

Ancestors And Their Descendants: A Comparative Study Of Characterization In Henshaw's *This Is Our Chance* And Soyinka's *The Lion And The Jewel*

John Ebimobowei Yeseibo

(B.A, M.A) Department Of Theatre Arts Faculty Of Humanities University Of Port Harcourt Port Harcourt

Abstract: *This paper is a comparative study of Henshaw's *This is our Chance* and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*. The basic methodological approach adopted here is context analysis of the two plays under study with the primary aim of foregrounding the commonality in them, especially in the area of characterization and in so doing, inferring influence. Both comedies are light-hearted and satirical and portray societies in transition from outmoded tradition to modernity. Both dramatize the issue of cultural conflict. Both plays present characters on two polar opposites—tradition and modernity—who are pitted against each other. On the side of modernity in both plays are Bambulu and Lakunle while on tradition, are Damba and Baroka. While Bambulu is portrayed as fraught with bright ideas, and the one destined to transform his community from darkness to a glorious dawn, Lakunle is still too immature to make any significant mark. Chiefs Damba and Baroka are core traditionalists. But while Damba opts for change to positively affect a repressive aspect of tradition, Baroka remains dogged in his adherence to tradition. It is also evident that Soyinka has emulated the theatrical techniques of Henshaw in especially repeating the bombastic lines of Bambulu. Both playwrights are guided by the need to preserve progressive aspects of tradition and to graft upon them the best from other cultures. Values are inherent in our culture and foundational for the judgment and assimilation of the new ways. Traditional institutions should not be totally discarded, they can still answer people's needs.*

I. Introduction

James Ene Henshaw is the precursor of contemporary literary drama in Nigeria. He wrote his first play entitled *This is Our Chance* in 1956. Despite his meritorious contributions to the development of Nigerian drama, he has been consigned by literary criticism to a position of obscurity. Soyinka, on the other hand, has evidently distinguished himself as a professionally trained artist and a more technically experimental dramatist who has, in very remarkable ways contributed to the dynamic growth of the literary drama in Nigeria. The question then that will excite the curiosity of the reader is why is Henshaw, a fortuitous playwright being compared to a professional one like Wole Soyinka?

In as much as this writer is not equating the dramaturgic effectiveness of Henshaw and Soyinka, the attempt projected in this paper is to establish artistic points of convergence and divergence in the two comedies of both playwrights. The attempt being made here is to draw inference of possible influence by Henshaw on contemporary playwrights in Nigeria, especially on Soyinka.

Analysis of Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* (1956) and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963)

This is Our Chance is a two act play which is about a society in transition from an outmoded tradition to modernity. Damba represents this outmoded tradition. To him, ...tradition is sacred. Custom is above all. To question tradition is sacrilege. If men do not respect tradition how can our society stand? How can we be proud of our forefathers and pass on our pride to our children? What would happen if you or I were allowed to change our ancient practices as we like? For us tradition is not a passing thing. It is the earth on which we live and the air which we breathe. It is what makes us different from any of the other villages (19)

It is this concept and meaning of tradition that creates conflicts of generations that the play dramatizes. Damba and his wife are old, and they have their parallels in Baroka and Sadiku in *The Lion and the Jewel*. *The Lion and the Jewel* is a light-hearted satirical comedy. The satirical sally is aimed at Lakunle, a village school teacher, and Baroka, a village chief. One is a self-opinionated impatient young man bound to fail because of his temerity, the other an elder who is already spent but desperately and cunningly clinging to life. The play is a dramatization of the clash between modernity as represented by Lakunle and tradition as demonstrated in the ways of Baroka. This conflict of cultures is dramatized in the selfish desires of both Baroka and Lakunle in winning the hand of Sidi, the village 'belle' in marriage. Lakunle, as an epitome of modernity goes against the payment of bride price while Baroka, a typical traditionalist, not only believes in such payment, but still adheres to traditional ways. He does not for instance want civilization by way of motor roads, railways which according to him, "will make all roofs look the same."

Only its nature...
Which makes all roofs and faces look the same
And the wish of one old man is
That here and there...
Virgin plots of lives, rich decay
And the tang of vapour rising from
Forgotten heaps of compost, lying
Undisturbed ... But the skin of progress
Masks, unknown, the spotted wolf of sameness not revolt your being,
My daughter? (52)

The playwright cleverly manipulates the plot of this play in such a way that at the end, old traditional ways represented by Baroka triumph over seemingly infiltrating modernity symbolized by Lakunle. At the end, Sidi who is also an embodiment of tradition is seduced by Baroka and finally married to him. This marriage is a blow to the mentally confused Lakunle who vainly tries to advance modern ways into the village of Ilujinle. Baroka wins because he is wiler than Lakunle and not necessarily because he represents better values, which in themselves motivate behavior. Soyinka's dramatic statement possibly is that the older way of life is preferable to a superficial imitation of the life.

The above outline of the thematic concerns of the plays will now provide useful aids in their comparison. A critical study of Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* and Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* foregrounds some elements of similarity and dissimilarity. First and foremost, *The Lion and the Jewel* is very similar to Henshaw's *This is Our Chance* in their thematic treatment. Both dramatize the issue of cultural conflict. In *This is Our Chance*, the idea of progress overshadows a seemingly retrogressive aspect of tradition—the preservation of an age-long enmity between the villages of Koloro and Uduara while in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, traditional concept of marriage is advantaged over the obfuscated modern idea articulated by Lakunle. Secondly, the portrayal of the modern characters in both plays looks both similar and different. *This is Our Chance* presents Bambulu as espousing western ideals in a traditional village setting. Bambulu is liberal in his ways. He encourages, for instance, a woman from Koloro to secretly marry a man from Uduara. This marriage is a sacrilege to Damba because it questions tradition. Bambulu introduces a most shocking idea which he calls ballroom dancing. His only reason is that "it is done in white men's countries" (26). To Bambulu, ballroom dancing's merit is that it is European. This view is hollow. Bambulu has a deficient notion of tradition as something obsolete to be shunned, hence his skepticism to most traditional customs and beliefs in the opening scenes of the play. For instance, when the fortune-teller foretells of an impending storm and change, he does not believe him but interprets the prophecy literally in scientific terms thus:

This is a rainy season and a time of great winds, and what bright prophecy have we this morning? A mighty wind and rain. And I can bet you, although it has been raining so often, today may be the hottest and the driest day of the year (14)

Bambulu however later recognizes and appreciates the values of tradition as foundational for the judgment and assimilation of the new ways. At this moment of anagnorisis, he himself reminds Chief Damba that tradition is a necessary element in village life. When Ajugo is banished by the chief, Bambulu pleads for him. Ajugo, the embodiment of uncompromising tradition is as necessary to the village as the new ways. He is irreplaceable and has virtues that the new ways lack. These virtues in the opinion of Bambulu need to be emulated by all in the community:

There goes a light out of this room; steadfast and honest, even to the point of cruelty...To our society he is like a foundation stone...But let us receive from him those virtues which we so badly need and which we lack (38)

In Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*, a similar character, Lakunle, is presented as the propagator of modern practices in the village of Ilujinle. Lakunle has an exaggerated notion of his knowledge, wielded a great amount of local interest, but decayed daily without any quality of leadership. He is a split personality, the two halves of which are clearly visible. He is stentorian in his denunciation of Baroka's backwardness. Lakunle rejects chief Baroka, the bale of Ilunjile and all he represents, that is, traditional royalty, masquerades, music and dances. For him, Baroka is prurient, dissolute, self-centred and incompetent, utterly ineffable as an administrator in modern times and a clog in the wheel of progress which must be uprooted with all speed. Lakunle, however, secretly envies the man just this: he vacillates between conscious posturing and his real self. An examination of his speeches reveals a potentially disastrous mental confusion. The ideas that come pouring out are so undigested that they sound comic. For instance, Lakunle is not willing to pay the bride price because it is "an ignoble custom, infamous, ignominious, shaming our heritage before the world..." (7). His priggishness is conveyed in the very form of his address "Ignorant girl, can you not understand: To pay the price would be to buy a heifer off the market stall. You'd be my chattel my mere property" (8). Soyinka even dresses Lakunle

ridiculously in “an old-English style suit, thread bare but not ragged, clean but not ironed” (1). This external appearance is an indication of the unformed values he embodies. His words confirm this visual image:

Voluptuous beast! He loves this life too well
To bear to part from it. And motor roads
And railways would do just that, forcing
Civilization at his door. He foresaw it
And he barred the gates, securing fast
His dogs and horses, his wives and all his concubines...
Ah, yes... all those concubines
Baroka has such a selective eye, none suits him but the best
Ah, I sometimes wish I led his kind of life
Such luscious bosoms make his nightly pillow
I am sure he keeps a timetable just as I do at school.
Only way to ensure fair play
He must be healthy to keep going as he does...
No! I do not envy him! Just the one woman for me.
Alone I stand for progress, with Sidi my chosen soul-mate.
The one woman of my life... (117-8)
No, Sidi (very tenderly)
When we are wed you shall not walk or sit
Tethered, as it were, to my dirtied heels. (100)

While Bambulu is portrayed as very progressive and learned through his discovery of the anti-snake bite vaccine, Lakunle is mentally confused and not worthy of any meaningful leadership. He is a split personality between two worlds—traditional and western. The obfuscated idea of modernity imbibed by Lakunle is best conveyed in one of his advances to Sidi: “I will not have you wait on me till I have dined my fill. No wife of mine, no lawful wedded wife shall eat of leavings of my plate, that is for the children” It is very ridiculous for a man who strives to be an embodiment of western ideals to nurse an idea of leaving remnants of food for his children.

Besides the revelation of their true natures, both Bambulu and Lakunle are pedants in Koloro and Ilujinle respectively in the colonial era with bloated notions of their knowledge.

In the opinion of Oyin Ogunba, both Bambulu and Lakunle are pioneers who unleash modernism on their conservative and extremely traditional communities and experience some personal suffering because of their challenge to the Establishment. (47) He carries this view further, saying that Henshaw seems to stake everything for Bambulu as the new man with all the bright ideas, the one destined to transform his community from darkness to a glorious dawn (48). This fact is attested to by Kudaro when she posits that, with the help of Bambulu’s anti-snake bite vaccine in effecting reconciliation between the warring Uduro and Koloro, “at last darkness is out and light will shine on us” (38). Soyinka, on the other hand, has an ambivalent attitude towards Lakunle as a man who, doubtless, has valuable ideas, but whose approach is still too immature to make any significant mark (Ogunba 48).

Let us see his picture of modernity, he himself presents to a bemused Sadiku:

... A motor road will pass this spot.
And bring the ways to us.
We’ll buy saucepans for all the women
Clay pots are crude and unhygienic
No man shall take more wives than one
That’s why they’re impotent too soon.
The ruler shall ride cars, not horses
Or a bicycle at the very least.
We’ll burn the forest, cut the trees
Then plant a modern park for lovers
We’ll print newspapers every day
With pictures of seductive girls.
The world will judge our progress by
The girls that win beauty contests. (37)(Emphasis mine)

The above progress manifesto reveals an African mind that has pitifully been lacerated by Western culture. It depicts a totally acculturated rabid African mind who is anxious to replace his own ‘primitive’ and ‘barbarous’ tradition with parks, ballroom dances, cocktail parties and strip tease girls of Europe. He is completely adrift from the values inherent in the culture of Ilujinle (Ogunba 37). Ahmed Yerima is in support of this view: “it is his stupidity, his misunderstanding about the progress of blending his education with traditional and cultural practices and his total misplacement about the norms of common social knowledge that convinces

Soyinka to give the village belle Sidi to Baroka, the old Oba” (64) Soyinka directs his satiric butt at Lakunle who exemplifies all those who are indoctrinated against their own culture and who are still tenaciously acculturating and imbibing Western ways of life. To him, Lakunle’s failure to see things in their proper perspective must preclude him from intelligent leadership at this important juncture in the life of the community. Since it is the fripperies of modern European life that tend to fascinate him, (and he has already rejected his own culture) he is likely to become spiritually arid. That is one of the reasons why we find him rejected at the end of the play. (37) Dasyilva, again, lends credence to this

There is, predictably, a constant conflict between the African culture (the older order) and the European values (the new order). Sometimes, the old and the new are satirized in a way that reduces the latter to a satiric butt in order to justify the ideals of the African culture... Sometimes, the badly digested western values are sharply highlighted. Examples abound in Mrs. Brofusem among others in *The Blinkards*, and Wole Soyinka’s Lakunle, the village teacher in *The Lion and the Jewel* (117).

There is the need for the co-existence of the best of the old order and the best of the new order. Bambulu is more useful in his inculcation of purposeful western ideals into the minds of his pupils, and in his invention of the snake-bite vaccine which finally brings about the desired friendship between the two villages. Bambulu does not bequeath his liberal and progressive disposition to his self-opinionated ‘descendant’, Lakunle who remains doggedly bemused in his acculturated ideas of modernity.

Both Bambulu and Lakunle use bombastic language to show off their learning of Western ways and education they have acquired. A picture of this bombastic Bambulu is presented by Kudaro thus: “Teacher? That half-wit, that humbug, that ... oh, to remind me of him! Half the day I don’t know what he is talking about. I always feel like breaking his head with an axe when he uses those big words; Queen’s English, he calls it” (12). We also encounter his bombastic nature in his discovery speech

This is the child of my brain, the product of my endeavour, and the materialization of my inventive genius. It is an anti-snake bite vaccine. Western science has not succeeded in producing anything so potent. But I, Bambulu, have, without laboratories, without any help, produced this medicine from the herbs of this village. I am a scientist, I am an Analyst, I am a Catalyst. (13).

This high sounding speech recall’s Bomber Billy’s in O.A. Ogali’s *Veronica, My Daughter*: “I assure you that this is nothing but a cocified agency antipasimodical producing nothing but voscadum, miszcandum and tisco. This medicine that I have in hand is called the Grand Electrical Punctichul Demoscandum which cures all diseases incident to humanity” (qtd in Ogunbiyi 26). Ogunbiyi does not tell us if Billy’s medicine was potent in any way but Bambulu’s own does actually cure the snake bite of Prince Ndamu’s younger brother. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, we encounter the same bombastic and garrulous ‘descendant’ of Billy and Bambulu in Lakunle as reported by Sidi:

...the whole world knows of the madman
Of Ilujinle, who calls himself a teacher!
Is it Sidi who makes the men choke
In their cups, or you, with your big loud words
And no meaning? You and your ragged books
Dragging your feet to every threshold
And rushing them out again as curses
Greet you instead of welcome. Is it Sidi
They call a fool—even the children-
Or you with your fine airs and little sense! (3)

Besides Bambulu and Lakunle, Damba and Baroka are both similar and different in their leanings to tradition. Both Damba and Baroka, in their respective plays, are custodians of tradition and as such they are suspicious of anything and everything new that threatens tradition. Baroka’s knowledge of traditional ways is evident in his knowledge and application of proverbs and traditional adages in his speeches. For instance, in the process of wooing Sidi, he resorts to the following traditional expression: “The monkey sweats. It is only the hair upon his back which still deceives the world”. Damba too knows the traditional essence of pouring libations; to call his forefathers. Tradition in the understanding of Damba indicates static, anti-progressive customs, exemplified by hatred of enemies. The play underlines Damba’s wrong notion of tradition as a destructive, rather than a redemptive agent and also as a blind observance of customs detrimental to human growth and well-being. But as Damba clings to tradition he leaves his mind open to the new ways and even prepares his daughter for life in the emerging society by educating her in the western way. The chief also develops quite an interest for vitamins. Baroka on the other hand, displays negative attitudes toward modernization because of the threats it poses to his authority and status. So while Baroka can be described as a type character who remains dogged in his adherence to tradition, Damba opts for change to positively affect a repressive aspect of tradition. Two other characters need to be looked at before we conclude our comparison. These are Sidi and Kudaro. While Sidi is overwhelmed by the power of tradition in *The Lion and the Jewel*, this is not the case with her ‘ancestress’ Kudaro in Henshaw’s play. Kudaro is in fact portrayed as the catalyst of

change in *This is our Chance*. Her use of Bambulu's invention—the anti-snakebite vaccine—to save the life of the young Prince is responsible for progress. This singular act is responsible for the cessation of the age-long enmity between Koloro and Udura.

II. Conclusion

As the first Nigerian drama in English for schools and colleges, *This is our Chance* is not technically developed and the characters in the play do not have inner psychological existence apart from their public or surface life and everyday relationships. In *This is our Chance*, Efik mythology is not used in the way Soyinka uses Yoruba mythology because Henshaw is only interested in recreating before his audience a whole traditional way of life. Whatever Efik mythology he makes allusion to, is as it is lived by the people.

Both Soyinka and Henshaw are in their respective ways influenced by tradition. In their writings, they seem to be guided by the need to preserve progressive aspects of tradition and to graft upon them, the best from other countries. Henshaw credits the new culture for saving lives while the kind of culture represented by Lakunle is incapable of any meaningful advancement. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, neither Baroka representing tradition nor Lakunle, representing the modern, has Soyinka's approval. Soyinka is firm in making the point that basic strengths and values cannot be overruled by shallow posturing in the name of progress. The play does suggest that traditional socialization is still operative, and that traditional institutions may still answer people's needs, even that the older way of life is preferable to a superficial imitation of the new (Nkoyo 120). Henshaw advocates the fact that Christianity is compatible with nationalism and can very well replace the negative aspects of tradition.

Though Henshaw cannot be measured on an equal footing with Soyinka, his thematic treatment in *This is Our Chance* has undoubtedly influenced the more technically experimental dramatist in the treatment of the clash of cultures. There is also no denying the fact that Soyinka has emulated the theatrical techniques of Henshaw in especially repeating the bombastic lines of Bambulu.

Works Cited

- [1] Dasyilva, O. Ademola. *Studies in Drama*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers, 1997
- [2] Edet, R. Nkoyo. *The Resilience of Religious Tradition in the Dramas of Wole Soyinka and James Ene Henshaw*. Rome: Pontifical Urban University Press, 1984
- [3] Henshaw, James Ene. *This is Our Chance*. Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton Educational, 1956
- [4] Moore, Gerard. *Soyinka*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited, 1971
- [5] Ogunba, Oyin. *The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1975
- [6] Ogunbiyi, Yemi. *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria: A Critical Source Book*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 1981
- [7] Soyinka, Wole. *The Lion and the Jewel*. Ibadan: University Press Plc, 1963
- [8] Yerima, Ahmed and Duro Oni. Eds. *Trends in the Theory and Practice of Theatre in Nigeria*. Lagos: Society of Nigerian Theatre Artistes (SONTA), 2008