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The Treatment of 'Tradition and Modernity' in Selected Plays by Credo Mutwa, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, James Henshaw and Efua Sutherland

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Introduction

Introduction

Tradition and modernity are two integral concepts, yet their integration is based on their opposition. Tradition represents the past which should be related to the present, while modernity represents the present which should be related to the future. Their mutual influence is meant to develop societies but also their increasing estrangement can lead to the collapse of these societies.

The most remarkable example of this estrangement between tradition and modernity has been clearly manifested in Africa whether during or after colonialism. The way Africa was enforced to repudiate its tradition and to adopt an alien modernity led to a serious clash between tradition and modernity rather than their collaboration for Africa's development.

On the one hand, tradition has always been an inseparable part of Africa's cultural identity. Europe, on the other hand, has been the cradle of modernity which idealized man's reason as well as freedom of choice against the restrictions of the old times.In this situation, the contact between Africa's tradition and Europe's modernity could have been prosperous for both sides. Africa could have adopted Europe's modernizing influence in industrialization and technology while Europe could have allowed Africa's traditional spirituality to soften the materialism and stiffness of its modern societies. However, the balance of this collaboration was disturbed right from the beginning because it was based on colonialism.

Africans have always been considered as nations living in pre-modern conditions. Therefore, when Europe declared its colonial scheme in Africa, there was no better cover to Europe's exploitative desires than bringing

modernity to those who lacked it. From this moment, a new shape of modernity began to emerge. For Europe, it meant moreeconomic andindustrial development while for Africa, it meant exploiting its natural and human resources to achieve Europe's modernity.

The claim of modernizing Africa which was presented under the banner of colonialism was made up of two inseparable procedures. The first was represented in destroying all that was traditionally African and considering it an obstacle to African modernity. The second was adopting the European identity in its colonial form by accepting all that was culturally alien to Africa.The result was the creation of a modern African identity which was neither African nor modern in a real sense. In fact, it was a colonial identity which was based on accepting the cultural and mental enslavement of Africa by the colonizers.

From the womb of this cultural deformation, the new class of the educated elite emerged. Such class was physically African, but culturally and mentally European. This class was intentionally created by the colonizers as the thorn of colonial modernity that would cut into the African traditional community.

Contrary to the colonizer's wishes, two groups came out of this class. The first were completely assimilated as their main allegiance was to Europe's culture rather than their own. They regarded Africa's traditional culture from the colonizer's perspective as primitive and pagan. As for the members of the other group, their role appeared clearly during the 1950s and 1960s when Africa's struggle for independence was at its peak. This strong nationalist wave was accompanied by a cultural one which called for a return to Africa's traditional culture before colonialism.

However, full revival was an illusion as the European culture has already left its permanent mark on Africa. Therefore, two trends began to appear in the African society. The first was all about honoring African tradition and considering it as a source of pride. Followers of that opinion believed that adopting the modernity that was brought in by the colonizers can ruin Africa's identity and destroy independence. The second was to abandon the African tradition for being Africa's shameful burden that must be thrown away to enable Africa to become a member of the modernized world.

Sensing the gravity of adopting one without the other, a third mediating opinion appeared which stated that tradition and modernity must be examined critically for their advantages and disadvantages. By merging the positive sides of both and leaving their negative sides, a balance could be reached between Africa's traditional identity and western modernity.

Following this view, the role of the educated elite becomes visible, as they can use their foreign education in asserting Africa's identity rather than creating perplexity. They can lead their people towards a mediating policy between the authenticity offered by tradition and the progress offered by modernity.

Hence, the main objectives of the dissertation are first, to examine the effects of colonialism on the African cultural identity. The second objective is to explore the confrontation between African tradition and colonial modernity. Through the selected plays, the dissertation investigates three interpretations of this confrontation. The first glorifies tradition and believes that returning to a pre-colonial African culture is the main shield against modern evils. The second demonizes tradition considering it the

main reason behind Africa's disunity and weakness. As for the third, it suggests that though tradition represents the past, it can be infused with a modern spirit that suits Africa's present needs.

The chosen plays are: *uNosilimela* (1973) by the South African playwright Credo Vusamazulu Mutwa (1921-), *The Black Hermit* (1968) by the Kenyan playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-), *This is our Chance* (1956) by the Nigerian playwright James Ene Henshaw (1924-2007), and *Foriwa* (1967) by the Ghanaian playwright Efua Theodora Sutherland (1924-1996).

The reason behind choosing these plays in particular is that they display the main theme of the dissertation by showing different views regarding tradition, modernity as well as the possibility of merging between them. Another vital point is that the four chosen playwrights had a dual cultural identity which included tradition and modernity. The traditional part was acquired through their upbringing in a traditional household and the modern part was through their western education.

Therefore, this study raises the following questions: What is meant by tradition and modernity? What are the consequences of violating African tradition? Can tradition and modernity merge to give Africa a modern view of its distinctive identity?

Regarding the theoretical framework of the dissertation, it is based on the postcolonial theory. The researcher focuses on the works of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) including: *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), *Black Skin, White Mask*s (1967), *A Dying Colonialism* (1967) and *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (1988). The researcher also uses the works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o

(1938-) like: *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics* (1972), *Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (1983), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) and *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (1997).

The reason for choosing Fanon and Ngugi in particular is that they complete each other in analyzing the cultural and psychological effects of colonialism on the African's tradition and culture. These effects are seen by the researcher to be the base for the conflict which occurred between tradition and modernity in Africa. For instance, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) Fanon describes this colonial effect as "cultural imposition"(192) and in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), he terms it "cultural estrangement"(210). Similarly, Ngugi deals with the same destructive processin *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). He calls it "a cultural bomb" (3) which causes a state of "colonial alienation" (28).

This cultural disturbance was carried out through Christianity as well as European education. Regarding education in particular, both Fanon and Ngugi dealt with the colonizer's language as one of its fiercest weapons against the colonized. Being a carrier of the colonizer's culture, the colonizer worked on substituting it with the indigenous African languages. In return, the colonized Africans believed that by learning the language of the civilized nations, they can be their equals. The result was further inferiority when the colonized rejected their own culture and elevated that which dehumanized them in return.