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The Fluidity of Lewoh Traditional African Beliefs and Western Catholic Beliefs: A Study of John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God was African*

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ABSTRACT

The paper, "The Fluidity of Lewoh Traditional African Beliefs and Western Catholic Beliefs: A Study of John Nkemngong Nkengasong's *God was African*" seeks to juxtapose the similarities and differences in the traditional Lewoh African beliefs and the Western Catholic beliefs as portrayed in the selected text. The main character in the text seems to find himself at crossroads with making a choice between their traditional Lewoh beliefs and practices and their Western Catholic beliefs. Having been exposed to both belief systems from home and at school, the protagonist finds himself in a dilemma as to which of the belief systems to adhere to principally. Is any belief system actually superior to the other or better than the other? This study is based on the proposition that none of the belief systems is better than the other as much similarity abounds between the two systems in question. The study concludes that all the belief systems are geared towards the worship of an Omnipotent God based on the religious context of the believers. The author therefore advocates for hybridized characters who understand and embrace the Lewoh and Catholic beliefs based on the context in which they find themselves. This study will employ the theories of Trans-Deconstruction: Theory on Monism and Theory of Interpretation as propounded by Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar.

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I. INTRODUCTION

H. L. B. Moody defines culture as the peculiar characteristic of a particular community, including its organization, institutions, laws, customs, work, play, art, religion, music and so on (qtd in Ayuk, 193). The nexus of this paper is built on the religious worship of the entire Nweh clan and Catholicism from the West. Religion is treated in this article as an aspect of culture that shapes and determines the way of life of a particular community; the African and the Western in this case. This paper, "The Fluidity of Lewoh Traditional African Beliefs and Western Catholic Beliefs: A Study of John Nkemngong Nkengasong's God was African" aims at examining the two belief systems as portrayed by the author. At the surface level, there seems to be an imminent clash of cultures between the Lewoh traditional way of worship and the Western Catholic way of worship that almost tears the community apart. The protagonist, Kendem, is not exempted from the psychological turmoil that constantly traumatises him anytime he has to choose between his traditional religious practices and Catholicism as taught in school and in the church. In the same light, the religious conflict that seems to pull the community apart is resolved in no time.

Theories are like vehicles through which the contents of works are aptly analysed and conveyed. This study will employ the theories of Trans-Deconstruction: Theory on Monism and the Theory of Interpretations as propounded by Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar. Pawar's theory of Trans-Deconstruction: Theory on Monism (2021) holds that the dichotomy between the centre and the margin is rather a symbolic manifestation of uniformity, singularity and uniqueness as a

centered-universe needs to be decentered. This also, is likened to the way deconstruction begets trans-deconstruction when a reader is haunted by his endless search for one meaning in the crowd of the multiplicity of meanings. For him, “the binary oppositions like presence-absence, light-darkness, day-night, hen-eggs, and seed-tree are all merged into the Absolute, the Truth where no entity is privileged over another” (3). This paper will focus on this tenet in its analysis amongst others.

With regard to the Theory of Interpretation (2024), Pawar makes an enchanting comparism between the author/the text and soul/body:

The author is the soul of the text; he has never been dead in any interpretation of the text. In fact he is alive through his point of view in the text, having been rested forever beneath the super-consciousness of the text. An author stands as a soul in the body whereas the text forms the entire body. How can the ingrained presence of the author be left without any interpretation of the text? If you drop the author and simply focus on the text, it means that you disprove the presence of the creator and celebrate its creation only. This leads to mean overlooking the father as a creator and pampering the son as a creation. The celebration of any creation in absence of the creator is a literary injustice to the text. This is an unfair practice in the interpretation of the text. (1)

The author is therefore portrayed as the soul of the text, while the text is the body of the creation which cannot be separated from the creator. Pawar equally sees every piece of writing as a symbolic manifestation of the self to the world, signs to the signified, and words to the world (2). These theories by Pawar are more suiting to this article as they do not only acknowledge the role of the author in the fair interpretation of literary works, but celebrates their very existence and contributions as in this *Gedenkschrift* in honour of Professor John Nkemngong Nkengasong. The intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of the text will be used in the analysis and interpretation of this paper as propounded by the theorist. This researcher will examine the author’s biography,

and thereafter, adapt a problem-solving approach, where conflicts arising from the texts will be examined and their proposed solutions made.

Brief Biography of the Author

The examination of the biography of the author is motivated by Henry James’ claim in *The Art of Fiction* that “the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer” and that “no good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind” (1385). This assertion also gives credence to the functionality of African literature in shaping the society as well as projecting cultural values.

John Nkemngong Nkengasong was born in 1959 in Lewoh Fodom, Lebialem Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. He attended his primary education in the Catholic Mission School Fotabong, and later moved to the Government School Mamfe. After his First School Leaving Certificate, he continued with his secondary school education in Our Lady Seat of Wisdom College Fontem, a Catholic institution of great standards in Lebialem Division, where he received a holistic education and Catholic upbringing with the Focolare Missionaries. His critical mind, high moral standards and his love for truth and fairness could have been developed at his teenage age in this college. In an online conversation between this researcher and Nkengasong on March 17th 2019, Nkengasong admits, “I think the school [Our Lady Seat of Wisdom] greatly shaped my life and vision of the world today” (3). The school, his “alma mater provided and still provides a solid moral foundation for its students” (2).

After studies in the Government High School Mamfe, Nkengasong proceeded to the lone University of Yaounde at the time, in the United Republic of Cameroon, where he later obtained a Ph.D. He served as a Professor of British Literature in the same university. It is not surprising therefore, that his high moral values, his firm stance in what he believes in and his craving for the truth and what is noble made the authority place him in charge of ethics and deontology in the Faculty of Arts in the University of Yaounde 1. During his reign as President of

Anglophone Writers' Association, many literary works by Anglophone Cameroonians were published with the help of subvention from the Ministry of Culture.

His anti-assimilation thoughts began earlier on as a teacher in the secondary school where he and Azong Wara fought hard in 1991 for the establishment of the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Board for the welfare of the Anglophone System of Education, which was gradually being assimilated into the Francophone System of Education. He also won the Fulbright Scholarship to New York in the United States of America. He was a writer of reputable celebrity both at home and abroad with many novels, plays, short stories, and a collection of poems to his credit: He was also winner of the 2013 Eko Prize for literature and accredited for the proponent use of local imagery in his works, which assert his African background and the Nweh culture in particular. He passed on into eternity on June 11th 2023, while actively serving as Dean of the Faculty of Arts in the University of Buea, Cameroon.

II. LEWOH AFRICAN BELIEFS VERSUS WESTERN CATHOLIC BELIEFS

This section of the work examines the conflicts portrayed in the texts, which emanate from some cultural differences in the way of worship. Religion is treated in this paper as an aspect of culture and the societies involved are the African and Western Societies which are further delimited to the traditional Lewoh beliefs and the Catholic beliefs in particular. Even though other conflicts abound in the text from racism as witnessed by Kendem during his Fulbright Scholarship programme in the United States of America, a greater part of it stems from a clash of religious practices and beliefs between the indigenous and the imported Catholic beliefs.

In his key note address "Parachuting into Space" (2024), Mbuh Tennu Mbuh opined, "God is a destination" and argues that most of the conflicts witnessed are "conflicts of how to reach the destination" (unpublished key notes). The utopian communities seem to be facing the same difficulties where confusion, misunderstanding,

and hatred arise in the process of reaching this destination. The conflict could be identified as twofold; within hybridized individuals who seem to have fairly embraced the two religions and amongst the non-hybridized individuals who adhere strictly to one of the religions only.

Some hybridized characters include Kendem and his mother, Chief Beyano, his first wife and some of his many wives and children, while the non-hybridized characters include Father Tom, Kendem's father, Bombabili, and the rest of the Nweh villagers. Most of their character personas reveal their belief systems as either hybridized or not as would be discussed. Some of the conflicts to be discussed arise from performances of burial rites, habitual rituals, types of marriages, other doctrines about God and spirits.

2.1 Burial Rites

The novel opens up with the arrival of Kendem followed by a vivid description of the beautiful topography of Lewoh village where Kendem hails from with an exposition of some of the good and evil spirits of the land and their specific abodes. Through the technique of flashback, the reader learns that Kendem has been in the United States of America. The first conflict is revealed through the technique of dialogue when one of the men in the bar inquires, "Mbe Nwet, has the matter been settled" (8)? Mbe Nwet had hardly responded when another villager intruded with a response which did not only raise eye brows, but turned out to be proleptic: "Do you see it as a matter that can be settled in a day? This matter has teeth. It will split Lewoh country if not handled in both hands. The chiefs are already divided" (8). The suspense continues in the reader who wonders what the precise issue is. Again, another man in the bar intercepts the conversation with "But if a chief must be chief, he must follow the rules of our ancestors" (8). At this junction, it becomes clear that there is some bridge of tradition or rule. The men in the bar blame Chief Beyano for not initiating his children well into the traditional and religious practices of the Nweh clan. One of the men summarily reveals the conflict and some of the Lewoh traditional beliefs:

The children are now insisting on a Christian burial for their father. But some of the fathers of the land do not think that this is the right thing to do to a departed chief who was one of the custodians of our culture and who knew that he was to travel to the land of his ancestors and then return as tradition demands. (8)

In the first place, the villagers do not want their chief buried in church because he will not be able to meet his ancestors and return to rule his village if the traditional rites are not performed as demanded. They firmly believe that a chief disappears and returns to rule after a number of rituals is performed.

In the second place, the children have violated the traditional belief by taking their father to a mortuary when they are aware that as they were growing up a chief never died, but went on a journey to return in another form. This conflict split the village as “some people were clearly on the side of the church while others held firm that the laws and the customs of the land must be respected” (9). This conflict split Chief Beyano’s family as well as the entire village.

2.2 Rituals and Practices

After Kendem’s returns from the U.S.A., his mum tells him of her dreams the night before his arrival, where he saw his father welcoming him from his journey though not happy and asking about Kendem’s brother whom he “put in place to continue to stretch his umbilical cord” (15). She therefore orders Kendem, “You must visit your father in the shrine and tell him that you have returned” (15). She pauses and cautions him not to hesitate in spite of the fact, that he has gone to many places in the world and learned many new things, because a woodpecker always returns to its hole however far it flies into the forest. This analogy is telling as it reminds Kendem of his cultural values. Does this doctrine make any sense to Kendem?

Kendem finds himself in a fix after his mother leaves him. He sits back wondering why she was so concerned about his visit to the ancestral shrine which he had long forgotten, especially the

site where his father used to perform rituals in honour of his ancestors when they were still young. He soliloquizes, “I had believed that the shrine no longer had a place in modern life. And as I went to college and continued the academic trip to the university I didn’t think that I should be steered into primitive cultures. I was a modern man, a civilized man and believed that some old traditions had to be discarded” (16). Kendem, a hybridized individual, finds himself in a dilemma: His mother urgently wants him to visit his father’s shrine while he is deeply convinced the shrine visit is primitive.

In addition, he had lost complete sight of the shrine after his father’s death, “except for the image of a hut with a tattered roof attached to the back of the main building that still hung hazily in [his] mind” (160). Kendem’s exposure to Catholicism and Western Education makes him perceive his traditional beliefs and practices as primitive.

2.3 Types of Marriages

The Lewoh and Catholic beliefs do not seem to have any intersection on the question of marriage. The Lewoh tradition believes much in polygamy and marriage is primarily for procreation that brings much happiness and dignity to a man based on the number of wives and children he has. This view is contrary to Catholicism that believes in monogamy and love as the primary essence of any marriage with children coming as a blessing to the union. Kendem tells Don Tomson that his father has five wives, while his grandfather had twenty-one with a flood of children.

This clash in the two beliefs brings disharmony and destabilization in the Lewoh community, where a chief abandons his twelve wives and weds with the first wife. Even though Kendem’s mother does not wed his father in church, she was baptized as the first of five wives. Each system therefore perceives the other as not being valid. For Pawar (2021), differences should be celebrated as they rather form a part of the unified whole and the ultimate truth.

2.4 Conflicting Religious Doctrines

Some clash of beliefs in Lewoh tradition and Catholic beliefs seem to bother the young Kendem. As a young boy, Kendem went to the village ceremonies with his dad where it was contradicted, “that only wizards and evil spirits visit the sky” while “people talked about their gods and ancestors living in the earth, and who gave the living food, water, fire and air from the earth” (27). Kendem gets confused the more on the doctrine about heaven, for Father Tom had told him in Wysdom College that God lives “in Heaven above” (27). He questions, if this was not the place “where Father Tom told us good people went to when they died?” (27). Kendem gets trapped between the different perceptions of Heaven being above the sky and beneath the sky.

III. AUTHORIAL PROPOSED IDEOLOGY

In the light of Pawar, there is Truth in the heart of every text which constitutes power, since basic truth can never be changed even if distorted. Every attempt of interpretation is therefore geared towards uncovering the basic truth in a text. How is this uncovered?

Pawar (2024) holds that the text is a complete body of super-consciousness, full of ambiguities in-built in the text, beyond definition, interpretation and analysis which needs to be trans-deconstructed first (4-5). For him, the author is never dead in the interpretation of the text. He is in fact, still alive through his point of view in the super-consciousness of the text and as the mouthpiece of the different characterisations sketched, scheduled, and designed by him. In his masterpiece, only the author can make the directions in the interpretations of the text. As a matter of fact, the authorial note needs to be taken into consideration in any research activity.

Guided by these tenets, the reader gets many of the authorial voices amongst the men drinking in the bar which could posit the stance of the author: “But the church should know that it did not travel from wherever it came and found a vacuum in Lewoh country. It came and met people with their own customs and traditions. Ugh! How does one kill a snake that has coiled round his calabash of

oil” (8)? The indigenes therefore had a culture, a way of worshipping God before the coming of Christianity from the West. Bombabili regrets this when he shares with Kendem, that “God was African” (29) even though Christianity saw their Gods as satanical, and their culture as barbarical causing them to burn up their juju, while installing theirs. Jean Piaget (1937) holds that individuals actively construct their understanding of the world through interactions with their environment. This is very true of Bombabili, Kendem, and his mother based on their lived experiences and perceptions.

As regards the preservation of home and identity, Princess Kingful and Olatunde Adeyemi Ojerinde (2023) assert that “Home and identity have been at the center of most postcolonial investigations of literature and society” (63). This view to them is supported by early theories such as Edward Said who propagate for a fixed identity with every individual belonging to a particular culture, whereas Evans Mwangi in *Africa writes back to self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality*, holds that “new, engaging twenty-first century writing from the continent and the Diaspora is neither a ‘writing back’ to Europe nor an endorsement of Euro-American neo-colonialism. It is, first and foremost, about self-perception” (qtd. in Kingful & Ojerinde, 63-64). This assertion by Mwangi is valid to a greater extent in the context of this literary artefact, where most of the characters like Kendem, his mother, Father Tom, and Bombabili act according to the perception of the world around them and in a bid to uphold their identities.

For G. Ojong Ayuk (1986), “in building their cultures, African nations must remain outward looking, but the desire to remain open should not be taken to mean that indigenous cultures are to be smothered by alien models” (200). He states, that “Colonialism, in establishing by violence the cultural unreality of the subjugated peoples, in petrifying their cultures in an immense ghetto of history, deprives the colonized of all identity” (199). This is similar to the burning of the indigenous juju in favour of the Western juju.

IV. POINTS OF CONVERGENCE IN THE BELIEF SYSTEMS

Oscar C. Labang (2014) posits that Nkengasong in his works “undertakes the task of reminding his own people of their past as well as informing the outside world about their traditions and its value” (146). Some of these values are portrayed in this section of the work. Reading through the text, one tends to see more of convergences than divergences in the Lewoh traditional ways of worship and Catholicism: As concerns hierarchical structures in the two systems, His Majesty, Fuo Atemangwat is the highest authority in the Nweh Clan just like the Pope in the Catholic Church, who is the Successor of St Peter.

The Lewoh indigenes belief in the good spirits that reside in Nyi-Mbong and the bad spirits that reside in Nyi-Mbinda. This is not different with Catholicism that believes in the good and bad spirits that either guide or destroy the individual. Father Tom tells Kendem in school that good people go to heaven, while bad people go to hell. The notions bear much semblance.

Similarly, the belief in the resurrection of the dead and communion of saints is common to both belief systems. Kendem’s father “had built the shrine in the backyard of the main house of the compound in which he displayed relics of his ancestors and offered sacrifices to them at different times of the year” (29). These sacrifices are offered to either ask for specific favours or in thanksgiving for the abundance they enjoyed.

The Catholics too have shrines which they visit regularly and ask for intercessions like the special favours of Mary, the Mother of God. Besides the shrines, other places of worship exist like the chapels and churches in Wysdom College in Nweh land, in Lewoh Village for the parishioners as well as the Church of St Joseph in the U.S. where Kendem used to worship. Kendem equally talks of the Church of St Joseph and the mosaic structure at the altar which usually carries the relics of the named saints. Just as Kendem’s father used to put up a feast in honour of his ancestors, the priest at the Church of St Joseph encouraged the Christians not to come to church only when there

was a crisis like the September 2011 disaster at the Trade Centre and the Paragon, but to come to church just to praise and worship God. The author also makes use of historical and biblical allusions giving credence and verisimilitude to his narration.

In like manners, Bombabili tells Kendem that the rite carried out in the past to chase away bad people at Lewoh boundaries are rarely done since “you pipu [Catholics] came and built your juju house and put your own juju in the house” and he laments bitterly, “we didin knows what we was doing and we put our jujus in the fire and burnt it” (129). It was only later on that they discovered God was African in the peaceful and respectful way that they treated their Gods with sacrifices offered, rather than beating him to death on the cross. The juju house that Bombabili is referring to is the tabernacle where the Consecrated Host is kept. The two systems therefore operate juju houses based on their different contexts. Instead of the woeful destruction of cultural values, Nyanchi Marcel Ebliiyu advocates for “leaders to create the necessary environment where home cultures can accommodate new ways of life and practices, especially with respect for the norms on the ground” (152).

The author also makes use of a symbolism to drive across his message: The protagonist in the text is called ‘Kendem’ a variation or wrong spelling of his original name ‘Nkue-ndem’ which means ‘God’s message’. Although his names have two variant spellings, the personality is neither changed nor affected by the variants. In the same way, the two belief systems are only varied ways of worshipping the same God and should not affect the believers adversely, since the practices are directed to the same God.

Most especially, the decision of His Majesty Fuo Atemangwat to perform the traditional rites on Chief Beyano according to the traditions of the Nweh clan before handing to the Catholic Church was befitting as both parties felt satisfied and expressed their own cultural beliefs based on their different contexts. The initial threat to seize the chieftancy from Chief Beyano’s family did not happen and the initial conflict from the intended

Christian burial that split the family before that of succession was equally resolved peacefully.

The authorial voice resounds again through one of the men in the bar when he states:

Things have long changed. The church and tradition today are one. Do we not sing the same ritual songs in church today which the church forbade our fathers from singing in their shrines a long time ago? Did they not say the songs were pagan songs and that it was the work of Satan singing those songs and dancing? The church refused eating the crab when it first arrived. Today it is eating its sauce and licking its fingers. (9)

The author employs a good number of local Nweh imageries in the text. The plot is wrought with a lot of flashbacks and intertext narrations which is a characteristic feature of this author.

When asked about his craving for truth and justice in society as expressed by some literary scholars, Nkengasong replied:

[The] world no more listens to the voice of Truth; it no more reveres Truth the foundation upon which a harmonious society should be built. One of the major causes of pain in the world is the illusory nature of our policies, practices, conceptions and ideologies. Therefore, a writer, if he/she has any real value for his/her works must seek to debunk the illusory world which we have created as a result of our bitter souls. (www.duniamagazin.com).

For Nkengasong, truth is the fundamental principle for living in a peaceful society, for attaining harmony which is badly needed in the world today, for achieving unattenuated progress in the world.

According to Pawar (2024), "An idea of the inner self is always codified in writing. It can be termed as a speech-mini manifesto" (3) and the author sometimes speaks through his characters to project his point of view as portrayed by Kendem's mother on the clash between the two belief systems. Kendem's mother is described as a

devoted convert of the Roman Catholic Church, a hybrid of Lewohism and Catholicism who respected both religions with equal attentions by adhering to all the rites and rituals in the two systems. She tells her son, "that in this matter of the church, let the trap be sensible and so the animal too" (20) in relation to the burial conflict raised because "the two faiths resided in her soul and each had occasions for expressions" (19). Pawar likens the author to the soul of the text and the text itself to the body. The lived experiences of the author could shape his writing to an extent.

V. CONCLUSION

The reading of the text can be reached to its destination through the theory of transdeconstruction, where the intention of the author is deduced through his voice, his characters, plot, as important tools of expression for interpretation (Pawar, 2021). Religion plays a vital role in shaping the individual and collective lives of the communities in the text. The religious differences are to be celebrated in their uniqueness and beauty and perceived more as beauty in diversity as they all aim towards the services of an Omnipotent God. This study concludes therefore, that the two belief systems in the text have more convergences than divergences, that no belief system is more superior to the other, that they do not complement each other, but are rather perceived as diverse ways of worshipping the same Almighty God based on the cultural context of the believers.

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