



TRADITION AND REVOLT IN POST-COLONIAL SOCIETIES: A STUDY OF WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN* AND DEREK WALCOTT'S *DREAM ON MONKEY MOUNTAIN*

MBWOGÉ DELPHINE MBONG
University of Yaounde 1
Email: delphinembwoge@gmail.com

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.2.77](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.2.77)



Article info

Article Received: 05/04/2024
Article Accepted: 12/05/2024
Published online: 16/05/2024

Abstract

Tradition initiates, re-interprets, and above all revalorizes the old and the new. In the examination of tradition and revolt in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, a profound exploration of tradition as a cultural phenomenon emerges shedding light on the socio-cultural values within the post-colonial context. It is worth noting that the debate over the nature and function of tradition, the issues surrounding it; that is the constituent of that tradition, how it is to be used in the present and the future, and how it is to be valued are issues which are in themselves very pertinent for any society or culture that is experiencing a rapid technological and social change. Drawing upon New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critical approaches, this article delves into how Walcott and Soyinka navigate the complexities of tradition and rebellion envisioning diverse possibilities for socio-cultural change. Moreover, it underscores the utilization of traditional customs and folkways to bridge societal divides and restore harmony amidst fragmentation.

Keywords: Tradition, revolt, New Historicist, Cultural Materialism, Societal divides, culture.

Introduction

Many people live in a complex realm of tradition and customs which later turn to make life more complex and sometimes unbearable for the people. The life of an African is characterized by a combination of factors - external and personal factors. Talking about external factors we refer to the spiritual, gods, and rituals, while personal factors are one's will,

senses, reason, and state of mind. Societies have their belief systems, customs, and traditions that are peculiar to a given community. Femi Osofisan's (1998) assessment of theatre gives expression to the hopes and concerns of the dispossessed (11). Such an expression gives the central concern of the most exciting and dramatic works performed across the globe in recent decades. Writers, who generally originated from nations formally colonized by

Western imperial powers, saw the need and developed a strong urge to recuperate local histories and local performance traditions, not only as a means of cultural decolonization but also as a challenge to the implicit representational biases of Western theatre. Walcott and Soyinka fit well in this category.

New Historicism is one of the critical approaches for this work, and as revealed by Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: a User Friendly Guide* (1999), literature is referred to and often refers to things outside the text as it focuses on representation of facts (279). The plays of Soyinka and Walcott focus on both within and without the dominant traditions of modern and African drama and have equally built a remarkable mastery of Western and African traditions. In this light, we come across cultural materialists like Peter Barry, who in *Beginning Theory*, thinks that cultural materialists go beyond Marxism in that, "they focus on the marginalized rather than solely on class conflict." (87)

The complexities of tradition and revolt as highlighted in the selected works of Soyinka and Walcott mark the beginning of a turning point in the lives of their characters. Africans, for example, have an important component on their conception of reality, a domain whose existence is explained mystically. This is one of the most powerful beliefs in African cosmology which has equally influenced the way Africans turn to understand the "person". The "person" is seen as a composite of body (material) and spirit (immaterial) yielding a dualistic conception of the human being (Godfred Ozumba's "African Traditional Metaphysics" in *Journal for African Studies*, 2004). A combination of these factors gives human beings a sense of direction and control. Africans give more prominence to the supernatural to be able to connect to their physical surroundings. This is highlighted during the invocation of the gods – the pouring of libation for example. At this point, the metaphysical aspect of an African is incontestable because he believes it is the moment that he is in direct connection and communication with his ancestors and most importantly, feels more connected to tradition.

On the basis of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism critical approaches, this article delves into how Walcott and Soyinka

present the issues of tradition and revolt in their works and how traditional customs and folkways can be employed to bridge societal divides and restore harmony amidst fragmentation.

The evolution of tradition in post-colonial societies

In the post-colonial context, tradition assumes a multifaceted significance, serving as a repository of cultural heritage and a means of resistance against oppressive systems. Soyinka, in his exploration of Yoruba mythology and traditional practices, exemplifies the fusion of tradition with contemporary literary expression thereby, affirming its enduring relevance in the modern world (Soyinka 1990).

In most of Soyinka's dramas, for example, he has adopted Yoruba mythology and traditional practices such as the 'egungun' and the New Yam Festival to create a mythic and ritualistic view for dramatic action that exploits and projects the resources and energies of tradition. In *Death and the King's Horseman*, Mr. and Mrs. Pilkings are dressed in the 'egungun' attire – the ancestral mask that is sacred to the Yoruba people. In Olunde's view, the Pilkings have no respect for the culture and tradition of others. Olunde's view is seen in a conversation he has with Jane Pilkings:

Olunde: You are Well, you look quite well yourself Mrs. Pilkings. From what little I can see of you.

Jane: Oh, this. It's caused quite a stir I assure you and not all of it very pleasant. You are not shocked I hope?

Olunde: Why should I be? But don't you find it rather hot in there? Your skin must find it difficult to breathe.

Jane: Well, it is a little hot I must confess, but it's all for a good cause;

Olunde: What good cause Mrs. Pilkings?

Jane: All this, the ball. And His Highness being here in person and all that.

Olunde: (mildly) And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?

Jane: Oh, so you are shocked after all, how disappointing.

Olunde: No, I am not shocked Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand. (41)

Olunde is not happy to see Jane Pilkings desecrate the ancestral mask because, to begin with, she is not part of the Yoruba culture; moreover, she does not know anything about the traditions and customs of the Yoruba people. From the above conversation, Olunde opines that he has spent some time with the white race and has discovered that whites do not have respect for what they do not understand (41). This is about New Historicism which states that, "an individual's identity and his cultural milieu inhabit, reflect and define each other". The relationship is mutually constitutive: "they create each other and are dynamically unstable" (Lois Tyson 280). It is clear that global forces like geography and technology are beginning to take a toll on the tradition and customs of the people around the globe especially that of the Africans who seems to be in an "endangered situation", and if the African is not careful, he may lose sight of his very existence which may, to a greater extent, affect individual and national identities.

Vincent A. Tanda and Emmanuel N. Chia (2006) in "The Impact of Globalization on the Socio-Linguistic Landscape of Cameroon" express their worries about the increasing process of globalization as they note:

If we continue to embrace globalization and forget our roots, globalization will simultaneously tend to undermine language and cultural diversity and necessitate new opportunities for its expression. And if this happens, the world's population will feel that the languages and cultures they embody are in jeopardy. (32)

It is in this light that Olunde sees the need to protect the culture and tradition of the Yoruba people from the likes of the Pilkings.

What Soyinka accomplishes in *Death and the King's Horseman* is to counter-pose the dominant culture of the Oyo Kingdom against the equally hegemonic culture of the white invaders. Here

cultures are not at loggerheads with each other but the people bearing that culture act as a reminder to others of the dying need to preserve their culture and to see to it that the white man does not defile the African culture. African culture is there to bind the African people and communities together likewise Western culture. But each culture should be given its space to function within the confines of its heritage.

Early in Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, when Makak is arrested for disorderly conduct, he forgets his legal name (219). Walcott brings this out to make the audience understand that the delirium from which Makak suffers is clearly at least in part a function of his inability to link himself to family or culture. Makak's behavior can be considered as partial amnesia which is a result of the psychological trauma he suffered during the periods of slave trade and colonialism. The fact that he cannot identify himself with any culture is indicative of what the bloody past has done to his very self. Tar Tsaaioir elaborates further as he narrates:

... Much of the culture of the uprooted black slaves in the Caribbean islands was intangible and within the dominant matrices of plantation slave ideology, these intangible cultural heritages were endangered by the white plantation owners. However, certain resilient cultural resources have stubbornly survived this violent erasure of cultural mores and now serve as unique mnemonics of the African past. (629)

Culture has a strong influence on those who value and recognize its importance as it reveals an ethical connection to the tradition of a people. Despite Makak's state of loss, towards the end of the play, he connects to and links himself to a particular culture or heritage. He identifies his roots that have been planted deep down into his ancestral lineage that remains in no other place but Africa. He has, in effect, been informed by an ideology that strips him of the individual and human identity implicit in the name as he seeks to structure his identity around racial ideology. Walcott believes that there is more to Makak than a disvalued and disrupted constitution, a disintegrating ego formed from shadows deep in the mines of racist ideology. In complete

opposition to all that he sees, Makak experiences himself and other blacks as human and whites as a force of natural and supernatural evil – this is what brings about his delirium, for he can neither resolve this contradiction nor live with it. In his hallucination, Makak is seen as the saviour of his people. Walcott sees Makak as:

The man who will revive their culture, return them to the time before colonial degradation, lead them out of the cave where they see only shadows, and bring them into the light where they will see the truth. The dream on Monkey Mountain is both Makak's delusion and prophetic vision of the light. (qdt. in *Colonialism and Cultural Identity* 49).

The visions of revenge Makak goes through as an African in a multi-racial society stem from inherent injustice and racial classification instituted by the colonizer.

In Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, there is the consciousness to redeem the self from the chains of slavery and colonialism. Makak's execution of the white apparition is similar to what Maya Jaggi in *The Necessity of Negritude* describes as "the cycle of violence generated by colonialism" (9). When Makak looks at himself, he sees what a white racist sees. He is in fact a metaphor for those legions of colonized subjects who in Walcott's words, "look at life with black skin and blue eyes" (*What the Twilight Says* 9). He is thus suffering from the "contradiction of being white in mind and black in body" (12) or more accurately, white in self-perception and black in self-image. Walter Rodney in his *Revolutionary Legacy "Groundings"* (1983) maintains that, "it is as though no black man can see another black man", or Walcott might add that, "except by looking through a white person. It is time we started seeing through our own eyes" (34). Borrowing from Patrick Hogan Colm, "Makak's identity, his understanding of the world, his evaluation of himself and of others, all have been determined by white perceptions, white ideas—which is to say, by ascription that serve to sustain racial hierarchies (48). To the white race, there is no other race that is equivalent to them in any dimension. For cultural critics, however, there is no meaningful distinction between the so-called "high" or "low" forms of culture, for all

cultural productions can be analyzed to reveal the cultural works they perform.

It is understood that tradition assumes a multifaceted significance. In the past, marriages were contracted on tribal, cultural, and racial norms. Before a person got married, the parents of both parties must see to it that their child is getting into a well-behaved and respectable family, their child is getting married to his or her tribe's person, and above all, he/she is marrying within his/her race. In most cases, the parents of the boy or girl would be the ones to choose a suitor for their child and if that happens, the child would gladly accept the parents' choice. This is illustrated in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* where on the night of Elesin's suicide, he is given a wife who will carry his seed when he is gone. Iyaloja points out to Elesin; "... the fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor the next..." (17). Though Iyaloja is not the mother of Elesin, she plays the role of the mother of the village to whom certain responsibilities are entrusted, reasons why she is the one who looks for a bride for Elesin as demanded by Elesin before his death.

Today, it is a common phenomenon to see people of different races and backgrounds intermarry. Given the globally structured agencies that are today at work, people and individuals have gone beyond tribal and skin-color differences. More so, education has had a lot to play in these changes. We believe that traveling is education. Borrowing from Ali Mazrui (2001), the more people travel, the more knowledge they gain. As a consequence, boundaries have been dissolved, artificial barriers broken and distances reduced, thus accelerating mobility.

It would be wise to suggest that African cultures and traditions need to be preserved by instituting them in the school curriculum for fear not being eroded as societies are gradually experiencing rapid technological change.

Understanding Tradition

Central to the discourse is the role of tradition in initiating, re-interpreting, and revalorizing both the old and the new. As advocated by New Historicism, understanding historical events entails, not merely discerning occurrences, but also comprehending the

interpretations thereof by the involved parties. This approach emphasizes the significance of tradition in shaping societal narratives and responses (Lois Tyson 293). The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines tradition as the enduring customs, behaviors, and beliefs transmitted across generations within a particular group or society (1211). These traditions not only foster cohesion but also imbue events with significance as evidenced by rituals such as drumming in the African societies to announce significant occurrences. It is well to note that the ritual of songs, dance, drums, proverbs, or legend are aspects of oral tradition which can be seen as a set of cultural norms used by a people to govern the day-to-day activities of their communities.

Oral tradition as defined by The Merriam-Webster Concise Encyclopedia is "how information is passed by word of mouth from one generation to the next in the absence of writing or a recording medium" (1132). Before written literature, all literature was oral. It was composed orally, transmitted orally, and performed orally. Oral tradition has been in existence from time immemorial and it is not limited to people of the past, rather it is widely spread in contemporary cultures. In the days before universal literacy, music composers or praise singers would sing or chant memorable songs in praise and honor of the people's stories. They would devise various techniques to keep their memory alive and also to help their listeners keep track of their stories. One of the reasons for such a performance was to keep the customs, history, or culture of the people alive, and though it was a form of storytelling, it was a popular entertainment. Oral tradition features in written literature from colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary literature. Most works of commonwealth literary playwrights like Walcott and Soyinka who happen to be the main playwrights in this article, laced their works with aspects of oral tradition.

Henry J. Drewal, John Pemberton, and Rowland Abiodun in "The Yoruba World" note that the Yoruba are known as people who belong to two distinct yet inseparable worlds - "aye" (the visible, tangible world of the living) and "orun" (the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits). In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, two worlds and two

forces come into play. The world of the living and the dead, the African world and the Western world, and the supernatural force (spiritual force and the human force). In this light, the aspect of metaphysics comes into play. As the play opens we discover that Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman whose pride and duty is to follow the dead king to ride with him to the 'abode of the gods' marches through the market as he is followed by the praise singer and drummers. According to native laws and customs, the night of the great king's burial, his horseman will have to die that night to accompany him to his journey beyond. Joseph, the houseboy of the British district officer explains, "It is native law and custom. The King dies last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die to accompany him to heaven" (22). What the District officer could not understand is that such a ritual does exist and is tied to lineage. But he will have to understand that his father before him occupied the social position he currently occupies, and all things being equal, his heir will do likewise, thereby ensuring the continuity of the "Oyo" tradition and social-spiritual harmony. Moreover, if Elesin fails to complete the ritual, that could destroy the Yoruba universe. The death of the King has occasioned the ritual through which Elesin, the King's Horseman, must go.

It should be understood here that death for Elesin is not a final contract; it is rather the rite of passage to the larger world of the ancestors, a world linked in the continuous bond of Yoruba metaphysics to that of the living and the unborn.

Similarly, in one of Soyinka's most renowned African plays, *The Strong Breed*, there is a dying need for a carrier ritual. Eman, the protagonist in *The Strong Breed* dies for the renewal of society. In Eman's village, the ritual of carrier is different from that in Sunma's village. In Eman's home town a carrier must be willing, which implies that the tradition of the willing carrier which is Eman's inheritance is one "worthy of respect" (Soyinka 97). They do not choose a "stranger or deformed" person like Ifada as is the case in Sunma's village. Eman lectures Jaguna that the carrier family is respected as the strong breed. On the day of the ritual, the carrier will not be "decorated or

humiliated". Instead, oil will be applied to his whole body and white rings will be marked around his eyes. No one chases or beats him. On the contrary, he is sent with a "mark of respect by drumming". The carrier is not sacrificed; instead in the place of the carrier, a small boat is built that contains indefinable items that symbolize the sins of the village. This is taken to a river by the carrier, and the boat "drowned" in the middle of it (Soyinka 102). In the new village where Eman takes refuge, for fear of the call of blood, the ritual is strange and cruel; he finds a new kind of carrier ritual which is human sacrifice. He reflects on his home and recalls how his father once asked him to take his hereditary function as a carrier because such a function can be performed only by men of such a family as theirs - *The Strong Breed*. The old man tells Eman:

Do you know what you are saying? Ours is a strong breed, my son. It is only a strong breed that can take the boat to the river year after year and wax stronger on it. I have taken down each year's evils for over twenty years. I hope you will follow me (*The Strong Breed*, 103).

Eman had thought he could run away from his blood. But once Ifada, the deformed idiot boy is chosen for the carrier ritual, Eman is astonished and calls the custom a savage act. Ignorant of the customs of the new place, Eman harbors Ifada in his house and dances the music of the gods. Eman's sacrifice is likened to the call of blood. This is because "blood is strong like no other. Anything you do in life must be less than this" (*The Strong Breed*, 105). Later in *The Strong Breed* Eman's father warns him "...your blood will betray you son, because you cannot hold it back..." (105). Eman cannot escape his destiny; his blood will bring him back because he is surrounded by supernatural forces that control and shape their very existence.

James Frazer in "The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion" sees *The Strong Breed* as a play that explicates more on the fate or destiny of an individual. Through that, Soyinka brings out the Yoruba traditional belief system on destiny or "Ori". The Yoruba community believes in the form of destiny. To them, every individual has to accept his/her destiny, and to some extent, one can improve his/her life with the guidance of the Ifa

divination priest by giving sacrifices to Olodumare.

Tradition can be well comprehended only if the people involved are made to see the significance that is attached to that tradition. In Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, through his principal character Makak, we see that connection or link to his ancestry. Makak reveals that he "... can read the palm of every leaf" and "prophesy from one crystal of dew" (288). This is an indication of his knowledge and understanding of his culture. From Makak's statement, we can opine that he can identify with every leaf in the forest and can tell which leaf treats which ailment. An example of this is indicated in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* where Makak uses herbs to treat the man who suffers from a snake bite (243) and heals Boy who suffers toothache but with a mere rob of traditional blue stone (245), after all other medicines had failed. He reiterates the power of faith in Act One Scene Two as he tells his patients to believe in him and have faith that they will be healed. His repetition of "faith, faith! Believe in yourselves" (249) emphasizes his attachment to tradition and projects the cultural values of the African people. This goes in line with Cultural Materialism which posits that human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence. Cultural Materialists like Marvin Harris in "Cultural Materialism" in an *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology* (1996), make a distinction between behavioral events and ideas, values, and other mental events. (277)

In Walcott's *Malcochon*, the idea of taking a thief to the waterfall to be disproven of theft is what beats my imagination. The death mute, described as "the old thief without a tongue" (179) who kills the white man for a few silver spoons, is taken to the waterfall where he starts confessing. Old Man tells us, "That waterfall, they say it has strange powers that it can make some sinners deparler, talk out their sins for the whole world to know them" (180). The waterfall is a symbol of tradition to the people of Malcochon and such behavioral events highlight the theme of superstition in the play that can only be understood by those who believe in them.

Alobwed'Epie in *The Lady with a Beard* highlights some aspects of tradition and how

such aspects reinterpret and revalorize the cultural values of the Bakossi people. The use of dialect is indicated in words like "Pahnechin" - a traditional knife commonly used by women to peel cocoyam. "Melem" - cocoyam leaves, "ndong" - pepper, and "ndere" - garden egg. "mue" means my friend (5-8) is to bring out the language of the Bakossi people which binds them to a particular ethnic group. The use of dialect is accompanied by proverbs which contain meaning beyond the ordinary articulation. There is a proverb that goes thus, "she who wants to fight a tiger must have claws and fangs" (17). This is to say that Emade, the heroine in the novel, is not an easygoing woman to contend with. Whoever wants to confront her must be brave enough to face her; "A deep-rooted mushroom loses its crown" (18). "She who organizes a hunting expedition and she who kills are equally responsible for the death of the animal". Alobwed'Epie is so good in proverbs that the imbedded meaning of the novel is revealed which highlights the understanding of the culture and tradition of the people.

His introduction of drums, dances, and songs in *The Lady with a Beard* is to emphasize that aspect of ritual in a traditional setup. When Ewang, Emade's son kills a buffalo, the chief plays the drum and within a couple of seconds, his compound is steaming with people. After the villagers assemble, the king hoops into the crowd and intones a war song, "The deity has come, the deity has come, the deity has come, the deity has come. If we are not deities who are the deities?"

Chorus: The deity has come, the deity has come. If we are not warriors, who are the warriors? (21-22). The repetition of "the deity has come" shows the ethnic connection between the people, their tradition, and their land. The Chorus intensifies the drum beat and gives more steam to the song. The beating of drums is used as a traditional means of communication and to rally the villagers to a common square. The beat of the drum echoes louder and it is one of the means used to communicate or pass on information to the villagers who are in distant places. When Mechane dies, Emade goes to Mechane's late husband's dilapidated house and gets the drum that was covered

with some thatches. She beats it as loud as she can, to announce the death of their late sister. Although the three sisters of Mechane cried hard and loud, their cries could not reach the other villages. They cried for about fifteen minutes, but no single villager came (34). But immediately Emade beats the drum, no sooner was the whole compound streaming in with villagers. Emade's intention of beating the drum is to inform the villagers in their farms that death has occurred in the village. Each drum beat carries with it its desired message and that which Emade beat was to announce death. As a typical African, Emade is cognizant of the fact that her people understand the language of the drum which is why she uses it to send the message that death has occurred in the land hence, revealing the cultural and traditional values of the African societies.

The Dynamics of Revolt

Revolt, as articulated by *The Free Online Dictionary*, encompasses acts of protest, rejection, and defiance against perceived injustices or impositions of authority. Within the framework of tradition, revolts often arise from the defiance or desecration of established norms, underscoring the inherent tension between preservation and change. People revolt because they are not happy or are dissatisfied with their socio-cultural, political, or economic situation and as a result, they resist any form of government, authority, or superior force that might be detrimental to them as individuals in particular and the society in general. During the period of the slave trade, most slaves were taken to America (the new world) for the interest of the slave raiders. Slaves in America were expensive commodities that were therefore, to be treated by their slave owners with care—to keep them well-fed and healthy. But these slaves happened to fall ill they were allowed to starve to death. Conrad makes this remark in *Heart of Darkness*. He says:

They were dying slowly. It was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the cast in all the legality of

time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest... (14)

African slaves working in white plantations did so in very deplorable conditions with no food or shelter. The only consolation they had was in songs. They could barely eat due to exhaustion from the heat and sun, their sweat became their water. Makak and Moustique in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* are poor charcoal burners whose dream is to return to Africa. These slaves have wasted all their lives saving the white man, working in their plantations, in the end, they are worse than slaves. Moustique dissatisfied with his condition tells Makak:

...someday Makak, swing high, swing low, you will have to sell your dream, your soul, your power, just for bread and shelter. That the love of people is not enough, not enough to pay for being born, for being buried... I tried begging. Look, look at us. So poor we had to sell the donkey. Barefooted, nasty... (254)

The experiences of Makak and Moustique in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* are not different from what other blacks in the Congo Basin experienced. When Kurtz and other European invaders raped Africans of their land, ivory and gold and stripped them naked, the Africans did not have any voice to protest. Walcott makes us understand that "... a wide range of individuals who suffer colonialist racism and who at some point try to strike out against it, suffered great hardship in consequence" (*What the Twilight Says* 38). Conrad further explains, "...they were raping the land, practically stealing the ivory from the natives, whom they were treating like slaves, or even worse than slaves..." (12)

Patrick Colm Hogan in *Colonialism and Cultural Identity* notes that "after independence, many nations descended into cruel dictatorship and civil strife, often ethnically based" (73). By the time *Dream on Monkey Mountain* was first performed, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, Uganda, Nigeria, the Congo, and several other African nations including Ethiopia had experienced dictatorship, significant ethnic conflict, or both. Makak describes the situation after independence as "sectarian violence" (73).

He feels horror in his heart when he thinks of people like Lestrade, Moustique, and Souris who did not hesitate to deny a greater part of themselves and who did not want to accept that there was hope for a possible return away from those he despised. He saw to it that the very people who rejected his dream must be taught, tortured, and even killed.

The reign of terror begins; "their skulls will hang from my places. I will break up their tribes" (301). "The tribes! The tribes!" Makak laments, "One by one they will be broken" (306). Makak's promise to his people and other blacks like Lestrade and Moustique is a direct reference to the historical times. When those who did not support a particular regime or did not respect the laws of the government were brutally molested and killed. Makak feels revolution against the regime in power would bring all forms of injustice to an end. When he looks at himself, he sees one old man with no wife or children. Dissatisfied with his state he revolts:

Attention and listen. I want to speak to my men. I want to tell my armies, you can see their helmets shining like fireflies, you can see their spears as thick as bamboo leaves. I want to tell them this. That now is the time, the time of war. War Fire, fire, and destruction. {He takes his spear and dips it in the fire}. Fire, death. {Souris and Tigre withdraw in darkness, and the sky grows red} Fire. The sky is on fire. Makak will destroy. (295)

Makak does not end here, he goes ahead to behead the white woman, who to him "paralyzed his mind" (319) and he must free himself from whiteness which is "as fatal as leprosy" (318), if he is ever to achieve "peace" (319). When beheading the white woman, Makak says, "Now, O God, now I am free" (320). Makak stands boldly in opposition to the white regime. Beheading the white woman, he completely disentangled himself from anything that held him back - his freedom, his identity, his race.

In Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, the market women and their daughters exemplify the act of revolt against the institutionalized authorities that govern their land. To them, Amusa and the Pilkings are those who want to stop Elesin from performing his duty to the gods and refuse or deny Olunde the

opportunity to bury his father as tradition demands. Despite Pilkings's "assistance" to Olunde, the market women assert to Amusa that "the same ocean that washes this land and the white man's land...will bring him black" (35). Amusa instead intensifies his control and authority over the market women and tells them "The government says dat kin'ting must stop" (28) and adds "...duty is duty...tell these women to stop obstructing me in the performance of my duty" (29). The big question is what duty Amusa will have to defy his tradition? The market women and the girls belittle and berate Amusa and the other constables as "white man eunuch" (31). Amusa turns and pours the blame on the mothers for endorsing their daughters in minimal rebellion.

Coming to the question of power, New Historicists argue that "power" does not emanate only from the top of the political and socio-economic structure, given that human beings are never merely victims of an oppressive society for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives. For New Historicists, even the dictator of a small country or community does not wield absolute power on his own. To maintain dominance his power must circulate in numerous discourses, like in the discourse of religion, which can promote belief in the "divine rights of kings" or God's love of hierarchical society (282). In Wole Soyinka's *The Swamp Dwellers*, for example, the Kadiye uses his discourse on religion to manipulate and extort wealth from the people of the swamps. He is seen in his community as a supreme being, a representative of God to the swamp dwellers. Soyinka highlights the discourse of science based on the Darwinian Theory of "survival of the fittest" whereby only the fittest can survive. This theory fits in Soyinka's play in the sense that the Kadiye uses his power to grab all he can get from the masses in the name of religion. He uses his might to survive in the very harsh and difficult conditions in the swamps. Since he has power and authority by using God's name and hiding under his canopy, he lives far better and richer at the expense of the masses. Things turn sour on the part of the kadiye when he faces an aggressive reproach of Igwezu, who among other swamp dwellers have experienced the unholy and ungodly practice of the institution he represents.

The dynamics of revolt as exemplified in the selected works of Walcott and Soyinka stand to condemn certain malpractices and evil deeds instituted by individuals and institutionalized authorities at the detriment of others.

Literature as a Reflection of Societal Realities

Soyinka and Walcott employ literature as a medium for dialogue between the writer and society, embedding their works with socio-political commentary and cultural critique. Through references to historical events and cultural practices, they illuminate the complex interplay between literature, society, and the environment. (Soyinka, "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patterns" in *Encyclopedia of African Literature* 2013).

John Peck and Martin Coyle in *Literary Terms and Criticism* hold that:

The boundaries between history and literature have become fluid and open so that, for the historian, texts increasingly represent a major source of information about the lived realities of a period, just as for the literary critic - the historical background has become a text to be read. Such fine interplay between history and literature, however, is characteristic of current criticism as it endlessly re-examines and questions the basis of our understanding of literature and its context. (202)

We can deduce that Literature cannot be separated from history. New Historicists hold that literary texts are "situated" within the totality of institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and from which the literary text emanates. New Historicists also claim that ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination that characterize a given society. The setting of a play is a representation of the socio-cultural and historical conditions within which the play is set.

New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critical approaches show the relationship between literature and society based on the socio-political, historical, and cultural realities launched by colonialism and imperialism. This

can be highlighted in *Homecoming* as Ngugi wa Thiong'o takes time to elaborate on the discursive past that has triggered many debates and opinions that are today related and recounted in works of literature and many other disciplines of interest by writers. He points out that:

Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum: it is given impetus, shape, direction, and even arena of concern by social, political, and economic forces in a particular society. The relationship between creative literature and these other forces cannot be ignored, especially in Africa, (and the Caribbean) where modern literature has grown against the gory background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations: slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism... no area of our lives has not been affected by the social, political, and expansionist needs of European capitalism: from that of the reluctant African, driven by whips and gunpowder to work on the cotton plantations of America, the rubber plantation in the Congo, the gold and diamond mines in Southern Africa, to that of the modern African worker... (xvi)

It is in line with the above assertion that post-colonial writers see the need to recount the historical and socio-cultural realities of their distinctive societies in their works. Soyinka uses reference in the play of *Death and the King's Horseman*, which is based on events that happened in Oyo, "ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946". Soyinka reveals that, "That year the lives of Elesin (Olori Elesin), his son, and the District Officer inter-twined with the disastrous results set out in the play". (Anthony Appiah "Wole Soyinka and the Myth of African world" in *Death and the King's Horseman* 103-105).

The historical event motivates the production of *Death and the King's Horseman* which Soyinka uses to interpret the events that happened at that particular period in time. This shows that literary texts are "situated within the confines of their production. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: a User Friendly Guide* acknowledges the inextricable relationship that exists between a literary work and its context. In

simple terms, this means that new historicists believe that the analysis of a literary text is based on referentiality. Otherwise stated, literature is referred to and it often refers to things outside the text. Tyson nurtures the fact that historical and political realities underlie the definition of art, truth, and beauty. Tyson contends that:

For New Historicism, the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other like the dynamic interplay between individual identity and society, literary text shape and are shaped by their historical context. (289)

In line with the above, Walcott and Soyinka's plays highlight this view by showing how the playwrights use their creative ingenuity to represent and interpret historical facts in fiction. In Walcott's *The Sea at Dauphin* characters like Afa, Gacia, Augustin, and Hounakin hold on to fishing activity which is a tradition and a source of livelihood to the West Indians and highlights the aspects of Caribbean cultural identity. Even when the tides are bad the fishermen will still go fishing knowing well that it is their only source of survival Gacia remarks; It staying so for six months, *compere*, and in all my life I never see it vex and it have many seasons, fishing *nasse*, I see it bad: but never in life, like this. But is work or starve (47). This is in line with Cultural Materialism which shows that literature reflects social reality, cultural values, and political and historical conventions at the time in which the play was written.

Here, Traditional Historians believe they are sticking to facts but the way they contextualize those facts including which of those facts they would deem necessary enough to report and which are left out determines what stories of those facts they will tell. In this light, there is no such thing as a presentation of facts, there is only representation. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: a User Friendly Guide* explains that:

Like all human beings, historians live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own

experiences within their own culture. Historians may believe they are being objective, but their views of what is right and wrong, what is civilized and uncivilized, and what is important and unimportant and the like, will strongly influence how they interpret events. (279)

New Historicists come in here to say that reliable interpretations are for several reasons difficult to produce. They believe that one of the difficulties is the "impossibility of objective analysis" (279).

John Peck and Martin Coyle in *Literary Terms and Criticism* hold that:

The boundaries between history and literature have become fluid and open so that, for the historian, texts increasingly represent a major source of information about the lived realities of a period, just as for the literary critic - the historical background has become a text to be read. Such fine interplay between history and literature, however, is characteristic of current criticism as it endlessly re-examines and questions the basis of our understanding of literature and its context. (202)

It can be deduced that Literature cannot be separated from history. New Historicists hold that literary texts are 'situated' within the totality of institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time and place, and from which the literary text emanates. New Historicists also claim that ideological representations in texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination that characterize a given society. The setting of a play is a representation of the socio-cultural and historical conditions within which the play is set.

In an 'interview' with Walcott (1979), the playwright reveals that the play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* is about things; "it's about the West Indian search for identity, and about the damage that colonial spirit has done to the soul" (284). Combining dream and reality in the play, Walcott emphasizes what he perceived to be the dangers of replacing the realities of Caribbean cultural diversity with a romanticized vision of

Africa, the hope of re-establishing cultural roots. Walcott's obsession with the quest for identity is more explicit in his writings. The play *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, written more in poetic form expresses that quest for an identity that Walcott's characters are in dire need of.

Soyinka in "Theatre in African Traditional: Survival Patterns" in *Modern African Drama* (2002) reminds us that:

We must not lose sight of the fact that drama, like any other art form, is created and executed within a specific physical environment. It naturally interacts with that environment, influenced by it, influences that environment in turn, and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society. (89)

It is necessary to emphasize here that Walcott and Soyinka are not just writing for art's sake, but for the audience to be able to determine the social realities that surround the vision of the artist and how it affects the perspective of the playwrights.

Conclusion

From a Cultural Materialist and New Historicism standpoint, the aspects of tradition and revolt in Post-colonial societies exemplified in the cases of Nigeria and the Caribbean, examined tradition as a cultural phenomenon that highlights the socio-cultural values of a people in a society that is experiencing a rapid technological and social change. It can be said that the selected plays of Soyinka and Walcott dwelt on various possibilities that may ensure an exploration of the past and visions of the future which are capable of communicating a change in the socio-cultural and traditional set-up. It has been proven that every individual or society is guided by a tradition and the values that are attached to it. Tradition is part of human existence which helps to guide and lead the gateway of our very own person and this is what the playwrights under this study have succeeded in bringing out from the hearts and minds of their readers and audiences as portrayed by characters in the selected plays under study. But the disturbing part is how traditional practices are performed in some societies; Elesin, the horseman of the king in *Death and the King's Horseman* for example,

traditionally "is to commit death tonight as a result of native law and custom" (20), while Ifada in *The Strong Breed* has been chosen to be killed to cleanse the land of all its impurities. Jaguna remarks; "it has happened before" (99).

The ritualized theme of the search for identity, roots, and ancestral foothold are some of the major aspects that characterize Caribbean literature. The Caribbean or West Indian is in constant search of his roots or identity which leaves him or her in a fragmented state. In Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* Makak is seen in a state of disillusionment which causes him to go mad. He forgets his name, his race, his denominational affiliation (219), in fact, anything that can link him to his tradition and ancestral past. All these push him to revolt as he beholds the white goddess. James Tar Tsaaior in *Themes in Caribbean Literature* shares his view about this as he remarks that, "it is this search of roots and an authentic identity that constitutes the journey leitmotif quintessential of Caribbean literary tradition, a journey that inevitably tapers into an epiphany movement of historic self-knowledge" (631). These legendary journeys are deeply engraved in the minds of the West Indians.

Despite the cultural onslaught on African metaphysics particularly the belief systems through the spread of the Western scientific worldviews and philosophy, Africans who understand their values and belief systems have never completely lost touch with their traditional metaphysics. The traditional belief system has continued to inform much of the activities of the African people. It is however important to make it clear that there is a marked difference between our thought and that of the West and yet we still allow Western philosophies to govern our education, our children, industry and commerce, and most of all our legal system. If this "Westernized" phenomenon is not well handled, African cultures and traditions will be lost. Thus, we suggest that older generations of Africans should not fail in their responsibility to hand down to younger generations the African cultures and traditions of long ago and equally to take the subject of globalization and post-colonial discourse seriously.

Works cited

Primary sources

- Wole, Soyinka. *Death and the King's Horseman*. London: Methuen, 1975.
Walcott, Derek. *Dream on Monkey Mountain*. New York: Heinemann, 1967.

Secondary sources

- Ali, Mazrui. "The Post-colonial Theorist". *African Studies Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2014: 135-152. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Alobwed'Epie. *The Lady with a Beard*. Edition Cle, Yaounde, 2019.
Kwame, Anthony Appiah. "Soyinka's Myth of an African World". *Crisscrossing Boundaries in African Literatures*. Three Continents Press, 1991: 11-24.
Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Coyote Canyon Press, 2007.
Henry, J. Drewal, John Pemberton, and Rowland Abiodun. "The Yoruba World". [Smithsonian Libraries and Archives](#), 1989.
James, George Frazer. *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*. 3rd edition. Macmillan and Co. and the Macmillan Press, 1922.
James, Tar Tsaaior. *History as Character in Caribbean Literature: Implications for Language, Culture and Identity*. LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, 2010.
John, Peck & Martin Coyle. *Literary Terms and Criticism* (Key Concepts). Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000.
Marvin, Harris. *Cultural Materialism: Idea of Pattern of Race*. University of Alabama Press, 1968.
Maya, Jaggi. "The Necessity of Negritude". *Negritude: Ideology, key Actors, and Critiques*, 2014. <http://www.salvationpress.net/essays/literature/Features-of-Negritude-in-David-Diop-Africa-and-Leopold-Senghor-Night-of-Sine3.htm>
Ngugi, wa Thiong'o. *Homecoming: Essays on African and Caribbean Literature, Culture and Politics*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
Osofisan, Femi. "Theatre and the Rites of Post-Negritude Remembering". *A Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*, edited by R.V. Cassil and Joyce Carol Oates. New York: London, 1998: 142.

- Ozumba, Godfred. "African Traditional Metaphysics". *Journal for African Studies* edited by Scholte, J. New York: London, 2004.
- Patrick, Colm Hogan. *Colonialism and Cultural Identity: Crises of Tradition in the Anglophone Literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean*. State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Peter, Barry. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Viva Publishing, 2010.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Garland Publisher, 1999.
- Vincent, A. Tanda and Emmanuel N. Chia. "The Impact of Globalization on the Socio-Linguistic Landscape of Cameroon". *Globalization and the Future of African Languages*. Ibadan Cultural Study Group, Nigeria, 2006.
- Walcott, Derek. *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.
- _____. *The Sea at Dauphin*. Extra-Mural Department, University College of the West Indies Press, 1954.
- Wole, Soyinka. *The Swamp Dwellers*. Oxford University Press, 1958.
- _____. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 1990.
- _____. "Theatre in African Traditional: Survival Patterns". *Modern African Drama: background and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.