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Cultural Nationalism and Postcolonial Imperatives in Irene Salami-Agunloye's Emotan: A Benin Heroine and Emmy Idegu's Ata Igala the Great

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This article examines the efforts of postcolonial creative writers, particularly dramatists, who attempt to rethink the seeming erosion of African culture in the face of western cultural expansion. The present research adopts the methods of descriptive and content analysis, as it dwells on books, journal articles, and internet materials to examine its subject. Of immediate interest are two Nigerian plays, *Ata Igala the Great* by Emmy Idegu and *Emotan: A Benin Heroine* by Irene Salami-Agunloye, which are read as paradigmatic texts for interpreting problematic postcolonial relationships. The article contributes to discussions related to colonialism and the hidden agenda of neo-colonialism, which are often interpreted in terms of western economic interests underlying cultural expansion. The article demonstrates how African postcolonial writers have striven to reverse this trend by promoting Africa's cultural aesthetics as they represent indigenous ways of life and their problematic interaction with western cultural patterns. The discussed works focus on cultural canons related to African life, such as consultation with oracles, ancestor worship, and festivals; and they demonstrate the aesthetic specifics of African dance, music, songs, and their semiotic significance. The article concludes that even though the two plays "speak back" to power, their strength lies in the articulation of certain aesthetic patterns that contribute to African self-location. Thus, the plays not only attempt to assert African culture, but they also strive to rethink the meanings of western cultural imperialism.
Keywords: African culture, cultural imperialism, postcolonial writers, cultural nationalism, Africanness.

Introduction

In this age of globalization and increased cultural overlapping within global socio-political space, the vigorous struggle of African playwrights to enhance cultural significance conditions the representation of indigenous ways of life in the problematic context of western cultural expansion. These intensive endeavours can be read as strategies for escaping cultural disempowerment. Ever since slavery and colonialism's strangleholds were broken from the neck of Africa, the threat posed by neo-colonialism to the survival of African culture has been a source of anxiety. This threat, which manifests itself through the instrumentality of western literature, media, the performative arts, and other forms of representation and communication, is regularly produced through the medium of technology.

Raymond Williams explains that a linguistic and semantic mapping of the term "culture" has shown it to have undergone not less than four stages of semantic transformation, from the last decades of the eighteenth to the first half of nineteenth centuries (xvi). In its fourth meaning, it is generally known to be "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual" (xvi). Seen from the perspective of available socio-cultural evidence, particularly through the lens of anthropology, the concept of "culture" has not deviated that much from this semantic signification. In the present article, *cultural nationalism* does not

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imply the pursuit and representation of homogeneous cultural aesthetics by African playwrights. Rather, it denotes the attempt by postcolonial African writers, in this case creative writers and performance troupes, to play up the numerous forms of African traditional and cultural ethos, particularly as specific to their milieu and sub-nationality, through the use of imagery, semiotics (signs and symbols), sound, dance types, music and nuances of concrete, and abstract paraphernalia that confer cultural particularity on their works.

In view of the above, the article considers the responses of African literature to the challenges posed by western cultural imperialism. It views these efforts as a postcolonial strategy of challenging the intractable growth and spread of englobing cultural patterns. In the course of the discussion, I will focus on two Nigerian plays*, Ata Igala the Great* by Emmy Idegu and *Emotan: A Benin Heroine* by Irene Salami-Agunloye, reading them as paradigmatic texts that illustrate this strategic postcolonial approach. However, the analysis is largely concerned with non-verbal cultural elements to avoid unnecessary repetition as the subject of language in postcolonial literature has already been discussed in one of my other publications. The present research adopts the method of descriptive analysis and that of content analysis, dwelling on a variety of sources – books, journal articles, and internet materials – to offer a broader understanding of the discussed matter.

The more specific aim of the study is to analyse critically the two plays as cultural texts that engage in deliberate attempts to represent African cultural aesthetics, and by so doing to problematize western claims to cultural universalism. The article, therefore, attempts to ascertain whether or not western expansion may condition the erosion of African culture, to investigate the sources of such risks, to examine how the discussed African playwrights respond to the threat, to identify the specific purposes of their responses, to evaluate the success of these literary efforts, and to suggest ways of maintaining the relevance of African culture in ways that could promote African identity.

Review of Relevant Critical Sources and Literary Works

Although we can observe a number of positive effects of cross-cultural interaction, such as literacy and technology, Black African culture has also experienced substantial cultural suppression in the course of its problematic relationship with western cultural models. Such inferiorizing effects abound across the length and breadth of the continent and the works of theorists, creative writers, and critics attest to these cultural transformations. It is apt to note that Africa was a continent at peace with itself before European incursion, which started with the arrival of the Portuguese on the west African coast in the fifteenth century. The sorry story of Africa is clearly reflected in the two harrowing experiences of her historical trajectory which nearly annihilated African culture: slavery/slave trade and colonialism. Not less than twenty million able-bodied men and women were estimated to have been transported from Africa to Europe and America as slaves (Bristol para. 3). This excessive violence signals the beginning of the erosion of African culture.

Just like other colonized territories, Africa's experience of domination, which lasted over four centuries, has not completely come to an end. According to Edward Said, "the nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers" (19). In turn, Simon Gikandi observes that one of the things motivating Chinua Achebe's writings is the view that the African world has been "turned upside down during centuries of slavery and foreign domination" (31), and has also been culturally disorganized, just like many other countries of the world. Gikandi argues that Achebe's desire for an African narrative is motivated by a negative consciousness – knowledge about the loss or repression of an African tradition under colonialism – a consciousness that in turn "generates narratives such as *Things Fall Apart* that revalorize Igbo culture" (37).

Culturally, pre-colonial Africa was overturned by the European powers right from the inception of colonialism. This view is expressed by many African and African American writers such as Jegede (237–247) and Welsh-Asante (1–20). The colonizer considered the politics of the colonized as unacceptable, the religion of the colonized as paganistic, the way of life of the colonized as barbaric, and the continent itself as a dark continent that needed to be "civilized." These accounts warn against the erosion

of African culture, triggered by the colonizer, and against the imposition of foreign culture (Jegede 241) through practices that were actually meant to pave the way for the implementation of Europe's mercantile colonizing project.

The imposition of a foreign political system of government, foreign languages (English, French, and Portuguese), a new religion (Christianity), and new patterns of social relationships (individualism), instead of the traditional system of government, indigenous languages, traditional religions and pre-colonial communalism in Africa, produces today's landmark features of colonialism that bear witness to the erosion of African culture. Jegede observes the malignant attitude of western scholars to African art: "in recent years attempts have been made to popularize the use of 'tribal' as a substitute for 'primitive'" (241). He condemns this as unacceptable in describing African art because, "it is, in a sense, a 'divide and study' approach that negates, this time on a cultural plane, the preoccupation of modern-day African nations with forging national unity and cultural identity" (241).

However, the excruciating tangible relics of colonialism as well as the debilitating effects of imperialism have persisted in the guise of a new form of colonialism – that of neo-colonialism. With this new means of exerting imperial influence, the west has further inscribed itself on the psyche of the "Other" (Africa, Asia, etc.), facilitated by the advantages offered by technology. European (and North American) models of cultural supremacy have affected a wide range of forms and activities in today's Africa: music, clothing, language, social relations, film, communication, just to mention but a few. To make matters worse, the colonizers did not go without leaving behind a crop of stooges who had been indoctrinated and trained as inheritors of colonialism and positioned to operate as agents of the neo-colonial programme of the west. Typically, Chinua Achebe's writings are concerned with a postcolonial aesthetic paradigm which, as Gikandi summarizes, is "predicated on the belief that narrative can enable the writer to express an alternative order of things opposed to realities imposed by imperialism and western domination" (29). In his appraisal of Leopold Senghor's position, Bernth Lindfors argues that he refers to Africans as the "cultural half-castes of Europe" (23) and this designation tells us a lot about western attitudes to African culture. Achebe himself argued that "it was Europe which introduced into Africa the problems which the writer (African) was attempting to solve" ("The Duty" para. 12). Perhaps, this explains why Welsh-Asante points out that "the western world's ability to beam its message and culture to the entire world is a technological feat with implications for cultural imperialism" (xiv).

Europe's neo-colonial project likewise involves the persecution of institutions and individuals regarded as capable of challenging the flow of imperial power from the "metropolitan centre" to the former colonies. Such an individual and collective self-assertion has often been curbed by acts of intimidation and sometimes brutal attacks carried out by state powers in accordance with metropolitan rule. Said pertinently observes that:

> [the] real problems of democracy, development, and destiny, are attested to by the state persecution of intellectuals who carry on their thought and practice publicly and courageously – Eqbal Ahmad and Faiz Ahmad Faiz in Pakistan, Ngugi wa Thiongo in Kenya, or Abdelrahman el Munif in the Arab world – major thinkers and artists whose sufferings have not blunted the intransigence of their thought, or inhibited the severity of their punishment. (18)

This hostility against courageous artists is a carryover from the military era in Africa which recorded incessant hostility against writers and activists like Wole Soyinka in Nigeria and Ahmadu Madi in Sierra Leone, both of whom were perceived by the authorities as threatening the continual entrenchment of European cultural and economic hegemony in Africa.

Homi Bhabha provides another critical assessment of the discussed cultural situation. He notes that "postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (171). Thus, African intellectuals, particularly critics and dramatists, have rather been suspicious about western cultural expansion in Africa and its controversial effects. Lindfors makes the following observation:

> The new literatures in English and French that have emerged in Black Africa in the twentieth century have been profoundly influenced by politics. … Writers have served not only as chroniclers of contemporary political history but also as advocates of radical social change. Their works thus both reflect and project the course of Africa's cultural revolution. (21)

Adeleke Adeeko equally suggests that since "1962 … African literary criticism has been preoccupied with devising strategies for indigenizing the substance and language of its governing principles" (234). According to him, leading African writers have participated in "formulating the parameters for devising a meta-language and a hermeneutic predisposition that will place indigenous forms at the centre of the definition, classification and appreciation protocols of culture, especially literature" (234). This salutary attempt to indigenize the hermeneutic predisposition of African literature spanned nearly all literary genres – novels, drama, poetry, and music, without leaving out visual art. At the centre of writers' literary works was a heavy reliance on the culture of the postcolonial state.

Such a cultural reclamation, Abiola Irele notes, however, first began in Africa with the Negritudinists, led by Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the late 1930s. Césaire, who, according to Irele, originally coined the term, defines it as follows: "Negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history, and of our culture" (203). Though the movement's ideological concept was seen as rather controversial and considered to be racist and escapist (Adekoya 5), Irele defends it in his famous essay, "What is Negritude?" where he attempts an explication of the ideology as black cultural nationalism:

> It is with respect to this formal expression of the black nationalist consciousness – or to be more precise, – of black cultural nationalism – that a second and closer sense of the term can be defined." Thus Negritude can be taken here to describe the writings of the French-speaking black intellectuals in their affirmation of a black personality, and to designate the complex of ideas associated with their effort to define a new set of references for the collective experience and awareness of black people. (204)

He describes Negritude as an exaltation of the black race, associated with a romantic myth of Africa. He further identifies the central project of Negritude as the rehabilitation of Africa (from its dehumanization and cultural denigration), which, according to him, also "represents a movement towards the recovery of a certain sense of spiritual integrity… the definition of a black collective identity" (204).

The concept of Negritude is seen as unreliable even by African critics, such as Soyinka and Adekoya, because it suggests a degree of homogenization of African culture, values, and destiny, and it seems to fail to recognize the aspect of plurality, focusing instead on a dogmatic and "nostalgic" vision of the pre-colonial era; and also because its "reference point took far too much colouring from European ideas even while its Messiahs pronounced themselves fanatically African" (Soyinka 127).

In defence of Negritude, Senghor (195) argues that the concept implies "neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself and self-confirmation, confirmation of one's being. Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called *African personality*" (195). Senghor wondered whether Africa could not find its own ways of doing things, its own peculiar socio-cultural practices that would mark it out positively as being distinct from the rest of the world, particularly from the imperial "centre," thus attempting to dislodge European universalism:

> Who would deny that Africans, too, have a certain way of conceiving life and of living it? A certain way of speaking, singing and dancing; of painting and sculpturing, and even of laughing and crying … Nobody … What then is Negritude? It is … the sum of the cultural values of the black world; that is a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe. (195–196)

Notwithstanding the nuances of criticisms of Negritude, it is our view that it still represents the first movement of African/Black nationalist consciousness or Black cultural nationalism in the face of colonial imperialism and a postcolonial reaction to the "Centre."

This portrayal of national culture in fiction has continued until the present. It characterizes the early cultural productions of African writers, such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and *The Strong Breed*, John Pepper Clark's Trilogy (*Song of a Goat*, *The Masquerade,* and *The Raft)*, Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* and *King Emene*, and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame,* and *Kurunmi*, as well as *Marriage of Anansewa* by Efua Sutherland of Ghana and *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, by Ama Ata Aidoo (West Africa). The list continues with Ngugi wa Tiongwó's *The Black Hermit* and *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I will Marry When I Want*) and Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*, the latter being a long lamentation poem about an illiterate housewife deserted by her educated husband for an educated city girl. In fact, *Song of Lawino* shares similar thematic concerns with Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* and Ngugi's *The Black Hermit* whose protagonists lose touch with their African roots, due to the erosion of their cultural past and self-awareness, as a result of western cultural assimilation. All these writers attempt to create a dignified image of the African past, not necessarily by romanticization or glorification of the pre-colonial era as a golden age, but as an accurate assessment, as much as possible.

Celebrating African culture, both in terms of form and content, these creative works articulate an African identity, which can partially be seen as consistent with Welsh-Asante's definition of "the African aesthetics" in his 1993 edited book, *The African Aesthetics: Keeper of Traditions*. This particular work reaffirms Fanon's observation that "the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities" (224). Adeeko observes that this is an "opposition between 'universalism' and 'particularism', the latter defining itself, above all else, by its opposition to the former" (225).

Regardless of this oppositional relationship, Welsh-Asante suggests that "any art form that celebrates the features and history of the people corresponds to the highest expression of the aesthtic. A viable aesthetic becomes a significant cultural barometer with a responsibility to the entire community, both living and dead" (3). He explicates further that "when discussing an African aesthtics, one must make mention of the African's relationship with time and space, the concept of community, rhythm and myth (symbolic representation of mythical forces)" (3).

The necessity of putting African aesthetics into the service of community interests informs Welsh-Ashante's rejection of what he calls a "substitution art form" (5). He describes this type of art forms as "those arts that insert a black face, scene, play, dance while adhering to the structure, format and development of a cultural aesthetic that comes out of a completely different tradition" (5). He promotes such a rejection eagerly as, "while the artistic product of such a combination may work, it essentially supports a Eurocentric artistic tradition while demonstrating empathic sensitivity" (5).

Lindfors equally argues that the early postcolonial African writer "was regarded as a teacher whose primary task was to re-educate his society to an acceptance of itself" (25). This, he suggests, the writer could do "by strongly affirming the value of African culture" (25). Similarly, Achebe stresses his role as a writer whose fiction suggests what is expected of others: "to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And this is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word" (105). Achebe would be satisfied if his novels, especially the ones that are set in the past, "did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on god's behalf delivered them" (105). Two of his most prominent works, *Things Fall Apart* and *A Man of the People*, are rich in African culture and black consciousness. No wonder Gikandi observes that Achebe's "seminal status in the history of African literature" lies precisely in his ability to comprehend that the novel provided a new way of re-organizing African cultures, especially in the crucial juncture of transition from colonialism to national independence" (30-31). In his quest for postcolonial aesthetic forms, therefore, it is Achebe's view that "narratives can indeed propose an alternative world beyond the realities imprisoned in the colonial and pre-colonial relations of power" (Gikandi 31).

This narrative potential can further be discussed in dialogue with other critical views. Ahmed Yerima, for instance, refers to Terry Eagleton's idea of culture and suggests that it actually implies the possibility of employing cultural self-awareness as a pedagogical instrument, which, he argues, "fits us

into political citizenship by liberating the ideal or collective self within each of us" (9). This means that culture can provide a sense of belonging, politically and socially, by resuscitating the spirit of collectivism inherent in each of us but often found in its latent form until ignited or awakened. Yerima observes that culture is a "signifying system, through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (10). This perspective highlights the instrumentality of culture as a potent weapon in the hands of creative writers due to the social engagement of their works.

Similarly, Jegede has advanced the argument that African art is functional ("art for life's sake"), and thus establishes an antipodal relationship with the more popular Western doctrine of "art for art's sake" (237–247). He believes that art in Africa operates as an expression of the culture of the people: "art is lived out; it is experienced intimately; it is expected and demanded. In such cultures as exist in traditional societies in Africa, art is integral to life and to man's well- being. It is expressive of a people's world-view, and its absence creates an obvious but uncomfortable vacuum" (239). It is, therefore, implied that drama and theatre as art forms could be employed to project and promote the culture of a society and its people, with a view to ensuring the socio-cultural and even economic and political survival of that particular society. This argument is not far from Bhabha's admission that culture can be approached as a strategy of survival, through ontological continuity, with socio-political and socio-economic relevance:

> Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement… Culture is translational because such special histories of displacement… makes the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture a rather complex issue. (172)

Art functions at two distinct and closely interdependent levels, spiritual and secular (Jegede 241), and both partake of the mechanism through which literature and theatre actualize themselves. As explicated by Jegede:

> The spiritual domain involves religion, with the associational elements of ancestor worship and the various shrines – communal and personal – which are installed. Many African societies repose faith in their ancestors. Though dead, ancestors are believed to have the power to transform themselves to formidable spiritual entiities who generally intercede in support of their offsprings. It is this need to fulfill religious obligations, to appeal to, or venerate ancestors, or to appease malevolent powers, that have encouraged the production of artworks – in wood, metal, clay or composite materials – in considerable quantity. (241)

In its secular performance, art fulfils different kinds of socio-political and economic functions, such as prestige, semioticism, aesthetics, and activism, among others. Of relevance to this study is that African postcolonial creative writers employ both the spiritual and the secular means of artistic expression to project the culture of Africa. For instance, attempting to communicate with the spiritual world, most Africans consult the oracle, and this is a well-developed motif in the literary, dramatic, and theatrical endeavours of African postcolonial artists. In most cases, this is *Ifa* oracle, a prominent figure in Yorubaland, Edoland, Igalaland, and west Africa. It is interesting to note that the interest in *Ifa* as a medium of cognition, investigation, and problem-solving has been recently gaining ground even in the west. Intellectuals like Professor Wande Abimbola, the doyen of Yoruba and African literature in Nigeria, and Yemi Elebuibon, to mention two of them, are typical Ifa advocates, specialists in Ifa pedagogy, and Ifa instructors that have made tremendous advancement in western institutions (see https://dawncommission.org and Adebayo).

The above-mentioned complexity that Bhabha refers to probably informed Yerima's argument that the concept of "culture" expands beyond the basic definition of being "the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment" (43-44), a principle that can be illustrated by Nigerian cultural policy of 1988. In contemporary times, culture is rather viewed as even more evolving and involving, more complex and yet more ordinary, and because it is all around

us and within us, it shapes human identity and is closely linked to the human past, present, and future. Yerima holds the view that culture has become commercialized, but he also notes that it can be seen as a political weapon, "in an organized form for attracting attention to a country" (44). An ample example in this context is the Festival for Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) which was organized in Nigeria to pull together nearly all the countries of Africa to exhibit and demonstrate the arts and culture of their nations. Rebranding its cultural attributes, the Nigerian Institute of Cultural Orientation (NICO) was established to contribute to the evolving national cultural identity.

A further critical perspective in this respect is Fanon's view expressed in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, presented in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*:

> The first step for a colonized people in finding a voice and identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation's past, seeing its pre-colonial era as a pre-civilized limbo or as a historical void. Children, both Black and White will have been taught to see history, culture, and progress as beginning with the arrival of the Europeans. If the first step towards a postcolonial perspective is to reclaim one's own past, then the second is to begin to erode the colonialists' ideology by which that past had been devalued. (192)

The postcolonial writers' efforts to reclaim the culture of their people, to "write back" to the apparatuses of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and, in particular, to challenge the "grand narratives" characteristic of colonialism, illustrate Fanon's standpoint here. An analysis of Salami-Agunloye and Idegu's selected plays will provide insights into how they address the subject of cultural imperialism as a major concern of postcolonial drama.

Cultural Nationalism in *Emotan: A Benin Heroine and Ata Igala the Great*

Ata Igala the Great is a historical play that dramatizes the experience of a paramount ruler (Ata) and his kingdom with the colonial authority in the central part of present-day Nigeria. A characteristic motif in the portrayal of colonial authorities and their concentration in the figure of the ruler, the conflicting relationship between incompatible socio-cultural positions ends up in a complete breakdown of all forms of affilitiation that eventually lead to Ata's face-saving death. The other work under discussion, *Emotan: A Benin Heroine*, is also a historical play. It revolves around a monarchical conflict that engulfed the Benin Kingdom in the southern part of present-day Nigeria in the seventeenth century. Ogun, a rightful heir to the throne, is exiled to the forest and his throne eventually usurped by a supposedly trusted younger brother. The conflict generated by this scheme compels Emotan to brace himself for fighting the injustice. A subterranean move by the duo subsequently leads to the King's assassination and the restoration of the throne to Ogun. The present article is concerned with the aesthetic, symbolic, and functional aspects of the story and how it articulates African culture and its social dimension.

Both plays reassert important cultural canons by representing political, religious, and communal systems of social organization, the values held by the people, their clothes, and customs. These cultural specifics articulate African culture as profound, significant, and comparable favourably with any other culture in the world. The first major point that cannot be missed in both plays is the elegant presentation of traditional institutions. The cultural implications of royal power reveal the political institutions of ancient African kingdoms not only as rich and respectable, but also as divinely ordained and commanding communal approval and reverence. This is seen mostly in the way Idegu introduces Ata (the king) onto the stage in *Ata Igala the Great.*

In the play, it takes Idegu five and a half pages to introduce Ata to the stage, that is, his entry into the festive celebration taking place in his palace, described by the stage directions. Idegu describes Ata's majesty eloquently and vividly (he does the same in *The Legendary Inikpi*) – his attire, the ceremonies surrounding his appearance, the architecture of his palace, the retinue of aides, the dances, the music, instrumentation, the cultural practices that herald his entry, the entry itself including the nuances

of gestures embedded in his movements and his subjects' reverent attitudes. Space may not permit us to analyse these details properly, but a compressed version of the story can still be illuminating:

> It is morning time in Ata Igala's palace. A piece of indigenous architecture permeates the entire palace…. masquerades are scattered all over the palace entertaining all the people present and at different locations. … royal trumpeters blowing the trumpets that produce the "Ata, At'ododo" sound with a "gbum" drum sound accompaniment. … The atmosphere is charged with reverence and awe. Preceding Ata is a retinue of his royal wives, children and attendants. … They are adorned with beads on their necks, wrists and waists. … in an organized abruptness music ceases to a gentle flow of flute. … From a little distance are seen a group of royal advisers dressed in their royal attire with beads on their necks and wrists. Each of them carries a horse tail which they use to acknowledge the cheering crowd. … The flutist runs towards the advisers, blows his flute for a while, goes round them again for the second time, and then a third time. … Gradually, the flute diminishes as the royal trumpeter blows very loudly his "Ata, At'ododo" sound, to which the crowd yells in ecstasy. … From a distance, the praise singer to Ata is first sighted chanting the praise of his majesty. … Immediately Ata is seen, still from afar, the whole crowd burst into a loud ululation and they all collapse on their faces and knees in obeisance. He wears a spotless red cap with red "uloko" bird feathers round the cap. On his chest hangs a silver mask, "ejubejuailo" – the face that frightens other faces. … The praise singer chants loudly and then faces the crowd and chants, "Meg'wAtaaaaaaaaaa", to which all male reply "Ggggaaaaaaaaaaabbbaaaaiiiiiddduuuuu" while all females answer "Amideju Mideju, Amileku Mileku", meaning "if he says I should live, but I will live, if he says I should die, I will die". … In their well-organized form, music groups explode in performances. … any group that amuses him, the attendants fanning him cover his face with their "utofo", hiding his face from the crowd; for traditionally, Ata does not respond to humour or grief in the open. (5–10)

In all, the reverence and grandeur extended to Ata's kingship show how important he is to his people and how idiosyncratic and memorable African culture and its political institutions can be.

The consulting of the oracle to shed light on obscure areas of life and circumstances is prominent in *Ata Igala the Great*. The oracle is considered the repository of knowledge and wisdom in Africa. Therefore, in the ontological and cultural contexts of African cultural self-location, oracles are relied upon for profound pedagogical and epistemological knowledge, even to the extent of being able to perceive things that run beyond human logic and comprehension. Oracles are, therefore, consulted on a regular basis to reveal the unknown. For instance, in *Ata Igala the Great*, Ata consults the oracle through the chief diviner, Ohioga, the night after the festival for the celebration of life. He has a troubling dream for which he needs some light to be shed and only the ancestors are considered capable of providing the needed illumination through the oracle (23–27). In this play, Ata consults Ifa on three different occasions, in search of solutions to the problems he and his kingdom confront (pp. 23–27, 72–73, and 86–87). This is also seen in *Emotan* where both Oba Uwaifiokun, and Emotan consult the oracle at different times as they attempt to find solutions to their dilemmas. For instance, Okutukutu consults the oracle for Emotan about the feasibility of Ogun ascending the throne and Emotan is requested, among other things, to perform some night sacrifices as part of the measures undertaken to meet that end (71–73). In fact, Imade's statement, "who amongst us does not consult the oracle via our husbands?" (66), points to the practice as a popular act amongst the Benin families. Many African families engage in the act as a means of self- and world-knowledge. Divination is, therefore, represented as a regular African cultural practice in both plays.

Related to this is the belief of Africans in ancestral help, which, in turn, gives rise to ancestor worship. In Africa, ancestor worship, rituals, and festivals are interwoven. The kith and kin that die are often believed to have migrated to another realm or planet, and are believed to possess the power to watch over their living relatives while, at the same time, they can administer judgement or inflict pun-

ishment where necessary. For these reasons, they are approached and worshipped by the living who also believe the ancestors can occasionally visit them on earth. A typical example of ancestor worship is the masquerade festivals that are celebrated in many parts of Africa. Little wonder then that Omosede, a character in *Emotan*, says: "Who cares? The kingmakers have called the masquerade – the masquerade is here dancing" (59), referring to another greater set of beings (more powerful than the kingmakers) who are able to hand down punishment on erring kingmakers.

These cultural practices can also be seen in the opening of *Ata Igala the Great* (5–13). The opening stages a celebration of life, a festival where sacrifices are made to the ancestors to honour them and win favour with them. It is a forum for all citizens to interact in the atmosphere of conviviality – love, joy, peace, togetherness, unity, and warmth. The ceremony celebrates the preponderance of music, song, and dance that usually accompany such festivals. This festive phenomenon is usually led by the head (king) of the land. Ata's statement at the festival is instructive: "It has been a great day indeed. Our ancestors are happy with us and so I am happy with all of you. As our ancestors accepted our sacrifices, may they defend the land from sicknesses and afflictions" (10–13).

The Igwe or Ewere festival as a typical cultural phenomenon in the Benin Kingdom is also dramatized in *Emotan: A Benin Heroine*. The ewere leaves and the burning torches that are used during the festival have semiotic signifcance. As explicated by Akaeronmwon, the royal jester, while the ewere festival is an ettempt to commemorate and appease Queen Ewere, who was wrongfully killed, "the burning torches is to remove the evil curse brought in by Ubi's intrigues and any evil deeds in the land. The ewere leaves signify peace, tranquility, and favour" (25). Similarly, the incidences of a tiger and a snake disturbing Ogun's sleep in succession constitute negative semiotics (bad omen) for his safety at that moment, so he has to take immediate precautions: he kills the two animals and hurriedly leaves the place. His statement about these signs suggests that "[t]his is strange. A near-attack from a leopard and snake, in one day? … The gods must be giving me some signals. I must go forward. The enemies are probably nearby" (74).

In certain African rituals, different things (living and non-living) were required for sacrifice, culminating in human sacrifice. I*n Emotan*, the eponymous protagonist volitionally agrees to present herself as a sacrifice for her society to experience peace, wellness, and stability. Although the phenomenon of ritual is still a regular practice in Africa to date, human sacrifice is now outdated and definitely belongs to the past. Arguably, Salami-Agunloye allows this human self-sacrifice in order to discharge the burden of historical credibility. The performance arts (songs, music, dance, and instrumentation) in *Ata Igala the Great* are noteworthy as they refer to the traditional African arts of the pre-colonial and colonial periods. The ways in which the performers exhibit their art possess distinct significations and symbolisms. For instance, "the royal music announces the coming of Ata. … In an organized abruptness music ceases to a gentle flow of flute" (6). The artistry of the flutist who blows his flute to announce the royal arrival is not only intended to display elegant manners, but also has spiritual significations.

Therefore, the dances, music, instrumentation, songs and other arts, including the architecture of the palace, are all forms of cultural aesthetics specific to the Igala "nation" of Africa. This is exactly what Welsh-Asante means when he opines that "The court dances of every ethnic group in Africa embody certain behaviour on the part of the royalty and the masses. These dances become part of the epic memory and serve as resources for artistic expression of today" (4). The same goes for the ewere dance in *Emotan*. The dance has a cathartic symbolism of spiritual renovation. For this reason Oba Uwaifiokun is disturbed when Emotan refuses to drop her own leaves, like other women do. Her action is a clear message of the Emotan's relentless position and her rejection of his Obaship, and the message sinks well into the Oba. This informs his disturbed mood and statement after the departure of the women from the palace: "my chiefs, did you notice that Emotan refused to present her ewere leaves?" to which Chief Esogbon erroneously responds: "your Majesty, why do you worry over petty things?" (30). To Esogbon, it is petty, but to Oba Uwaifiokun, it is not, because as a culprit, he knows the gravity of what he has done and the possible implications of the same to both the traditional and royal institutions.

There are other cultural canons that are deployed in *Ata Igala the Great* and one of this is dressing. Of particular significance here is the dress style of Ata, his chiefs, and the other members of the

royal retinue. Apart from wearing court costumes, they have beads round their wrists, waists, and necks to signify their status. Also, the masquerades performed are regarded as cross-border rituals that enable the ancestors to visit the world of the living. The flute, the royal "utofo" used to fan Ata, and the horse tail used by Ata as a ritual attribute are cultural paraphernalia that, combined with other such items and practices, strengthen the Africanness of the plays.

Many other forms of cultural aesthetics are employed in the two plays. An eloquent example, in this respect, is the myth of the Ovia river (Oya in Yoruba mythology), who, in her eathly life was believed to have married Alaafin (His Royal Majesty) of Oyo. This mythical woman appears to Ogun as a spirit to stop him from drinking from the stream because, as she says, "as a king you are not to drink from a brook or a stream" (76). Her mission is to let Ogun "know that your days in exile are coming to an end. Very soon, your brother will be killed by your own sword" (76). Employing myth in African theatre is a common practice. Playwrights such as Femi Osofisan, Akinwumi Ishola, Ahmed Yerima, and Olu Obafemi, among many others, often find it useful, though not all of them use it the same way, as ideological preferences often influence the various uses of myth.

The practice of animism is also visible in the discussed plays, as, for instance, in the belief that a river has a soul and can communicate with people. The belief that the chirruping of some birds portends some particular omen for people, such as the bird *ahianmwen n'kioya*, which the play depicts as foreboding a bad omen whenever it chirrups around a man/woman (93). Such beliefs may sound superstitious, but they have their place in African culture. Sometimes, they are perceived as warning signs that precautionary measures must be taken and at other times, they might be experienced as actual magical events, especially when they operate as mystical attachments.

Conclusion

This article attempted to read two African plays, *Ata Igala the Great* and *Emotan: A Benin Heroine,* authored by Emmy Unuja Idegu and Irene Salami-Agunloye respectively, as cultural texts. The two playwrights consider it imperative to employ the cultural aesthetics of their society to highlight the Africanness of their creative works, thus indigenizing their drama. They have adopted indigenous forms of cultural aesthetics such as festivals, ancestor worship, sacrifices to the gods and the ancestors, animism, consultation with oracles, dance, music, song, and dress style, among others, to emphasize idiosyncratic cultural traits. Hence, the plays can be approached as literary endeavours that contribute to the postcolonial quest for national self-assertion, and their authors are postcolonial intellectuals who attempt to recall the pre-colonial past of their indigenous cultures with a view to reinventing it in a contemporary cultural environment.

The two plays demonstrate clearly the importance of reclaiming the cultural roots of Igala and Benin communities. Apart from educating African readers and giving them confidence in their cultural heritage, the discussed literary works also serve to enlighten non-native readers in order to help them get rid of some false impressions about African culture, acquired in the course of centuries of cultural misrepresentation. In the characteristic manner of postcolonial literature, the plays "speak back" to power – both local and metropolitan – and it is our conclusion that their strength lies in the wide scope of the employed aesthetic forms that signify idiosyncratic Africanness. This fact points to the functional purposes of the plays: that they do not attempt to entrench African culture only, but also to diminish the effects of western cultural imperialism. The author of the present article is convinced that featuring indigenous cultural practices is needed to preserve African heritage and protect it from the uneven distribution of cultural importance in the process of cross-cultural interaction. It is important to bear in mind that cultural self-assertion is vital to guarantee cultural survival in today's globalized world.

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