

Preservation of African Poetic Heritage through Self-Representation in the Poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Alfred Kisubi

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Abstract

*This study examines the perpetuation of African traditional art-forms by contemporary African diaspora poets through the different ways of representing “the self” in their literary creations. It explores the continued utilization of oral art forms by African poets – Tanure Ojaide and Alfred Kisubi – who live and practice their literary art in the Diaspora in the contemporary period; and how the consciousness of inhabiting multiple locations influences the blending of the oral arts forms with the modern styles of poetry expression. The selected collections of poetry are Tanure Ojaide’s *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* and Alfred Kisubi’s *Time Winds*. The research appropriates Postcolonial concepts of Alterity, Hybridity and Subalternity in the interrogation of the extent to which the consciousness of inhabiting the complex transnational space in the global age influences the creative output of African Diaspora literary artists, as reflected in the poems studied. The study establishes that the hybrid nature of these literary artists’ creations stem from their consciousness of straddling diverse locations in the global era. It also shows that through the practice of conveying their experiences in the creative pieces, in their own unique way, these Africans in the Diaspora are able to universalize and internationalize Africa and her cultural values. The study further reveals that the contemporary African diaspora writers in order to uniquely assert their identity and personality in their creative texts rely heavily on the African oral art forms and use mostly African images and symbols to enrich their scripted experiences.*

Keywords: Preservation, Poetic, Heritage, Self-Representation, Contemporary

Introduction

In the wake of globalization – which has now become yoked with Diaspora – the global and the local spaces are intertwined and interwoven due to increasing interconnectedness between these locations. This interrelatedness across borders indicates the decline of definite national boundaries and the intensification of worldwide human relations “as global and local social relations interweave” (Eade 17). Thus, Africans in the Diaspora, who continue to experience dislocation and displacement in the contemporary (postmodern) period due to increased

movements across diverse national boundaries (as a result of this process of globalization) are becoming more and more integrated into the host communities. With this development and the resultant “spatial compression”, the present configuration of African diaspora unlike the ones before it, inhabit “multiple spaces,” which according to Arjun Appadurrai entail “a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (www.indiana.edu).

Thus, in response to the ongoing reconfiguration of the modern world system, which unites the universal and particular localities, and opens up cultural ties between world’s peoples (Gikandi 629), some African Diaspora poets and intellectuals are directing their imaginative focus at conveying the experiences of being Africans in the global world, and also articulating African “universality in culture-specific terms” (Xie 22). This, being evident in many of the literary creations of the contemporary African diaspora, reveals how the Africans (in diaspora) creatively engage the new global social practices, in their bid to negotiate their identity and existence and also articulate fields of possibilities for themselves (as Africans) in the global world. Simon Gikandi’s submission underscores this fact as he states that the “most powerful signs of the new process of globalization come from literary texts and other works of art”, which though bear the global frame of reference, still retain the “history, foundational mythologies and the quotidian experience of the “nation-state” (632).

The practice of fusing the homeland experiences and influences from the new places of residence (as Africans in the Diaspora continue to rely on pre-existing socio-cultural modes as well as adopting new forms and using same to re-valuate and redefine their identity), which reflects in their literary productions, bears witness to change that has occurred within the purview of African migration over time. The shifts in self-awareness and consciousness, among Africans living in foreign locations, due to prevalent global realities, apart from aiding the maintenance of an unbroken socio-cultural link with their respective places of birth, have also led to the absorption of some cultural forms from the host societies, as they have increasingly become predisposed to everyday realities of the life and influences of their new homes as much as they maintain an uninterrupted material and emotional link with their places of origin (Mohabbat-Kar 12).

Diaspora, Culture and Mobility in the Globalized Age

Diaspora, which involves the movement of peoples from their traditional homes or places of birth to other locations, has assumed different connotations in the

postmodern period. Donald Carter maintains that Diaspora involves an endless drifting on the “betwixt and between of the world boundaries” (Koser 3). For him, Diaspora is not merely a form of movement or moving from here to there but rather “a way of being here or there” and at all “the points in between” or what he terms “dwelling in travel” – that is, a kind of passage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving (Koser 3). James Clifford is also of the view that Diaspora is different from travel; that it “involves dwelling, maintaining communities, and having collective homes away from home” (308). He believes that it is for this reason that Diaspora is different from exile which often has an individualistic focus (308). Clifford’s argument presupposes the communalistic nature of Diaspora existence. Perhaps to lend credence to Clifford’s claim, Baser and Swain perceive of Diaspora as a long-distance nationalist community which pursues radical agendas taking advantage of the freedom and economic opportunities that host land provides them (45).

Justin Edward’s interest in Diaspora studies resulted in his focus on exploring the impact of the fluid and multiple movements of culture on contemporary creative Diaspora writing (through the process of globalization), which he describes as very significant. This to him is reflected in the complex task of textual representation (of belonging in multiple locations) which reveals “how cultures travel through globalization” (27). Andrew Thacker describes diaspora writing as a textual representation of the “movement across and between spaces” which he says produces a sense of disorientation in the texts so created (Layiwola 73). Thacker seems to suggest that Diaspora texts traverse multiple spaces as they register diverse emotions. Sandra Jackson-Opoku’s article, “Out Beyond Our Borders: Literary Travellers of the Transdiaspora”, maintains that Diaspora writers do not only cross borders, but that they “lift up the edges and braid the strands of diverse cultures; traversing, transferring, and transforming as they travel” (478); describing African Diaspora literary writings as ambitious projects which illuminate historical moments, conjure memories, and give voice to the experiences of diverse communities of people of African descent (479). In his opinion, Henry Oripeloye also dwells on the effect of “double identity” of Diaspora writers on their works, and notes that its influence on the writer and the text is varied and unpredictable (94,95). For instance, Ojaide’s declaration in one of his poems “I am still the Iroko” serves to demonstrate his hybrid disposition as much as his altered deportment, as he expresses his continued preservation of his African essence in spite of his sojourn in the Diaspora. Tayo Olafioye contends that although the atmosphere of his diaspora home may have inspired a sharper

verbal zest in the poet, that it is the “Africaness” which the poet internalizes and carries within him that drives much of his poetic vision (138).

This study therefore, engages in a further investigation to unearth how the consciousness of living in the Diaspora influence the literary creativity of the new African Diasporas poets. The term “new African Diaspora” as used in the study, refers to those Africans who migrated out of Africa in the postcolonial era and who live and work outside their place of origin while still retaining links with their homeland as much as they maintain cultural and socio-political relationship with their place of residence. In exploring this subject-matter, the study uses the poetry collections of two Africans, Tanure Ojaide’s – *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live* and Alfred Kisubi’s *Time Winds*. It examines how the new consciousness of living in the Diaspora in the age of globalization reflects in their poems as they “explore their own identities as new (African) diasporic intellectuals” (Zezeza 42). Postcolonial theory, which is adept at explaining intersecting range between the global and the local in the age of globalization is employed in analyzing the data in this study. Specifically, the concepts of alterity, hybridity and subalternity are utilized as analytical tools to help provide an understanding to how the global and the local cultural values, forms, and concerns come in contact, interact and impact or transform one another as reflected in the selected texts.

Alterity helps in interrogating the present practice of “appropriating and transforming global cultural forms” to local needs and conditions (Ashcroft 40), and in examining how the poets under study represent these multiple and shifting (altered) forms of conditional identifications in textual forms. Hybridity is applied in analyzing the complex global interaction (the increasing cultural movement and contact) and the resultant unconscious absorption of cultural materials between the interacting cultures. Subalternity helps in assessing the level of self-representation of postcolonial citizens (African diaspora) who live in global cities, to reveal how the complex situation of living here and relating or belonging there, influence their textual self-representation.

The depiction of notions of these concepts as reflected in the selected texts is explored to reveal the processes through which Africans in the Diaspora preserve “otherness”, express cultural ambivalence and are currently engaged in the practice of representing “self” in the postmodern time, respectively.

Identity Affirmation in the Poetry of Ojaide and Kisubi

Although Ojaide and Kisubi are contemporary Africans who live and practice their art in the Diaspora, a critical examination of their writings reveal that they are more attuned to the use of African oral art techniques in their writings, perhaps, to affirm their true identity in a globalized world. Accordingly, as writers enmeshed in two literary traditions (the African oral art tradition and the modern written European tradition), the poets employ the forms of African traditional art and fuse same with the written art techniques in order to effectively assert their new identities while also perpetuating the African oral heritage, and thus internationalizing Africa.

Therefore, in the process of inscribing their Diaspora experiences, the poets also instinctively articulate their unique identities as Africans in the global age who straddle multiple locations. Ojaide demonstrates this in his poem, “Opening Song”, where he expresses his concerns for the undermining of established African traditional systems by the postmodern practices and trends as he declares his commitment to the reorientation of his people through his writings (even while residing in the Diaspora and imbibing new cultural values). He renders the poem through the use of Urhobo traditional axioms to express his identity and emphasize his belief in the efficacy of the African customary systems:

Now that the child walks,
let him run errands for the village;
now that the cockerel’s of age,
let it wake the community from stupor;
now that the stump has grown back into an iroko,
let it shield the forest with its crown...
Let me be *eyarega* grass,
harassed by warrior winds;
supple but never supplanted (*When It No Longer Matters* 28).

The poet who believes that no amount of exposure to foreign cultural norms and values can efface his African essence likens himself to “the *eyareya* grass” which though harassed refuses to be supplanted as a result of its supple nature. In the second section of the poem, the poet employs local aphorisms in antithetical phrases in self-affirmation to emphasize his determination to re-entrench the derelict traditions of his forebears. In the concluding sections, he continues to affirm his unique identity “Call me / fire that burns big trees / & leaves the underbrush / grass that grows wilder / the more it is cut... (28). In “Script of

Fate”, Ojaide conveys his identity as an African in the global world who straddles diverse cultures. In the poem, the poet is delighted about his African origin as he celebrates the African creative ingenuity (which he says he proudly carries around on his person for all to see). In furtherance of the articulation of his unique identity, the poet concludes the poem by revealing his dual literary heritage of the oral art and the written art. He also discloses the motive behind the espousal of the written form of the oral poetic art by the contemporary African literary artists – to preserve the rich African literary culture in a modern world that understands only written matter (“a paper-choking world”). In these poems, the poet, in articulating his identity, displays his hybrid nature as much as he reveals his unique African identity (his altered self).

In a similar manner, Kisubi in the poem, “I Will Grow”, also expresses his identity as an African with a unique disposition and identity describing himself as “*magendoist*” (a coinage from a Swahili word “*magendo*” which represents something that defies the general rule), to illustrate his hybrid posture and to signify the peculiar place of an African in the contemporary world, perhaps, as a consequence of his status as object of imperialism. With reference to a biblical exhortation – “Verily, verily I say unto you / Except a grain of wheat fall / into the ground and die, it abideth / alone; but if it die, it bringeth much fruit (John 12:24) – which illustrates the essence of communion with other brethren, in the prologue, the poet justifies his sojourn in the diaspora among other nationalities, and asserts his peculiar position arising therefrom but he maintains his resolve to always retain his African essence and to also use the distinct hybrid position in the Diaspora, to his advantage:

I, the Magendoist, a prisoner of Economic war,
Languishing on the hard floor
In the dungeon of survival.
No air–No breath,
I, – suffer, I suffocate–
But I do not collapse
Hope lies in unreliable endurance
No inch to turn here, alright,
But I am a liverwort spore
Now spoilt, but never split.
I will grow on this stone
South of the Sahara (*Time Winds* 39).

Alluding to the hapless condition of African citizens, in the postcolonial/neocolonial period (who are neglected at home, in Africa, and segregated in the Diaspora), the poet discloses the unique identity and the strength of character of the African in the Diaspora. He explains his resolve to continue to exploit the difficult circumstances that he encounters, in the postcolonial world, to his benefit. Using the peculiar images of “liverwort spore”, the poet further illustrates the ingenuity of Africans living in the Diaspora by likening himself to this green-leafy plant (liverwort) which lacks firm roots, yet is capable of reproducing and giving rise to a new life.

Ojaide and Kisubi both employ oral poetic elements such as story-telling and dialogue, chants and incantations, fables and symbolic representations; African proverbs, adages, aphorisms, idioms and other linguistic patterns in their writings. Kisubi’s poem, “A Call from Grandee”, which is rendered in short lyrical lines much like the recital or chants of African oral art, emphasizes the theme of the cordial bond among Africans, even between the living and their dead ancestors. The poet simply uses the poem to highlight the traditional African beliefs and the cultural practices – funeral rites of passage, the cyclical concept of time and other traditions – in his attempt to enlighten the world about the African value system and to also explain her extra-terrestrial setting, and thus, to universalize Africa:

I dreamt
He called!
Hallo my *musangi*
Put this down...
At the sharing
Of responsibilities ...
So and so, the cows
Some the houses
Others this,
And that...
Provided Bukya
Who took my shoes
Takes my children to school... (*Time Winds* 64).

Using vivid images, the poet in this poem, describes some entrenched traditional African norms and rituals. In the narration, he recounts his “grandee’s” wisdom, passionate love and concern for his descendants even after his passing; thus, revealing the inherent nature of the African people – astute, warm and

affectionate. Similarly, Ojaide's "The Diviner's Chant", is akin to the African oral chant and incantations of an African traditional sage or priest. In the poem, the poet also employs the device of repetition to heighten the musicality of the delivery. In "Drum Suite II", Ojaide expresses his fascination with the way and manner in which Africans in the diaspora are able to construct unique identities in their foreign abodes using relics from various cultural backgrounds, drawn upon their interaction in multiple spaces. The poem is accompanied by the African talking drum – as indicated in the opening lines of the poem – "kogi kogi kogi" (*When It No Longer Matters* 127-128). He uses the talking drum, an African tool of communication and entertainment to convey his message to a global audience, to further highlight the uniqueness of the African-Diaspora identity. Kisubi's "Childhood Memories" is characteristically rendered in a conversational style like in the oral art form. Recalling his intimate moments with his grandma in a typical African setting, the poet presents an exchange between him and his grandmother. The repetitive phrases in the poem – "so she used to say/ so she used to mutter / so she used to foretell / so she used to foresee / now I see what she used to say... (*Time Winds* 65) – reinforces the musicality of the poem, much like a refrain in the oral folk-tale. In "My Turn", Ojaide appropriates African proverbs and aphorisms as in the oral tradition to recount his consciousness of living in the diaspora and to explain his degree of attachment to the different locations "It's more than for their share of bones / that the dogs led the hunt in the wild.../ I want to be the mammoth tree / that falls without hitting the ground... (*When It No Longer* 36).

Both writers also make ample use of African images and symbols, and employ language embedded in African cultures and traditions as they make copious use of African terms to give their writings a unique African touch. Kisubi, for example, relies on a variety of African terms and images that either describe important personages or historic places (such as *Kihika, Muyaye, Kibuli, Magendoist*, in his poem "I Will Grow"; *Moshi, Kintu, Kagera River, Lukaya, Mengo*, in "Sons of Wanga") to deepen his commitment to universalizing Africa. In "Greetings", the poet uses many African words and phrases which demonstrate the different forms of greetings in African societies – "*Kiti Kidenguni*", "*Shamsha mani*", "*Bwailire*", "*Umuofia kwenu*" – to illustrate the familial bond that exists among members of the African communities. Ojaide also uses African terms - *Akpalu, Ewe* songs and *Aridon* to sing his praises of the rich African cultural heritage which has given him leverage in his career as a poet. Through the practice of representing themselves using the oral arts forms, the poets demonstrate the ingenuity of contemporary Africans to represent and "speak" for themselves by themselves, in

most appropriate ways as opposed to being represented or spoken for by “others”, who may not represent them appositely.

Through the transposition of the traditional forms into the contemporary world order and the appropriation of foreign social forms, symbols and images to represent African cultural forms in their poetic texts, Ojaide and Kisubi (the contemporary African Diaspora poets under study), attempt to illuminate the efficacy of the African value system and institutions and to also mirror the true African humanity to the global audience while also sustaining the African cultural heritage. In Kisubi’s “Aprilfest in Prairie village” for instance, in an attempt to convey the African value system, the poet adopts systems and values from other cultural zones and alters same to suit the needs of the African cultural background. In this poem, the poet internationalizes Africa by appropriating the fertile North American land of Prairie to represent a supposed naturally endowed and fertile African village and compares the local tropical season of the African village to spring in the West. Prairie village just like the poet’s homeland (which was overwhelmed by the activities of the colonial overlords and stripped of much of her rich natural endowments), is still very much naturally enriched. This poet’s village is so abundantly blessed that it could also be likened to the animal-game rich land of the Shawnees in the South of America. Appropriating different good qualities from other cultural regions, the poet extols the rich African inheritance as he universalizes the cultural endowments of his homeland. He makes ample use of images adopted from another cultural zone to represent African symbols and scenes:

Prairie village is festively green
This spring.
Like she was before
She was stripped bare to the bone
By combine harvesters
And pioneers who husked
Her woods into plywood
For windows and doors...
To enjoy the gorgeous colours
Of tulips springing up
In the backyard (*Maybe* 28)

The images of “spring” and “tulips” are foreign to his African homeland, yet the poet employed them to represent African (rainy) season and flora, respectively in

a bid to describe the remarkable worth of the African landscape. In “When a rock is a drum”, Ojaide also internalizes Africa as he likens the raging waves of the Pacific Ocean to the Thunderous breath” of “Sango”, the Yoruba god of thunder. In articulating their identities and representing Africa and her cultural value system in the above poems, the poets affirmatively assert that African social, cultural and traditional world order is as good as any other socio-cultural system, in any other part of the world.

Conclusion

As observed in the texts analyzed, Ojaide and Kisubi like most African writers living in the Diaspora, both use their writings to project their unique identities as influenced by the consciousness of their hybrid existence, but which are anchored on African cultural and traditional systems. These literary artists aim at continuing to reflect and epitomize the African cultural systems in the way they represent their identities in their respective texts. The identities they articulate are constructed mainly with orientations of their African homeland spiced with some imbibed trans-border cultural values. In effect, although these Africans’ sense of self is evaluated based on the new values, norms, and sometimes the belief systems that they have acquired in the course of interaction with various cultural systems that have come in contact with while sojourning in the Diaspora, these values and norms are adopted and used within the African contexts. Thus, the new African poets represent themselves in their creative texts through the display of their hybrid nature and their altered selves (by sometimes exhibiting their ambivalent deportment and other times demonstrating difference)

Thus, in the postcolonial period (contemporary times), Africans in the Diaspora have undertaken to represent themselves and speak for themselves. Their primary goal is to present Africa in a positive light, deconstruct the negative stereotypes and the entrenched adverse perceptions and images that have come to be associated with Africa and people of African descent and ultimately to preserve the rich African cultural heritage. By this, these African literary artists seem to answer Giyatri Spivak’s query, “can the subaltern speak”? (in her concept of Subalternity), in the affirmative.

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