

THE PLAYWRIGHT AS A HUMANIST: EXAMPLES OF AIDOO AND SUTHERLAND

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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, is influenced by it, influences that environment in turn and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society. Wole Soyinka (Art, Dialogue and Outrage)

INTRODUCTION

Humanism as a literary concept can be traced to the revival of interest in classical literature, arts and painting in Europe between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Prior to this, human affairs were approached from a religious perspective, but the Renaissance spirit had sensitized the people to revolt against organized religion. This culminated in a return to the works of Plato, the Homeric epic, the Greek tragedies and the narratives of Plutarch and Xenophon in an attempt to liberate man from religious bondage. Therefore, humanism sees man as the most central being in the universe and advocates that he/she should be protected against anything which restricts the human mind. So, as a literary movement, it marks the transition between the God centered civilization of the Middle Ages and the man - centered civilization of the Modern Age.

But unlike European humanism which explores written literatures for the preparation of the human mind towards social responsibility, African humanism emphasizes values - social, religious, political and economic which were initially transmitted in the oral medium. This emphasis on orality has helped European scholars to propound a myth on the absence of a viable culture in Africa before the colonial era. The misconception is central to Chinweizu's analysis of Africa's encounter with Europe in *The West and the Rest of Us* and *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* where they approached the subject from historical and literary perspectives. This is because the anti - oral traditionalist usually argues that a thought system is not authentic except it is documented since morality accommodates errors and distortions.

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Nevertheless, Uduigwomen (1995:36) has insisted that the oral tradition "is a very strong vehicle for the transmission of knowledge in African society" because it is generally acceptable to the people. This justifies Henigei's (1982:2) assertion that a thing is traditional only if it is widely understood and practiced in a society". Thus, there is something which makes an African a human being in a way his/her Western counterpart cannot understand; and this is entrenched in the worldview. European humanism reflects the fragmentation of reality in the modern world while African humanism centres on the religious universe and reflects its preference for cosmic unity.

Umokoro (1989:72) recaptures this most vividly in his reference to Leopold Senghor's article titled "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century." In that essay Senghor states that

...the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe... The latter is essentially static, objective, dichotomic... It is founded on separation and opposition... The African on the other hand receives the world beyond the diversity of forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique reality that seeks synthesis (72).

When the renaissance-humanists revolted against religious restraint in Europe, they were making a case for individualism and perhaps, materialism. But African humanism promotes values that create and maintain stability and peaceful co-existence among the different spheres of existence. This, as Soyinka (1976:144) explains is closely linked with the fact that "life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living and the unborn" (144). And so, Africans show hospitality to strangers because there is a belief that the gods visit the world in the form of human beings. This is a true reflection of the harmony that exists within the three dimensions of existence in African cosmology, a thing the Europeans readily exploited in their quest for economic expansion in Africa.

However, it is with Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland among women writers in Africa that African humanism moves from the oral to the written dramatic genre. These two women have devoted their creative abilities to the exploration of African values. There is no doubt that their sex has imposed a unique tone on their works because the female

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sensibility, Wilson-Tagoe (1981:83) remarks, perceives the world differently from the male sensibility.

This is the point Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:10) is making when she insists that "the female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a third world person..." Yet the label of being women has not imprisoned their vision, neither has it hindered them from an objective examination of the human condition in Africa. This work uses *Anowa* and *Edufa* to examine Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland's commitment to humanity as African writers. The choice is necessitated by the fact that the above plays explicitly illustrate their vision of life both as creative artists and women writers.

AIDOO'S HUMANISM IN ANOWA

Published in 1970, *Anowa* shows how Aidoo uses the folktale to enact a drama on the theme of human incompatibility. Just like the girl in the tale, Anowa refuses to marry the men who ask for her hands in marriage and single-handedly choose a husband for herself. This is at variance with the custom and the desires of her parents yet she stands on her convictions. Incidentally, the Kofi Ako she loves embodies the very ideals that she opposes, especially in his attitude to slavery, materialism, child labour and fertility. As the play progresses, Kofi Ako increases in wealth and power without a corresponding growth in his relationship with Anowa. Intact, they move on parallel levels; and so, it is obvious that Anowa must pay the price of choice.

But then, Anowa is initially very optimistic about her choice and promises "to help him do something with his life"⁽¹⁸⁾. This is in consonance with African humanism because the woman is expected to be a strong supporter of her husband in all areas of human endeavour. Indeed, Anowa lives up to her vows by becoming a wealthy trader and the live-wire of her husband's business. Anowa's resilience recalls Acholonu's assertion that "African women [are] economically independent of their men and in many cases more economically viable or stable". Although this comment may be true in some cases, a vast proportion are struggling under the crippling effects of poverty and sexual exploitation.

However, Anowa's economic advancement borders on moderation but her husband overstretches his to accommodate materialism in its worse form - slavery. African humanism sees the human being as the supreme

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creation of God and the greatest asset anyone can possess. In essence, man is the noblest course in life which is why his/her humanity cannot be negotiated. This is shown in the choice of names in Africa; some names project the values that Africans place on life in their religious universe. Also in libation texts and even the breaking of Kola nuts, Africans pray for life, healthy children and wealth in that order. Never has wealth been exalted above human life in traditional African society.

This is why, the act of buying slaves to work in the farm sounds outrageous and abominable to Anowa. Aidoo recaptures Anowa's disposition to man's dehumanization of other human beings in the following lines.

Anowa: (Getting up so slowly that every movement of her body corresponds to syllables or words in her next speech). My husband! 'am I hearing you right? Have we risen so high? (Corking her ears) Kofi Ako do not let me hear these words again (29).

Yet her husband goes ahead to acquire slaves; this is the one thing that keeps them apart for Kofi Ako eventually loses his humanity on the altar of materialism.

This unconventional quest for material acquisition is what destroys his family which is the foundation of Africa humanism. The sanctity of the family in the traditional society is preserved by the husband's ability to provide for his wives and children. But Kofi Ako is morally and physically weak so he abandons consensus behaviour and degenerates into an idle person who in his laziness resorts to the exploitation of other human beings. Therefore "The Big House at Oguaa" symbolizes his dehumanization, especially since the pursuit of wealth has emasculated him.

The fundamental problem with Kofi Ako is that his search for mobility negates the values of his society. It is not that social advancement is bad but he has opted for artificiality as a viable lifestyle. He has no child but he is not bothered. Infertility disrupts the transition from the world of the unborn to the world of the living. So it causes cosmic rift in African cosmology. Ayisi (1972:15) explains this problem further when he remarks that a marriage without children cannot form a family. According him a "family consists of man, his wife, and child

or children. By this definition, a childless marriage is not a family". The fact that a man of Kofi's status cannot produce a family and yet exploits other people's children points to another dimension of his inhumanity.

Aidoo's skill in dramatizing the conflicts between Anowa and Kofi Ako comes out most visibly in the narrative patterns that she employs to the story. The play begins with a "Prologue" which uses Old Man and Old Woman to narrate the key issues in the life of Anowa. They are the voices of tradition although their perspectives are slightly different. Adelugba (1976: 80) has remarked that the Old Man is "the voice of reason and individual choice while the Old Woman represents the voice of emotion, prejudice, and communal compulsions". Beyond this binary opposition, these two characters give a compressed summary of Anowa's life before the major characters appear.

The play is set in three places. Phase One in Yebe during the Nineteenth Century with Anowa in the protective cover of tradition, a tradition she questions by asserting her individuality in the choice of other spouse. Phase Two is set "on the Highway" and it reveals Anowa's commitment to her husband, the struggle to make him a man and the forces which keep them apart. In this segment, Anowa's moral superiority is contrasted with Kofi's moral bankruptcy. This is why he sees a "strangeness" about her and hopes to exorcise it. In phase III, they have parted ways because "The Big House in Oguana" symbolizes a depravity in Kofi Ako that she cannot stand and it accounts for why she becomes a "wayfarer." The monologue which opens this phase speaks of Anowa's encounter with slave trade and the destruction of African people. Its location within the texts helps to deepen the gulf between Kofi Ako and Anowa, a fact which shocks the boy and girl in their childlike ranting.

Anowa is a woman of immense greatness but "the irony of the play Etherton (1982:237) comments "is that reason and understanding is a cruel afflictions it is especially cruel if it is found in a woman". The heroine Anowa is a woman of immense greatness but "the irony of the play Etherton (1982:237) comments "is that reason and understanding is a cruel afflictions it is especially cruel if it is found in a woman". The heroine corroborates this in this lament.

Anowa: Someone should have taught me to grow up to be a woman. I hear in other lands a woman is nothing ...in order for her man

*to be a man, she must not think she must not talk. 0-0 why didn't someone teach me how to grow up to be a woman?*³²

This is Aidoo's greatest humanist statement in *Anowa* because she questions the rationale for sexism and castigates a social system which accommodates the mediocrity associated with it. For if the human essence is equal in both sexes, the suppression of women in our society tantamounts to mass ignorance.

Anowa's lament turns out to be a voice of revolt because having lost all, her voice is not muted. This enables her to explode the myth of woman's infertility-in childless marriages. Indeed, the best way to survive Kofi Ako's schemes is to be a rational being; a fact Okafor (181:41) affirms when she posits that *Anowa* is a "theatrical representation of suppressed enlightenment symbolized by Kofi". The issue is not that Anowa rejects change. Indeed, she is a progressive but the change she advocates according to Ekpenyong, (1991:41) "is not a destruction of tradition, but a re-examination of some retrogressive aspects of tradition".

Anowa is the symbol of the Earth Mother, the Muse who cares about her children. This is why the play should not be confined to the idea of female self-assertion in a narrow sense because its thrust lies in the freedom of the human person-women, men and children from all forms of oppression. It explains why Anowa cannot stand the contemptible practise of engaging the Boy and Girl (someone's children) to fan an empty chair. It is for the same reason that she agonizes over Kofi Ako's refusal to continue his linkage. Her lament is not just a product of unfulfilled desires because even in her frustration, she retains consciousness with her society. Therefore, her death is a repudiation of her past, an affirmation of the rational impulse in the midst of chaos and a testament that the woman is no more the muted specie.

Sutherland's Humanism in *Edufa*

It is as if the symbol of humanity who asserts herself in *Anowa* gradually develops into another vast possibility in the person of Ampoma. In that case, Kofi Ako's development into *Edufa* portrays his coming of age as far as human depravity is concerned. Again, just as Ama Aidoo, Efua Sutherland resorts to folktale (the Twenchoa Kodua) for

her material. She does this through the theme of unrestrained love which Ampoma has for her husband, Edufa, when she promises to die for him. Even at the point of death, she still affirms her love for the only man in her life. As the frantic attempts to counter the effect of the charm prove abortive, we know that Edufa has done Ampoma wrong. No ritual bath nor rite of purification can drive out the spirit of death from Edufa's home.

Thus, Ampoma's death is a sacrifice on account of love. Her life is an expression of commitment just as her death is an affirmation of love so she is one with her husband both in this life and beyond as she expresses in the following lines:

*Ampoma: ... I declare to earth and sky and water,
and all things with which we shall soon be one
that I am slave to your flesh and happy so to be.
Wear it proudly this symbol of union of our flesh.*
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Sutherland presents her heroine as an ideal woman in tradition – she is a devoted wife, a mother of children, an enigmatic beauty who is also the embodiment of feminine attributes. The women call her "mother" because she accepts other people as human beings.

Incidentally, Edufa is the opposite of his wife. According to Kankam, Edufa's father, his son is moving on the path of self destruction as this comment shows:

*...Pity him, you spirits. He grew greedy and
insensitive, insane for gain; frantic for fluff of
flattery; And I cautioned him...I tried to make him
stop at the point when men must be content or
ourselves be lured on to our doom. But he
wouldn't listen...*¹⁹

Edufa's life violates the collective conscience of his people although he wins the respect of favour-seekers. The way he treats his father shows the disregard he has for the wisdom of the elders. Even though he has enough to feed the villagers, he abandons his father because having rejected moderation, his father constitutes an enigma to his materialist ethic. Kankam's confrontation with Edufa emanates from the realization that his son's outward display of sophistication is only a thin mask over his inner sense of frustration.

The point Sutherland has made is that Edufa lacks true humanity

within the African framework. Senchi-the Poet Singer-whom the playwright introduces into the work at the highest point of conflict provides a foil to the protagonist's life. He is not just providing comic relief; in fact, he is a celebration of life in its natural state. Senchi is a wanderer but his life is more meaningful to others because he affirms the supremacy of human life above material acquisition. This is why he confesses that he must at all times maintain a genuine contact with the basic earth in [his] shoes".⁵⁴ The fact is that Edufa has lost touch with reality without a valid replacement.

The doom which hangs over Edufa's roof is introduced in the "Prologue" as Abena keeps vigil because Ampoma is ill. Edufa's inner desperation is revealed through his taciturnity and the closure of the gate to his mighty house. So, it is obvious to a careful reader or audience (in a performance situation) that Edufa is trapped. Ampoma's slow death from the effect of the charm in Act I speaks on Edufa's inhumanity and shows the gradual disintegration of his fulfillment. That is why he pleads with his father saying: "let me not be charged for any will to kill, but for my failure to create a faith".²¹ The struggle to drive away evil spirits from Edufa's family by the women in Act II further reveals the degree of his dehumanization, especially since the women are ignorant of the fact that "He whose-hands-Are-Ever-Open" embodies the evils of witchcraft and human sacrifice.

It is against this background that the celebration of Ampoma's recovery in Act III becomes a celebration of death. This is because she is closer to death than life, a fact she shows with her parting present to Edufa. The offer of waist beads in a casket symbolizes her death for the sake of love and a reminder that Edufa and herself must remain soul-mates even in death. This is the greatest indictment on Edufa's personality as a husband who betrays the unconditional love of his spouse. We are left to wonder how a woman of immense proportion like Ampoma came by a man who is as morally sterile as Edufa.

Although the Tweneboa legend sees death as a heroic act which makes for the continuity of life, it is unimaginable to sacrifice human life for the selfish realization of another man's dream or a person's vision. This is the central concern of this work and the playwright dramatizes it

through a series of irony; some dramatic, some verbal. When Edufa asks who wants to die for him, he expects his father to make the promise. But Kankam's reaction is "son, die your own death." Similarly, the chorus appears for a rite of cleansing in Edufa's house just when he is struggling to keep off the spirit of death from his home. It is also interesting to observe that the moment Edufa chooses to celebrate Ampoma's strength coincides with her preparation to merge with nature. Sutherland portrays this very vividly in Act 111, Scene Ampoma II.

Edufa: (with unconcealed concern) Ampoma.

Ampoma: I'm all-right, (she rises, she is not all-right). It is a moving thing to feel prayer poured into your soul. But mm it's over: (pause). Give me some wine.³¹

What is actually over? Life is over for her yet she continues to say "I'm all right." It is as if she is working in her sleep. These ironies with the accompanying symbols help to project the playwright's commitment to an honest presentation of the human condition.

CONCLUSION

Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland have explored in these two plays the intricacies of human relationship. So *Anowa* and *Edufei* really confirm leader's (1981:5) assertion that relationship between the sexes constitutes "the most intricate, perplexing and elusive...is full of paradoxes and evades precise definition" This readily explains Anowa's change of fortune and Ampoma's gradual death. The reality of these women's lives defies "precise definition," especially since they are located within the framework of myth. But that men are the tools of their elimination indicts the society for the continuous exploitation of women. This is where Aidoo and Sutherland succeed in reflecting their female sensibility because they have chosen to write as women. But more than this, they have given their vision a universal dimension by the concern for the freedom of human beings (of both sexes) from social exploitation.

Mythology has provided their materials, but their artistry is not in doubt. This is because, as Nkosi (1981:6) remarks, traditional forms have been used to enrich the modern theatre since the emergence of the latter did not make African traditional forms obsolete (173). Thus, Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua Sutherland have utilised trends in the traditional theatre such

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a procession, song, dirge, rituals and other elements of orality within a Western medium. Although the former is more successful, both in characterization and the perception of women's experience, they are one in the humanism they express because their heroines are used to confront a social structure which allows for the dehumanization of human life.

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