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ORAL AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY  
AFRICAN DRAMA: A READING OF EFUA  
SUTHERLAND'S *THE MARRIAGE OF ANANSEWA*.

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### Abstract

*Oral literature has remained a source and material for African literature. The intentions of most African writers are to uphold and ensure that the traditions do not go extinct. This paper maintains that *The Marriage of Anansewa* is an adaptation and exploitation of the indigenous Akan storytelling tradition. The paper also establishes that, both content and technique of contemporary African drama is a reflection of the oral story telling performance. It concludes that the contribution of these writers have played a huge role in sustaining the African tradition and culture.*

### Introduction

There is an increasing interest by African writers to exploit and adapt oral tradition/conventions in their works. This rise in interest towards reviving the oral tradition cannot be isolated from commitment to the African tradition. The progenitors of the literary African tradition (oral tradition) such as Amos Tutuola and the first generation writers of the 1950s gave focus to the actualization of this goal. This is to say that tradition has remained viable and has not lost its essence. In his essay, 'Oral literature and Modern African Literature', Okpewho (2007) identifies three categories through which the oral genre can be classified as medium for the writer, they

include: Translation, Exploitation and Adaptation. Okpewho further reiterates:

As far as the creative writers are concerned, the main offshoots of this program have been to collect and publish texts of the oral literature of their people as practiced by them overtime and to use that literature as a basis for writing original works that reflect, from a more or less modern perspective, some of the major concerns of today so as to demonstrate that traditional African culture is not obsolete but relevant for the articulation of contemporary needs and goals (84).

Affiah and Ndubisi (2012), further observe that "the Magnitude of Tutuola's indebtedness to the oral tradition 'forced Omolara Ogundipe- Leslie to declare Tutuola a borrower' (307). Ogundipe Leslie adds that Tutuola did not invent much in *The Palmwine Drinkard*. From the above, we observe that, commitment is a factor that propels writers. Furthermore, the concept and discourse of commitment in African literature can be traced to the intent of most of writers to preserve the tradition.

Most playwrights have employed oral performances and adapted them to their plays. For instance, Whole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* captures the Yoruba Cosmology as a result, we are cognizant with the procedures and festivals that accompany such rituals. In this

case, the readers are exposed to the rituals and festivals of the Ghanaians in Sutherland's play. There seems to be an interface between the European and African tradition. Efua Sutherland thus, belongs to the crop of writers who combine both the African and western traditions. Bernth Lindfors buttresses this:

But not every African yielded so completely to foreign or indigenous literary influences. Some tried to combine the two traditions artistically, welding European form to African matter so skillfully that no one could tell without careful inspection precisely how or where they had been joined. These were the writers who began to contribute something new to world literature, for they were forging genuine links between the disparate cultures Africans had inherited, one by birth, and the other by education. (27)

The above reiterates the reality of merging both western and traditional African traditions. Two important factors may advance for the Lindfor's assertion. First, the traditions, culture, norms, mores and values of African writers are inherent, therefore it is only expected that African writers produce what they have been accustomed and exposed to. Secondly, these African writers have adopted the language of the colonizer as the medium of education therefore, enhancing the possibility of entrenching and weaving both traditions.

However, the intention of most writers in this school

of thought might be deliberate. This only means that, the English language had to conform to a unique approach, in other words, exploited to suit the African experience. For instance, Achebe's artistry in incorporating folktales, rituals, festival, proverbs etc, in a bid to propagate African values has attracted so much critical attention with most critics attributing credit to him for his effective use of elements of oral tradition in his foremost novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Bernth Lindfors (2002) also asserts: "Achebe civilised his African world domesticating the English language and making it carry the full weight of what he wanted to say. His characters spoke and were spoken of in proverbs, metaphors, images and symbols that expressed their African experience. (45)

#### **Synopsis of the Marriage of Anansewa**

The Marriage of Anansewa is a story woven around a character called Ananse. The play opens with an introduction of Ananse lamenting over a financial distress and crises in which he has found himself. Ananse, therefore, schemes out ways to be free of his problems. He enters a secret deal with four chiefs to marry his daughter Anansewa. Anansewa on discovering this is alarmed and distressed. The suitors are all assured of their marriage to Anansewa they therefore lavish gifts and money on Anansewa. The chiefs are in dire need of their bride (Anansewa so as to commence the process of legalizing the marriage proposal) Ananse persuades his daughter to act dead. His plans come to fruition when the chief

who accepts responsibility for the “dead Anansewa” emerges as Ananse's choice for his daughter.

### **Oral Aesthetics in *the Marriage of Anansewa***

The *Marriage of Anansewa* is an adaptation of the oral story telling performance in Ghana known as *Anansemem*. Efua Sutherland's intention is to preserve oral tradition and by doing this, the culture and core of African values are embedded in this play. Furthermore, the theatrical performances in the play are a replication of what obtains in both content and technique of oral performances. Lindfors (2002) therefore concurs: “let us admit... that much African writing has been derivative. The earliest African authors were profusely influenced by whatever literary models-oral or written-were available to them.” (24). The above buttresses the source and influences of most existing works of African literature. The Akan speaking people have a story telling tradition that revolves around a character known as Ananse; this is the Akan indigenous name for the spider, the trickster. However, the theatrical performance of the play in Ghana is referred to as *Anansegoro*.

The phenomenon of the trickster is universal with figures unique to specific indigenous groups. In some communities, trickster figures include the tortoise, the spider, andhare.etc. Behind (2010) ascertains the didactic essence of the trickster oral tales: 'trickster tales are very useful in

teaching youth some morals. In the main, the trickster figure is a central character (hero) in African story-telling.'(7)

Anny Wynchank quoted in Kehinde (2010) avers that 'a society expresses itself through oral tales, these in turn, reflect that society and its beliefs.'(7). This affirms that oral tales have entrenched in them, mores and norms that govern the society. However, the educative function of these tales cannot be overridden by the entertainment function as the intentions of the tales are corrective. The core of this tradition is buttressed by Bukar (2013), who stresses the need "to revive the age old practice of telling children intrinsic tales by preserving in writing the best folktales, many which are believed to be fast disappearing as their human repositories pass on."(34).

This explains the quintessence of Sutherland's adaptation of the Akan Folktale tradition. Preservation of tradition is paramount. Ker further buttresses that, 'Oral literature has a lot to do in the preservation of indigenous languages. This is because oral literature is concerned with the imaginative verbal creations of man. This could be in forms of stories, folk beliefs, songs, tongue twisters, proverbs etc. These have been passed on from one generation to another.'(45). Although Efuwa Sutherland makes use of the English language; she is still at parity with Ker's observation. This is because the indigenous traditions passed down through tales and preserved through written literature would help

preserve the people's culture and language.

Ananse, the main character is the trickster. He represents every vice and man in the society. Like the spider, he exhibits cunningness as he spins the web that epitomizes greed, avarice and deceit, as he takes advantage of the slightest opportunity to be well-off. For instance, in his bid to enhance his financial fortune, he assures four chiefs of his intentions to give out his daughter as bride to them. He therefore extorts money from them. Whereas, the chiefs have no idea of the tricks Ananse plays on them. To achieve his aim he compels Anansewa to write letters to them. For instance, he writes the following to the chief of Sapa:

I have returned safely home after my visit to  
you. The little affair about which we  
spoke seriously occupies my  
thoughts. How can I ever forget that  
you have done me great honour? To  
show my gratitude. I will guard the  
object of your interest.... With all  
the vigilance in my power. (14)

Unknown to Anansewa, she is the 'object of interest'. Ananse speaks in idioms in order to keep Anansewa ignorant of his intentions. Ananse employs praise singing as a form of salutation. With the intentions of winning the chief's heart

O mighty-Tree-Of-Ancient-Origin!

Mighty-tree-Of-Ancient-Origin,  
Rooted in the Shrine of deity!  
Countless branches in which  
Benighted wondering birds  
Are welcome to shelter (14)



Anansewa observes thus:

All of that? All that in the place where 'Dear Chief of Sapa should go? Is this a letter? How can I fit it in?

Ananse responds thus: "fit it in. Chiefs adore appellations."(14)

In line with the schemer that he is, Ananse is always seen exhibiting skill in his diction. His verbal articulations also stand out in the play. Furthermore, the use of such appellations is usually associated with the ancient tradition. The praise singing tradition above, are concomitant with royalty.

Ananse's craftiness is seen, yet in another letter, he writes to the king of Akate:

"The thing you sent me by your most respected messenger has reached me; and it is so unexpected, so welcome..... All is well with the object of your interest. I look forward to the time when-it-will come out of my custody into your hand...." (16)

According to Obiechinna quoted in Kehinde (2010), 'The trickster is 'a stock character that is often something of a rogue. He manages to extricate himself from intriguing and sometimes dangerous situations by a display of mental ability' (7). The validity of the Obiechina's assertion is realised in Ananse. For instance, when the purported time for the chiefs to legalise the marriage proposals, emanate, Ananse devices ways to disentangle himself. In other words, he plays on the intelligence of all other characters in the play including Anansewa, his daughter.



This is further buttressed in the climax of the play. One of the chiefs intends to come and place the head drink, knowing the implication of this, Ananse decides to compel Anansewa to “act dead.” He however extricates himself from the consequence. The story teller in *Anansem* plays an important and vital role. He tells the whole story himself. This however, is replicated in *The Marriage of Anansewa*. The story teller is part and parcel of the play and he explains the events in the story at intervals.

Musical performance is an integral part of the folktale tradition in Africa. This is replicated in the play. Musical performance during an oral performance in the Ghanaian tradition is called *Mboguo*. The *Mboguo* are part and parcel of the stories themselves and are performed in context led by the story teller. A typical story telling session opens with a series of rousing *Mboguo* songs, led by a specialist group's signature tune. *Mboguo* may be reflective of a mood or aimed at quickening the pace of performance or inspiring the general assembly.

The *Mboguo* is usually open for general participation. This exactly is what obtains in *The Marriage of Anansewa*. A whole lot of examples abound in the play but most distinctive is the instance where the Anansewa's out-dooring ceremony is to be performed. Anansewa's peers perform the song below:

Sensemise e

We welcome you this day

Sensemise e

We welcome you this day  
 Sensemise e  
 Welcome to you.  
 Anasewa we welcome you this day  
 Anasewa  
 We welcome you this day" (50)

The songs are characterized with repetitions. This means that Sutherland does not alter the content and form of the songs. Her intentions are to be sure the songs to retain originality so as to sustain culture. Also, Ananse's financial fortune is captured in the song below:

Oh, some time ago  
 It was bad at home  
 But maybe now it's getting better.  
 Oh friends, do look at Kweku Ananse's amazing ways,  
 It's with craftiness solely that he manages his life.

Oh some time ago  
 It was bad at home  
 But maybe now it's getting better  
 Oh some time ago  
 It was bad at home  
 But maybe now it's getting better

.....

Oh, friends, do look at Kweku Ananse's cunning ways.  
 It's with falsehoods solely that he manages his life. (38)

Most of the *Mboguo* have rooted in them didactic lessons; from the song above the audience is admonished to shun greed and craftiness; which most times are with the intentions of getting rich. The virtue of sincerity is upheld in

this song contrary to Ananse's antics.

Occupational songs, dirges, etc, also form part of the Mboguo. The importance and virtues of hard work is captured in the song below:

Who doesn't like work?

Oh I love work!

Work, work-

This work that I do-

Work, work-

This work that I do-

Yes yes

Supplies my clothing

Yes, yes

This work that I do

Yes yes

Supplies my food.

Yes yes

This work that I do-

Yes, yes

Supplies my cash

In this regard, the workmen in the play: the Painter, Mason, and Carpenter are used in the play to emphasis the value placed on hard work and the evils of idleness. This is to provide to the audience an alternative to Ananse's greed. Here, the virtues of hard work are encouraged. This is in contrast with Ananse's opinion on how wealth can be acquired.

The playwright employs appropriate dramatic techniques, chiefly woven around the Akan narrative tradition. Beside the oral story telling adaptations, we are also

exposed to certain aspects of tradition, especially the ceremonies and rituals guiding marriage. Akwasi and Akosua's intended marriage exposes this. Through their conversation the readers are aware of marriage rites such as the importance of placing the head drink before a union is consummated. This reflects virtues on the sanctity of marriage as upheld in the community.

### Conclusion

This paper has looked at *The Marriage of Anansewa* as an exploitation and adaptation of oral tradition. From the foregoing discussion, it has been established that most of the literary writers are committed to resonating the African value with the purpose of preserving them. There is no doubt that most African writers are informed and influenced by the oral tradition. *The Marriage of Anansewa* displays such interest, both in content and technique. *The Marriage of Anansewa* is a text that will sustain and preserve the African tradition.

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