet of elders with the title of Mazi. This cabinet helps the Nze in decision-making for the people in the community. In Amato Community, just as its obtainable in some African setting, the position of the traditional leader is hereditary and any attempt to act contrarily attracts negative consequences and calamities from the gods of the land. Example can be seen in the violation of this traditional culture when Egwatu took over the throne instead of Ichie Onugha being the traditional heir to the throne.

Traditional Occupations: The play vividly captures the traditional occupations of the people through carefully dramatized scenes that reflect everyday life in the community. Women are portrayed returning from their farms, symbolizing agriculture as a central means of sustenance and economic activity. Similarly, palm-wine tappers are shown descending with their calabashes, ready for communal drinking, highlighting indigenous skills and social bonding practices. Within this context, the role of Chief Izudike as the Traditional Chief Priest further reinforces the cultural richness of the African setting. His occupation underscores the spiritual dimension of labour and authority, illustrating how religious responsibilities are deeply interwoven with social structure and cultural identity in traditional African society.

Traditional Songs: The use of songs in true African gathering need not be over-emphasized. Songs are traditionally used during festive season, coronation ceremonies, victory sessions or during local festivals. The importance of traditional song (in Igbo language) is captured in the play by the community folks while jubilating over their victory. The use of dirge is also typical of African culture as seen in Act 3: Scene 4. The dirge is used at the end to create a mournful mood to bid goodbye to those that died: Onye Ie Lawa uwa, Odi ka bewe akwa, Umunna liwe ya, Onuma eju ha obi.... Iya iyoooo iyo! (*The Beautiful Masquerade* 78).

Consultation and Communication with the Deity: The belief in supernatural medium cannot be separated from the cultural practices of some Africans. Typical of some African culture, the gods or relevant deities are consulted for spiritual direction. In *The Beautiful Masquerade*, there are instances where the gods (Ikenga and Ebini Ukpabi) were consulted “to make necessary inquiries for ill-advised action...” (17). Communicating through medium with the gods of the land is a widely acceptable practice in some African societies. This is well captured in *The Beautiful Masquerade*, especially where Chief Priest Izudike (Alaike Custodian) is finally released from jail to communicate properly with the gods of the land (as traditionally ordained) for reliable, direct and authentic guidance from the gods, concerning the land and the happenings.

Greed, Traditional Evil Machinations and Betrayals: The culture of greed can also be found in the traditional setting as seen in the position of Nwabueze in supporting the ambition of Amauche against the traditional culture of leadership inheritance. He does this with the aim of becoming the Leader of Warriors in the community and the plan to avenge against Ikoku for betraying Egwatu. In opposition to the traditional rules in inheritance and hereditary in every established vulture, there are some actions orchestrated to thwart or frustrate the process. However, in *The Beautiful masquerade*, certain characters in connivance with Amauche decide to subvert the tradition by engaging in some machination plots to assist him annex the throne against the tradition but were duly punished by the gods of the land. This can be seen by the activities of Okute and some elders who acted so because of greed for positions and bribes as well as spurious contract awards. Amauche, in an effort to succeed, hatched a plot to replace the traditional religious practice. He advocated for the destruction of Ikenga Shrine and possible replacement with Christianity through the establishment of Church and recognizing Jesus as the true God, so as to achieve his ulterior motive of becoming the Nze.

Masquerade: Masquerade is recognized as one of the most significant cultural phenomena in African society, serving religious, social, and symbolic functions within the community. In the play, the role of the masquerade is prominently highlighted, revealing both its revered status and its potential for abuse. Of particular importance is the antagonistic behaviour of the masquerade towards women, especially virgins, which exposes the gendered power dynamics embedded in certain traditional practices. This is vividly portrayed through the Egedege Masquerade and its violent actions against Akwaeke, an incident that underscores how cultural institutions, when unchecked, can become instruments of intimidation and oppression. Through this depiction, the play critically interrogates the darker implications of masquerade traditions within the African cultural framework.

Honesty and Loyalty to Cultural Values: The likes of Emenike and Iweka symbolize the traditional loyalty that can be found among outstanding individuals in a typical traditional society despite the undue pressures and monetary inducement. These characters showcase honesty and uprightness that uphold the sanctity of cultural values (as seen in Act 2: Scene 1). In Act 1: Scene 4 of *The Beautiful Masquerade*, Amauche's aunt, Ugoye, refuses to support her late sister's son in his quest to forcefully take Akwaeke as a wife, she bluntly tells Amauche to leave Akwaeke for Nwabueze who has already been engaged to marry Akwaeke with marital rituals already in the process. She maintains her honesty and loyalty to the cultural values of the community as enshrined.

Chanting, Invocation and Rituals: All the above listed cultural elements are captured in the play text to emphasize the uniqueness of the cultural practices in a typical African setting. Such is exemplified in the instance where Chief Priest Izudike chants different incantations, pouring libation (drinks) and observing ritualistic gestures to invoke the spirit of the gods (Ikenga) for action.

The Traditional Penalty of Violating the Culture: Those responsible for violating the traditional laws are believed to be overtly and physically punished in The African culture and this is captured at the end of the play with the banishment of Okute into the forest as well as the death of Amauche and his cohorts.

Conclusion

Despite intruding influences faced in different societies globally, culture, as a way of life of a people, is unique in every ramification since it is through culture that a group of people or community can be identified with attendant peculiarities in terms of various beliefs, customs, traditional practices, activities, norms and values. In as much as these cultural elements date back to ancient times and transmitted through ages, there is likelihood that many may face moderation, reformation, outside influence or possibly extinction. Therefore, it is required that for the sake of posterity and heritage, they should be preserved. To this regard, the theatre, through creative works of playwrights, should make research and make effort to replicate the cultural values in their homesteads in an effort to keep a legacy for posterity

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