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**Oral aesthetics and cultural distillates
in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine***

Abstract. The inherent indebtedness of the African novel to the corpus of African oral forms and cultural resources as well as the Western literary tradition has sometimes been unacknowledged and unappreciated. Indeed, the Western metaphysical tradition and philosophical ferment has negated the hybridity of the novel and its African provenance citing its historical, cultural, and regional specificities in the Western hemisphere and literary tradition as contingencies for this seal of negation. Because the rise of the novel is assumed to be consistent with a bourgeois intellectual and scribal culture, Africa is essentially conceptualized as the oral *Other* and hence lacking in the literary sophistication required to lay claim to the written form. This is the proclamation of the dominant and hegemonic Western epistemological formation. This paper addresses the hybrid heritage of the African novel based on the reality of the fusion of its African oral antecedents and the Western novelistic tradition, using Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* as *Exemplum*. It argues that African novelists have domesticated the novel form through their exploitation of indigenous oral literary and cultural elements and submits that a thriving relationship exists between the African novel and African folkloric and cultural forms, which gives the African novel its oral flavour, cultural particularity, and authenticity. The paper concludes that rather than construct asymmetrical hierarchical relations between the oral and the written, the two modes of literary expression should be seen as co-eval and complementary to each other, locked in a mutually beneficial and productive interaction as hybrids without which the Western argument will merely be representative of its own cultural politics and essentialisms.

Introduction

The socio-cultural specificity and situatedness of African poetics in the African metaphysical tradition and philosophical worldview has become a settled epistemological given. Indeed, many African writers have mobilized and continue to mobilize their creative energies in the direction of exploiting the rich oral literary and cultural resources of their traditional backgrounds as raw material for their literary enterprises. The trajectories of their literary practice and *oeuvre* are firmly moored in the socio-cultural landscape, feeding on folkloric elements like folktales, songs, chants, proverbs, myths, epics, legends, riddles, among other aphoristic and loric employments. Similarly, cultural distillates like deities, shrines, sacrifices, festivals, dances, marriages and other cultural flourishes populate their creative works.

The major concern of this paper is to negotiate the African novel as a hybrid form that benefits from its provenance in African oral forms and the Western novelistic tradition using, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* as an *exemplum* of an analytic category. The paper interrogates the received and uncritical idea that the novel did not exist in Africa prior to the introduction of a scribal culture by European civilization. It argues that the genealogy of the African novel in African oral aesthetics and cultural distillates resonates in the literary creativity and practices of African novelists. In particular, the paper argues that Amadi's *The Concubine* illustrates how African oral resources have been exploited by African novelists in the distillation of their themes, the construction of characterization, and narrative and discursive strategies as a marker of cultural authenticity and inscription of the African world-view.

In the same way, Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe demonstrates this ancestry of the novel in African oral cultures in his historical novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Through the deft deployment of proverbs, anecdotes, folktales, myths and other folkloric materials, Achebe's novels, which are fictional dramatizations and realizations of the tensions

between tradition and modernity, continuity and mutability, foreground the hybrid character of the African novel. Achebe's compatriot, Gabriel Okara achieves this, too, in *The Voice* which is an evocation and invocation of the voice of culture in his narrative. Ngugi wa Thiong'o accomplishes the same in *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*.

The potentiality of the conflationary impulse between the African novel and the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of traditional African ethos has been realised by African novelists largely through the creative manipulation and domestication of imperial and hegemonic English. This domestication has been achieved by the novelists through an ingenious metalinguistic process of bending the English language and investing it with an indigenous flavor for their creative needs to articulate forcefully their literary intents. In foregrounding or underscoring this reality, Amadi comments on Gabriel Okara, one of the zealous adherents of this manipulation of English,

a world language like English gives any culture tremendous publicity and recognition... A curious development has arisen ... "Nigerian English" has been born ... Gabriel Okara is the chief protagonist of this. The idea is to ride roughshod on grammar and syntax if necessary and walk the tight rope between literal translation of indigenous thought forms and incoherence. When success is achieved the effect is poetic and striking ("The Novel in Nigeria," 50).

Nigerian English represents the linguistic manipulation of English for reasons of cultural particularity and authenticity. This cultural particularity anchored in the African worldview, what Wole Soyinka (1976) characterizes as the "fourth stage" in his dramatic practice, serves relevant creative contingencies. First, it serves as an informing structural gestalt and framework to the literary artifact. It also acts as a thematic organizing principle. Fundamentally too, this worldview is a marker of African cultural cosmology and beingness and a signifier of authenticity and indigenous flavor. It concretizes the ideological gravitations and (post)Afrocentric crystallization of the poetics and locates them within the contours and fabrics

of African epistemology and culturality, thus endowing them with an unmistakably African identity and temperament.

African Oral Antecedents to the Novel: Amadi's Example

Amadi is a Nigerian novelist, dramatist, poet, critic, culture exponent and social activist, who as a soldier fought on the federal side during the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War. Besides *The Concubine* (1966), Amadi has published *The Great Ponds* (1969), *The Slave* (1978) and *Estrangement* (1986), which have established and strengthened his reputation as a serious writer.. Amadi is also a respected playwright and has woven into autonomous existence *Isiburu* (1973), *Pepper Soup* (1977), *The Road to Ibadan* (1977), *Dancer of Johannesburg* (1978) and *The Woman of Calabar* (2002). However, more than for his dramaturgic practice, Amadi “is better known as a novelist than as a dramatist, and this generic imbalance to his reputation has seemed to be ... based solely on studies of his four novels” (Koroye, v). He is one of the founding fathers of the Association of Nigerian Authors and has been severally garlanded for his writing.

This paper examines the reality of the oral aesthetics and cultural distillates immanent in the textual world of Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*. The significance of the paper congeals in the dynamic, soulful, and thriving kindredship which subsists between the African novel and African oral forms and cultural resources. But beyond this, the paper establishes that as a written form, the novel represents a subversion of the “oral text” through the commodifying and fetishising powers of the scribal tradition, thus rendering the text a veritable mutating product of late-capitalist and postmodern artistic and cultural production (Jameson, 1). As Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike argue, “In their themes and techniques, African novelists have utilized materials from African tales, fables, epigrams, proverbs etc”. They further aver,

These narratives have made thematic, technical and formal contributions to the African novel. Among the formal are contributions in the area of length, structural complexity, and textural complexity ... The structural and textural complexity of their narration have counterparts in short as well as extended oral narratives (27).

This foregrounds the inherent indebtedness of *The Concubine*, and indeed, the African novel, to orality. Similarly, Julien underscores the African oral antecedents of the novel and the healthy relationship that exists between the two forms, orality and writing, when she observes that “the oral nature of the novel is ... a question of narrative form, the adaptation of principles of oral narrative genres”. Julien affirms the oral coloration of the African novel when she further observes that “the oral nature of African novels refers to the representation of everyday conversation, or the inclusion of proverbs, tales, riddles, praises and other oral genres” (26).

This position radically contests and subverts the jaundiced perspectives of the Western critical establishment that actively negates the African provenance of the novel and its indebtedness to the canon of African oral literary traditions. Benjamin articulates this Western bias and essentialism: “What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature... is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it” (87). Roscoe also ventilates this fundamental hegemonic prejudice modish in the Western critical establishment when he states with a flourish of arrogant finality, “the novel, as it is known in the West, precisely because it is a written form, has no history whatever in Africa... It is a literary import... from Europe... It is not, in its nature, an African form... it is not a fact of the African past” (75).

What these Western critics fail to appreciate is that the African novel, though a benefit of the Western tradition, differs from it in its rootedness in the African oral forms and cultural ontology. The African novel, in this sense, cannot be strictly judged based on the universal canonical standards propagated by Defoe, Fielding, Richardson and Sterne. This is because the African novel is a fusion of the two traditions, at once Western in its appropriation of the

formalized and written structure of the West and African forms of orality. Precisely in this regard, the African novel can be seen as a counter-text to the Western novel in its attempt to revise and resist some of the unrepresentative cultural assertions by the Western imagination to construct Africa as essentially different from the West. It is against this tradition of cultural insulation that the African novel emerges as an alternative novelistic text to challenge the dominant master narrative of the West and its universal truth-telling and its textual politics. The African novel achieves this through its heavy reliance on oral esthetic resources and cultural distillates which are imbued in the African worldview.

The Western prejudice is also valorized and sustained in the elaborate construction of hierarchies and oppositional binaries between the oral and written wor(l)ds or traditions, a “binary opposition” which according to Julien, “may tend to obscure more than it illuminates”(28). In this hierarchical mapping, *orality*, which represents Africa, is synonymous with nature, primitivity, and perpetual inertia in the motions of human history, while scribality equates Euro-America and its claims to culture, civilization, and (post)modernity. This Western epistemology on the innate orality of Africa and other peripheral cultures represents a flagellation and protrusion of bland bourgeois intellection which is rather essentialist and even ahistorical. The essentialness refracts Africa through the prism of oralness, and the ahistoricity of the argument negates the historical antecedents of the novel in extended African oral literary forms, some of which were written even before the encounter with Europe.

In fact, Amadi engages at another level the conflictual interaction between the oral (traditional culture) and the written (European modernity) when he identifies what he calls a constellation of “irate critics” with a disturbing misconception of what should constitute culture and its investment in our literature. This group, to him, is “beginning to think that there is too

much emphasis on culture in the works of African authors” (13). He further elaborates:

African writers they say should snap out of culture themes and concentrate on burning issues of the day as writers in other societies are doing. The tacit assumption here is that any piece of writing with an African background is not likely to deal effectively with current issues... Assuming that writers in other societies are concerned with current social and political issues, just how are they doing it? Is it by escaping from their culture? If not, how much culture is too much? (“Religion and Culture,” 13).

Elechi Amadi’s *The concubine* is a canonical novelistic text which affirms the oral antecedents and autochthony of the African novel. It establishes the fact that despite the assumed historical, cultural, and regional particularity of the novel in England in the persons of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, the African novel has drawn heavily from the pool of African oral aesthetic traditions in the execution of its thematic concerns, technique, and structural essence modeled peculiarly on the African oral narrative. Transcendent to this, and as the African novel has demonstrated, orality is not necessarily symptomatic of primeval primitivity or synonymous with static tradition and lack of civilization and culture. Rather, the oral is complementary to the scribal and constitutes a continuum in human literary and aesthetic experience over history. This perspective ruptures Nasidi’s postulate that, “To see ‘African literature’ as continuous with the oral traditions of Africa, or as the outgrowth of a primitive, prehistoric Africa is not to be critical: it is to mystify history”(28). Nasidi’s postulate is reminiscent of the positions of Benjamin and Roscoe and is a gratuitous apologia to the racist and doctrinaire protrusions of Western critical orthodoxy which denies the hybridity of the African novel. Besides, it is economical of historical truth and espouses what Ian Watt calls “literary traditionalism” (13).

The orality and culturality of *The Concubine*

The Concubine constitutes a novelistic canvas on which is indelibly etched oral literary aesthetics and cultural elements. Through the novel, Amadi distills a narrative about and for

Africa which to him translates to “embodying in our works the aesthetics, history, religion, culture, politics and philosophy of Africa” (“The Sovereignty of African Literature”, 71). What emerges from this literary engagement is a novelistic discursive space dominated by epistemes which are authentically African, valorizing concerns that border on the daily lives of the people as they grapple with existential realities in Omokachi village. It is significant that the novelist constructs a world that is realistic, down-to-earth, and reflective of the rich cultural legacies and continuum of the people.

As a mosaic of orality and culture, the universe of the novel is molded with fabrics from Amadi’s Ikwerre Igbo traditional lore and culture in Nigeria. This is evident from the felicitous turn of language in interlocutory interactions through the deployment of a linguistic medium redolent with proverbs. There is also the dignity which accompanies marriage transactions and the appropriate aphoristic diction that dominates such occasions. It is common to hear the council of traditional elders employing aphorisms like: “A toad does not run in the afternoon except something is after its life,” which tells us that it is an important thing that drives out a man out of the comfort of his home to seek solutions to it. Another proverb: “It is the greedy fly that accompanies the corpse to the grave” could suggest that it is inordinate desire that is responsible for a man’s misfortune as in the case of Madume who is the victim of a cobra’s aggression.

In this novelistic space of Amadi’s, an oral culture dominates and governs social existence. Songs, chants, and dances are a constant marker of cultural celebration. Thus, from the offering of sacrifices of immolation to sundry deities to the consultation of *dibias*, among other elaborate ceremonials, the world of Amadi’s *The Concubine* cascades with oral literary aesthetics and cultural distillates. The novel foregrounds the dynamic functionality, relevance and vivacity of the oral medium which is representative of the traditional order in the articulation

and incision of Igbo and, indeed, African culture and civilization before the disruptive presence of imperialism and colonialism. The novel, therefore, orchestrates a meaningful intertextual dialogue with other African novels including that of Achebe, Ngugi, Armah, Ousmane, Farah, and Mahfouz, which are similarly suffused with oral elements and African cultural traditions and mores.

Amadi creates an idyllic, bucolic but harmonious world which is nevertheless known to tensions, subtleties of individual psychological formations, conspiracies, love, and envy and, generally, treats realistically the human condition in its ramified contexts and manifestations. He patterns the world of the novel delicately and juxtaposes the human world with the metaphysical as the human harmoniously interweaves with the ancestral world defining their daily existence in relation to the intervention of the spectral spiritual domain. Eustace Palmer captures this when he observes that Amadi evokes a universe that is "truthfully" traditional in orientation as it recounts the daily round of activities consistent with such traditional milieux:

The Concubine is a powerful love story, written with effortless ease, in lucid and beautiful prose. The author examines the problems of young love and man's relationship with the gods and presents a society whose stability rests on tradition and the worship of the gods... Amadi's *The Concubine* conveys most truthfully the quality of life not just in one particular region, but of most African societies. The activities he describes: daily excursions to the farm, setting traps for hunting, singing and dancing in the evenings, the effortless musical improvisations, the marriage customs, divinations and the fear of the gods - are all integral to numerous African villages (117-118).

Palmer's perspective corroborates that of Amadi's himself when he announces rather omnisciently: "In *The Concubine*, my first novel, a man actually struggles with a god for the possession of a beautiful woman and predictably he loses" ("The Novel in Nigeria," 56). The man in question here is called Emenike. Though a deconstructive reading of the tragic potentialities of the novel yields alternative interpretive grids concerning Emenike's death, no death in African cosmology occurs without human or metaphysical causes.

The novel exists at the intersection of the physical, metaphysical and nouemenal worlds, a reality which foregrounds the cosmological belief of the African world. The protagonist is Ihuoma, a young, beautiful and respectful woman who is believed to be married to the sea-god. Because of this, Ihuoma is destined to deterministically eliminate any man in love or marriage relationship or liaison with her. This happens to be the fatalistic course of Emenike, her husband, Madume and Ekwueme, three of the male characters in her life in the novel. Amadi constructs a novelistic universe which thrives on oral indigenous cultural traditions steeped in the influence of medicine-men, marriage transactions, festivals and their concomitant cultural imperatives, and a setting which appropriately conduces to his authorial intent.

Though each of the male characters in Ihuoma's life dies from 'natural' and verifiable causes (Nwokochah, 353), their deaths are nevertheless ascribed curiously to the metaphysical intervention and jealousy of the Sea-god who is vengeful and exacting (Okonkwo, 114). What Amadi has done in the novel is to institute a polyphony of full valued contestory voices which in turn has generated a carnival of interpretive voices in the negotiation of the novel's signifying system. The important thing is that he has executed this narrative strategy through the incision of oral aesthetic elements and the appropriation and re-appropriation of cultural resources which have invested the novel with an abiding sense of cultural specificity and oral situatedness. For as Amadi himself has articulated, the creative writer "must have roots somewhere. He must be nurtured and informed by his cultural, social and political background" ("Background to Nigerian Literature," 2).

The very setting and plot of the novel constitute a testament to its orality and cultural moorings. The village Omokachi reflects traditional life in all its purity, innocence and health untainted by the corruption of the (post)modernist order. In this village, a communalistic and

egalitarian ethos has not been overtaken by cold individualism yet. Here too, so much premium is placed on customary practices as indices of the people's grammar of values and mores, cultural identity, heritage and self-definition. Omokachi, the locale that provides the novel's setting is a close-knit society where the villagers share a communality that is unfettered by the cult of personality and the individualization of lived experience. Each lives their lives for others in an unwritten code which proclaims the creed of one for all and all for one. Thus, an individual's burden or misfortune is borne by all. This is the case with Ihuoma, the heroine and Ekwueme who is afflicted with psychic malady.

In consonance with the republican ordering of Igbo cultural life, the novel distils a communitarian lifestyle which binds the people together in a harmonious rhythm of existence tempered by the mediation of the seasons and the elaborate calendar of festival events and celebrations. When this harmony is ruptured by death, famine, or natural disaster, the communal spirit is invoked as a cushioning measure to ensure continuity. This is the case with Ihuoma when she loses Emenike, her husband. Her grief is shared by all particularly because she represents individual integrity, propriety, virtue, and dignity. But beyond her endearing personal qualities which commend her to all, it is a compelling cultural imperative that the entire community identifies with the misfortune of its members.

It is against this backdrop that the entire village opposes Madume for infringing on Ihuoma's fundamental rights as the owner of the banana tree which he wants to dispossess her of. That is why we are not too surprised that Madume is attacked by a spitting cobra. Even though the authorial perspective attributes this to the anger of the sea-god that jealously guards Ihuoma, a more plausible reason is that through his greed and impertinence, Madume has incurred the wrath of the community for his attempted violation of the community and is

assumed to be at war with the entire community. This view problematizes and deconstructs the novel's encoding of the causal essence of Madume's tragedy by attributing it to cultural referents entrenched in Igbo traditional systems: that injustice to one is injustice to the community.

There is an enduring relationship between the living and the dead in Igbo cosmogony and Amadi inscribes this in the narrative as part of the people's cultural heritage. The power that the metaphysical world exerts over the mundane is nevertheless overwhelming and definitive. This complex relationship is visible in the novel through the frequent consultations of *dibias* 'medicine men' who are refracted as intermediaries between the two entities and as custodians of cultural memory. The agency of the medicine men defines the narrative as they are consulted to ascertain the cause of Emenike's death, Ekwueme's psychological malady, and Ihuoma's true connection with the spiritual domain. Every disjuncture within the community is almost always referred to the *dibias* for expert interpretation and remedy. If there is any barrenness, strange disease or sickness, violent death or failure of crops, the services of these men is sought. This confers on them the central role and status of repositories of cultural knowledge and its interpretation. In this regard too, they constitute a viable identity marker which helps in the (re)definition of the cultural traditions of the society.

Gareth Griffiths articulates this cultural imperative and ideological expediency of self-definition and concretization of self-identity and underscores its strategic and symbolic significance especially in postcolonial situations. Though his observation is particular to Achebe's novels, it is also relevant to Amadi's too. He states:

Writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and rediscover his historical roots. This self-defining function of the novel is ... especially, important to writers in a post-colonial situation, especially where their exposure to European culture had led to an undervaluing of the traditional values and practices (Griffiths, 90).

Appropriately, therefore, Amadi is a collaborative agent with Achebe in his espousal of

the revolution in African cultural self-assertion and affirmation. Indeed, Amadi is in some critical circles identified as belonging to the Achebe school of African letters, which is devoted to impressing on the Western mind that Africa was not a cultural *tabula rasa* on which Europe inscribed its culture and civilization thereby saving the continent from its “barbarism” and “primitivity”. This cultural revolution is crucial particularly in deconstructing the Eurocentric negation of African oral aesthetics and the very existence of such oral forms as the epic and myth in Africa. This denial also negatively defined and determined the Western ruling attitude towards these oral forms in their interpretive approaches to the oral forms. Bernth Lindfors identifies three grids of critical intellection as approaches to folkloric interpretation in Africa. These are the impressionistic, the anthropological, and the interpretative. He elaborates:

An impressionistic approach to folklore in African literature is one involving assumptions and suggestions rather than facts and proofs. The critic is content to make a few bland assertions about the presence of traditional elements in a modern literary work without bothering to ascertain whether what he says about these elements is true... The anthropological critic who studies folklore in African literature tends to be obsessed with documentation. He wants to verify the legitimate ancestry of every item of folklore he comes across, tracing it back to ... testimony from bearers of the culture ... Interpretative criticism concerns itself with establishing and defending a theoretical position upon a body of literature. It avoids careless overstatements and amasses data only when the data is useful. The interpretative critic ... is more likely to be interested in investigating their artistic functions or their aesthetic and metaphysical implications than in merely validating their existence (Lindfors, 11, 12-13).

These paradigms roughly coincide with and are reminiscent of Euro-American oral literary scholarship in Africa based on the evolutionist, diffusionist, and functionalist schools before African indigenous scholars emerged and located these oral forms in their proper perspectives, underscoring their aesthetic qualities and culturality. *The Concubine* becomes a cultural revisionist and revivalist project which foregrounds African civilization and invests it with dignity and pride. The songs, dances, festivals, divinations, marriage ceremonies and worship of deities mediated through accomplished linguistic employments using proverbs, tales,

riddles, and other aphorisms, are a deliberate ideological and cultural strategy at counteracting the epistemic violence of the Western world on African culture and civilization. It is this ideological gravitation and cultural revolution championed by Amadi and other African writers that Neil Lazarus characterizes as the "resistance in postcolonial African fiction" (x).

This resistance has decidedly taken new directions which radically engage and undermine the potency and hegemony of received, uncritical, and unexamined Western epistemologies and hermeneutics of Africa and other marginal or peripheral spaces. According to Lazarus:

...the directions taken in recent African fiction reflect divergent answers to the unforgoable questions that forced themselves to the surface... obliging established writers comprehensively to rethink their positions and the fundamentals of their cultural practice, and providing points of departure for new writers with rather different interests and concerns (x).

Though Amadi straddles the old and the new generational formations, his commitment and vision as an African writer has consistently remained Afrocentric as he has faithfully pitched his literary tent with the revolutionary vanguard that has unswervingly advocated Africa's cultural renaissance and affirmed her distinct identity.

Through his exquisite dramatization of the rhythm of life in the Ikwerre Igbo traditional village of Omokachi, Amadi succeeds in making an unequivocal and unambiguous statement about the universality of African way of life evidenced in its elaborate cultural practices, values and mores. Oladele Taiwo comments on Amadi's achievement in this regard:

His greatest achievement in *The Concubine*, for instance, lies in the fact that he uses the novel to criticize life at a symbolic level. His realistic description of life at Omokachi village serves only as a basis for making a statement of more than local significance. The novel is concerned with the circumstances of a marriage which ends in disaster for reasons which are deeply human and universally valid (6).

But what is more significant about Amadi's achievement in *The Concubine* is his understanding

and appreciation of the dialectical relationship between literary productions and the isomorph of socio-cultural variants that over-determine these literary productions. This is what Chidi Amuta (1986, 1989) variously refers to as the “dialectical sociology” or “radical sociology” of literature. Without necessarily adhering strictly to the script of doctrinaire Marxism as Amuta announces, Amadi valorizes the very sociality of literature by situating *The Concubine* within its Igbo socio-cultural matrices and traditional mores. His vision is, in the words of Tejumola Olaniyan (1995), "performative" and "post-Afrocentric" as it elaborates and accepts a self-critical and open-ended admission of culture and tradition *as process*, always in a state of dynamic flux and becoming.

Conclusion

The repertoire of African oral literary and cultural forms has provided a reservoir for the novel to exploit in the fashioning of its themes, techniques and structures. As Okpewho argues, "There has, indeed, been an increasing tendency on the part of modern writers to identify with the literary traditions of their people in terms both of content and of technique" (293). Elechi Amadi, in particular, has identified with, and drawn from, his indigenous Igbo oral resources and cultural forms to construct the fictional world of *The Concubine*. The novel pulsates with characters, situations, events, mood and atmosphere, and setting that are peculiarly evocative of an indigenous society immersed in the daily rhythm of its life in close communion with the metaphysical universe of the gods. The orality and culturality of this fictional world authenticate and affirm the indigenous provenance of the novel form, and assert and vindicate Africa's unique cultural heritage and civilization.

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