

**INTEGRATING ROOTS WITH MODERN SENSIBILITIES: A  
STUDY OF AFRICAN FOLKLORISTIC CULTURE UNDER  
COLONIAL INFLUENCE**

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Sitting under the moonlight, outside their obi<sup>16</sup>, children in Africa grew up listening ifo<sup>17</sup> tales from their grandmothers. Didactic in nature, these stories were not only a means of entertainment but also considered significant for the psychological development of the child, teaching them what every folktale does, that is, the difference between good and bad. But, have our modern selves moved so far away from such traditions that this spectacle no longer exists? Or are the traditions, especially folkloristic traditions seen as a threat to our modern sensibilities?

Feeding our aspiration of moving along with the world we tend to detach ourselves from our roots. Charles Baudelaire synonymizes roots with tradition and permanence and therefore any change “is potentially felt as a loss and a threat to the sense of cultural continuation” (Anttonen, 2005, 43). While the biological metaphor of roots by Baudelaire deals with the threat to the community because of the weakening of the roots, the impact also extends to individual identity. In this paper,

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<sup>16</sup> Obi refers to a central gathering place for the reception of guests.

<sup>17</sup> Ifo tales are folktales popular in Africa.

we attempt to comprehend the conflict of the preservation of age-old traditions amidst changing modern sensibilities from the perspective of African folkloristic tradition. It seeks to complicate the position of the colonized subject as a carrier of ancestral traditions while submerged in the new age subtleties. A similar conflict is observed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where the involuntary distancing from the cultural traditions created gaps for the colonizer to dominate and unsettle the native's sense of belonging.

Modernity is often seen in the light of moving away from traditions. While modern societies, as defined by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt are based upon "individualization, social mobilization and exposure to media", folkloristic societies are perceived to be lacking "internal hierarchization" (Anttonen, 2005, 48). In an attempt to understand the modern as the 'new normal', traditional folkloristic societies conveniently become the 'Other' and are seen in a negative sense. Further, since the individual and the communal identity are closely intertwined, the natives are equally affected and their identity threatened. Jürgen Habermas' notion of "we-consciousness" seeks to establish itself as an idea of "an imagined blood relation or on cultural identity, of people who share a belief in a common origin, identify one another as 'members' of the same community, and thereby set themselves apart from [others]" (Eze et al, 2021, 3). Traditions such as folklores develop the "we-consciousness" that brings about a sense of belongingness leading to identity formation.

The African identity can be understood in terms of superstitious beliefs, fear of the spirit of ancestors, reverence for nature gods, and values such as hard work and diligence. The African society exists as what Benson O. Igboin terms a "composite" universe, that is, a blend of "divine, spirit, human, animate and inanimate beings, which constantly interact with one another" (Igboin, 2011, 98). Although the fear of the ancestor and their reverence for multiple nature gods is embedded in their tradition, it contributed to maintaining the morality of African society. However, with the coming of the colonizer, their entire belief system was shaken to the core

since the Europeans brought along the idea of worship of a single god as opposed to multiple gods.

The loss of identity can be comprehended through Nassima Dalal's concept of "psychocultural marginality" used in the Native American context. It is "the loss of one's cultural identity along with social and personal disorganization. Such impact is produced when people are denied access to their traditional culture, values and norms leading to historical trauma and cultural alienation" (Dalal, 2011). However, the same concept can be applied to any colonizer-colonized situation. In Africa, disorganization of the immediate space led to the emergence of "psychocultural marginality".

To take their authority forward, the Europeans established institutions such as schools and churches. It helped in spreading their beliefs of Christianity and influenced the native language and traditions. When these institutions seemed limited, the government introduced a judicial system to monitor and control the natives via force and laws. In Africa, earlier transmitted through oral tradition, folklore was endangered by the modern institutionalized education, which depreciated the value of the language and the folk tales. Due to the absence of documentation of the native folk tales, the domination of the western documented tales gained popularity among children as the oral tradition fell prey to decadence. The same is also noted by Zygmunt Bauman and Myers Briggs who see oral tradition as "fragile" that needs protection from the "industrialized culture" (Anttonen, 2005, 52).

Folktales are passed from one generation to another to create a cultural continuum. They form a significant part of the culture of a community, which is endangered with the coming of the colonizer ultimately restricting the community's growth. This can be viewed in the light of O.C. Acholonu's argument that "a nation cannot develop beyond its level of cultural development" (Anyanwu, 2015,13). The

colonizer attacks the native culture to disintegrate the society and undo their sense of individuality and community that stems from their culture. In *Things Fall Apart*, a text that shows the plight of Africans under the influence of colonial power, a similar situation can be observed. While decoding the strategy of the white man, Obierika says, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe, 2001, 166). This contrary force of the colonizer makes it imperative for the natives to preserve their culture in all forms possible. In this light, the folklore tradition becomes more significant for younger generations to acknowledge.

Moreover, several studies indicate that indigenous folktales contribute to the psychological development of the child by inculcating in them important African values and providing them with a sense of belonging. However, western education limits holistic growth since children fail to identify with the culture of the colonizer. The African folktales preach values and morals central to native society such as hard work, morality and obedience which get substituted with foreign ideals of the West. The children no longer even identify with popular African folktale characters such as Agu, Mbe, Ewi, Ezi, etc. but with Western characters like Tom and Jerry and Noddy. They start following the western values that promote individualism in place of African collectivism. This process of abandoning one's culture and subsequent identification with foreign culture symbolizes an irreversible break from their tradition.

The African society functions as a clan where the brotherhood extends from the immediate blood relations to the community. The life of every individual is valued and protected by all members. With the colonial slave trade, the importance of human life depreciated drastically leading to the death of several Africans. Further, the internal conflict within the community also attacked the spirit of fending for each

other irrespective of everything. Before the advent of the colonizer, it was considered a grave crime to harm a fellow clan member but colonization forced them to raise arms against each other. Not only this, but the slave trade also distanced people from their ancestors rendering the transmission of culture difficult. The combined factors of the slave trade and internal conflict led to the weakening of the roots and a movement from collectivism to individualism.

The shift in pedagogy at a young age also influences the religious beliefs of the children who later grow up to be adults. Religion is one of the strongest pillars for the creation of a community that provides people with fundamental beliefs to connect over. With the spread of Christianity through institutions like the Church, the religious beliefs of the natives slowly keep fading till they reach a point of saturation. Moreover, the colonizer's religion does not only strip the natives of their spiritual beliefs but also leads to a reconfiguration of the community landscape. Some sites of culture are used by the colonizer to build new institutions. An example of this can be traced from *Things Fall Apart* where the evil forest of the Igbo<sup>18</sup>, a prominent site of the culture of the Africans, was given up to build a church:

Every clan and village had its 'evil forest'. In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine-men when they died. An 'evil forest' was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in their clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept (Achebe, 2001, 140).

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<sup>18</sup> Igbo refers to an ethnic group in Nigeria.

In the above statement, it can be seen that the taking over of the native site of culture did not affect the colonized at first only to later realize that it was a beginning to the end. Contrary to what the natives thought, when the colonizer was not harmed in the least, it unsettled their superstitious beliefs.

However, resisting the colonial power was difficult because not every native shared a similar outlook of the colonizer. The western religion often became a haven for women and outcasts. While childbearing becomes an important identity marker for the women of Africa, the culture of the west provides them with a respite from the same by offering an open avenue for autonomy. The Africans still hold on to the conservative beliefs in matters of divorce and do not allow women a respectable position in society. Another neglected section in African society, the outcasts are often captivated by Christianity because of their immediate acceptance. An example of this is also depicted in *Things Fall Apart* where the missionaries rescued the twins from the evil forest. They also accepted other outcasts, or *osu* in their new religion because they believed everyone to be equal in the eyes of God. This acceptance led to an internal conflict among the natives which made it harder to resist the colonial power. When asked by Okonkwo if the white man understands the customs of their land. Obierika replies “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? (Achebe, 2001, 166)

The break from the past traditions makes us question the reasons for abandoning native folkloristic culture in pursuit of the culture of the colonizer. It is through an inquiry into this question that one can discover that rural-urban drift, colonization and technological advancement are some of the reasons. The dual factors of education and urbanization lead to rural-urban drift, which results in abandoning aspects of their own culture. Since the African societies do not have access to the

resources such as electricity and the internet, it causes a hindrance in their advancement, making their culture irrelevant via contemporary accessibility.

Alan Dundes views Folklore from a devolutionist point of view and establishes “social, economic and technological changes” (Anttonen, 2005, 49) as grounds for the deterioration of the folklore tradition. Together these factors ultimately lead to a negative attitude of the native towards their culture. As a result, they devalue their culture and do not preserve it, let alone pass it to the following generations. This can be traced back to J.W. Berry’s cultural strategies of “Assimilation” and “Separation” in which one tends to lose the identity of their own culture. Further, with the advent of colonialism comes modernization and technological advancement that makes western folkloristic tradition appear attractive due to its easy documentation and access. Since African folktales are slowly vanishing, there arises an immediate need to preserve and document them. However, even this process of documentation has ‘a politics of its own’. It can be observed by looking at the already documented folklore studies how the process tends to be Eurocentric in nature. This is partly due to the fact that people in African societies follow oral tradition. While drums, bells, town criers, etc. become modes of communication in African societies, the ‘modern’ societies employ newer technologies to preserve and advance their culture.

We cannot clearly demarcate or separate tradition from modernity since they are both fluid categories that intersect and overlap at multiple points. Nor can either of the two categories exist in isolation from the other without an interlink. In this light, while “Assimilation” and “Separation” fail to provide lucrative solutions to the cultural dilemma, “Integration” can work as a better strategy. As proposed by Berry, it is a process of embracing the other culture while preserving one’s own culture. Adopting this strategy can help the upcoming generation to be at par with the rest of the world as well as hold strong to their roots. One needs to acknowledge that the native folkloristic traditions do not become redundant in contemporary times but act as a helpful instrument in providing solutions to modern problems. It has long been

observed that in times of distress, individuals tend to turn back to their origin to discover answers in their place of comfort. To make a sense of his identity in the present context, it is equally important for an individual to know the history of his people and nation. It is rather significant for a colonized subject to understand his situated-ness in the postcolonial space where his identity is a blend of different cultures. Since their indigenous identity is subject to erasure, striving for a balance via “Integration” is imperative so that their own cultural identity is not lost.

In the case of Africans in *Thing Fall Apart*, the natives witnessed an absolute loss of culture due to the colonial forces. It is evident in the following lines “It was the time of the full moon. But that night the voice of children was not heard. The village ilo where they always gathered for a moon-play was empty. The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance to be displayed later to the village” (Achebe, 2001,186). It can be observed here how the Africans lose their sense of integrity along with culture. A macroscopic view of the Africans would entail us to look at possible solutions which include documenting the folktales and an acknowledgement of their heritage by the younger generation.

Folktales, a part of the cultural continuum, not only help in upholding the beliefs and values of a community but also act as a medium of preserving the culture. Gaining knowledge of one’s culture in the formative years helps develop individual and communal identity, further creating a sense of belongingness. Therefore, folktales are not a thing of the past but given their notions of morality and assertion of a communal identity, they serve the function of adding to our modern sensibilities.

Our spirit of questioning does harm to traditions. It is unjustified to view them from the lens of our modern sensibilities as one would only see the tradition, culture and folktales as the ‘Other’, something that is defined as a ‘lack’. In this respect, the spectacle of ‘sitting under the moonlight’ is lost. What constitutes this loss is a loss of

communal bonding, identity and belongingness. While the modern sensibilities are limited to providing a rational understanding, one has to come back to traditions to seek togetherness. It is further not possible to leave one behind in pursuit of the other arising a need to readjust and readapt the modern selves to accommodate traditions.

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