

CULTURAL RESPONSES IN GASTON-PAUL EFFA'S *NOUS, ENFANTS DE LA TRADITION*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess the impact of the desire to belong as quest motif on the characters in Gaston Paul Effa's narrative and to explore Effa's position on issues of identity, hybridity, alienation and difference that informs the globalizing world. Here, I have discussed the characters' response to cultural contact which either creates or destroys the character as he/she struggles between them. This essay foregrounds the contention that Gaston-Paul Effa in *Nous, Enfants de la Tradition* presents characters that are caught in the web of varying cultures. These characters, faced with a plurality of cultures and migrant experiences are struggling to grapple with their new environment. Furthermore, the migrant ends up in a state of cultural alienation or becomes a hybrid. The paper has as theoretical tool the blend of postmodernist and postcolonial theories. Both axiology deconstruct the dominate "self" and lends voices to the dominated, oppressed and repressed "other".

Introduction

Culture is the sum-total of the values that make up the worldview of a particular group of people. According to Emily A. Schultz and Robert H. Lavenda in *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*, culture is a "set[s] of learned behavior and ideas that human beings acquire as members of society. Human beings use culture to adapt to and transform the world in which they live. Culture makes us unique among living creatures" (3). Schultz's and Lavenda's view is very vital in this study given its insistence on the fact that culture is learned and acquired. Therefore, culture is not innate. It is not natural but a human creation and therefore it should evolve and be dynamic as its creator – the human being. Also worthy of note is the view that cultural practices are geared towards the transformation of the human being to "fit" in a particular place and at a particular time. This is important because the different cultures of the world have in many ways been at the source of human joy and distress (competing for strength, knowledge and superiority) to humankind. This becomes the locus for the "self" / "other" divide which is enshrined in the concept of "difference".

The fact that culture reveals identity is the cause of “difference” and “otherness” in the human world. This “difference” is so strongly essentialist that the different cultural values are protected and jealously guarded to be able to pass from generation to generation. It is these values that make up the people’s culture. According to Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, “Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought” (1994: xiii). Said’s definition leaves us with some key issues worthy of closer attention: first, culture has to do with refined and elevated values of a people. This means that it is not just the best conclusions but also what a people find as sublime and trustworthy. Secondly, culture has to do with the be-all and the end-all of a people no matter who they are. It is for this reason that men of all times have fought seriously to protect and to teach their cultures to others. The desire to protect culture makes it aggressive. This view is sustained by Edward Said who argues that cultures are barbaric. This is because, as Said holds, culture “is a protective enclosure” (1994: xiv). This means that people of all cultures hold firm to their values and are ready to protect it even to the point of shedding blood.

Gaston Paul Effa’s *Nous, Enfants de la Tradition* presents Third World migrants living in the metropolis – France – attempting to construct an identity for themselves. How effective this desire to “be” is, raises some ambivalence in the response by the different characters. My main focus in this paper is to assess the impact of this existential quest on the characters in this narrative and to explore Effa’s position on issues of identity, hybridity, alienation and difference that inform a globalizing world. Thus, I am looking at cultures – what the migrants brought and what they have to live with – and the result of its different shades of manifestation on the characters in Effa’s narrative. A cultural response is to me the by-product of the characters’ absorption and abjuring of cultures in a particular context.

The main thrust of my essay is the contention that Gaston-Paul Effa in *Nous, Enfants de la Tradition* presents characters that are caught in the web of varying cultures. These characters, faced with a plurality of cultures and migrant experiences are struggling to grapple with their new environment. Furthermore, in the course of this, the migrant ends up in a state of cultural alienation or becomes a hybrid. Effa’s narrative has been artistically crafted to reveal this ambivalence seen in the African diaspora.

The paper has as theoretical tool the blend of postmodernist and postcolonial theories. Both axiologies deconstruct the dominant “self” and lend voices to the dominated, oppressed and repressed “other”. Homi Bhabha’s views in *The Location of Culture* will greatly guide in this study. Bhabha argues for multiculturalism and the opening up to pluralism and tolerance among cultures. He, therefore, upholds ‘cultural diversity’ against absolutism (34).

As an artistic representation of society, African literature in particular, borrows and projects African culture. Oladele Taiwo, in *Social Experience in African Literature*, opines and rightly too that:

No Nigerian [African] novelist is not in one way or another, and sometimes in several ways at once, preoccupied with his country's indigenous culture. From author to author, however, the directions and emphases which this preoccupation involves vary in important respects (47).

According to Taiwo, the uniqueness of the African novelist is his/her preoccupation of culture and tradition which is not just a romanticization of culture but also a critique of its excesses. It seems clear that the African artist has not been biased in his presentation of African spaces and cultural values. It also seems to me that though the writer projects his/her culture, the perspective of looking at culture is not at all homogeneous. It is a call for the respect of other cultures and the learning to appropriate the "other".

A close reading of Effa's narrative reveals that there are two cultures that dominate and influence the characters' behaviour. The first is the African culture where Osele, the main character in the story, appears to be a faithful follower as he appreciates some of the values that African tradition such as solidarity. Osele says that "Les africains aiment la famille. Ils sont généreux, souffrent en silence et dansent avec la mort. Facile à dire quand on n'est pas africain" (25)¹. From this statement, one has the impression that Osele is using the African culture to justify a deed that is not understood by Héléne, his wife, who represents European values in the narrative. He first of all appreciates the fact that Africans live in a family and it is difficult to separate an African from his family. This statement shows how attached Osele is to his family because of such cultural values. Osele's view of the family is to explain an opposite view that comes from Héléne, who thinks that

Ta famille africaine ne te fait miroiter que ton droit d'aînesse et la tradition lorsqu'elle a besoin d'argent pour payer un mariage, un enterrement de plus. Mais qu'est-ce qu'ils crient là-bas, qu'il suffit de ²ramasser l'argent dans les caniveaux et de l'envoyer par Western Union (10) ?

Your African family can only project your rights to the law of primogeniture of tradition when they need money to pay for a marriage, a burial ceremony and so on. But what do they think there, that it suffices to pick money from gutters and send by Western Union?

From the passage one realizes that there is cultural conflict between the two characters. Note should be taken that Osele and Héléne are living in France.

Osele is the migrant and having his wife as host. This means that Osele's territorial and cultural space should be alien to him as he is a Fang from Africa. In other words, Osele is a Caliban figure in Prospero's land struggling to challenge Prospero. This conflict comes because of their way of seeing and viewing the "other". Otherness comes because of the way the family should be handled. To H el ene, Osele is wasting resources to take care of his family while Osele sees his gesture just as appropriate as any true African child will do for his people and family. Homi Bhabha argues that

The awkward division that breaks his line of thought keeps alive the dramatic and enigmatic sense of change. That familiar alignment of colonial subjects Black/White, Self/Other - is disturbed with one brief pause and traditional grounds of racial identity dispersed, whenever they are found to rest in the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy. (40)

Homi Bhabha's declaration is revealing in that the conflict between Osele and H el ene is focused more to the fact that H el ene continues to feel the "master" space as far as her relationship with her husband is concerned. In this connection, her husband in his negritudist discourse all through the novel evokes some kind of resistance to the oppressive and supremacist discourse of his wife. The quarrel between these two characters arises from their inability to understand one another and to accept one another even though coupled. They have constructed stereotypic views about the "other". According to H el ene, the culture or tradition that Osele seeks to protect has no sense. This ties with what Homi Bhabha says that "the black presence runs the representative narrative of Western personhood: its past tethered to treacherous stereotypes of primitivism" (42). This means that white people like H el ene are born and prone to think that everything African is out of standard and primitive. This justifies why she adopts a ranting tune accusing not only her husband but all of Africa. From her tone, it seems evident that the African, in the continent, is exploiting those of the diaspora by always demanding from them. This reading, by H el ene, misconstrues the African communality and the fact that the child in the community is the community's child. H el ene's gaze of Osele is purely from how she sees herself which symbolizes Europe. From the two standpoints, it seems clear that there is a plurality of voices in the text and this deconstructs the meta-text construction the modernist and colonial discourse will advocate. This plurality of voices heightens the tension and the suspense in the narrative as the reader would want to see which side of the divide is going to be victorious at the end. But as a postcolonial and post modern text, I want to underscore the fact that the different cultures seem to have almost very important narrative duration and frequency in the narrative. Effa's construction, almost equally of European and African values in constant conflict in the mind of Osele should the inevitability of cultural contact and thus, suggests that even in the inner self, different cultures should co-exists by learning to depend on one another and

not fight with one another. Osele's relationship with Hélène is an extended metaphor to the relationship between Africa and Europe. Osele's inclination to his culture is therefore a kind of resistance to the dominant culture that is incarnated in his wife.

In most postcolonial writings by Third World writers in Europe, Europe is often represented by female characters. Interestingly, this white female image is very active and still is at the centre as the black man entirely lives under her subjugation. This puts to question the grand theory of patriarchy and its domination of the globe. The "femininity" of Europe in this text illustrates the power and control of the white-female "self" as against the male-black "other". This as we will see later is so complex for Osele to the point that the conflict will be built of two "feminities" with the strong influence of Osele's mother who stands for Africa. Osele is lured at first by the pressure from his wife and we see him caught up between two worlds. « Je pensais aux remèdes à employer et, bein vite, je me rendis compte que deux choses seulement pouvait me suaver: l'abnegation d'Hélène ou le renoncement à ma famille africaine » (10).³ From what the narrator says, any reader will pity him for he stand at the centre of this conflict. He really finds it hard to take a decision. This already helps us to see Osele as someone without a root as his legs are standing on two dominant forces that seem not to pity him but are ready to alienate and destroy him.

Osele's conflicts and confusion reveals the true mind set of modern Africans – victims of European colonialism and advocates of a rich and almost forgotten African culture – who in the conflict of belonging ends up being in the impasse. If Osele chooses to listen to his wife, he will be alienated by his family and if he chooses his family, he will be alienated by his wife and children who belong to a different culture – the diaspora culture. Effa does not seem to pay emphases on this other tradition as it seems evident to me that he, in this novel, attempts to awaken the African/Westerner to learn how to blend the traditions that entangle him and not to be alienated. This gives rise to what will be called the African diaspora culture. That is where Osele seems to have failed in the novel. His action of alternating from one culture to another is childish as he becomes a baby looking for whom to take care of him.

As mentioned earlier, the African culture and the Western culture in the novel is represented by women – Osele's mother on the one hand and Hélène, Osele's wife, on the other hand. What is interesting is that the narrative programming that Effa presents makes Osele divided by the pressures that come from these women. He says Hélène and him share a lot in common: « Hélène avait à peu près mon âge et, sous bien des aspects, ma vie

ressemblait à la sienne" (10).⁴ The narrator is the homodiegetic one. According to Jahn Manfred, in *A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*, homodiegetic narrative is told "by a (homodiegetic) narrator who is also one of the story's acting character (N1.10). From this point of view, one sees the voice of the narrator more from an autobiographical perspective. It also shows that he and his wife truly are not different though he is black and his wife is white. Effa seems to advocate the fact that the black man and the white woman are not different as all of them are human beings.

Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is right when he traces the origin of man to come from the Greek word *zoē* "which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods) and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (1995: 4). This etymology stress that humans have the same characteristics and attributes and therefore, the inscriptions otherness and "difference" are artificial creations or social constructions that have been taught and learnt for a long time. Osele's comparison with his wife brings us to Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask* where he says that: "There is this fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all cost, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?" (10) In the first place, Fanon shows that the black man like Osele, the narrator of the text has for a long time had the project of accepting the white man as a fellow human.

Fanon's words also show that the contact between African and Western cultures is based on binaries and each wanting to prove itself either as superior or as equal. This kind of war, Effa seems to denounce as baseless and having no positive impact in the world's progress. This, unfortunately, seems to be the base on which the marriage between Osele and his wife Héléne are built. The novel opens with dramatic action which in a narrative enforces reality and makes us believe the plausibility of the events. In terms of discourse, one finds Héléne quarrelling with Osele as to how money must be used in the house not only as an economic issue but as a quarrel built on cultural differences. Osele sees Africa and its values as an aspect to sustain and honour which his wife sees as waste. For him to go close to his African root, he makes himself an alien to Héléne with whom he shares every thing in common and even his children.

Here, one African culture, for which Osele belongs, alienates him because he embraces the other. There arises a kind of narcissism among these two people – different in race and culture that may or seem to put the world in a permanent state of divide. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* ends the book with this strong claim

The conclusion of this book is that this ought to be in order to recover hermetically sealed and culturally absolute traditions that would be content forever to invoke the premodern as well as anti-modern. It is proposed here above all as a means to figure the inescapability and legitimate value of mutation, hybridity, and intermixture en route to better theories of racism and black political culture than those so far offered by cultural absolutists of various phenotypical hues. (223)

The quest for a race-free and post modern society that ascribe importance to all and deconstructs "difference" seems to be the major point of the culturalist critic. This cry is far from being understood by Osele who is caught up in battle of two women which as I mentioned earlier represents two "feminitys" based on subjugation of the black-male "other".

Osele's acceptance of the African culture is thanks to another female voice which like the white voice of H el ene, is very influential to him. This is the voice of his mother. Talking about the great role his mother plays in his life, he says "elle ne me quitterait plus". (28)⁵. This shows the strong attachment that Osele has for his mother. It also reveals an aspect of African culture where the child remains loyal to his or her parents and has the responsibility to take care of them during their later years. This is what H el ene can hardly understand for it seems not part of the responsibility of the Western child to take care of aging people talk less of the fact that they are his or her parents. The mother symbol is also very strong because Effa does not only use it in terms of biological representation but symbolically raises the contemporary issue of African diaspora and the duties to the mother continent. Here, he seems to remind Africans of the need to take care of the mother – biological and the continent. Through Osele, we read: "Que j'en parlerais en souriant ou en pleurant, lorsque je serais reconnu comme un veritable Fang, celui qui ne garde plus rien pour lui, qui donne tout, tourterelle et ses petit" (2008 :28).⁶ This shows Osele's commitment to serve the African tradition. From his tone, one finds sarcasm as he satirizes Western tradition for greed and individualism. This is enforced through the image of the turtle-dove and her children which also enhances African folk tale tradition. However, this intimacy with the African tradition is just an episode in his process of traditional alienation. This is because he will no sooner return to European culture (his reconciliation with his wife) and will sever all relations with Africa.

Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask* has argued that for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Fanon means that black people are aliens to themselves and their cultures and are struggling to live and do the things that whites do. This is not surprising that when faced with difficulties, Osele will abandon his African roots to cling with his European wife for support.

Effa here is satirical in that he seems not to appreciate the Third World's continuous dependence on the colonialist any time these countries are faced with difficulties. Osele's rejection of a tradition he has so much romanticized in Negritude-style comes as surprising to any reader of this narrative. It also enforces the ironic twist that Effa generates in the narrative programme which is supposed to be that of the protagonist liberating himself from all sorts of entanglement, yet still attaching himself to other forms of entanglements. Osele turns his back from Africa and at this point suffers alienation from a different perspective which is abandoning his roots.

J'aurais aimé naître ailleurs, loin de cette Afrique et de ses traditions. Je m'égarais, j'oublie. La tradition, cette ombre où j'ai si longtemps pataugé, ce n'est pas à la surface qu'elle est, c'est à l'intérieur : elle est l'intérieur même. Nous vivons avec elle comme avec les larmes, la sueur et le sang. (2008:97)

I would have loved to be born elsewhere, far from this Africa and its traditions. I will separate, I forget. Tradition, this shade where I have for so long time floundered about, it is found not at the outside, it is even inside. We live with it like with tears, sweat and blood.

Though Osele wants to escape his African roots, they are haunting him. He is seen desperately in need to liberate himself. It is unfortunate that his desire to free himself from African mores will only be to entangle himself into the western culture, seen through his reconciliation with his wife. From this point, Osele falls short of creating an identity for himself which further makes him an alien as he fluctuates between cultures; accepting one at a time and rejecting the other and vice versa. Culturally, he becomes a neither-nor figure. This kind of personality is not much appreciated by the advocates of the global dispensation and cultural theorists who hold that the global is born from the local. However, Gaston-Paul Effa ridicules Osele's way as he advocates traditional hybrids that will be my next point of focus.

Gaston-Paul Effa's ideological vision in *Nous, Enfants de la Tradition* is not incarnated in his principal character, Osele. His ideology in the narrative seems to be that people like Osele should not be aliens to culture but to appropriate the different cultures that have come to be theirs. This means every man is born into some values and instead of being an alien to these values it is good to blend all of them to be a better person. This position rejects the modernist hermetic seal to cultures and announces the post modernist view of recognizing "difference". Homi Bhabha has dwelt much on the issue of blending cultures and advocates hybridity as a solution to the divided world that is incarnated in the person of Osele. Homi Bhabha says that "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of the past and the present (7). He further holds that to be a hybrid is creating a new being in one that is a mixture of the past and the present. This past and present does not only measure in the intrinsic

personality of the individual but has to do with the socio-cultural environment where “instead of living within the bounds created by a linear view of history and society, we become free to interact on an equal footing with all the traditions that determine our present predicament” (Lionnet 7). Osele fails in this. He keeps rejecting one and allying with the other. This is because at no one point in the narrative do we find him celebrating his “twoness” to borrow from WEB DuBois. By “twoness” Du Bois meant that

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, - this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach the Negro soul in the flood of white Americanism. (45)

Though in the African American sense, WEB Du Bois statement hold true to any one faced with different cultures and Osele fails in this case to blend his Africanness or to be specific his “Fangness” and his “Frenchness”. Osele’s attitude reveals that he is a child growing up and that seems to be at the centre of Effa’s narrative programme. This is because we see the child growing up and making decisions about himself accepting and rejecting some. But what becomes very ironic about Osele is that he does not evolve but turns around. He is like the dog that, from time to time, will return to its vomit. This demonstrates his childishness what is in sharp contrast with Cisse and Daniel.

Daniel is a Caribbean and specifically from Guadeloupe. Like Osele, Daniel lives in France. This Caribbean is a black. Osele describes him in these words:

Daniel était noir. Un nèg-noir brûlé par le soleil, un Guadeloupéen. Il prenait lui aussi la parole. Un de ses sujets de prédilection était la recherche d’une terre oubliée, la lointain Afrique. Il s’appliquait à traduire sa pensée en de longues phrases sinueses. Il parlait mieux que les noirs, ses mot donnaient l’impression d’un texte élaboré. (92)

Daniel was black. A black-negro burnt by the sun, from Guadeloupe. He took the floor himself. One of his topics of predilection was the search for a forgotten home, far in Africa. He tried to put through his thoughts by using long meandering sentences. He spoke better than blacks; his words gave the impression of an elaborate text.

From the homodiegetic narrator’s voice, Daniel happens to be presented in the image of one living in pain and suffering. This suffering can be expressed in the passage at two levels: the skin, burnt blackness of his skin relates back to the period of slavery which enforces the theme of lost, alienation and suffering in Daniels personality. The next level has to do with his rootlessness which gives the pain of the psyche that he does not belong. On like Osele, Daniel attempts to identify himself by appropriating the traditions that have

come to be part of him. First the French culture exemplified in the language he speaks which Osele confirms that it is better than what other blacks speak. He uses this language to tell people about himself. This is one of the characters that we seem to see selling his culture in Europe. He contrasts with Osele who does not even succeed to convince his wife and children to accept where he comes from.

Daniel's mission is not only talking about his past but he makes an effort to link this past to his present so as to give him the 'newness' that Homi Bhabha's talks about. Daniel's introduction of what the Creole is seems to me the ideology of Effa that characters like Osele need to learn. He says:

Nous avons rejeté notre nature de nègre d'Afrique et la fierté de nos corps, nous avons inventé le créole pour avoir une langue à nous, nous ne sommes plus assez nèg-noir, on nous a fait rentrer la révolte dans la tête à grand coups de fouet. (92)

We have rejected our nature of black Africans and the pride of our bodies, we have created the Creole to have a language that is ours, we are no longer fairly black, and they made us enter revolt in our head with heavy lashes.

The acceptance and the creation of the Creole which is a blend of what was African, European and Caribbean serves as a good lesson to Osele who does not invent a culture or tradition from the Western, African and Catholic traditions that he is born and introduced to. In the course of talking about this invention of a hybrid language, Daniel revisits the period of slavery and the floggings of black people in the plantations which shows that for one to invent and to create 'newness' one cannot forget the past.

All in all, I set out to show that tradition like culture is one of the best values that a people agree to adopt. But again, the coming of cultures together put the individual under pressure and as Effa reveals, there are two responses to it – being in a cultural impasse like Osele or being a hybrid like Daniel. With the guidance of assumptions from postcolonialism and post modernism, my stand seems to share with Effa that at a time when the world is a migrant one, it should also be a hybrid world built on tolerance and the acceptance of the other.

Notes

¹ Africans love the family. They are generous; suffer in silence and dance with the dead. It is easy to say when one is not African. (All translations in this work are mine).

² I was thinking about what to do and fast. I realized that only two things could save me: avoiding Hélène or renounce my African family. Hélène and I were about age mates. In many aspects, my life was like hers.

⁴ She will not leave me.

⁵ That I will speak laughing or crying, when I will be recognized like true Fang, he who does not keep things for himself. He who gives all, turtle dove and its young.

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OF NATIONAL MYTHS, MYTHICAL NATIONS AND THE
NARRATIVISATION OF NIGERIA AS A POSTCOLONIAL STATE

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Abstract

As an oral form of cultural expression, myth occupies a contested and contestable site in cultural studies. Dominant and totalizing epistemes whose derivation is from the Western philosophical and scribal tradition have sought to locate myth and the mythic in the archives of prehistoric memory. The usual, received argument has been that myth issues from, and goes into, an oral, pre-scientific culture. In this regard, conscious, ideological efforts have always been made, especially by some in the Western academy, to constitute myth as a fixed, monumentalised cultural event without apportioning to it any agency in contemporaneity. In this paper, I engage myth as a dynamic, living tissue which participates in the contingencies and currents of modernity. I argue that myth even anticipates or prefigures the future. In this regard, I avow that it is rewarding to appropriate the avian

trope of the ageless eagle which constantly renews its youth and strength as a fitting metaphor for myth. This is significant because though with its provenance deeply rooted in ancient tradition, myth constantly rediscovers and renews itself in concert with the motions of culture and post/modernity. Allied to this concern is my intention to negotiate myth as an oral form which intersects with, and enriches, writing. Myth, therefore, enjoys an enduring life-span whose diachronic possibilities necessitates its immanent presence and cultural energies in time past, time present and time future. It is, therefore, not merely incidental that myths are implicated in national formation and invention as they are constitutive sites for social, cultural, and political becoming. Nations weave themselves into existence through myths just like myths also weave nations into being. But the paper problematises the issue of nationhood as myth. Even though it recognizes myth as critical to the fabrication of nationhood, it enters a caveat that the myth-nation dialectic can only be necessitated by cultures and peoples and their shared experiences since myth is culture-specific and species-particular. In this case, the paper examines the representations of Nigeria in the national media and observes that more than anything, Nigeria emerges as an allegory, a mythical creation more than a cohesive, united entity thus making the very idea of her nationhood mythical.

The idea that nations are invented has become more widely recognised...literary myth too has been complicit in the creation of nations-above all, through the genre that accompanied the rise of the European vernaculars, their institution as language of state after 1820 and the separation of literature into various 'national' literatures by the German Romantics at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role (Brennan 49).

It is the mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy-and an apparatus of power-that it produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories, like the people, minorities or 'cultural difference' that continually overlap in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity (Bhabha 292).

Introduction

In negotiating Nigeria as a nation, a mythical nation which has been constituted in turn by national myths, it is compelling to begin with two defining anecdotes. These anecdotes definitively underwrite her contingent and uncertain destiny as an imagined community, as a myth. The first anecdote relives a seemingly ambiguous dialogic encounter between Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president and Sir Ahmadu Bello, the premier of the Northern Region during the London constitutional talks leading to independence in 1960. Zik was believed to have, in a conciliatory and statesmanly manner, appealed to the Sardauna to forget the inherent differences that threatened to pull them apart as nationalist leaders and founding fathers of the nation. He rationalised that the congealed differences in turn had spiralling, untoward repercussions on Nigeria and her national cohesion. As such, they should rather focus on those things that possessed the potentials to foster mutual understanding and unity rather than those that pulled them apart.¹

The Sardauna, in a measured response to Zik's perspective, told his interlocutor that it was imperative for them to understand their differences rather than forget them. In his estimation, Bello argued that to understand would be a more efficacious and productive way to build a nation-state with a heterogeneous character like Nigeria. To forget would be convenient but only for a moment. Sooner than later, the limits of the forgetfulness would manifest and call for a rethink on the political expedience of remembrance. On the other hand, to remember and understand would not necessarily and mechanically translate to a harmony of positions on how best to steer the imagined community called Nigeria to the desired destination. Indeed, to remember could also invite discomfiting and divisive tendencies with disastrous repercussions. The two perspectives were simultaneously persuasive and repellent, constituting an oppositional discursive binary.

Superficially, what can be gleaned from this encounter gestures towards the politics of convenient forgetfulness, on the one hand, and the politics of uncomfortable remembering, on the other. While Zik chose the option of cautiously picking the way strewn with thorns and thistles towards coherent nationhood, Bello advocated an energetic discursive passage through the weeds. However, lurking beyond the surface can be identified the tensions resident in the political perspectives nourished by the two politicians as to how to engineer the Nigerian polity at that moment in history. The national imperative to forget or to remember, to be silent or to discuss with all its political significations still haunts the nation more than half a century after its incarnation as a postcolonial nation-state. The current debate on the desirability or otherwise of a national conference, sovereign or not, is reminiscent of the discursive skirmish between Zik and Bello.

It will seem that relationally, the pendulum of native wisdom swings in both directions and this perhaps resolves the paradox which settles in the positions by the two nationalist politicians. Zik was obviously involved in a political discourse whose narrative centre congealed around the well-known centrifugal tendencies which haunted the young Nigeria still ensconced in politically vulnerable swaddling clothes. These ruinous tendencies ranged from ethnic loyalties, regional affiliations, religious/cultural differences and political allegiances. Added to these were the pathological fears and animosities nursed by each of the so-called nationalist leaders against one another based on their political ambitions and the spectre of hegemonic domination by their respective ethnic configurations: the Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba.

While Zik was willing to tactically avoid treading the political landscape cleverly planted with landmines and other dangerous explosives by the retreating British colonialists, the Sardauna felt that walking gingerly on the terrain was a wise lesson in statecraft and national definition. To forget, therefore, suggested that the portents would be silently contained. To remember meant to get to the core of the national conundrum and impose convenient limits to potential crevices that could threaten the national boulder. A more philosophical turn would have been to remember the not-too-uncomfortable and to conveniently forget the too uncomfortable. But as it was to be, the differences of the two leading 'founding fathers' became foregrounded sooner than expected.

But let me also focus on the second anecdote which is no less gripping and perhaps richly portentous too. In an apparent reflection on the contingent condition of Nigeria's imperial invention as a nation by the British, Obafemi Awolowo, the premier of the Western Region was believed to have announced that Nigeria was not a nation but a mere geographic expression and that he was first a Yoruba before a Nigerian.² Awo was merely expressing his fundamental freedom and right to comment with courageous conviction on the nation's state of affairs at that moment in history, an opinion he was entitled to as his inalienable right to free expression. And he did it with forthrightness and sincerity.

This, however, instituted a national discourse whose politics of signification resonated widely. The pronouncement lent itself to a plethora of interpretive possibilities in a politically signifying sense. The main interpretation gravitated to what was perceived to be the subversive content and character of the words. To many observers, these positions gave him out as an ethnic jingoist, a defender of his Yoruba nation against national interests, and a purported nationalist who never nursed any pan-Nigerian feelings. These interpretations were largely uncharitable and as ethnocentric as any other in themselves. To profess fidelity to one's ethnicity as a marker of primary cultural identity does not putatively translate to an undermining one's faith in

one's nation. It is, I should think, to be realistic and down-to-earth. And for this Awo can be spared the charge of national betrayal.

By referring to Nigeria as a mere cartographic manipulation, Awo was also underscoring the imperial cobbling of Nigeria by the British through the wilful construction of artificial and mechanical boundaries which failed to recognise the cultural peculiarities and social sensibilities of the disparate peoples. Geography and colonial fiat more than mutual consent and the will to coexist as a united entity dictated the imperial need for Nigerianness. This in itself negated one of the cardinal verities for national invention: communal consent, mutual willingness. In the end the politics of national resistance and the liberationist ethos it hoped to foster became undermined by the politics of ethnicity and regionalism which frustrated the aspirations for national cohesion and coherence. Indeed, he was to also comment on the notoriety of forging a united nationhood when he observed that "West and East Nigeria are as different as Ireland from Germany. The North is as different from either as China." (Quoted in Gunther, 773) These thoughts may well represent the opinion of a credible nationalist ruminating on the true state of a nation-state like Nigeria.

Theorising Nationhood

Theoretical elaborations on the notion of the nation are variegated and sometimes contentious. Etymologically, the word "nation" is a derivative of the Latin "natio" and the French "nacion" which signifies what has been born (Harper online). The idea of "birth" or being "born" is of symbolic significance to the nation. It constitutes the nation, in an ontological sense, as a living cell, a soul with a lived experience which is specific to it. If a nation is a soul because it is a living cell, it also implies that it possesses a spiritual dimension to its essence. This is in radical contradistinction to a soulless, cadaverous entity which lacks an animating presence. It also foregrounds the necessarily contingent, historically particular and culturally specific nature of the nation. In other words, nations are born in history, are products of history and have a cultural quality and value to them.

Teleologically, therefore, if nations are born, it translates that they possess the capacity to exist like human beings. Like human beings, they enjoy their youth, reach their majority and perhaps cease to exist by disintegrating in the ashes of history or rising from the ashes to be born again like the proverbial phoenix. This much has received historical validation from the disintegration of many city states in Europe and empires/kingdoms in Africa and Asia. Many of these city states, empires and kingdoms have undergone the alchemic process of transformation through the kiln of history to become modern "nations" or "nation-states" today. What, however, remains intrinsic to them are that their births have been over-determined by the exigencies of particular histories within particular cultures and particular geographies.

But to return to the idea of the nation as a living soul which is crucial to our understanding of it, Ernest Renan corroborates this knowledge schema by postulating that the nation houses a spiritual principle, a sacred lever thereby underscoring the sacred quality with which nations are endowed. As he contemplates,

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are one, constitute this spiritual soul. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form... (19)

More valuable by far than common customs, posts and frontiers conforming to strategic ideas is the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage of regrets and of having in the future, (a shared) programme to put into effect or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together. These are the kinds of things that can be understood in spite of differences of race and language... Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of the more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort (19).

Resident in Renan's crystallisation of nationhood is its spirituality which is moored in its past historicity and present reality both pointing determinedly to future un/certainty. The soulfulness and spirituality of the nation assumes concrete materiality in its fusion in the temporalities of the past and present based on the fecund fund of memories and re-memories, and the sense of urgency to transmit the memories to engage the present realities and challenges posed by modernity and the voluntary commitment to a communal existence. All of these memories of the past and the willingness of the present to consensually perpetuate the values and heritages of the past converge to invent the nation.

In coming to terms with the presence of the past and the present as well as the future as complementarities rather than oppositional binaries in the fabrication of nationhood, Brennan initiates a discourse concerning the distinction between the nation as a product of (post)modernity and ancientness. He states with a definite sense of historicity:

As for the 'nation', it is both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state and to something more ancient and nebulous – the 'natio' – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging. The distinction is often obscured by nationalists who seek to place

their own country in an 'immemorial past' where its arbitrariness cannot be questioned (45).

Brennan implicates history in the idea of the nation but also gestures specifically at its ancient character as something consistent with immemorialness and as quintessential of modernity.

It is this same idea of the 'natio' that Raymond Williams (1983) mobilises in his reification of the nation:

'Nation' as a term is radically connected with 'native'. We are *born* into relationships which are typically settled in a place. This form of primary and 'placeable' bonding is of quite fundamental human and natural importance. Yet the jump from that to anything like the modern nation-state is entirely artificial (12, original emphasis).

Though Raymond's perspective on the original beingness of the nation gravitates precariously to what can be said to be its *folk* character, it teleologically establishes and accentuates the tension between the negotiation of the nation in its historical sense and the artificial fabrication of modern nations contemporaneous with eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe which also impacted positively or negatively on other marginal spaces during the defining moment of the colonialist and imperialist encounter. According to Paul Ricouer (1965), indigenous colonised peoples massed in the 'natio' need to "forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revendication before the colonialist's personality". He further observes: "But in order to take part in modern civilisation, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past" (276-277). In the formerly colonised world, this appears to be the grand paradox of nationhood and national becoming, particularly in Africa.

Attempts at figuring out what a nation is and is not will continue to structure academic researches. But from the discursive trajectory above, a rhizome of ideas about the nation have been identified as important coefficients of a nation. These include the corporeality of a people, community life and participation, culture, historical legacies and the elemental will to live together, amongst others. We can, therefore, extrapolate a definition or a set of definitions. A *nation* may be a community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, ancestry, or history and who see or imagine themselves as such. This idea of the nation is voluntaristic: without any form of violence, imposition or coercion. A *nation* in this perspective need not have any physical borders or defined, sacrosanct boundaries.

On the other hand, a nation can also refer to people who share a common, defined territory and sovereign government irrespective of their ethnic or racial configuration. This definition is closely allied to idea of the modern nation better understood as the "nation-state" as opposed to the more

traditional and ancient “natio”. Benedict Anderson’s theorisation of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson 11) finds clear attributions in this concept of the nation. An imagined community may be seen as a nation because it is historically constituted, it is a stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture, and those who belong to it politically imagine themselves as one people. But lurking beneath this seeming homogeneity can be found an arrangement which is a product of hegemonic fiat, imperial domination, political violence, economic exploitation and social oppression. In many situations, these are the conditions that define the modern nation-state. For the avoidance of contradiction, it does not mean that the “nation” as an ancient arrangement is immune to such contradictions but these are minimal. It is, therefore, difficult to contemplate the nation in present history without thinking of modernity, particularly Euro-American modernity, with its political, economic, social and cultural institutions like governmentality, the law, the military and police, a civil service, diplomatic corps, an official language, amongst others.

Many African states - certainly not nations - lack this spiritual principle, the desire, the consent and the will to co-exist as Renan prescribes. And this explains why they are perpetually enmeshed in a sticky and inextricable web as they continue in an ever-receding, never-ending journey in the political wilderness in search of a centre and true nationhood. The result is that they continue to sink in the ever-deepening quagmire of the realities of their postcolonial existential vagaries. But this is not inexplicable. The idea of the nation largely hardly exists in modern Africa in a conventional sense. The mass of nations that populate the continent are historical mishaps and testaments of rites of violence. They are products of the vast, internal, external and, perhaps, eternal conspiracies of History all of which found eruption in the colonialist and imperialist project of Europe.

When the pure idea of a nation is applied to Africa, it is almost impossible to find a nation in its purity in modern Africa. Nationhood in Africa is as such notoriously difficult to define. It makes meaning only when sieved through the perfidies of history and narratives of violence scripted in monuments of blood by the colonising enterprise and empire-building project of European nations. Through this violence of history and history of violence, what has been aptly called the “curse of Berlin” (Adekeye 3), Europe erected artificial borders on the continent through its mindless and brutal scramble for and partition of Africa. Through the instrumentality of fraudulent treaties, treachery and what Fanon calls an array of bayonets and gunpowder,

Nigeria as Myth

One persistent substrating myth which defines Nigeria as a British creation is that it is a nation. Clearly, Nigeria’s nationhood is a myth when subjected to

the normative principles and definitional proprieties of the nation. A nation is a group, community or people with a common genealogical line, cultural belonging, shared experiences, linguistic affinities and national aspirations and interests. Indeed, a nation is a soul with a spiritual principle which animates it, endows it with cultural energies and galvanises it on the path of social and political be/longing. One propelling force in the constitution of nations is the capacity to weave myths and other narratives which mediate the nation and bring it into concrete existence. These myths become veritable communal property shared by the people as a unified cultural category. Usually, there is a central, exemplary figure who embodies the social, political and cultural institutions which bind together the people as a group or nation.

Nigeria clearly lacks the soul, the spiritual principle which should qualify it as a nation. As an imperial creation of the British, Nigeria lacks some of the constitutive habits of nations. It is rather a nation of nations with a complex of heterogeneous cultures, ethnic diversities, linguistic and ethnic identities. Thus, where a nation should install homogeneity in its cultural and social frontiers, Nigeria constitutes itself as a mosaic of cultures and ethnicities and linguistic backgrounds, something synonymous with a carnivalesque spectacle, the plural, multi-colouredness of the rainbow. Each of the over 200 ethnicities with different identities is from a different cultural background with hardly any similitude in institutional realities. Though in some exceptional cases like the United States America where such hybrid origins have become an asset and an elemental energy for national becoming, in Nigeria, such hybrid origins have become a disabling liability, a nightmare the country is struggling to wake from and transcend.

Against this trajectory of a multiple heritage which renders nationhood notoriously difficult to achieve, Nigeria also presents another mythic quality which is the absence of a coherent, determinate and stable national ethos which should define and give it a concrete and distinct identity. Rather, what Nigeria radiates is a contradictory, chaotic and nondescript ethos which is characteristically at variance with a national community. This absence is necessitated largely by another absence: the lack of a rich legacy of shared historical and cultural experiences which should serve as the cultural morphology and the grammar of values that inspire communal sentiments and the urgent aspirations for be/longing. The absence of such historical nodes and social networks which should constitute the dynamic for meaningful cultural transactions and strengthen the bonds of nationhood compromise the willingness to yield loyalty to the nation and encourage ethnic zealotry.

Naming strategies are critical to national formation. In Africa, the politics of national naming has become central to postcolonial engineering as many African countries asserted their political autonomy from their metropolitan overlords by renewing themselves through the symbolic process of self-

renaming. Gold Coast, for instance, became Ghana. Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Upper Volta, became Burkina Faso, Tanganyika was christened Tanzania, etc. Curiously, Nigeria was to be named Songhai in the tradition of the earliest Western Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai as two modern nation-states, Ghana and Mali took the names of the other empires leaving Songhai to be appropriated by Nigeria (Achebe 7). These were not empty political mantras or cultural rituals. The renaming processes were rites of self-initiation announcing the arrival of the countries on the global map as independent and autonomous players in world politics. This conferred on them the requisite political capital, the agency and subjectivity to determine their future destinies away from the colonial hegemony of Europe.

The case of Nigeria is somewhat difficult to discern in the political economy of naming on the continent. The myth in Nigeria's naming inheres in the fact that the country is believed to have been named by Flora Shaw, mistress and later wife of the first Governor-general, Lord Frederick Lugard. The name is believed to be a conflation or blending of the two words, "Niger Area", a fusion which produced Nigeria. It will seem these words were reposing peacefully somewhere, waiting to be roused from their somnolence or hibernation so that they can be affixed to the country following the ceremonial rites by Flora. This argument derives its assumed strength and cogency from the historical reality of the presence of the Niger River, one of the main reliefs that define the country's geography. But where is the Benue? This is another river which is also central to the divination and definition of the fate and making of the country. It spatially also forms a quintessential aspect of its relief and cartography.

Indeed, in the schematic reality of this myth is embedded the politics of European selective glamorisation of particular geographies, spaces and cultures as an insidious process of divide and rule. After all, the official British colonial administrative policy in Africa was the indirect rule system. The myth in this British naming system is that it never captured the topographical essence of the country in the first place and succeeded in creating an absence. The Niger and Benue Rivers are both locked together as they form a confluence in Lokoja after following their lone, snaky ways. It is little wonder that this city was once a capital of Nigeria. The Y-shaped confluence represents in masterful watery strokes the intended unity of the nation by Nature's design and any British permutation or manipulation to ignore one of them through wilful imperial arrogance is but a mythical contraption. Symbolically, however, this initial deliberate rite of omission through the imperial design of Britain laid the rubric for future omissions which have proved destabilising and centrifugal in the country's struggles to achieve authentic nationhood.

There is also another myth which shares kinship with the immediate preceding one. This is the myth of the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 by the

same Lord Lugard, the lone antelope with a thousand footprints. Historiographical sources impress on us that the Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated to form a united nation in 1914 and Lugard presided over the rites. Native wisdom articulates that the efficacy of the ritual as a therapy can only be enforced by the purity of the votive intention and the sacrificial victim. In the case of the amalgamation, what constituted the intention and who was the victim? Was the amalgamation an act of altruism, political expediency or cultural convenience, or some or all or none of these reasons? How nationally rewarding has this colonial fiat of violently yoking together the heterogeneous peoples of Nigeria been? In other words, how has Nigeria fared since the amalgamation? The deficit in forging a national union appears to be the testament to our reality as a nation of nations. Consequently, the imperatives of British colonial administrative convenience, the mercantilist interests which superficially lurked beneath, profitable markets and investments and cultural arrogance, not unifying the nation, were the impetus or propelling forces behind the political gerrymandering of the coloniser. The truth is, and still remains, that Nigeria has never been a nation and may never be a nation. This is not a curse. It is partly because of the nature of the nation and the willingness on the part of the constituents units to forge a nation of their dreams. That willingness, in the Nigerian experiment does not exist, at least in present history.

Amalgamation, by its very nature, is an administrative cause sufficient to unify and present a common front. In our case, it was meant to further divide us which is why united nationhood has been illusory and unmaterialistic even since the British departed. The questions which bear testimony to this unrealistic and self-serving amalgamation include the following: was the amalgamation an act of colonial benevolence or an ideological process of deepening British stranglehold on the conquered territory? Why were the "natives" and "heathens" not consulted? Agreed, colonialism imposes on its subjects a culture of silence and subordination but why were some parts of the amalgamated nation privileged over others and accorded greater political valence and voice in the running of the nation? And most crucially, why has the nation refused to cohere since the amalgamation if it was actually intended to unify the component parts?

Perhaps, the most ruinous and deceptive of all the national myths is that of the founding fathers of the nation as if there were no founding mothers. Nigerians are routinely subjected to epistemic assault as codified even in the two stanzas of the national anthem as part of our communal canon that the country had founding fathers. It is, therefore, possible to identify the gaps and absences inherent in the anthem and pledge as markers of our quasi-national identity. A careful negotiation of the anthem and pledge "locates the ambiguities, ambivalences and contradictions within the Nigerian nation-state...which privilege masculinity over femininity" (Tsaaior 36). This

engendered political project is executed through the recognition of a patriarchal order and the masculinist politics it espouses to. For after all, Nigeria is a patriarchal society and the patrilineal principle should and must take precedence over the matriarchal in the construction of national symbols, the weaving of myths and the celebration of its iconic figures. Only patriarchs, not matriarchs, exist here. Only heroes, not heroines, have attained canonical status in the narrative tradition of nationalism and patriotism.

The personages - mainly men - identified as our heroes fought for independence and preserved our honour and pride as a people with a history and culture. These founders/heroes are Nnamdi Azikiwe, Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello, Obafemi Awolowo, Herbert Macaulay, etc. The towering stature and courage of these figures during the nationalist struggle and the politics of resistance against British colonialism and oppression cannot be reasonably denied. There is a consistent myth implied in this selective glorification and deification of old men as fathers of Nigeria. Where are the women who became co-creators of history with their rich legacies of courageous resistance against imperial hegemony? What about the legendary contributions of women like Margaret Ekpo, Fumilayo Kutu, Hajia Sawaba, etc. who were also actively engaged in the anti-colonial resistance movement?

One phallic idea which sticks out is that the nation is almost always constituted as a male creation. This is the reason why in "nationalist discourses, especially in patriarchal discourses, the mother-nation dialectic has been opportunistically employed by the founding fathers of nations to include women as part of the nationalist vanguard only to exclude them soon after freedom has been won (Tsaaior 51). As one critic insightfully posits, bodily fluids like blood, sweat and semen are used as metaphors for masculinity and as markers for national re/invention" (de Almeida 11). In attempting to inscribe Nigerian women into the scroll of the nationalist struggle and thereafter, the commitment of the patriarchal lot to the national aspirations of the anti-colonial ferment needs to be interrogated. For instance, whose particular interests were they protecting: theirs or their ethnicities or the country's? When subjected to this intense evaluation of their roles as founding fathers, some of these nationalists emerge as pitiable ethnic jingoists, political opportunists, cultural demagogues and religious bigots whose interests in Nigeria were merely selfish, egocentric and self-aggrandising.

It is my reasoned opinion that though these so-called founding fathers mobilised their intellectual and political energies in the anti-colonial struggle to transcend the British, their sense of nationalism/patriotism was waylaid by personal and ethnocentric concerns. Nigeria meant so much to them in deficit, not in reality as the overriding ambition of some of them was to own the country as a personal/regional estate, not in trust for the rest of the component parts. This much became clear when political independence was

won and the British retreated. The process of internal colonialism became instituted and entrenched. Regional domination of the country by some of the heroes became a deft political calculation, not the ideals of national becoming and belonging. As Ngugi wa Thiongó, the Kenyan writer aptly argues, many of the nationalists who rode to power following the political independence of their countries were infected with the imperial germ of the big man as their minds were corroded by colonial ideology. What was needed was to decolonise their consciousness so that they would have a progressive vision for their countries as a viable alternative for development (*Decolonising the Mind* 1).

Nigeria's national situation fell into formulaic streak. Many of the nationalists and founding fathers became overly and inordinately ambitious for the soul of the fledgling country and soon the founding fathers became floundering fathers. They became intent on plunging the nation into a waiting precipice after conducting it like a locomotive without a rudder. Perhaps, they really meant well except that their patriotic energies were not productive enough. Or they walked into the landmines dutifully planted by the British. Or both. But one thing remains obvious. At the centre of Nigeria's founding was an unarticulated, chaotic and confused mass of interests, ambitions and strategies which produced a tissue of paradoxes that lacked a meaningful and stable national agenda. The fractious character of this hotch potch of ideas about the new nation and what should constitute its soul became obvious when the true interests became manifest.

Conclusion

It is fascinating how these national myths are constructed, how they in turn construct the Nigerian nation and how they circulate freely within national discourses thus validating the crisis of nationhood Nigeria is enmeshed in. In this paper, I have restricted my attention to historiographical sources, autobiographical narratives and other modes of self-telling in their oral and scribal manifestations. But Nigeria's mythical and problematic nationhood is not restricted to these narrative arenas and events alone. The myth of the Nigerian nation can be encountered in the print and electronic media. In particular, national newspapers constitute a viable paradigmatic and analytic category in this regard. National newspapers, it must be stressed, are discursive and representational sites which institute modes of knowledge and interpretive grids which are central to the mythic construction of Nigerian nationhood. Media ownership and the ethnic origin/background of the owners in Nigeria, for instance, is a foremost index of how not to engineer nationhood.

Almost every media organisation in the country springs from an ethnic /regional threshold even though it announces itself as a national publication. Quite often, they nourish vested divisive interests which are sometimes

antithetical to the aspirations of the nation. Beginning with *Iwe Iroyin* in the Western Region and *The West African Pilot*, all other succeeding publications have almost always followed the familiar path of championing sectional interests. An average Nigerian newspaper, and by extension, television or radio house, will always purvey a particular ethnic or geo-political partisanship. In many situations, this partisanship is not progressive in temperament. This in itself would not have been a problematic thing. After all, everything in life is defined by politics and ideology. Indeed, not to have a political position or ideological interest is itself a politics. However, in the Nigerian context, national cohesion is not always the galvanising force in the narrativisation of the nation whether it is in the realms of oral/written accounts, popular cultural expressions or media representations. If anything, in many contexts, our sense of nationhood is actively negated or undermined and subsidiarised to personal, ethnic and religious interests. This throws into relief the idea of a nation whose claims to nationhood is at best a myth, and nothing more than a myth.

Notes

¹ One of the defining discourses on the founding of Nigeria as a nation and its future direction after political independence in 1960 is this encounter between these two leading nationalists and politicians. The discourse was to structure and define Nigeria's future destiny as a nation-state in a state of becoming. For more on this see Ahmadu Bello, *My Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962 and Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey: An Autobiography*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 1994.

² Much of the political thoughts of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, foremost Nigerian nationalist and politician, can be found in his *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

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**A REVIEW OF KUNLE AFOLAYAN'S *THE FIGURINE* (2010), 122 MINS.
GOLDEN EFFECTS/HIBUZZ**

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Multiple award-winning Nigerian film, *The Figurine* (2010) poses a question to the viewer before the closing credits: "What do you believe?" But the answer to that question is the ideology on which the film rests i.e. Araromire is responsible for the tragic end in Sola (Kunle Afolayan) and Femi's (Ramsey Nouah) lives. Although the question invites the viewer's analysis soon after Femi's confessions, much of what is portrayed in *The Figurine* casts a glaring dominance of the goddess' powers. The closing riddle is a camouflage of the film's real ideology. Featuring brilliant storytelling with the technical elements of filmmaking deployed to a more or less successful degree, *The Figurine* towers above numerous Nollywood productions. The manipulation of the wooden image and the acting are especially commendable, thus making the viewer quick to overlook the occasional drag, sound and lighting problems in Afolayan's second directorial attempt.

At their National Youth Service Commission (NYSC) orientation camp, an endurance trek through the village, Araromire, finds Sola and Femi lagging, the former to accompany his ailing friend. Seeking shelter from an unexpected downpour, they scurry to a previously unidentified hut. There, Sola finds and keeps a wooden sculpture which purportedly alters their lives in a conflict drawn from folklore, education and reality. The outcome jolts the viewer, and remarkably underlines the opening voice-over in which the catastrophic end was foreshadowed. In the beginning, the film appears to have two protagonists – the one who seems to be a hero, Femi, saving Mona (Omoni Oboli) from her troubles and health hazards, but is actually an obsessed lover and the other, Sola, who is an unrepentant playboy and chronic adulterer. It can also be argued that the real protagonist is Sola whereas the antagonist is Femi, but this is a point the viewer arrives at only at the end of the film.

Set in rural and urban areas of Western Nigeria, the two-hour narrative has four acts. The first is the NYSC posting, camp orientation and primary assignment (and perhaps Femi's travel). This segment is significant because the discovery of the image which informs the direction of the narrative is

made here. The second is the seven year prosperity period. This act is characterized by business promotions, restoration to health and financial boom. Here also, we encounter Lara's relocation to Sola's house for academic reasons – a major plot point in the story. The third segment deals with the losses and a series of catastrophes, the last of which results in a journey to return the image. In the final segment or what is more appropriately called the unraveling, revelations of character traits, deeper motivations and confessions occur. The initial and painfully slow pace of the film picks up after half an hour to a faster pace. The camera movements, however, is prolonged for seconds after the point of a scene has been made – a hallmark of Nigerian video films. Although a unique story, *The Figurine* does not build up to suspenseful moments. The only attempt at suspense which occurred when Lara was looking for Junior did not have a corresponding audio effect. Rather, surprises are used to effect significant dramatic moments such as the announcement of the wedding, Sola's murder and Femi's death. Thematic orientation border on betrayals and more importantly, the tradition/modernity dialectics play up too.

The viewer is driven to believe in Araromire's powers. Merely mentioning the name 'Araromire' evoked fear (Femi's father), curiosity (lecturer), obsession (Femi) and indifference, reluctance even conflict (Sola). Several strands of storytelling point to the supposed power of the goddess Araromire and her presence in the lives of three friends. Four instances will suffice. 1) The eerie sound heard on the parade ground. That sound mysteriously led Sola and Femi closer to the image. 2) The repetition of swift turns on the parade ground, in the bush (Femi) and by Lara in the search for Junior. 3) The heavy rain when Araromire's shrine was burnt, when Sola found the image and when both friends went to return it. 4) The parade commander's refusal to help the men return the image and the conversation that ensued. With deliberate or inadvertent camera movements, the film compels the belief that Araromire the goddess is not only powerful, but also present in the lives of those who touch her image. There is a conflict of opposing forces, but clearly, one is the more powerful or the film director chose to make it so. The only incident that discredits Araromire's powers is that Femi does not have the woman of his dreams. There would be no story if he did! But the triple cure of his health problems plus his father's 'miraculous' turn-around from cancer as well as the four points above suppress the lone 'episode' of unrequited love.

Further, Femi's confessions do not provide explanations for their quick rise to success, the loss of a son, material wealth and miscarriage. My arguments do not deny that Sola and Femi could have been lucky or perhaps hardworking. But the fact that Sola was set up as a reckless persona do not support the assumption that, without a change of character, he rose to success. Rather, a more plausible explanation for his 7-year successful career is Araromire. Besides, after Sola receives notices of tax evasion and financial loss, the

camera pans to the figurine and back to him. That was a powerful statement on Araromire's invasion. Afolayan himself believes he gave viewers options. Ironically, the unfolding events suggest the opposite.

However, the use of the figurine as prop is the most outstanding quality of the film. The image was worshipped, spoken about, revered, ridiculed, lost, discovered, re-sculpted, shown in a book, thrown away, burnt, hidden, multiplied, used by one character to frighten another, and it was given 'power' to frighten those who came in contact with it. And arguably, this is yet unmatched in the collection of Nollywood films available, perhaps a pointer to the direction of the new Nollywood. Incidentally, this further lends credence to my argument on the film's ideology. Afolayan skillfully presents two options – tradition and modernity – but makes one less plausible. His projection of paranoia, and at the same time, the reference to education subjugating superstitious beliefs (which is embodied in Sola) is seen as an unusual technique. Mona's paranoia escalates when Junior passes away. This forces Sola to reconsider his position on Araromire's involvement in the orchestration of events in his life, and so agrees to return the image. From this point, one tragic event leads to another.

Paradoxically, Sola who is the voice of education and modernity (he lives in a beach house, has a swimming pool, plays golf) is always attired in traditional outfits. Femi's inclination to tradition and belief in the folklore is not reflected in his outfit or manners. Mona takes a mid-point with respect to costume. It is from her POV that the viewer's imagination progressively ascribes supernatural powers to tradition wherein education protests, is challenged and finally overthrown. Afolayan brings the education principle back in Femi's confessions and the inexplicable (raised by Linda) is labeled 'coincidence'. After viewing the film with a teenage audience and a graduate class, the consensus reached reflected variations of magical realism. The interest and reception of the film was heightened by its combination of the Yoruba language, Nigerian Pidgin and English language.

Without doubt, *The Figurine* is a delight. Its awards and official selections at international film festivals did not come as a surprise. The film will impress an indigenous or foreign audience because of the visually appealing sites of Osun State, its elevation of art and culture. But filmmakers need to take cognizance of as well as ownership of the subtle and more pronounced ideology of their productions.