

*Book Review*

# **The shared pain of a culture's decline: A study of Femi Abodunrin's 'The Dancing Masquerade'**

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Received 18 April, 2016; Accepted 29 July, 2016

Although in recent years Africans have, through their very rich indigenous performing traditions, began once again to re-affirm the functionality of their arts, yet not many people today have tried to relate these to questions of mass mobilization and conscientization. It is believed that African art and particularly traditional African theatre, story-telling or art serve a social function with several pieces of African literature, such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (1958) receiving significant worldwide critical acclaim for their analysis on the effect of colonialism on African cultures. This study is a critical examination of Femi Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade*. From the colonial and postcolonial perspectives, the study investigates a peoples' shared pain of perceived decline in culture. It scrutinises the uniqueness and relevance of African cultures as they interface with European and Western cultures in the present era of globalization "so that we are able to understand each other not simply as different but as bearers of a common humanity". Invariably, the study examines some adjustments which African cultures have had to make, or ought to make, as they come in contact with other cultures. It is assumed that through such an endeavour, the twenty-first century can find its freedom of choice and association.

**Key words:** Africa, *The Dancing Masquerade*, shared pain, culture, globalization, mobilization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Importantly, literature's foremost objective is to impact the reader or listener. This seems to be the aim of Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish essayist, poet and novelist who believes that the difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him or her precisely as you wish. His opinion is that the first merit which attracts in the pages of a good writer, or the talk of a brilliant conversationalist, is the apt choice and contrast of the words that are employed. He

adds that all speech, written or spoken, is dead language, until it finds a willing and prepared hearer. Therefore, Stevenson classifies art into two categories; some form of art like painting and acting, in his opinion, are representative or simply imitative while others such as music, dance and architecture, are, although self-sufficient, but merely presentative.

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again to re-affirm the functionality of their arts, yet not many people today have tried to relate these to questions of mass mobilization and conscientization (Akinola, 2015). Traore believes that African arts and particularly traditional African theatre, story-telling or art serve a social function with several pieces of African literature, such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe receiving significant worldwide critical acclaim for their analysis on the effect of colonialism on African cultures. This study is a critical examination of a people's shared pain of culture's decline from colonial and postcolonial perspectives in Femi Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade*. It scrutinises the uniqueness and relevance of African cultures as they interface with European and Western cultures in the present era of globalization "so that we are able to understand each other not simply as different but as bearers of a common humanity" (Tembo, 2011). Invariably, the study examines some adjustments which African cultures have had to make, or ought to make, as they come in contact with other cultures. It is assumed that through such an endeavour, the twenty-first century can find its freedom of choice and association (Tembo, 2011).

Even if at the risk of being regarded as repetitive of postcolonial themes by African writers, the on-going misrepresentation of and bias against African cultures makes it important that we examine the peculiarity of Abodunrin's thoughts in *The Dancing Masquerade* concerning on-going postcolonial debate by African literati. Notable in this regard, according to Balogun and Saliu (2006), repetition becomes continuous emphasis for carving an enduring perception and image in the mind's eyes – especially in a situation of so much conscious and prejudiced misconstruction of experience.

Although a reiteration of peculiar themes on African postcolonial cultures and societies by writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* (1977) and Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters* (1965), Femi Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade* is a re-presentation of in-grained postcolonial themes found in African societies. In another sense, a critical examination of Abodunrin's discourse in *The Dancing Masquerade* appears to open critics up to a necessary continuum of the long running debate pioneered by Augusto Boal on whether art should educate, inform, organise, influence, incite to action, or should it simply be an object of pleasure.

## SHARED PAIN IN THE DANCING MASQUERADE

Pain is a kind of shortcut to mindfulness. It makes us suddenly aware of everything in the environment. It brutally draws us into a virtual sensory awareness of the world, much like meditation (Konnikova, 2014).

The attention-centric nature of pain has long been recognized as one of its central characteristics, in both a physical sense-when something hurts, you turn toward it -

and an emotional one. According to Konnikova (2014), whether shared pain itself is sufficient to forge bonds of group loyalty is what Brock Bastian, a social psychologist has been studying for the last six years. His findings reveal that shared pain seems to play a central role in a group experience in a way that pleasurable or neutral bonding experience simply does not. We tend to overvalue pleasure, he says, but [shared] pain is a central part of what it means to be human and what makes us happy. For Bastian et al (2014), the loyalty that we experience after feeling [shared] pain goes beyond any need to reconcile dissonance or to signal commitment. He believes that when you go through and experience pain with complete strangers, that experience brings you together in a way that is formative. This seems like the intention and, or, outcome of Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade*. He appears to expose painful moments of unnecessary cultural frictions within Africans who have been to Europe, and frictions between them and those who may not have been to Europe. For the purpose of our study on the shared pain of a culture's decline in Femi Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade*, I will define shared pain as the sum of a people's frustration, disappointment, surprise and disbelief. *Frustration* because of the allurements that Euro centrism continues to offer Africans; *disappointment* at ways that even supposed custodians of a people's culture tend to betray the trust reposed in them traditionally; *surprise* that some Arrivants, in spite of European influences, still connect to their cultural roots, even if by selective amnesia and *disbelief* because the very core of a people's culture can be side-lined for the sake of other influences.

The narratives in *The Dancing Masquerade* presents according to Balogun et al (2006) a first person account of "reasons and effects of colonisation in the imaginary country of Baluba". The narratives, divisible into sub-titles from six parts, including the preface (*If The Masquerade Dances Well* and *The Era of Bad-Feeling*), and epilogue has in the first part, *The Great Traditions* and *The Dancing Masquerade* while the second part, features *The Arrivants* and *Once More With Passion: What is Love?*. The third part is *The Auction Bloc* while the fourth part is *The Return*. Physically located in Europe, Port city and Aiyeru, the narrative has its plots around Tunji, his family and neighbours. The preface is a summation of the story: a poetic description of the personage of the masquerade and also a metaphoric representation of postcolonial African society.

As revealed by Balogun (2006), The first part reminisces on Ayeru's rural communal scenario in Baluba, highlighting, according to Balogun and Saliu. (2015), its friendly, simple, innocent, and familial comfort in existence in an African setting in spite of the influence of colonialism. The second part sets in a Western influenced island of Port city. The third part depicts the life of the narrator, Tunji, abroad as well as his friendship

and common interests shared with Paul, Mike and Mary (new generations of non-colonial Britons) and Bukola and Olu as well as the return of the “team” to Baluba while the epilogue marks the conclusion of the narrative.

Largely, Abodunrin employs metaphor to represent actual historical and current realities of the Nigerian postcolonial scenarios, alluding to de-familiarisation of Africans by white colonialists. For example, the fictional Baluba label put on the people because of their closeness to the river in Abodunrin’s narrative is not alien to the historical name, Nigeria, which was given by Flora Shaw (Lord Lugard’s mistress) to the area that fell around the River Niger. Also, according to Balogun and Saliu. (2015), Port city with its slums, lagoon, network of roads and ‘posh’ areas paints a mental picture of Lagos state while the Owode and Oja Oba markets are popular South Western Nigerian markets.

*The Dancing Masquerade* presents Femi Abodunrin’s agreeableness with Niyi Osundare on the kissing and painful quarrelling that occurs (or ought to occur) at the *meeting* and *melting* of two cultures. According to Osundare (Abodunrin, 2002) when two cultures meet, they kiss and they quarrel. In an instance, a painful experience from encounters of cultures ensues at the Port in Port City as Tunji and others receive the Arrivants. At that moment when Tunji, according to Baluba’s age-long salutation tradition accorded elders, makes to prostrate to greet his arriving parents, everyone laughed at the gesture. Tunji, not amused, painfully wondered if he did something wrong or stupid to have expressed a Baluban culture of respect and honour for elders. According to his Baluba upbringing, one that Tunji assumes his parents and Baamiagba at the scene ought to be better informed of, he mused, “don’t girls kneel before the elders and boys prostrate”?

Retrospectively, Abodunrin’s narration of this incidence expounded the shared pain which average Africans feel (or ought to feel) when African cultures are treated with disdain and neglect. The Yoruba nation in Nigeria, which Abodunrin represents, like most pre-colonial African cultures treats honour and respect for elders as of utmost importance. Among the Yoruba, it is commonplace that by this show of respect, or a lack of it, the ‘sanity’ or otherwise of the younger generations are indeed measured, whether consciously or otherwise. To show honour and respect or gratitude, the younger males prostrate while the younger females fall on their knees.

In *The Dancing Masquerade*, Abodunrin presents a youthful Tunji who epitomises this age-long Yoruba culture. This youth approaches his parents, at the presence of elders, presenting to them his most valuable possession: Respect, honour and gratitude, through a symbolic act of prostration but, painfully, only to be turned down. Tunji, representing the continuum of age-long culture of Yoruba’s respect for elders, here encounters mockery from the same elders whose duty it is to preserve and pass on to future generations the cultures

and values of a people. Tunji would rather be glad (just like Bukola when she encounters her mother’s forgetfulness of Baluban culture) if these elders could tap “into humanity’s collective storehouse of knowledge and wisdom instead of the monolithic after-thoughts of the land of their sojourn”. Bukola, on her part, had rather shockingly, chided her own mother, another Arrivant, by saying:

“Yes Maami, you are still one of us. That is one of the wisest sayings of our people – if the farmer is slow in apprehending the thief, it is in the nature of thieves to turn around and accuse the farmer (Abodunrin, 2003).

The farmer here, according to Nigerian Yoruba orature, is the rightful *owner*, as concerns possession or *custodian*, as concerns culture. The proverbial thief represents the ingrate or usurper. The older woman, Bukola’s mother, ought to be the ‘owner’ and ‘custodian’ of Baluba cultures by the significant reason of her age, but she has painfully switched role with her own child, who ought to be “feeding” from her, culture-wise. And again, that Bukola refuses to take offence after her mother slaps her on the face exudes a type of calmness and maturity in handling conflicts attributed mostly to elders. Painfully, the mother plays the child while the child plays mother, in a matter as complicated and as simple as culture! At another painful instance, after been offered a bottle of coke, Tunji respectfully, again as his custom is, prostrates to Mama Lati in gratitude but felt embarrassed when the woman “looked rather surprised” (Abodunrin, 2003). As if in answer to his internalised pain and confusions, Tunji “remembered the women missionaries who visited our school in Aiyeru and the way they shook hands with the teachers”, perhaps signifying the possibility of Abodunrin revealing that Mama Lati’s exposure to European culture must have contributed to the neglect and contempt of her own culture. However, Abodunrin’s clamour to protect a culture from further decline features again when Tunji notes that “luckily enough, our parents’ accents were not badly affected”. Subsequently, even Tunji was shocked when Baami mouthed the refrain that “afterall no religion can say that we shouldn’t appreciate the practices of our forebears!”, as if to respond to another shared pain inflicted by Bukola’s mother who does not expect someone who is called a Christian to mix respect for God with the worship of idols (Abodunrin, 2003).

In lending a voice against the shared pain of a culture’s decline, Davidson (1992) seems to add his thoughts that nothing in this context remains more depressing, than the incapacity of European states at the end of the twentieth century to accommodate the reasonable expectations of ethnic diversity. Abodunrin is not amused by the pain inflicted on his people by Africans who, on arrival from Europe abandon their culture. For instance, when her mother threatens her with hunger, Bukola is quick to remind her that “this land and its people taxed themselves so hard to send you and others like you to go

and learn about the white man's power – his secrets – and not go and become white yourselves". She further bemoans that:

We thought you were going to return with the theories and practices of liberation and not icons of further colonization and enslavement! (Abodunrin, 2003).

In what appears like a residual sense of hope for a culture in decline, Abodunrin presents Tunji and Bukola who, in spite of the painful culture's decline around them, represent the undying allegiance of Africans to their cultural bents in the face of the popularisation of Euro centrism by the Arrivants.

### **CULTURE'S DECLINE IN THE DANCING MASQUERADE**

It was Spengler (1926), in his *The Decline of the West*, who said that the meaningful units of history are not epochs but whole evolving aspects of cultures. *Decline*, as a word, is believed to render, more accurately, the intended meaning of Spengler's original German word *Untergang*, often translated as "downfall". However, Spengler does not refer to *decline* to mean the catastrophic demise of a people's culture but, rather, a protracted fall. A people's culture, according to Rufus (2013), includes things as diverse as songs, novels, customs, values, myths and works of arts, adding that culture serves a people's psychological or spiritual need much more than their material needs. Whenever a person does not see another person with similar value, homogeneity tends to break down while their culture enters into a decline and the people loose shared lives in communication, experience and, ultimately, identity. Therefore, literature's universality affects everyone because it essentially speaks to us all.

Aside *kissing* of English colonial education, Louis James (Abodunrin, 2008) reveals a quarrelsome view of the flip side of colonialism by suggesting that at the same time the English tradition could be destructive. He opines that petrified within the social structure as the standards of respectability, they (colonial education) could also, divide class from class, and construct the evolution of national ways of life. For instance, Mr Owoeye in *The Dancing Masquerade* is portrayed as a Baluban (African) teacher who, essentially, relishes the thought that one day he would move up to the 'superior' British life and culture. As if to volunteer his superior knowledge of the ways of the British whenever there is a debate, even if unsolicited, he says, rather arrogantly, that "that sort of thing can never happen in England" (Abodunrin, 2003). "But what shall we say", goes Abodunrin's query on culture's decline, "children of our mothers, now that historians are confounding philosophers in an orchestrated bid to conflate one era with another"? He

goes on to instruct that "our vocation - like the healers we happen to be - is to win back the souls - convoluted and confounded - now bearing arms one against another on a matter as complex, and yet as simple as belief! He further reveals that - "this fanaticism has come to us - by sea and by air - it now permeates the very air we breathe, and men are bearing arms - preparing to go to war over a matter of belief" (Abodunrin, 2003).

In *The Dancing Masquerade*, Abodunrin paints an instance where religious persuasions of Africa collide with that of the West at the commencement of a new religious movement. Because the vision of the new founder was expansive, he had to abandon his vocation as tractor operator immediately "to the chagrin of his white engineer boss overseeing the construction of the road". It appears, according to the narrative, as if the rigidly minded white boss who holds his religious persuasions as 'higher', was almost going to war over a matter of belief. Of this church, goes the narrative, "it was a long time before we knew that ours was a breakaway church whose founder was a road worker who, as they say, received a distinct call from God to start the church while driving a tractor. Rather than bury their heads in denial like the proverbial ostrich, Abodunrin challenges Balubans (Africans) to discover themselves by examining possible fault lines of their present Westernized religious culture(s), such as "the complexity of avarice" and "enigma of feelings": cultures that are strange to those of their forbears. While at it, he exclaims that:

We have asked for the dark origin of this discourse – shall we not see its discursive bottom? (Abodunrin, 2003).

Rather than abdicate issues of culture's decline in Africa, Abodunrin suggests interrogations. With several interfaces of African and Western ideals in *The Dancing Masquerade*, Abodunrin essentially protests against, not only dominations of the white man's interpretations of religion, but also that the ideals and ways of life of the colonizer are not always novel and superior, neither are the ideals and ways of life of the colonized always primitive and inferior. Of this, Tunji recalls what appears as a result of the clash between religious persuasions, noting that "the founder parted ways with the white church because of fundamental differences" (Abodunrin, 2003). Achebe is of the opinion that differences in religious persuasions ought not lead to 'war':

Yes and if we win the battle for the minds, the first thing which will go is that rigidity of mind that has come to us with the so-called 'higher religions', this fanaticism, that can make a man go to war over a matter of belief! (Abodunrin, 2003).

Furthermore, Abodunrin opines that it amounts to double speak on the part of the Europeans, to condemn every

aspect of the Baluban (African) cultural antecedent – be it clothing or medicine, not to talk of the thorny issue of one man, one wife, while aspects of European cultural rather than spiritual antecedents were taught as gospel truth, whereas it is believed, for example, that Yoruba (African) traditions and cultures give them a unique place not only among African societies, but among literate peoples the world over.

Davidson, alluding to culture's decline in his *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the curse of the Nation-State*, reveals how severe upheavals of the nineteenth century through East Africa eventually consigned the Fipa and their neighbours to Germany and subsequently to British rule in what was to be the colony of Tangayika (Tanzania after 1964). After this, the history of Ufipa frays into silence (Davidson, 1992). Consequently, the development of Ufipa shows it as the outcome of a process in which tolerance of change was an essential feature. Degraded under colonial rule to the status of migrant workers, the productive force of Ufipa dwindled and died while the people's self-identity, as a state and as the arena of a living community, withered and vanished. Not until 1953 with the rise of tribal associations, would Fipa people think it useful or meaningful to reassert their existence as a community distinct in themselves (Davidson, 1992). In Chinua Achebe's conversations with Ulli Beier as they interrogate colonization and neo-colonization, Beier suggests that one might recreate the spirit of the culture, not by going back to some antiquated custom, but by making people realise again that the world is a market place that constantly opens to bargain (Abodunrin, 2003). To this recreation of the spirit of culture, Achebe responds that this involves a rediscovering of the meaning of the old saying, 'the world is a dancing masquerade!' (Abodunrin, 2003).

The primary aim of Abodunrin's submissions in *The Dancing Masquerade* seems to be constant with his thoughts in his, for instance, *Blackness: Culture, Ideology and Discourse*, which is to bring under critical focus the possible dominant influence of Africa and in that process, contextualize how the remnant Blacks who, although no less affected by the commodification of their kins, have continued to react to the decline of their African cultures over many centuries of physical and spiritual estrangement.

*The Dancing Masquerade* shares thematic focus on cultural retrieval in a rigorous and creative attempt to regain a cultural identity that is gradually becoming obsolete as a result of Africa's involvement with the Orient as well as the Occident (Tembo, 2011). The dexterity of African culture and literature is revealed in this nostalgic narrative, prompting the reader to reminisce on the core cultural values of the African communities which, if revisited, tend to re-invigorate a commitment to ingrained uniqueness of the African cultures. Davidson (1992) asserts that if this is right, how extraordinary, then,

that writers about Africa should tell us that Africans have known no effective and meaningful participation in their own politics. He reveals further that the evidence(s), if actually examined, provides an exact African parallel with the European *regna* (kingdoms), and in almost exactly the same historical time. Therefore, at the chiding of her daughter, Mama Bukola was quick to assert that "there is nothing wrong with your upbringing. We are the ones trying to be what we cannot be. But the story is far more complex than you can both imagine. How we arrived singing songs of enslavement and further colonization", she continues, "is no simple matter. But when you've been lobotomised, there is no simple way out of your socio-cultural dilemma" (Abodunrin, 2003). Abodunrin, through Mama Bukola, further reveals a culture's decline as he exposes complex and futile efforts of Balubans (Africans) who struggle to get Anglicized, and in the process, spiting their African cultures. Another discussion between Tunji and his uncle while they awaited the Arrivants from *Ilu Oyinbo* (Europe) highlights this bewilderment of Africans who, by any means possible, work hard to be Anglicised. The uncle asked "well, 'Tunji I certainly hope that you have rehearsed your English, so that you can speak to your brother and sister"? The Arrivants who happen to be Tunji's parents and siblings now appear to only communicate through the white man's language, rendering the African language secondary. He says besides surgeries to our tongues, we think in one language and express ourselves in another language, "so that we can sound more and more like the colonizers" (Abodunrin, 2003). Expressing the futility of this exercise in Anglicization, Abodunrin points out that when we struggle to express ourselves in another language how can whatever we utter make any sense even to ourselves? He further explains the double danger of neo-colonization when one has been released but unable to harbour the thought of releasing oneself.

## CONCLUSION

Aside raising awareness of the rediscovery of the 'submerged' cultures of the people of Baluba, Abodunrin stirs in his reader the pertinence of discovering the functions and usefulness of art in the twenty-first century. His narrative reveals the liberal disposition of Africans, particularly the Yoruba, when they kiss and quarrel with other cultures. *The Dancing Masquerade* particularly distinguishes the African culture's disposition to have contact with Western cultures without contamination. Of this view, Soyinka (Abodunrin et al., 2001) thinks that Europeans still marvel at the ex-colonial - somebody at the lower scale of civilization as far as they are concerned - being able to respond in a very natural and intelligent way to another civilization. Ulli Beier agrees that the Europeans felt that they have to export their culture in order to lift other people to a higher level of

civilization and that the thought of any mutual enrichment was quite foreign to the Europeans. Invariably, *The Dancing Masquerade* as a work of art stimulates self-confidence, community thinking, expression, awareness and organisational strengths of cultural groups, communities and their cultures. Besides other matters dealt with in the narrative, these appear to be the crux of Abodunrin's deliveries.

Largely, appropriate choice of words and tones make literature an engaging discipline that could affect and effect: To affect the reader who in turn strives to effect, participate or begin to harbour thoughts of participating in actions that signifies a new reasoning, opinion or ideology. Abodunrin, through *The Dancing Masquerade*, appears to hand over this vocation to readers who contemplate on his work in order to address issues of shared pain of a cultures' decline or anyone with a hunger for brilliant writing. In effect, a study on Abodunrin's *The Dancing Masquerade* explore, on one hand, the exuberance of the colonized at agreeable Western ways, as well as, on the other hand, the retreat of the colonized from the grips of the colonizer's cultures with the possibility of the colonized sometimes caught in betwixt the shared pain of cultural influences and counter influences.

### Conflict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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