



A Study on Traditional Values in "The Voice" by Gabriel Okara

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Abstract

African literature and novels, modern and traditional, were characterized by their appearance as well as their characterization, starting from the precolonial period to the postcolonial and modern ages. African literary works were also influenced by modernism and traditional debates. The rise of the modern African novel is the result of the creativity and the living experience of the African writer. Schreiner explains that the application of the term modernism in discussing Anglophone South African literature has its basis in the concept that modernism as cultural production exists in a dialectical relationship with the geopolitical and economic structures of modernity (Schreiner, 2017). The reason why modernism emerged in South Africa in the nineteenth century as a foundational and enduring mode of literary expression is directly associated with the imperialist means by which the area was included in the capitalist world system (Ibid). Traditions are a contrasting concept to modernism that authors may incorporate into their novels. Isabel Caldeira says about it: They may choose to revive traditions to give back to communities a sense of belonging and identity (Caldeira, 2016). *The Voice* by Gabriel Okara, which includes the two concepts, and many writers consider it a creative experiment novel, needs to be considered more. In his introduction to *The Voice*, Ravenscroft explains: "I share this view." Nevertheless, "*The Voice*" has not had the kind of recognition it deserves". (Okara, 1964, p. 4).

Key Words: culture, folklore, Imperialism, loyalty, myth, rules, self-government, traditions

Local Traditions in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

The writer employs traditional rules to emphasize the subject of traditions and attempts to explain the relationship of language and identity to psychic and cultural forces. In Okara's *The Voice*, which takes place in the village of Amatu In African postcolonial communities, in which imperialism has been replaced by a blind fealty to the leaders, this has been one of the strongest traditions in an African country that recently won independence. Ostensibly, there has been a great change with the shift to self-government. The local traditions' images, such as the blind loyalty to the leaders and the acceptance of unjust judgment and slavery in collective, are all



summed up in Okara's saying: "No one in the past has asked for it." (Okara, 1964, p.24).

Okara used oral traditions, which are written down, normally in the form of storytelling, so they can inform us a lot about the society and those who originated them and allowed history to be stored.

Djénéba Traoré, in her book, *African Literature from the Oral Tradition to Current Trends*, states: "The modern-day literary trends in Africa, are characterized by their sharp criticism of the present-day neocolonial situation in African countries." (Traoré, 2010, p.20). The authors emphasized the loss of cultural values as well as the variety of positive aspects of tradition. It appears that, evidently, literature reacts very actively in nations in which social and political contradictions end up worse (Traoré, 2010).

Folklore and Myth

One of the local African traditions in general, even though the colonizer tried to impose his language and different lifestyle rules on the natives of the land. Focusing on the presentation of myth and folklore in the novel, it can be said that despite the influence of the colonizer's language, religion, education, and way of life on the natives of the land, the colonized have their own staunch notions and beliefs, which are not forgotten. In the novel *The Voice*, as the messengers set forth towards Okolo's house, they converse with each other:

"First Messenger: My right foot has hit against a stone. Second Messenger: Is it good or bad? First Messenger: It's bad." (Okara, 1964, p.24).

Foremost among the prose forms in African literature is the myth. Like myths everywhere, African myths typically explain the creation of the universe, the activities of the gods at the beginning of creation, the essence of all creatures, and the nature of their relationship with each other. Next in importance is the legend, intended to enhance the listener's understanding of the constitution of the universe. The epic and African legend has a lot in common because both are about heroism. The folktale, another prose form, is usually reserved as a means of 'nighttime entertainment (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). In *The Voice*, Okara says the following: "The embers move and glow like a new appearing sun or a going-down sun." (Okara, 1964, p.33)

The Confession

It was also believed that if a person committed a crime and did not confess to it, then the person would face disaster in the near future-either by the wrath of the clan's deity or unnatural events. In the novel, when Okolo is accused of having sheltered the betrothed girl, Ebiere, he is asked to swear and invoke God (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). In *The Voice* (1964), Okara states the following:

Hear O Amadosu! Something has fallen on my head which I do not know how to remove. If I did the thing which they are putting on my head, shown in the usual manner. Things of the ground, also, hear and the dead also hear! (Okara, 1964, p. 109)



The Witch

The woman branded a witch, called Tuere, and this is one of the characteristics of religious traditions in Africa; Turaki (1999) asserts that religion is the continual participation in traditions (myths and rituals) passed on from one generation to the next (Beyers, 2010). In *the Voice*, Gabriel Okara uses the following:

“I keep no one. Why should I any of you keep who called me a witch and have kept me away from the town? Why should I any of you keep? leave me alone .” (Okara, 1964, p. 29)

Moreover, another speech in the novel is as follows: “Is it you who speak thus” said Tuere.” Is it you , Seitu? It was you who first called me a witch and then others followed you to call me a witch. Now you say nothing followed you to call me a witch.”. Okara adds also: “When did your belief in the powers of witchcraft finish in your inside?” (Okara, 1964, p. 30).

In the novel, when Tuere keeps to herself and does not flirt with boys though she has a hunger-killing beauty, the people of Amatu consider her ‘a girl of strange behavior.’ Furthermore, they openly label her a witch after her mother and father died within a few weeks of each other, and after each young man who proposed to her died one after the other (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). As in a traditional society, a non-conformist was considered an outcast, and so did the people of Amatu consider Tuere: “They then from the town drove her”(Okara, 1964, p 33).

Woman's Chastity

Okolo is exiled, and he undertakes the long journey to Sologa. One day, on board the canoe, he sits next to a young woman who is being brought to the capital by a mother for her son, covering her with his raincoat when it begins to pour. There is then considerable debate and concern about whether he touched her inappropriately when hidden from view like that though both the girl and he insisted he did not (Hinde, 2019).

It is one of the different old traditions in Africa; chastity. Gabriel Okara gives this concept its own part. He states the following:

It refers to his earlier experience on the river journey in the opposite direction when his kindness in sheltering the girl bride under his raincoat during the storm was interpreted by her mother-in-law as a piece of immorality. (Okara, 1964, p. 5).

Furthermore, Okara adds: “And next to Okolo on his left-hand side, a girl sat, she rested her on his shoulder, sleeping. She must have killed sixteen years” (Okara, 1964, p. 59).

The Power of Traditions in Izongo’s Character

In the village of Amatu, which is typical of traditional African societies, which were ruled by a group of elders, men of status and power whose decisions ruled the clan. The elders came one by one to Chief Izongo’s house, and when they had sat in a semi-circle facing Chief Izongo, Izongo called them each by their praise name, as is usually done at gatherings (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). And when something was to be discussed between Izongo and the elders, it ran like this:



“Izongo : Yes. I am lightning. Nothing stands before lightning. What is yours? Second Elder: You are asking me? I am Water. Izongo: Water! Second Elder: Yes! I am Water. Water is the softest and the strongest be.” (Okara, 1964, p. 38)

Indeed, as Michael Andindilil points out in his book, the Anglophone African novel is a cross between a European invention, the novel, and African oral traditions, orature (Andindilile, 2018). On the other hand, Okara adds more about chief Izongo (1964) and states the following :

So Chief Izongo spoke at the gathering of Elders and the Elders, in their insides, turned these spoken words over and over and looked to see the path they would take to avoid this stinking thing. they turned over the spoken words and sent messengers to Okolo to ask him to cease forthwith his search for it. (p. 24)

The continuing use of English in Nigeria’s national discourse allows the language to serve as a vehicle for transcribing and assimilating beliefs and values of disparate organizations, creating for this multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multireligious nation an environment conducive to the emergence and sustenance of an Anglophone literary-linguistic continuum (Andindilile, 2018). Such traditional elements can be represented in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1964):

Tuere turned and faced Chief Izongo and the crowd, her inside smelling with anger . Doesn't shame fall on your head, you man without a chest, for saying you want to burn a woman's house down to the ground ? if you are a man be with a strong chest, come and take him, she challenged standing straighter than straightness. As she finished speaking thus with her breathing not reaching the ground because of her smelling anger, Okolo suddenly spoke from her side *The Voice* (Okara, 1964, p. 36).

A Voice in the Wilderness

Okolo means "the voice" in Ijaw, but in Okara's novel, it is a voice in the wilderness, a voice of wisdom and meaningful dissent, heard by no one except Tuere, the alleged witch, and Ukule, the cripple, both of whom are symbolic extensions of Okolo's identity and predicament in Amatu. Obiechina argues that *The Voice* is perhaps the sublimation in the prose fiction of Okara's poetic visions of his mission through literary creativity to reform and purify society. But he sees Okolo more as a poet-reformer than as a Promethean political revolutionary (Ashaolu, 1979).

Okara drives Okolo to attack the Nigerian politicians. when he addresses Izongo and Abadi and says:

“While a complex meaning for it does emerge clearly and it is ultimately a moral meaning connected with the value of an individual's life in relationship to the lives of his fellow- men” (Okara, 1964, p. 7).

Through the protagonist's actions, Gabriel Okara gives different sides of modernism in his novel: “Whom are you fighting against?... Are you not simply making a lot of noise because it is the fashion in order to share in the spoils. You are merely making a show of straining to open a door



that is already open.” (Okara,1964, p. 44).

Pointless to say, the people of the local town—following the chief’s lead and direction, find Okolo as a threat to the new law. The complaints of Chief Izongo, the leader of the old rules about Okolo in Gabriel Okara (1964), are the following:

Chief Izongo rose one morning, the morning that made the seventh morning since from the town he drove Okolo, and spoke with his inside and agreed with his inside to celebrate his freedom from Okolo. So he agreed with his inside, but he also with his inside became free of the voice of Okolo like the voice of a mosquito which had driven even sleep out of their eyes. (p.91)

Okolo, as a composite character, can be seen either as a particular individual or as a representative thinking man; even, perhaps, as an artist in society. In an interview conducted by Bernth Lindfors in 1973, Okara declares that the predicament of Okolo was the predicament of any intellectual, young or old, who had the courage to speak up (Ashaolu,1974).

Ashaolu (1974) explains that many people were forced to merge with the crowd, and if one didn’t do that at that time or even now, well, the forces that were raised against him would submerge him just as Okolo was submerged in the river. Given the assertion that *The Voice* is consciously written to reflect this authorial vision, it would seem that one needs to pay close attention to the symbolism of the characters and their actions and dialogue in order to grasp fully the meaning of Okara’s *The Voice*. This will facilitate one's appreciation of the novelist's technique of highlighting the predicament of the social reformer in a predominantly corrupt society.

Furthermore, the use of different human body parts like “eyes”, “hands”, and “chest” can be seen in the novel. The manner of beating Okolo is found in the novel in the following:

“Okolo and the men fell to the ground. Hands clawed at him, a thousand hands, the hands of the world.” (Okara, 1964, p. 15).

Okolo ultimately resigned to his fate. He ponders the meaning of life, finding satisfaction in his own conclusion, and resolves to keep his inside as clean as the sky. However, he recognizes that his purity poses too great a threat to those seeking or grasping for a meaning of life elsewhere (Hinde, 2019). Okara states in *The Voice* (1964):

Yes, each one has a meaning of life to himself. And that is perhaps the root of the conflict. No one can enter another’s inside. You try to enter and are kicked out the door. You allow another to enter your inside and see everything in it, you are regarded as one without a chest or as one who nothing knows (Okara, 1964, p. 7).

Okolo’s Search for Truth

In his introduction, Arthur Ravenscroft begins “Okolo's musing about relationships between human beings, and the effect that one man’s words and actions can have on the lives of everyone



who has known him.” (Okara, 1964, p.6). Also, there is miles of this conviction approximately. The interdependence of human beings upon one another is important to Okolo's quest for it inside the story, and to his inclined sacrifice of himself for the sake of truth and integrity.

Okolo is the young man who was mocked and despised by the people for daring to think for himself and contemplating the meaning of life. Okara, in his novel, shows his attempts in different ways: “So he started his search for *it*. And this stopped the Elders from slapping their thighs in joy because of the coming thing” (Okara, 1964, p. 23)

Curious parallels have been drawn between Okolo, the central character in *the Voice*, and several other literary characters. For instance, Sunday Anozie sees Okolo in the light of Hamlet, seeking to get to the “bottom” of things but having to run his head against the wall constituted by the usurping King Cladius. He also identifies *The Voice* thematic echoes from Conrad's *Victory* and claims that the tragedy of Okolo is comparable to that of Axell Heyst (Ashaolu, 1974). Eustace Palmer likens Okolo to Christian in Eustace Palmer likens Okolo to Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which is a Christian allegory, and in Man in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones* novel who are not yet born because all these characters in their search for salvation. The main character, Okolo, is conveyed principally as a person who is in search of “it”. This is a quality or value which is never clearly defined but which is associated in a passage that presents his thinking on the subject with a sense of the meaning of life:

So Okolo for three days and three nights sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, talked in his inside and in the end agreed with his inside that everybody has or ought to have a purpose apart from bearing children and the sweetness of one's inside in the word is fulfilment of that purpose. (Okara, 1964, p. 112).

Cultural Disagreement

Okolo, no doubt, is the summation of the bits and pieces of the alienated personae of Okara's poems; he is, indeed, a transformation of these poetic identities into an almost mystic and visionary “voice” calling out to mankind, but falling on deaf ears. But, contrary to Anozie's contention, Okolo does not emerge as a man of two cultures: the traditional African and the Western European who, like the persona in Okara's “Piano and Drums,” is equally lost in the “labyrinth” and “complexities” of their musical artifact (Ashaolu, 1979). We cannot even identify the central dilemma of Okolo, if any, as how to strike a balance between what is and what ought to be (Ashaolu, 1979).

One would think that Okolo is obsessed with the internal call to transform his society's social and spiritual decadence into what he calls “moral rectitude,” rather than the mission of striking a balance between the two. The mode of conflict, which Anozie's argument suggests, has no place in the novel. To identify the predicament of Okolo with cultural conflicts, as the critic has done, is to misunderstand Okolo's inside voice and its function in the novel. The critic's allegation of Okara's poverty of art and vision would seem to be an unfair devaluation of the novelist's skill in creating a highly symbolic character who represents an ideal. This ideal is attainable (Ibid).



The Experience of Gabriel Okara's in Presenting the Living Reality

Okara, a modern African writer, with his novel *The Voice* shows real-life cases. Djénéba Traoré states in his book *African Literature from the Oral Tradition to Current Trends*:

Situations that appeared after the country's wide independence. The writers emphasize in their novels, in unique ways, especially nepotism, enrichment, nasty groups, pricey ways of life, as well as poverty, manners-decay, unemployment, and the destruction of the individual through the deformed capitalist system (Traoré, 2010, p.19).

In African literary writing, however, Gabriel Okara, as a modern African writer, translated straight from the Ijo (Ijaw) language, so he immersed the Ijo linguistic rules into English in order to give literal expression to African thoughts and pictures. Moreover, the experimentation of Gabriel Okara in his novel creatively creates a symbolic image, in which the forces of traditional African culture and Western materialism fight: "Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct. This they said was the result of his knowing too much book" (Okara, 1964, p. 23).

The writer formulates, notwithstanding, an alternative perception of African modernity through a creative forging from the furnace of the African cultural experience, an experience which includes many-sided, having sprung from the encounters with alien cultures and religions and problems inner to the practice of the indigenous cultural thoughts and values themselves (Caldeira, 2016).

As black writers in America and the Caribbean struggled to express themselves in the language of those who enslaved them, black African writers experimented with various approaches to communicating the experience of colonization and the feeling of their traditional cultures in European languages. A number of the most well-known West African writers working within the English language include Gabriel Okara, considered one of the founders of modern African literature. Gabriel Okara shows the experience of the English language in *The Voice* by the following: "If my left foot hits something as I walk, it's a warning to be [...] He always speaks of change" (Okara, 1964, p. 35).

The Voice is perhaps the sublimation in the prose fiction of Okara's poetic visions of his mission through literary creativity to reform and purify society (Ashaolu, 1979).

Words in *The Voice*

Some words such as "chest" and "eyes" are used for people who flow with the tide, people unable to take a stand. They seem to have given up morals and values for the trinity of gold, iron, and concrete. Everybody who is inside is filled with money, cars, and concrete houses (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). Tuere challenges the people of Amatu in the following manner: "Doesn't shame fall on your head, you man without a chest, for saying, you want to burn a woman's house." (Okara, 1964, p. 36).

Ijaw Worldview

In the novel *The Voice*, instead of using words like "soul" or "spirit," Okara uses the word



'inside' and 'shadow'. He avoids the former in order to convey an essentially Ijaw worldview. In his book *Post-Colonial Novel-Narrative of Colonial Consciousness*, Juneja states:

“In English, words like ‘inside’ are connotative of digestive system [...] but in the novel *The Voice*, Gabriel Okara solves this problem by building up these concepts of ‘inside’ within the novel itself.” (Juneja, 1995, p.126)

Okara molds the English language to bring out the local flavor, and the thinking and speaking habits of the people. Some of the words seen in the novel are “caring-nothing”, “know-God people”, “knowing-nothing footsteps”, “making-people”, “handsome day” and “never-happened before things.” There is dominance in terms of the use of figures of speech in the novel, such as metaphors, similes, and personification (Eve & Jeyachandra, 2017). In *The Voice*, Okara infuses local flavor into the English language in ways such as the following:

“Shuffling feet turned Okolo’s head to the doors” (Okara, 1964, p.40).

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the differences between modernism and traditions in Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*. Okara shows traditional rules through the first king of traditions, Chief Ozongo. The writer uses the blind fealty of the locals and their daily life and Okolo, the protagonist, shows how modernism exists through his experimentation in *The Voice*. It should be noted that Gabriel Okara employs a language experiment in which he translated directly from the Ijo (Ijaw) language, imposing the Ijo form on the English language in order to give literal expression to African ideas and images. The objective behind the overuse of those contradictory themes in *The Voice* is to highlight the writer’s own ideas and thoughts towards the authenticity of his country.

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