THE FOLK TRADITIONS: THE CORE OF LITERARY DEVELOPMENT USING SOFOLA’S

KING EMENE

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ABSTRACT
Several attempts have been made in different books, articles and other materials to discuss the importance and reasons for the use of folklore in the world of art. It can be deduced that folklore by its peculiar nature is transmitted orally; it is unwritten and verbal, and is usually a handed-down tradition which has survived in a particular community and among a particular people or is preserved or fossilized for future use. It can be said without mincing words that Sofola’s King Emene relies heavily on folk tradition, which is the core of literary development. In fact, the playwright used what she saw appropriate, subtracted most of what she had available and added what she thought was necessary in the writing of King Emene from her people’s folk traditions.

INTRODUCTION
Folklore is often regarded as springing from a distant past and is usually associated with preliterate societies. Thus, the term “folklore” carries with it connotations of simplicity, sincerity, traditionalism, collective wisdom, something of a rallying point for those societies who have not been overwhelmed by the sophistication and individualism of the modern world and above all, by the anonymity of the author.

As a result of the foregoing, some writers believe that it is a very challenging task on the part of the writer to write with his own people in mind and with the task of transforming the oral material of his people into the written form using a style that is representative of and accessible to his people. Albert Lord, for instance, maintains that there is nothing like a “transitional text” between oral and written literary tradition. He strongly believes that once the oral technique is lost, it can never be regained as the written technique which is incompatible with the oral and, as a result, the two could not form a third “transitional” technique (120).

He further argues that “when a tradition of an individual goes from oral to written, it or he goes from an adult, mature style of one kind to a faltering and embryonic style of another sort” (Lord 134). In fact, he sees the oral tradition as being superior to the written style.

African literature has been continuously criticized for various “shortcomings” in the execution of techniques and fulfillment of the conventions of the literary form. Some African playwrights have been criticized for having a penchant for diction that is largely inaccessible to a generality of their audience, while the subject matters they treat in their works have little or no relevance to contemporary realities. As Joel Adedeji puts it, the playwrights’ “subject matters are being distorted from the original sources beyond recognition, complementation and appeal of a majority of their audience” (140).

When we take a critical look at Adedeji’s statement, we will be forced to correct some impressions. What he forgets to consider in his statement is the fact that these African playwrights are not historians who are reliving actual past events. They try to use historical elements in an aesthetic and artistic way. To this end, Sam Ukala argues:

Though there have been waves of criticisms that subject matters of contemporary playwrights lack contemporary realities, but they have forgotten that while subject matter
of a play may appear outdated and irrelevant, its theme may be quite relevant and that by the playwright’s rating is more important than the subject matter (140).

Dan S. Izevbaye, in his criticism of Amos Tutuola and the use of oral tradition in African literature, postulates that since the novels adopt characteristics of both traditions, they lose something of each as the written style is ineffective in dramatizing tales in the way the oral performance would. However, it is important to point out that the use of oral tradition in written literature does not necessarily and immediately constitute a flaw. Rather, what should be of paramount importance is how the author’s creativity and ingenuity are manifested in his work. Though not within the ambit of the topic under discussion, it is important to point out that Daniel Hoffman and Gene Bluestein have already shown how American fiction developed mainly through its use of the people’s folk tradition (23).

One can, therefore, at this point say that there may be no such phenomenon as “transitional text”. All the same, it may still be pertinent to point out that the oral technique can be exploited and, through this medium give birth to a good written literary style. What Tutuola did cannot just be flatly regarded as a failure for the mere fact that he incorporated the stylistic features of the two traditions in his writing. Rather, his ingenuity should be seen as a worthwhile approach to literary creativity.

Also, Johann Gottfried, in an attempt to discover the source for a distinctly German tradition, showed that the literary expression of a particular people can be found in their folk traditions (9). And due to their tenacity among the people, these traditions could serve as the basis for the building of a national literature. It is, therefore, significant and to some extent imperative that literary writers should utilize folk materials in their creative works.

During this period, the Germans considered folk expressions as the preserve of the unsophisticated elements of the society. It is also important to note that this period corresponds with the English Restoration period, which laid emphasis on the urbanity and formal elegance of English verse. At this time in Germany, these folk expressions were accorded no literary value because they were for the illiterate or unsophisticated people: the lower class. As a result, more of the upper class or sophisticated individuals believed that there was hardly any influence these oral traditions had on the written literature.

Be it as it may, Herder, as quoted by Gene Bluestein had a different view. In 1763, he stated categorically that the folk traditions constituted the core of any significant literary development. As Bluestein succinctly observes, “Herder’s folk ideology made it possible to offer empirical proof that the major values of a national literature resided in the abilities of common men to create a folk tradition from which a formal, sophisticated literature developed” (11-12).

This new approach adopted by Herder gave impetus to the literary revolution in Germany. It also influenced, to a great extent, the German Romantic Movement and the early nineteenth century German folklore movement of which the Grimms were the prime exponents. Within the same period, the folk traditions greatly influenced the written literature in England (Fischer 66).

Despite Herder’s stance, there were still a few people who insisted that oral tradition or folklore had no influence on the written literature. Rather than believe in the influence of folklore on the written literature, they continued to attack the people who belonged to Herder’s school of thought. Prominent among those who belonged to the two schools of thought were S.T. Coleridge and William Wordsworth; the latter believed that folklore had a great influence on written literature while the former was on the opposing side.

Wordsworth in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballad (1800) stated that his “principal object was to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate them as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men…” (Grosart 81). On the other hand, Coleridge, as pointed out in “Biographia Literaria (1815/17)”, was of the view that Wordsworth having used these traditional forms in his poetry makes his poetry comparatively inferior (Shawcross 36-38). In the same way, Christopher Caudwell believes that Wordsworth was torn between contrasting loyalties, “…this ‘simple’ diction, just because it springs most from the individual needs of the moment and least out of enduring social affectivities, is least expressive and least artistic when using it. Wordsworth is least poetic (66). Due to Caudwell’s strong anti-folk feelings, he believes that instead of the folk traditions influencing written literature, it is the other way round. As a result, he argues that:

If the history of the phrases in hourly currency among our peasants were traced, a person not previously aware of the fact would be surprised at finding so large in number, which three or four centuries ago were the exclusive property of the universities and the schools; and at the commencement of the reformation, had been transferred from the school to the pulpit, and thus gradually passed into common life (40).

Frantz Fanon in his own argument posits that for there to be a “national literature” the writer should be concerned with addressing his people. According to him, “The colonized man who writes for his people
ought to use the past with an intention of opening the future; as an invitation for action and a basis for hope” (189). He goes further to argue that for the writer who concerns himself with his local audience and the struggles of his people, oral tradition can prove a pertinent tool, if it is critically applied. As far as he is concerned:

… the oral tradition – stories, epics and songs of the people – which formerly were filed away as set pieces are now beginning to change. The storytellers who used to relate inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts to date and to modernize the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of heroes and the weapons… The storyteller once more gives free rein to his imaginations, he makes innovations and he creates a work of art (187).

From Fanon’s view, it can be seen that in various societies, especially the African society, tales are essential modes for dramatic expressions. The storytellers often dramatise their stories to the audience. The listeners (audience), on the other hand, react to the stories by verbal or physical responses such as clapping, choruising, nodding of heads or snapping of fingers to express surprise. The storyteller’s story is often interspersed with songs and in singing everyone joins, thereby making the storyteller’s presentation a bit of acting in itself. Sometimes the storyteller may be required to act out his characters’ actions and words in such a way that his audience is able to capture, imaginatively and lucidly, the setting of the action. At some other time, the storyteller might ask a member or some members of the audience to act out some part of the story or the other, thereby involving the audience and making the story livelier.

In most cases, the effect created by this can be likened to drama as we know it on stage, that is drama as a mode of expression, “whereby a person or group of persons impersonate certain characters before a group of their fellows” (Shipley 89). It is, therefore, important at this juncture to say that the final artistic value of a particular written work depends, to a large extent, on how the writer is able to creatively incorporate the two forms – written and oral – in his or her writing. The success of most African playwrights, especially Zulu Sofola, lies in her ability in bringing in the elements of folklore into play in their dramatic works. In fact, her orientations and dramatic contributions have helped in making her stand out as a great literary figure in Africa.

SOFOLA AND THE FOLK TRADITIONS

In King Emene, Sofola presents another play which is deeply rooted in the tradition of her own people. In her first set of plays, we see tragic heroes who rebel against the tradition of the people or the old order, because of the determination to assert themselves. The play, King Emene, reflects the coherence that still exists within the traditional belief system of the people as they have been handed down to the present generation by their forefathers. There are traditional elements with which the people are in touch. These form the basis of the conflict that gives rise to the dramatic actions in the play. Due to the fact that the protagonist tries to stand against the old order, he is faced with a hurdle. In an attempt to assert himself or pursue vigorously what he thinks is right, irrespective of what the tradition says, he ends up tragically.

His innermost conviction for justice propels him to stand up against all odds. But because the tradition is much stronger than physical human determination, there is an ensuing conflict which generates action of which there is a disastrous consequence.

In the play, King Emene, a young and virile king who replaces his father as king tries to build a strong and virile kingdom and in the process shatters the traditional institutions of his kingdom because he sees them as obstacles to what he intends to do. Despite all the advice the king receives from the older generation or the older men in his kingdom, he believes that his father, the former king, died prematurely because he heeded their advice. He is therefore, determined to succeed where his father failed.

The play is borne out of the belief in a typical African setting that in the African society, a man’s existence is closely tied to his universe. He must obey the law of nature and the belief system of his people. This being the case, man must understand that there are various forces that rule the universe in which he finds himself, and be it as it may, his achievements depend to a large extent on how much he is able to operate within the rules and cosmic regulations of this universe. It is important to note that unlike the Western world, the African universe is still intact and a strong force in the lives of the people.

When there is an attempt to work against the laws of the land which is directly or indirectly related to the lives of the people, it is usually considered as a very threatening stance. The protagonist creates chaos around himself; the entire people in the community, including the people close to him turn their backs to him, and he is therefore trapped in the mess.

This is what we see in the play, King Emene. As Sofola writes on the blurb of the play text:
Peace week is the week when the king is transformed into a god and enters the shrine to carry the problems of his citizens to their God. According to tradition, the king must be pure and undefiled. The oracle and the goddess of the kingdom must confirm that all is well before the king enters the shrine. But all is not well. Nneobi, the king’s mother, has committed a crime so that king Emene may be enthroned. The elders and other officials warn the king of the need for public confession of the crime and the purification of the throne. But he sees the advice of the elders as a plot to destroy him. His rejection of their advice leads to tragedy …

In the play, the king is ignorant of a crime in the royal family that happened long ago. His mother killed the king’s half-brother who was supposed to be the king in place of King Emene. For this reason, there is need for public confession and the purification of the throne so that the king can enter the Peace Week. In other words, the peace of the kingdom has been disturbed, and before any attempt can be made at fostering a continued peaceful existence in the kingdom, the appropriate rituals must be performed in order to propitiate the gods.

But instead of the king to listen to the people, he sees their advice as a ploy to kill him as they killed his father. He, therefore, rejects all the advice that could have put all things in their proper place. As a result, the king ends up tragically, and as is typical of African society, the entire community suffers, albeit not as much as the architect of the problem. As Ayo Akinwale points out:

But backed up by … Chief Jigide, he proceeds. We see him being enmeshed in a web he himself makes; he gets to a point of recognition and reversal, but too late. He enters the shrine and he is driven by a boa. He has to and actually commits suicide. His mother, who actually committed the crime, does the same (69).

Furthermore, Akinwale argues that the play having been written shortly after the Nigerian civil war, though not directly related to the civil war but, many people believe that the civil war would not have taken place if our leaders had listened to the voice of reason. In the same way, the tragedy of the king would not have happened if he had listened to the voice of reason instead of seeing the advice given to him by his people as a ploy to undo him as they did to his father. “Sofola seems to be concerned not with kicking against the tradition but kicking against the voice of reason” (Akinwale 69). This is very true because if the king had listened to the elders (the Omu and Ndi Olinzele) as well as the queen, tragedy would not have resulted. But his mother and the sycophant, Chief Jigide, talk him into believing that the elders want to destroy him. But his (the king’s) rebellion brings about tragedy hence the play’s subtitle *Tragedy of a Rebellion*.

It can be said that the play relies heavily on folk tradition. In fact, the play opens with the King’s mother and the queen pouring libation invariably for the “goddess of Grace”, “goddess of Live” and “goddess of All” to bless the King and “give him wisdom and strength to reign over his own kingdom … keep evil without and peace within ….” In addition to this, Nwani (the person chosen to represent the Omu), Ezedie (the palace medical doctor and leader of the mob) and Sekwute (the king’s medicine bearer) are seen sprinkling libation, pouring medical powder or performing one purification ritual or the other at one time or the other in order to put things right. The mediatory role of medicine men between the gods and the people, especially when all is not well, is immediately brought to light.

Moreso, in the play, Sofola’s mastery of the traditional setting of her people is clearly shown. The importance of the Omu and Olinzele Council cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, the Omu’s entry anywhere cannot be unnoticed. In Act 1 Scene One of the play, she enters the palace, “with a stylized dance movement, with Odogwu Omu striking the gong.” She is the person who consults the Oracle and tells the King what the Oracle has said. The exchange between the Omu and King Emene in Act 1 Scene One is worthy of mentioning:

Omu: Your highness, for the third time, you have sent us to the Oracle and for the third time, we have returned with the message Mkpitime gave us.

King (Uneasily): What is the message?
Omu: My Lord, Mkpitime, remains the same, she says …

King: Swallow the rest …

Omu: No, your highness, I must deliver Mkpitime’s message to you. That you hate to receive a third warning to postpone the Peace Week until the crime in the royal family has been revealed is not my concern. I was sent by you to consult the Oracle and I must deliver it (5).

There is also music and dance in the play. In fact, it is integral to its plot. The play is interspersed with theme songs. The use of proverbs and transliteration in the play is worthy of mention. As Chinua Achebe rightly observes, “Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.” Many of the elders in the play, just
as it is typical of the Igbo people, make use of proverbs to express themselves. Let us listen to Diokpa (the people’s representative).

Diokpa: It is often said that each bubble in a cooking pot of soup fights so hard for supremacy that none listens to the cry of the pot itself; so when the pot burns, all the bubbles perish (18).

Be it as it may, Diokpa tries to advise the king to apply caution in his decision:

Diokpa: True, your majesty, but the Oracle has never been known to err and never has any person other than Omu consulted the Oracle for the king. That the king exiled the Omu and chose someone else who will tell him what he wants to hear does not alter the words of the Oracle. She speaks only once, and when she speaks it stays. It is our duty to do what she bids (18).

Despite the fact that at times proverbs are not explained, an Igbo adage has it that anyone who gets an explanation for an adage said to him is invariably proving the fact that the dowry paid on his mother is a waste of resources. That notwithstanding, despite Diokpa’s explanation, the king behaves like the proverbial dog whose imminent death does not allow it to perceive the smell of faeces. Even though the king seems to be in agreement with Diokpa’s statement, he seems not to have understood the latter’s statement. He, therefore, commits suicide at last and ends up tragically.

CONCLUSION

While some people do not believe that there is much artistry in using folk traditions in producing modern literary works, others view it as a challenging task, the success of which is doubtful. Yet, a third group sees it as using a higher literary form to produce an inferior art. However, when one studies Sofola’s King Emene, one can see that the playwright has artistically used the traditional forms of her people to produce a modern work of art. Her production is simply a success.

In this modern play, King Emene, Sofola masterfully employs not only the religious beliefs of her people but such literary forms like proverb, dance and music. Added to these is a profuse transliteration of the speech patterns of her people so as to produce something that can be near enough to what is obtainable in the traditional society. In other words, Sofola correctly belongs to the group that sees much dramatic and literary potential in oral forms.
WORKS CITED


