Narrating the feast: the ethics and aesthetics of celebrations in African literature.

Résumé:
Le récit de la fête dans l’histoire de la littérature africaine a une longue tradition depuis les récits exotiques d’écrivains étrangers aux récits ambivalents de la littérature africaine postcoloniale. Les descriptions des célébrations festives y obéissent à des impératifs à la fois idéologiques et esthétiques. Le récit de la fête est à la fois métaphore de la résistance culturelle, de la crise qui affecte la vie sociale et offre des perspectives de sortie de crise.

Mots clés : récit – ethnologie – carnaval – ambivalent – postcolonial – péjorisme -

Abstract :
Narrating the feast has always been a motif of literature about Africa with foreign writers who had recourse to it for the exotic flavor they sought for. In the postcolonial narratives, though, the description of festive celebrations has ideological and aesthetic motives. These narratives of feasts are not only the metaphor of cultural resistance but also of the crisis prevailing in the postcolony. But this motif also offers the ethic and aesthetic instruments for a way out of the cultural crisis that the continent goes through.

Key words: narrative – ethnology – carnival – ambivalent – postcolonial – pejorism –
INTRODUCTION

If festivals and celebrations are part of the everyday life of any human society and have been largely represented in artistic and cultural creations, the theoretical reflection on their meanings and occurrence suffers from a lack of a similar interest. In the literary productions of Africa in particular, celebrations and other festive events have been the subjects of several literary representations but have not been given an equally similar interest by critics and theoreticians. This has been so despite the impact of the representation of these events on narrative strategies, the structures and formal devices initiated by African writers.

This study reflects on the feast in the postcolonial literature of Africa and the meaning of its literary representations. Representation shall not be understood as a mere description of what is in the social milieu or real life. Representation, as J.M.Kouakou argues, shall be understood in the sense of passing what is perceived by our senses through the analysis of the psyche of the writer which works by a selection or affective decision. The social reality of the text is never the same as the referential one. The text's reality is therefore a partial, biased, fragmented reality. It is never a faithful copy of the initial reality captured by our senses. Representation is therefore to be regarded as a game the artist/narrator indulges in, a make-belief device which aims at giving the illusion of reality through narrative and enunciative strategies. (J-M Kouakou 2010)

To give an air of authenticity or reality to their narratives, authors indeed often present feasts in their literary works. The minute descriptions of these feasts reveal the skills of a narrator who borrows from the scientist the latter’s depth perception of all details, his critical and objective look at the realities described. Such a narrator is also endowed with artistic skills that make his literary arguments sound real and pleasing to senses and the mind.

For some literary movements like 19th century Romantic Movement in Europe, the insertion of long descriptions verging on scientific reports of festive celebrations as a way of asserting ethical and cultural values was and is still analyzed as an obstacle to the autonomy of the literary “field”⁸. The proponents of such a trend conceive of literature as a pure field that must state its autonomy from other fields like economics, politics and pure science etc. This trend is best summarized by 20th century Czech writer Milan Kundera who claims for an aesthetic that aims at “cleansing the novel from all elements that do not specifically belong to the novel.” (lettres.ac-rouen.fr/français/fx_gide/ faux/depouil.htm) Yet the introduction of descriptions of feasts often borrow a lot from the ethnological and anthropological discourses that aim to study the cultural practices and minds of non-western people.

In African literature, the narrative style that is strongly influenced by this “scientific” discourse is a key motif that can be traced back to literature produced during colonial era by colonial agents that supported explicitly or implicitly the colonial enterprise. Motives about this use of the feast in literature are different according to whether the author is African or a “colonial writer”⁹. For the colonial writer, feasts and rituals achieved a sense whose aim was to justify the epistemic, institutional and political domination. That literature can be referred to as colonial ethnological fiction. With this literature, analysts stood to learn more about the writer himself than about the people whose values he was representing as cultural practices were perceived through the lenses, phantasms and prejudices of members of the community of the dominator. For the African writer, on the other hand, who also has recourse to this ethnological style, the aim is different. Beyond the impact this style has on its literature, the topic itself is used in an ambivalent way. Sometimes it embodies the social crisis that African countries are faced to, sometimes it is used as a device to assert one’s cultural exception. In all cases, it is never used gratuitously. It has aesthetic and ethical purposes.

Basing ourselves on Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of literature, Frantz Fanon’s analysis of celebrations in the neocolonial society, M. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and A. Mbembe’s theory of

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⁸ Field is to be understood as French sociologist P.Bourdieu conceived it as a relatively autonomous thinking system with its own rules, norms, agents and institutions.

⁹ By colonial writer we refer to these writers whose literary works justified, supported or announced the coming of colonial enterprise. These works go from the travel narratives of D.Livingstone, R.Haggard, to pure fictions by Joyce Cary, Evelyn Waugh, G.H.Nicholls, Karen Blixen, etc.
postcolonialism, we shall analyze the novels of two outstanding figures of modern African literatures: *Fragments* by Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah and C. Achebe’s *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

In this study, we shall analyze the impact the feast with its traits of celebrations, carnival, display of colors, emotions, etc has on a literature that has made it one of its key motifs. This impact will be analyzed at the level of the use of language, style and narrating strategies. In another move we shall discuss the use of the feast as a narrative device to embody the social crisis but also as a way of asserting one’s cultural resistance. In a final analysis, we shall discuss the recourse to the feast as a way out of the general crisis Africa has been faced with since new leaders have been in power.

I- The impact of the narrative of celebrations on African literature.

The first consequence of the insertion of descriptions of local feasts and rituals in postcolonial literature is the advent of a particular type of narrator. The latter displays a wide range of skills that shows his familiarity with the events and contexts narrated. He is an expert in the geography, history, customs and traditions of the people whose lives and stories he is narrating.

The narratives in this context are pervaded by long descriptive texts which halt the development of the story itself to present some cultural facts and try to justify the rationale behind these practices. The focus is now from the perspective of a narrator who is no longer biased against the local people and their cultural practices. He is a member of that community and does not allow any indifference to the descriptions of the local feasts. He has a deep respect for these practices and provides the keys for decoding their meanings.

This committed narrative strategy borrows from the resources of oral narrative strategies where the performer has to entertain an audience with the only resource of his voice, improvisation and other performing techniques on a story whose main content is known to all. How the story starts and how it ends are often following the same pattern. The storytelling is about the personal variations of each performer on a common story. Digressions, whether internal or external, descriptions of characters, settings, dancing, songs, miming, etc are used as devices for making long a story that could be told in a few minutes in its general patterns. *Arrow of God*, for instance, is the story of an Igbo traditional chief priest whose stubborn and unavowed ambition is thwarted by the introduction of colonial administration and his local rivalries with other equally ambitious opponents. This local story which could pass for the narrative of the normal life of a common member of the society in an igbo village is given a local flavor and an ethnological basis with whole chapters devoted to the local calendar of feasts, rituals and other celebrations. The village meetings and their appropriate decorum, the celebration of the yam festival, mourning rituals, etc amply occupy two-thirds of the novel.

African writers have sometimes been criticized for being mere spokespersons for their communities, a position which they claim with a certain pride. In fact they often borrow from local myths, take local storytellers as their models and the patterns of folktales as the model for their creations. Most of them want to give a fair picture of their communities, which communities have their strengths and ambiguities. But above all, modern writers want the cultural practices of their people to be known and better understood.

The narrative of local celebrations could not but impact the forms of modern African literature. If we consider the feast in its bakhtinian carnivalesque sense, we could analyze some of the stylistic and linguistic experimentations as a consequence of the specific narrative of the feast.

Under the colonial system the imperial language was the language of the centre. It was claimed by the colonial ideology as the universal means of communication which embodied universal values and could speak for or in the name of all human communities. It was a ‘pure’ language that reached agreement of all its members and suffered no breaking of its established rules. In the postcolonial context, the theoretical category of ‘impurity’ becomes the dominating mark. Instead of its negative connotation, impurity acquires a positive meaning. Its features of disruption of norms, of cultural and aesthetic hybridity are set against the authentic, original, pure categories of the
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former colonial values and language. The preeminence of the “impure” is ideally illustrated by the feast, the popular celebrations and manifestations. The feast becomes an aesthetic category. Its actors are marginal characters such as the crowd, the mad or the popular anti-hero figure.

Lots of experimentations with the western languages and the way narratives are built can be analyzed as a celebration as they are experienced as a literary carnival. Suffice here to take the works in our corpus to establish this pleasant and humorous atmosphere that is created with the interplay of various and sometimes contradictory linguistic codes. In Achebe’s works, in general, and in Anthills of the Savannah in particular, we have interplays of various voices: that of the African traditions, the wisdom of rural communities with their representatives like the head of the delegation from Abazon and Elewa’s uncle and the urban ambivalent world which is represented by its equally ambivalent language. Both universes are presented in a light tone though the novel addresses important issues of survival for the African communities. The tone of the traditional storyteller is set next to that of a modern African poet inspired by the styles of poets like Walt Whitman, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Tennyson, etc. whose names are explicitly mentioned in intertextual references. This in no way implies any claim of any purity either in traditional context or the modern one. Each of these categories have their own internal mixtures and we have a juxtaposition of impure categories. Everything in the postcolonial bears the stamp of that impurity.

Another feature of these novels is the colorful interplay of languages of various and conflicting interests and origins. The “englishes” of Achebe and Armah are not the English of the BBC from all points of view. This is no consequence of some illiteracy in the English language the two writers having established their reputation and been to the best and most elitist institutions of the colonial educational system. In these narratives, in addition to these codes, we have these different linguistic systems such as academic English, pidgin and local languages all of them juxtaposed one next to the others in a colorful language which is sometimes close to making the reader feel dizzy with having to move from one code to the other. Some local words occur in the middle of a sentence which were not expected there without the slightest attempt to explain them. Most of these words or expressions could be perfectly translated into academic English but are kept untranslated for that sole purpose of disrupting the assurance of the English language. They serve as a dissenting voice, a marginalizing voice that fights for existence in a dominating language. Just as the carnival which generally celebrates the marginal, this feast of the language contests the dominating language and celebrates the peripheric language.

The experimentation is sometimes pushed a bit further with whole syntactic occurrences from differing languages overlapping. That is the case when a sentence starts in one language and ends in another one. Illustrations of this can be found in almost all novels from this generation.

Like the language of this literature which is colorful, full of unprecedented and unexpected experimentations, the narratives can also be characterized as colorful and carnivalesque with the narrator assuming different figures. He sometimes borrows from the traditional “griot” with his gleeful and amusing figure who wants to enlist the empathy of his listeners by his caustic, comic but also his artistic and sustained narrative tone. Some other times he is a narrator in the best tradition of the western postmodern narrator with his ambivalent tone which verges on cynicism, indifference to the facts he presents as a way of taking his distances from the ideological discourses of the new elite and also the traditional dominating class. He shows no sympathy for his hero and characters and makes their discourses pass through the filter of his ironic, ambivalent or even acerbic tone. When the same narrator does not assume all these instances, he juxtaposes characters in the same storyline who displays allegiances to these various and contradictory socio-cultural categories.

Such an experimentation is carried out along what can be regarded as a carnival of genres. Indeed literature as inspired by the modern western world is traditionally divided into fixed genres that are not expected to overlap. Literature is therefore divided into categories of prose and verse, narratives and
drama, etc. There are even subgenres in each of these general categories. A folktale is not a narrative in the academic sense. There is a difference between myth and folktale, between tragedy and comedy. This is a consequence of the modern Cartesian approach to realities. Yet that characteristic has long been contested by western literature itself. In spite of that, this classification of literature into fixed genres still serves as one of the identifying traits of western literary categories that African writers have inherited from the educational background they had in colonial schools.

Although they were educated in that tradition of writing according to genre categories, most modern African writers seem to have opted for the oral traditional mind whose option is for a holistic perception of the universe. Such a worldview stands out clearly in their artistic, philosophic and religious practices. In such a context, poetry, comedy or drama, prose writing, etc, are not categories that exclude one another. That is what can be analyzed as a carnival of genres. Here mythological and cosmological narratives appear next to secular prosaic narratives and versed poems along with dialogues which remind readers of a piece of drama.

The opening chapter of *Fragments* is revealing about this state of affairs. It is poetic prose or prosaic poetry interspersed with whole poems presented like evocations and libation prayers to ancestral spirits who are spoken to in the sacred and poetic tone: the novel closes in the same way with Naana assuming the narrating voice. The other chapters which are written in the form of prose and dialogues appear to be guided by the spiritual poetic language inspired by the living representative of the traditional life. Libation prayers in a poetic language open the novel which ends in similar poetic paragraphs interspersed into the prosaic narrative.

Where you are going, / go softly./Nanamon,/you who have gone before,/see that his body/does not lead him/into snares made for the death of spirits/ You who are going now,/ do not let your mind become persuaded/ that you walk alone./

In the case of *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem’s poems are interspersed into the prose narrative. In the middle of a narrative made of a dialogue, a long poem is sometimes introduced with the graphic marks of an inserted or quoted external text to the rest of the narrative without any transition and when it ends, the narrator resumes his prose narrative without any further transition. (27-28) The poem *Hymn to the Sun* ends chapter 3 on pages 30-31-32. In this chapter, not more than four pages are devoted to the narrative that keeps to the storyline while the poetic texts run over five pages. These, on the other hand are not classical versed poems but narrated or “prose” poems with social concerns rather than subjective lyrical poems. (211) Chapter 8 presents a mythological narrative on four pages before introducing the character Beatrice who is to conduct the narrative. In a paratextual note serving as an incipit to the chapter, David Diop’s poem “Africa” opens chapter 10 on pages 209-210. The reader is taken unawares with an extract of Ikem’s unpublished and unsigned poem *Pillar of Fire: a Hymn to the Sun.* (209) Narrative mythologies and cosmological poems appear side by side in a regular prose narrative.

To this generic melting pot must be added a whole list of sociolects that seem to vie with one another for integration into the economy of the whole narrative. The biblical discourse stands next to the prayers to ancestors, the military lexis often gives way to the Marxist rhetoric or the students’ Union sociolect as evidenced during the conference pronounced by Ikem a few days before he is murdered by Sam’s regime.

To sum up we can simply say that the two voices that are vying for ascendency are the traditional oral voice and written texts, the traditional way of life and the modern urbanist one. It is the attempt to make

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10 This organization of verses separated by slashes is my own. In the text, each verse appears down the preceding one making the poem running on several pages.
Narrating the feast: the ethics and aesthetics of celebrations in African literature. The two worlds coincide that is interpreted according to Bakhtin’s fruitful theoretical tool of carnival which is a feature of the feast. By this shifting from one reality to the other through ideas and aesthetics, the writers succeed in marginalizing the two universes and their ideologies but in so doing, they also emphasize and assert them. Like the feast which breaks the time and space continuums and also the norms of a group, modern African literature breaks the norms of the literary world. This joyful, funny, colorful, blasphemous language and narrative strategies also convey a sense of resistance to foreign cultural values.

II- The feast as the metaphor of cultural resistance.

That feasts have a political use is no specific trait of African communities. They are used to strengthen the society’s sense of community by the assertion of its values. Founding myths and the collective history of the community are recalled through festivals as a way to mobilize collective energies towards a common goal: that of the survival and perpetuation of the society and its values.

The denial of their humanity or the status of inferiority that was conferred on the colonized people by colonial masters has been the cause of a counter discourse whose main aim has consisted of a narrative of self-assertion. Such a narrative claims one’s identity, the existence of specific cultural values. Funerals, ritual celebrations, popular festivals are used by many novelists as the metaphor of that cultural assertion. Feasts are therefore the ritualized forms of one’s belonging to a civic space which is one’s home.

This sense of the feast seems to have been kept by modern African writers. In their narratives, the introduction of descriptive texts of traditional celebrations generally serves as a means of asserting one’s cultural values. The ethnological and anthropological intertexts about festivals and other celebrations are used as metaphors of the quest of the authors’ communities for authenticity and assertion into a world of colonial and postcolonial domination. This cultural resistance has mirrored an active political resistance since the colonial era. The recourse to the narrative device of describing local feasts appears as a hypertext to colonial texts in their expository, interruptive and detailed factual presentation even though this colonial hypotext is generally not explicitly evoked.

The role of the African novelist in line with most traditional conceptions, according to Achebe himself, is to be a “teacher” coupled with an ambassador. He has a social role which consists of educating those whose education remains to be perfected about the values of their community. The influence of western education on African writers in this conception of the role of the writer seems clear here. Despite the movement to separate colonial literature from African postcolonial literature, this role of the writer seems to be executed in a very “western” sense with a teacher instructing a class not as an integrated part of the traditional society. This obviously is one of the many contradictions of the postcolonial situation and states the evidence that many colonial influences have not been expunged. In this context, the narrator or the artist also has to instruct a class of foreign students, outsiders to the African societies, the values of his community.
Such a conception reduces the artist to a spokesperson. He speaks in the name of the community as he speaks from inside that community and presents its many cultural features. It is through the relentless presentation of local festivals, celebrations, folklore that this role of “teacher” of the values of the community is executed.

In the postcolonial context, the meanings of celebrations are explained. Where the colonial writer would have presented a celebration with an undertone of denigration or an erroneous interpretation, the modern artist is concerned about providing what he considers as a fair picture of a cultural practice in its dynamic development.

In an interesting story centered on a main character, a festival is often described by the narrator in minute details sometimes forcing the story to a halt for that descriptive purpose. If for the colonial writer, “the crocodile writer” (Obiechina 1977) the intertext of the ethnological and anthropological descriptive text often served exotic aims, i.e to satisfy the audience’s thirst for thrills and adventurous literature, here the aim is to assert the existence and presence of his society into a world which seems to deny any relevance to the world of the writer. With J.Conrad, we have “unimaginable orgies” at “midnight dances”

executed by hordes of natives and [b]lackmen howling with “terrible frankness and dance around lurid midnights fires ” (Conrad)

Festivals and celebrations in postcolonial literature seem to take precedence over issues of personal angst as a way of giving a communal perspective to their narratives. In the context of the dominating culture of the former white master, such a perspective is a form of resistance to cultural domination. Even if the traditional society and its practices are presented as faced with some crises, which shows their vitality and dynamism, these crises are internal to the society and do not always originate directly from the presence of foreigners. Such is the case of the novels Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God by Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah’s Fragments. Before the coming of the colonial administration, the Ibo society Achebe’s narrator presented experiences its first precolonial crisis with the killing of Ikemefuna, the abandonment of twin babies in the evil forest, etc. It is in this sense that Obierika questions some of the traditional rules of the village when his friend Okonkwo is compelled to leave Umuofia to Mbanta, his mother’s village, for an offense committed by accident during the funeral of Ezeudu. The hero’s gun exploded and one piece of iron pierced a boy’s heart. “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?” questions the hero’s friend (125) For Armah’s Naana, it is the deviation from established original rules and values that triggered the “long destruction of our people when the elders first – may their souls never find forgiveness on this head – split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling part to hardeyed buyers from beyond the horizon” (199)

In Arrow of God, Ezeulu seems to regain his authority during the new moon celebrations. His authority which had seemed at a moment to be in crisis is asserted during the festival of the Pumpkin Leaves
and the priest of Ulu can enjoy the collective commitment to his authority. This celebration served no exotic purpose in the narrative. Rather, the celebration serves to explain the development of internal issues of power.

The celebration is the dramatization of social concerns among which is the management of traditional power. During the New Moon festival, a cord is tied around the priest's waist. The cord is held by some assistants who seem to be in control of the movement of the priest. This scene tells us that the ruler does not seem to hold all the cards in hand. This mirrors a collaborative management of power. These seem to be political safeguards against individual power abuse. The mask's moves are tightly controlled which means that people entrusted with some parcel of power do not enjoy unrestrained power even if the community knows it has to show honor and respect to the person vested with some authority. It also teaches readers that there is no power outside the people as there is no feast without the people. The ceremony is no individual show but a collaborative celebration of a communal ritual. The actors are the crowd and the priest. It is for the people and in their names that the feast is held.

In the scene where the priest is running after a crowd, we have a lesson on the exercise of power. The priest runs after the crowd in a threatening way. The crowd runs for escape to avoid the flogging of the priest. Ezeulu runs as if to catch someone in the crowd but refrains from using his authority to sanction the crowd. In a word, it is a mock battle. This episode of the festival teaches a lesson on the way to use power. It also shows how power is to be balanced and exercised without any misuse. How to rule over the very people from whom and in whose name authority is vested? It is all about knowing how to behave with power in hand: to have power and restrain from misusing it, to know when to stop. All these issues of power in Igbo society are addressed in this episode thus giving the narrator the opportunity to distance himself from the prejudiced clichés of the sense of perversity and cultural backwardness of local people and asserting a new sense of celebrations and feasts.

When Ezeulu is back from the city where he had been imprisoned for weeks without any reaction of solidarity from the very people for whom he officiates their religious belief, he ruminates his anger against his people on whom he resolves to vent his frustrations. They will pay for their lack of solidarity to their priest. There will be no New Yam Festival. Yet social life is punctuated by these celebrations around which traditional life is organized. By refusing to listen to his clansmen who ask him to organize the feast and perform the ritual of yam eating, the priest of Ulu is contesting the proverb which states that “No man however great can win judgment against his clan” (287) By so doing, Ezułu seems to forget that the rules of Ulu are for the benefit of the community. He forgets that a priest or even a divinity with no support of the people over whom they rule is doomed to die. The tragic end of his son and his final sink into madness during the traditional ceremony shows to envy that power is the people's after all. Just unlike Okonkwo’s suicide by hanging which is given a paragraph or a footnote reference in the intertext the colonial administrator's book, this incident when narrated by an African narrator is presented with the complexities and the tragic flavor characteristic of Achebe’s fiction. In Things Fall Apart, the feast of the new yam is rendered in a narrative that conveys a happy mood into the whole village and readers are expertly led to feel the same festive atmosphere. To this feeling of elation is added a whole lesson on the
history and meaning of that feast over several pages. The preparation of the festival and the recipe for
the feast food, the cooking pots and utensils used, etc are all recorded with a festive lexis: “occasion for
joy”, “enthusiastic”, “excited”, “enjoyed”, etc.

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion of
giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life
of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was
more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been
committed to earth. (TFA: 36-37)

The tragic atmosphere after the accident that causes Okonkwo’s exile to his mother’s village is rendered
even more tragic as it happens during a funeral ceremony when people are dancing in honor of the
deceased. In works by western writers of the colonial era, these celebrations were reduced to
monotonous meaningless drumbeats that Europeans could hear from far. Here they acquire a meaning
and are put into a meaningful context.

So through these celebrations are addressed human issues which reveal a particular weltanschauung
that vies to exist along with the values of a world that considers itself as the “centre” and looks down at
others as the “periphery”. The descriptions of festivals and celebrations are therefore an artistic attempt
of decentering the western values and bringing the periphery into the center and the center into the
periphery.

III- The feast as the metaphor of cultural crisis in the modern novel.

In most African novels which use the detribalized and urban contexts of independent Africa, festivals and
celebrations are inserted into narratives with a new sense. It is also important to be cautious not to
overuse sweeping generalizations about the classical opposition between village and city as most
cultural practices are taken from the villages to the cities. Descriptive paragraphs of local feasts are more
about the elite and the dominated, Haves and Have-Not, exploiters and exploited who share the
“national cake” and those who are excluded from it. The same cultural crisis that is found in fictions set in
urban areas is also present in the novel which uses the rural background as a setting. The crisis that
affects these countries in almost all spheres of their social lives, i.e., at political, economic, cultural and
moral levels, is reflected in the discourse through which traditional and modern celebrations are
represented in fictions. The anomy, liminality, obsession with fragmentation, chaos, intrigue and
nonsense of life which have become the motifs of this literature are the same lexicon with which these
celebrations are described. Descriptions of feasts are affected with tones of the grotesque, ridicule and
paradox so as to reflect the crisis that erode the fundamental cultural practices. This literary style of
pejorism and bathos is instrumental into conveying the deep crisis eating into the fabric of cultural
practices. The ambiguous and paradoxical attitudes of the communities portrayed in narratives show
authors’ wish to question the new ideologies that often make a manipulative use of traditional rites and
festive celebrations. People are therefore portrayed as celebrating their dependence, their chains and
defeat. Such an attitude during parties can be equated with dancing one’s own domination.
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One of the most fundamental uses of literature in this context is to denounce fake conventionalism, which affects in a negative way human relations in both traditional and modern African societies. The description of the folklore is often imbued with this negative conventionality. Traditional ideologies and modern ones are often put into the same basket and denigrated in a similar way. Ideological and institutional conventions which have become hypocritical are denounced by the novelists. Against these hypocritical norms is opposed the figure of a naïve and unconventional narrator. The latter is generally presented as a character who finds it hard to understand the prevailing values, an option that sets him apart as a marginal member of the community. Through this character, we have a parodic denunciation of the conventional norms. The naivety and incomprehension displayed by this anti-hero figure is used to decry the fake conventionality prevailing in the postcolonial society. Elewa’s uncle in *Anthills of the Savannah* is a figure of that marginal character, a “buffon”, a jester with a potential force for denouncing pernicious conventions prevailing in the society.

In *Fragments*, the intertext of the “cargo cult” can be understood as a ritual of one’s dependence on foreign “cargo” (material things as opposed to spiritual values) which consists in waiting for foreigners to provide the cargo when they travel to the Island. Africans have become people who depend on others for their own survival. They consume things which they take no trouble to produce thus perpetuating their dependence. Those who should produce are content with the status of conveyor of the cargo. Hedonist non-stop parties are portrayed in these narratives with undertones of irresponsibility, ludicrous collective unconsciousness which reveals the complacency of the elite. Most characters in the narrative invite Baako and those of his like to their spending spree and binges but the hero sees their feasts as a moral catastrophe. They are celebrating their dependency and enslavement. It also reveals the industrialization of pleasure, an industry producing feasts, a commercialization of cultural and festive events.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, the party Sam organizes at the President Guest House at Abichi Lake is the opportunity for the writer through his narrator to make an acerbic criticism about the leader who embezzles public funds, twenty millions for its refurbishment when the civilian regime had spent some forty-five millions for its building. The Presidential Retreat, as the castle is named, is regarded as “irresponsibly extravagant [in the present] circumstances” (73) by the narrator as the buying for this palace was not passed through the normal Ministry of Finance procedures. At the sight of such a blatant act of mismanagement for the mere complacency and enjoyment of one man, the female narrator recalls the reaction of Ikem with whom she shows her total agreement:

“Retreat from what? From whom?” I recall [Ikem] demanding with characteristic heat. “From the people and their basic needs of water which is free from Guinea worm, of simple shelter and food. That's what you are retreating from. You retreat up the hill and commune with your cronies and forget the very people who legitimize your authority. (73)

The feast is therefore celebrated at the expense of the basic needs of the majority of the population. The insightful analyses of F.Fanon on the post-colonial society provide the theoretical tools for analyzing the attitudes of the black elites and the common people. In the colonial and neo-colonial worlds, to use
Fanon’s own terminology, the new black elite which takes after the white master encourages celebrations and festive events of the dominated as a way to offer an outlet for the latter’s embittered emotions that are being contained, a relief valve for their frustrations. Dances and celebrations are also used as a way of channeling the frustrations and angers of the dominated. Through these celebrations, the inherent violence of the dominated is channeled, processed and deviated as is theorized by Fanon. “When they set out,” Fanon argues, “the men and women were impatient, stamping their feet in a state of nervous excitement; when they return, peace has been restored to the village; it is once more calm and unmoved.” (Fanon, 23) This serves as a political and psychological device for improving upon the dominating system and therefore perpetuating it as it provides victims with an outlet for their humiliations and frustrations. By so doing, it makes the unbearable bearable.

Public celebrations therefore appear as a pretext for hidden motives which are not always known to the celebrants. The same way rituals and discourses of authenticity were encouraged in colonial era, here festivals, independence celebrations, funerals, naming ceremonies, New Year’s Days, etc are encouraged and even fostered in the interest of the new leadership.

What is more, these festive events are described with all the features of the postcolonial situation, i.e., its hybrid and ambivalent figures. They reflect the multidimensional crises that the continent goes through. Popular celebrations become the mode of exercise of political power in independent Africa. It is through celebrations that the men in power secure the prestige and ostentation on which their power rests. That is why, in this society, there is a tendency to turn any futile event into a big feast as a way of asserting a power and authority that lack legitimacy and substance.

When the traditional feast is kept in the detribalized and urbanized context, it acquires a new meaning and its original sense is lost or corrupted through and through. Rituals intended to celebrate religious fervor, to assert and strengthen solidarity or unity are corrupted to celebrate new values which are the consequence and cause of the crisis that is pervasive at all levels of the society. When tradition is recalled, it is in an ideological perspective, to serve the selfish interests of one individual or group to the detriment of the larger community. Tradition becomes a factor of power politics. Chief Nanga in A Man of the People plays the politics of authenticity as a way to mobilize his electorate in his constituency. His real concern is not traditions per se. The narrator is not fooled by this interested recourse to the local folklore and describes these celebrations with terms that suggest the grotesque. There is no complicity between the narrator and the festivities. He seems to stand aloof and cast a critical look at events. He describes them with scorn and shows disdain for its actors as the quotation shows to satiety:

As I stood in one corner of that vast tumult waiting for the arrival of the Minister I felt intense bitterness welling up in my mouth. Here were silly, ignorant villagers dancing themselves lame and waiting to blow off their gunpowder in honor of one of those who have started the country off down the slopes of inflation. I wished for a miracle, for a voice of thunder, to hush this ridiculous festival
Narrating the feast: the ethics and aesthetics of celebrations in African literature.

and tell the poor contemptible people one or two truths. But of course it would be quite useless. They were not only ignorant but cynical. Tell them that this man had used his position to enrich himself and they would ask you – as my father did – if you thought that a sensible man would spit out the juicy morsel that good fortune placed in his mouth. (2)

Popular celebrations require the bodies and energies of the people as if the latter would need to dramatize their subordination so as for them to show their partaking into the pomp and splendors of the elite. They are not only required to sing and dance, they also must show their happiness. The new elite, like the former colonial master Fanon describes, is an exhibitionist who always needs to show his power. His concern for his security leads him to remind others that he is the one in power. (19)

The term “contemptible people” tells much about the narrator’s view on crowds whom he regards as an unintelligent and undifferentiated mass characterized by its irrational and impulsive reactions. The truth however is that the narrator is not in any position to understand that these people are no mass of “silly” and “ignorant” people. This attitude of disdain for the crowd stems from a psychological conception which has been theorized by thinkers like Sigmund Freud, Gustave le Bon, Gabriel Tarde, etc for whom the crowd’s behavior is often heavily influenced by a lack of responsibility and critical sense. (Le Bon, 1896) In the postcolonial theoretical frame, the crowd becomes a favorite character endowed with a critical function. Here the narrator ought to go beyond this disdain and see that these people are not the innocent and naïve mob he portrays. In Fanon’s understanding, the world of the new elite attracts and repulses at the same time. By their attitudes and practices, their world is seen as a hostile universe which excludes the people but it also raises envy. The latter envy those in power and dream to be in their shoes. The universe of

the Nanga is no hell from which one must stand aloof but a paradise at close hand to be secured by the new elite against the people. (18-19)

As Fanon put it, they are playing their part in a national sport in which a group is always using strategies to deprive another one of its privileges. It is not about putting an end to oppression or domination but managing one’s way to the privileges others are enjoying. This mob does not hate Nanga and his likes. They rather envy them and are biding their time, ready to jump at the latter’s throats and deprive them of their privileges they would like to have for themselves. Nobody is silly and ignorant (19). They (elite and common people) are all calculating beings more concerned about their own selfish interests than any other value. They are actuated by their own secret motives and devise strategies to deprive the others of the latter’s privileges. That is why the very people who were celebrating a dictator will be the same people dancing themselves lame to the announcement of the fall of the same dictator the next moment he loses power. Some dancers in A Man of the People are awarded a few pound notes while others are “waiting for the promised palm-wine” (14). To put it simply, the Minister has something these dancers and singers want. He has the wealth and power they are all dreaming to have. As for the dancers, they have something Nanga wants: their support and votes during elections. The general theoretical background of an irrational mob is not valid here. The narrator who seemed to have taken distances form this “contemptible people” is very soon driven to adopt the latter’s attitude when he is seduced by the demagogue’s attractive proposals and manners. He ends up praising the man’s
“charisma” and “assurance” which are “simply unbelievable” (9). “The man’s charisma had to be felt to be believed. If I were superstitious I would say he had made a really potent charm of the variety called ‘sweet face’. (10)

In Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*, the naming ceremony which is a cultural religious ritual is used by Efua and Araba as a pretext to collect money from their guests whose egos are pushed to their extremes. When Naana asks Baako to save the baby from the farce or parody of what the true traditional ritual is, Baako tells the old woman that “it’s a new festival” (184). He is not wrong and the old woman is convinced that the baby was a sacrifice they made to a new divinity:

The baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people when the elders first – [...] split their own seed and raised half against half, part selling part to hardeyed buyers … (174: 199)

In the whole process of celebration, ancestors are forgotten, “there was no libation” (184), which to Naana is an unpardonable offense. The date prescribed by tradition is not followed and the argument for that breach is that “[a]n outdooring ceremony held more than a few days after payday is useless” (88) Money has precedence over tradition turning the whole celebration into a parody of a traditional or cultural rite. The ceremony is a pretext for other goals which are not spiritual. It is money which goads all these ceremonies.

The deconstructive and contesting potential with which Bakhtin’s theory entrusts the common people and their celebrations show the limits of the Russian theory in the postcolonial context. Here we rather have intimate relationships between victims and persecutors. The usual category of social classes is not valid for this situation for there is a permanent gateway between the two groups of people who actually originate from the same social class.

The trouble with our new nation – as I saw it then lying on the bed – was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say ‘To hell with it’. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in. (Achebe, 1984: 37)

Contrary to Bakhtin’s conception which analyzes feasts as mainly the prerogative of the masses who use it as a way to contest the established norms, here this contestation is not the permanent questioning of the norms. There is no order of the Noble and another one for the masses. During the feast, if the person in authority is requested to listen and hear the criticisms of the people, he must. But beyond this specific occasion, any criticism of meetings of the masked *egwugwu*. In *A Man of People*, on the other hand, we have a different picture the ruling body is decoded like an act of rebellion. In *Arrow of God*, the festival of the Pumpkin Leaves is the opportunity to reassert the traditional norms. If Nwaka is allowed to discuss and oppose Ezeulu during village meetings, during the festival he has to submit to the authority of the chief priest. He is therefore present and takes part in the ritual. The feast is opposed to Bakhtin’s carnival understood as a permanent contestation moment.
In a nutshell, feasts inherited from traditions, in the new context, symbolize the corruption that has eaten into all social practices. They are the metaphor of the cultural crisis. The feast becomes the measure of the corruption society is going through. For the elite, the feast becomes the mask that hides the corruption. The feast is therefore subject to an ambivalent interpretation in African literature according to contexts. In the traditional rural context where cultural practices still have some of their moral integrity, the feasts instruct leaders on inclusive ways to lead and suggest a certain degree of democracy. They lead to good governance. In the postcolonial urban context, feasts reflect a tool used to perpetuate corruption. These two contradicting figures of the feasts appear sometimes juxtaposed in the same novel with sequences which present various celebrations as negative; in some other sequences or works, they are presented as offering positive alternatives to the cultural deadlock in which African countries are trapped. *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* illustrate this positive figure during the festival of the Pumpkin Leaves, or during the.

**IV- How to end the crisis: the new sense of celebrations.**

Celebrations and feasts in postcolonial literatures are given an original understanding and are dealt with in a personal perspective. Though the celebration remains a social issue, it goes through the critical insightful analysis of the individual observer. In the postcolonial society which has experienced the disillusionment subsequent to the betrayal of the elite and bad governance, the individual and his critical mind remain a safety valve against manipulation and ideology. The new personal and original approach to the presentation of these celebrations is therefore the metaphor of the writer’s freedom to established codes of behavior and also his contribution to the dynamic development of cultural values. Characters’ attitudes to rituals and celebrations bear the stamp of ambivalence which is an efficient tool against ideologies and their manipulative effect. In such a context, there is a rejection of two extremes both of which tend to deny cultural values their dynamism: the ideology of authenticity and that of modernity which is confused with turning one’s back on one’s cultural values for new foreign ones. Both extremes are equally to blame.

The positive thing with this approach is the reconciliation that is effected by such an ambivalent and critical approach to humans’ practices. We witness a reconciliation of tradition and modernity, rural and urban lives, the past and the present or even the future, etc. Tradition here is interpreted with a critical mind. It is adapted to the new situation or is given a new meaning. Traditional rituals and celebrations are put at the service of the people. A contrary attitude is observed in the extremist veneration for traditional norms. People, in the new context, are not at the service of their traditions and do not have to sacrifice their true personality and freedom on the altar of the so-called discourse of authenticity. They exercise their freedom and are not the slaves of their traditions whose codes were established once and ad eternam by ancestors. These cultural practices are kept in cities and their previous meanings are given new interpretations. This attitude reconciles traditional practices with their true original spirit and
goal of harmonizing human relations, contributing to the happiness of human beings and providing answers to the existential concerns.

Like the hybrid personality of the detribalized Africans portrayed in the narratives, the festive practices acquire an equally hybrid sense to which people adapt their meanings and practices. This new adaptation of local feasts to the complexities of the new realities also helps present traditions in their complexities. In "colonial literature", African rituals were presented in a partial and simplistic way. With African writers, cultural celebrations regain their complexities and dynamism. They contest the colonial ideology of the simple mindedness of the African. These celebrations may be going through some crises in their autonomous dynamism and development, but they usually portend good outcomes and present an image of integrity. Thus with Wole Soyinka, Yoruba cosmology and festivals are revealed in their complexities and offer an outlet for the social and cultural crisis in which the modern society is tangled up in. In a similar way, Ayi Kwei Armah tries to reconcile people with their local myths by a good use of the latter. "The myths here are good, … Only their use …" (120) Akossua Russels through her poem inspired by a traditional myth has thus perverted its true meaning to celebrate contrary ideals that serve her selfish purpose.

Baako is close to his grandmother Naana for their common loathing of the materialistic turn that is affecting cultural values like the naming ceremony. But the young man has a new approach to these practices. If according to the matriarchal traditional way of life of the Akans Baako has authority over his sister’s baby as its true protector, he can’t overstep his role in the modern African society. A child is first and foremost that of mother and father. “Naana” he says, “… I understand what you have said, but the world has changed. I am only a relative. I cannot stop [father and mother] from doing what they want with their own child.” (98)

The naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa’s baby is one of those instances where traditional and modern ways of life are fused together and allowed to coexist. The participants to that ceremony do not belong to the ethnic group of the parents of the baby as it is likely to be the case in a rural and traditional context. New identities are thus negotiated. Here we have assembled a group of people who come from various ethnic groups of the post-colonial country of Kangan. Many aspects of the ritual therefore need to be explained to some of the participants: Agatha, Aina, Braimoh, Beatrice, Braimoh, Abdul, Captain Medani, Emmanuel. All the regions of the country are represented along with their traditions and religious beliefs at this ritual and feast.

Not only are the participants from various regions but they symbolically represent the whole Kangan society with its rich and poor, illiterate and university graduates, its Muslims, Christians and adepts of traditional religions. The main actors of this ceremony are referred to as an “ecumenical fraternization” (224) where Muslims sing and dance to a Christian hymn. When Beatrice expresses her surprise to see Aina the Muslim dancing to a hymn to the glory of Jehovah-Jireh sung by Agatha, Aina herself provides an explanation which is only a rhetorical question in the language of her social class: “Dem talk say make Moslem no dance when Christian de sing?” (224) Beatrice only has to join that ecumenical
fraternization as the representative of the traditional religion: “Well, if a daughter of Allah could join his rival’s daughter in a holy dance, what is to stop the priestess of the unknown god from shaking a leg?” (224)

The best approach to celebrations inherited from traditions is well illustrated by two outstanding figures who are the living embodiments of traditional values. The first one is the spokesperson of the delegation of Abazon. His comprehension of the sociocultural ceremonies is ambivalent and dynamic. He is no blind follower of the traditions. He is intellectually equipped to contradict those who are not prepared to question their traditional values. When the MC registers relentlessly his disappointment that Ikem does not take part into the tribal gatherings of his people in Basa, the old man finds resources in the same tradition to excuse Ikem:

Going to meetings and weddings and naming ceremonies of one’s people is good. But don’t forget that our wise men have said also that a man who answers every summons by the town crier will not plant corn in his fields. So my advice to you is this. Go on with your meetings and marriages and naming ceremonies because it is good to do so. But leave this young man alone to do what he is doing for Abazon and for the whole of Kangan; (122)

The old man sees beyond the tribe and ethnic group. What Ikem does for the whole country is more important than his partaking into tribal celebrations. Through the voice of the representative of the tradition, we are being taught a lesson of “nationalism” as having precedence over ethnicity. Too often in the post-colony, is often experienced a retrogression process which is harmful to national unity. Allegiance to one’s sectarian ethnic group is more asserted than allegiance to the interest of the whole nation in the name of fidelity to traditions. But with proverbs, insightful and humorous arguments, the old man convinces readers that the whole is more important than the part. “[T]he cock that crows in the morning belongs to one’s household but his voice is the property of the neighborhood. You should be proud that this bright cockerel that wakes the whole village comes from your compound.” (122) Ikem should not be led to stop the tremendous work he is doing for the country as a whole. He should not sacrifice his endeavor for a better nation on the altar of his ethnic allegiance. “I have heard of all the fight [Ikem] has fought for poor people in this land. I would not like to hear that he has given up that fight because he wants to attend the naming ceremony of Ogeke’s son and Mgbafo’s daughter.” (123)

This sequence is the occasion for the old man to teach his listeners a lesson on what to be modern means: to adapt traditions to one’s specific time and needs. His comprehension of tradition is a dialectical and ambivalent one. It teaches openness and tolerance for, as he argues, “what is true comes in different robes”. (123)

During the naming ceremony, Elewa’s uncle, that other representative of the traditional world, shows another picture of how traditional values are to be approached and dealt with. Tradition for him is no
object of worship, no fetish to worship. It should be adapted to one’s time and needs even if these needs can sometimes be selfish as it is the case with that old man. He won’t be any blind follower of an outmoded tradition that cannot be of any help in the modern context of Basa. When he gets at the venue of the naming ceremony and realized with some surprise that some of his prerogatives have been assumed by another actor, he shows no sign of being frustrated. He adapts to the development of the ceremony that had already started. Beyond the selfish opportunism displayed by this character which consists in accepting what an intransigent follower of the traditions would reject, he accepts things the way they come to him and tries to adapt his own norms to the actual facts. Elewa’s mother plays the role of the austere observer of the traditions and is soon marginalized by the group. When the old man proceeds to name the baby and is told that the baby has already been named, his first expression of surprise soon gives way to a burst of laughter to the surprise of the other members of the group present at the ceremony. Elewa’s mother is the only person who remains unaffected by the bombshell of gaiety that his humorous attitude brings to the whole group as the narrator presents her: “Elewa’s poor mother was left high and dry carrying the anger of outraged custom and usage”. (226) The old man creates a humorous atmosphere that affects the group.

The woman heaps this desecration of traditions on the opportunism of the old man which she likens to the ironic situation of a “medicine–man hired to chase evil spirits whom evil spirits were now chasing.” (226) Instead of interpreting what the young people have done as desecrating and taking offense of such a revolutionary attitude, he has this to say:

“Do you know why I am laughing like this? I am laughing because in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit ...[...] That is how to handle this world.” (227)

In a world where numbers of traditional practices are desecrated, it would be inappropriate to cling desperately to practices that cannot survive in the modern society. For the postcolonial baby, i.e., an intertribal and interclass infant, is organized something that can be termed as a postcolonial naming ceremony. It is at the same time national (crossing ethnic borders) and ecumenical. The assembly taking part into this ceremony is a heteroclite group which gives a heterogeneous ceremony with its undertones of cultural scandal and blasphemy. It is at the same time a Christian, Muslim and traditional ceremony. The naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa’s baby symbolizes the ambiguous characteristic of the new postcolonial nation, its invention of new identities. Then the old man proceeds with the rest of the ceremony and company which end in a happy mood.

CONCLUSION

Descriptions of traditional festive events which verge on ethnological discourse against the Romantic Movement’s claim of a “pure” literature have a long history in African literature. This descriptive style was used by colonial writers to give an exotic flavor to their fictions. When this
The nomos of postcolonial African literature is recaptured by African writers, the feast acquires a meaning and a goal that were not expected. It was used to foster the autonomy of African literature from the tutelage of western colonial literature. Postcolonial narratives represent feasts used to reinforce positive outcomes but are also used to combat the elite’s recourse to these feasts to reinforce corruption and illegitimate power. This is achieved by taking distances from the sense these traditional celebrations have acquired.

The presence of that pervasive descriptive text of African feasts did not go without any consequence on the development of this literature. It left an impact on the ethic and aesthetic growth of that art. Thus language and style of postcolonial literature reflects the joyful, colorful and carnivalesque atmosphere of the feast. Such a literature is full of stylistic experimentations that constitute a break from both former traditional aesthetic forms and the linguistic and stylistic experimentations initiated by colonial literatures. As for that impact on ethical values, we have shown how feasts are presented with a new sense: they sometimes appear as enhancing good governance and conveying qualities that can offer alternatives to the social crisis or are sometimes used to reflect the cultural crisis that African societies are going through.

The theories of Fanon, Bakhtin and Bourdieu associated with postcolonial theories have provided the hermeneutic tools for decoding this thematic occurrence. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival has been used to analyze some of the shifts in ethic, aesthetic and narrative strategies of this specific literature in its quest for autonomy. But the limits to the Russian theoretician have been revealed in Fanon’s analysis of the colonial and neocolonial contexts. To these critics has been added A.Mbembe’s insightful understanding of the postcolonial situation. In the works of these critical thinkers, feasts have lost their contesting potential and are now used by the new elites in an ideological perspective so as to perpetuate the system of domination set during the colonial era but which these new elites intend to pursue. Feasts are used in the new context to support the ideology of authenticity which hides the bad governance of their elite and frustrations of the people. The helpless masses are encouraged to dance themselves lame and sing themselves voiceless thus offering an outlet to their frustrations and humiliations. Such a manipulative use of celebrations serves to perpetuate a system of domination that was initiated during the colonial era and is still used to perpetuate domination. This is one of the criticisms writers address to the new elites about their manipulative use of local cultural values and practices. These writers seem to initiate and propose a new critical artistic approach to these festive events. Through their ambivalent representations, feasts sometimes embody the social crises prevailing in the new African societies; they are also used to represent a claim for a cultural exception to be respected. They also serve to suggest solutions toward a better governance. For this to come true, the cultural values must have been expunged from the corruption that has eaten deep into some others so as to recapture their true positive meanings which have been lost. The ambivalent figure of the topic makes the feast an instrument to gauge the state of African literature and use it to teach important lessons about power-sharing that can produce peace and greater stability.
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