

CULTURAL ELEMENTS AND AESTHETICS IN THE PLAY, *IN THE CHEST OF A WOMAN*.

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Abstract

In the Chest of a Woman is set in the Ghanaian society; the Akan cultural society to be exact and reads like a literary attack on cruelly erected male power structures that have confiscated and misused power for the sole glory of patriarchy. The play also discusses Ghanaian issues using folktale cultures; these Ghanaian issues in the play will be discussed to reflect the cultural issues of the society portrayed by the playwright. This paper seeks to investigate if contemporary writers have created a new form of writing by focusing on the indigenous African cultures (cultural issues) of their society or they are also following the practice of earlier writers. Hence, the study of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's *In the Chest of a Woman* to identify these cultural issues portrayed by the playwright.

Keywords: Culture, Akan culture, indigenous knowledge, inheritance, chieftaincy

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1. Introduction

Africa had a rich tradition as part of its cultural heritage but due to the intrusion of European colonizers, literacy in Africa was greatly influenced in terms of its history, socio-cultural strands, customs, and traditions. This affirms what Dathorne (1974) explains that in Africa, the novel is the only literary art form that has been imported and imposed over and above development from any indigenous pattern. This is based on the argument that drama and poetry were an integral part of the African heritage since they functioned within the oral tradition. Moreover, these were displayed and contributed to ceremonial and festival occasions.

The concept of culture in African literature is by no means an easy matter; it includes what has been exhibited in the experience of society so that, it would be worth transmitting to future generations (Triandis and Suh, 2002). With the gradual departure of colonialism in some African countries, many African writers focused on reviving a cultural identity for themselves. They decided to create a form of writing; basing their themes and other features on the indigenous cultures of the African society to ensure national unity. This led to the emergence of some African playwrights and dramatists, such as Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, John Pepper Clark, Femi Osofisan, J.C. De graft, Efua T. Sutherland, Mohammed ben Abdallah, Martin Owusu, Asiedu Yirenkyi, and Efo Kodjo Mawugbe.

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe, the contemporary African playwright whose works have been selected for this research, studied earlier by other researchers. They have been viewed from different perspectives. Mawuli (2011), for instance, employed language as an element of fiction to identify and analyze the language style portrayed by the characters in Mawugbe's play, *In the Chest of a Woman*. Asiedu (2010) also conducted a study in the area of Feminism. She identified that, *In the Chest of a Woman*, may be read as a literary attack against male dominance and the celebration of women and their right to leadership roles in the society when she analyzed three female characters in the play. They include The Queen Mother, Nana Yaa Kyeretwie, and Owusu Agyemang.

This study will go beyond these findings to examine Mawugbe's texts, *In the chest of a Woman* as a contemporary Ghanaian drama by identifying some cultural issues portrayed by the playwright, how these

cultural issues are revealed and how they are utilized in the texts through the spectrum of textual analysis.

2. Related Literature

Concept and Meaning of Culture

The culture of people living in a society is what makes them distinct from other societies. Understanding of culture entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to people to the extent that it marks them out from other people or societies. These include the people's language, dress, music, work, arts, religion, and many others. They also include their social norms, taboos, and values. It is necessary to have an idea of the concept of culture before one can have an appraisal of African culture and its values for literary analysis.

Bello (1991) sees culture as "the totality of the way of life evolved by people in their attempt to meet the challenge of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetics and religious norms, thus distinguishing people from their neighbors". Culture serves to distinguish people from others and Aziza (2001) asserts that

Culture... refers to the totality of the pattern of behavior of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people. For instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death... (p.31)

This explains the fact that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. One does not necessarily need all the definitions of culture to understand its concept and meaning since there is an element of similarity that runs through it from the perspectives of different scholars. One of these characteristics is to portray and capture culture as the entire or total way of life of a particular group of people.

Etuk (2002) is of the view that "an entire way of life would embody among other things, what the people think of themselves and the universe they live in - their world view, in other words, how they organize their lives to ensure their survival". It can be however stated that there can be no culture without society.

African Culture and Literary Writing

Having looked at the concept and meaning of culture and having established the place of values in culture, there is the need to bring it down to the African context. African culture can simply be seen as those beliefs and practices that are practiced by the African society. Society, however, has a way of dictating the beliefs and practices that are performed by its members whenever the occasion demands it.

Recently, the study of African literature has emphasized the degree to which literary and cultural studies must consider both the global and local characteristics to understand how African literary works. African literature is said to be produced out of numerous cultural and social circumstances that must be understood and preserved if Africans do not want to miss the benefits of enriching the human experience (Amouzou, 2007). The literary image of Africa in previous years has been created almost entirely by non-Africans since, in their perspective, African literature was considered as being primitive due to its evaluation by the western standards which created a situation of double colonization. Amouzou describes this situation of double colonization as; "The one that is suffered by Africans with all its consequences of humiliating slavery and the one which has been trying to impose western norms and standards on African literature" (2007, p.330) and the resultant factor being few Africans seeing any relevance at all in their cultural system which is frequently said to be backward or at best folkloric with poor quality. Amouzou (2007) further explains the reason why only a few Africans see the relevance of their cultural system. He states:

Western culture and philosophy have become prominent in the world, and the drama or narrative form for example is often interpreted from the west, obliging African writers to generalize many issues in their literary texts and in their desire to westernize their writings, some African writers have degraded African literary personalities, their cultures and philosophies in their works (p.333).

He however suggests that the African writer needs inspiration from the rich customs and traditions of Africa if he wants to be heard, understood, and appreciated not only by an international audience but also by the national audience. Amouzou's postulation presupposes that the African writer, who has chosen to write, must adapt or get the inspiration from the concepts of his own cultural or African folktale traditions. These concepts should also

reflect in his works which include the way he portrays such cultural issues through his characters, themes, settings, language, and other forms of concepts that represent a whole way of life in the African society. Hence, his writing must be devoid of any form of Eurocentric issues.

Again, Africans, to treat literature in their own right must focus on the established cultural traditions and historical experiences together with those aspects of the social and political life of the Africans which are helpful resources to their inspiration and techniques. In connection to this, Palmer (1979) argues that if the purpose of criticism is to display as accurately as possible the genuine quality of work, then our aim should be to use a criterion that will be most useful in bringing out that genuine quality. Secovnie (2012) argues that in West Africa, scholars have redefined the cultural perspectives of African literature as it has been understood in literary text analysis. Many critics and creative writers have however observed that African literature is not art for art's sake but on the contrary, it is creative writing which has specific social functions to play.

According to Wole Soyinka, the role of the African creative writer is to function as the traditional African artist, who has the record of the morals and experiences of his society and as a voice of vision in his own time (Soyinka, 1967). Like literature, culture is a contested phenomenon that is understood to mean different things by different groups and perceived as an inherited pattern of thought; thus, customs and beliefs are passed on from generation to generation.

Because of this, culture in African literature according to Matsumoto (1996) is the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people but different for each individual and communicated from one generation to the next. Speaking objectively in terms of African literature and culture, it can be assumed that true African literature and culture is still not documented because in taking a careful look at the daily lives of ordinary Africans, one is bound to come out with some benchmarks of what true African literature and culture can be; that is the total way of life of the ordinary African; the stories, drama, art, language: everything related to cultural values must be African, but here lies the case where colonial invasion within the African continent has resulted in the indoctrination of some African values, making it very difficult to define true African literature and culture.

Some scholars have somehow managed to maneuver their way around this complex definition of African literature and culture. Kellner (1995) has made an important point concerning culture and African literature when he asserts that cultural perspectives of African texts must be studied within the social milieu and systems of which that particular culture is produced. Although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meaning is invisible; thus, their cultural meaning lies precisely and only in the way some practices are interpreted by the writer as well as the reader (Hoftsed, 1991). For instance, the choice of clothing (costume) can be interpreted differently by different groups of people in terms of wealth, appropriateness, and so on. Barker (2003) in looking at culture and African literature argues that cultural perspectives of African literary texts must take into consideration, the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, language, and customs of any specific society.

One important concern of culture about African literature is the issue of language. It became clear that some advocates of African authenticity were quick to brand the foreign language as a tool of colonial domination and so they decided to prevent some of these practices from dominating post-colonial African literature. This argument can be based on the premise that the introduction of a foreign language presupposes the inferiority of the imitator (African), (Darko, 2002, p.5). This assertion affirms what Ngugi (1972) as cited in Darko (2002) states about language that "it is a means of spiritual subjugation and language carries culture and culture carries particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (2002, p.5). Still on the discussion on African culture and literature, one has to come up with a convincing argument about how these two terms are intertwined, interrelated, and how they affect every aspect of our lives.

One essential issue about African culture is that the themes, language, setting, personalities, music, costume, just to mention a few which are developed from literature often lack authenticity and relevance due to western influences and education from the African writers. Amadou (1969) as cited in Sow, Balogun, Aguessey, and Diagne (1979) observes that it will be better if modern African writers make the conscious effort to recognize their traditional culture themselves to take stock of it, to define its nature and essential value as well as creating an intelligible language so that this culture can be brought within the hermetic practices of the initiation centers. This assertion presupposes that the creative works of most African critics and authors will become more relevant and authentic if their writings are thoroughly based on African traditions and deeply rooted in their cultures and history.

3. Background of the playwright

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe was born in 1954 to Madam Comfort Tulasi, a cook at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology's African Hall, and Michael Ayivi Mawugbe who also worked in the same University at the laundry department. Mawugbe started his primary and middle school education at Weweso Local Authority School. He later went to Mawuli School where he obtained his General Certificate of Education (GCE), Ordinary and Advanced levels. He acquired an interest and passion for drama when he was at Mawuli so he joined the school's drama group. As a member of the drama club, he played many roles including the role of Senchi in Efuia Sutherland's *Edufa*. He also acquired a talent for writing while in school and he succeeded in writing plays for his house (Trust House) in the school. Mawugbe continued his formal education at the University of Ghana where he studied Theatre Arts and majored in Playwriting from 1975 to 1978. He served as a senior research assistant in African Theatre at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Centre for Cultural Studies) in the year 1979 where he helped many students in the development and production of plays. In 1991, Mawugbe did a certificate course in Senior Management and Development at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). He also studied at Bauff Centre for Management Calgary, Canada in 1999 and was sent to the E.T.A Chicago, USA, on a USIS sponsored attachment program in Theatre Arts and Events Organization.

Mawugbe further pursued his studies at the British Council in Glasgow and London where he did a certificate programme in Theatre Management and Audience Development. He returned to the School of Performing Arts of the University of Ghana in 2006 to continue his studies and obtained a Master of Fine Arts (Playwriting).

He taught in several schools and universities. In 1977, he taught English Language and Literature at the Ghana Empire Secondary School. He taught the same courses at the Technology Secondary School, KNUST, Kumasi. He was a Graduate Assistant for Playwriting at the Theatre Arts Department (Legon) in 2001. He was a Part-time Lecturer of African Theatre (Theory and Practice) in 2004, at the Department of English, University of Education, Winneba, and also a Part-time Lecturer at the African University College of Communication.

Mawugbe did not only focus on teaching; he also served his country in the field of Creative Arts through diverse means. He was appointed the first Director of the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival (PANAFEST Project) in 1991. He was also appointed as the Acting Executive Director for the W.E.B DuBois Center for Pan-African Culture, Accra, in 1991. Mawugbe also served as the Regional Director of Arts and Culture, Centre for National Culture for the Central Region, and worked for the Arts Council of Ghana in the Eastern Region. In 2001, he was appointed the Regional Director of the Arts and Culture in the Western Region. He was the Director for Research, Information, and Public Education for the National Commission for Culture in that same year where he planned, monitored, coordinated, and evaluated all national and cultural programs for the nation. Mawugbe was also in charge of the committee that reviewed cultural agreements between Ghana and other countries or international bodies. He carried out protocol duties, involving foreign dignitaries and cultural delegations to Ghana and also acted as the interface between the commission on culture and international agencies in Ghana, among other duties.

Based on his diligence and hard work, he won many awards including the VALCO Literary Award (1979), Playwright of the Year (ACRAG AWARD), the Japan Foundation Award – Eminent Cultural Personalities from Africa's short-term visit in 1990. He served as a member of some professional organizations that deal with the performing arts and artists. He was the Organizing Secretary of I.T.I (International Theatre Institute) and a Board Member of I.T.I Playwright Committee from 1991 to 1995. He was also the Artistic Director of Kozi-Kozi Theatre in Accra in 1992 and the Board Member of the National Drama Company at the National Theatre in 1997. Mawugbe at the time of his death was the Deputy Executive Director (Artistic) of the National Theatre of Ghana. He was a Judge for TV3's reality show, Ghana's Most Beautiful.

Mawugbe has written several plays which include; *A Calabash of Blood* (Radio Drama, GBC 1978), *Aluta Continua* (a drama produced for radio, stage, and television and distributed in Africa by URTNA 1979), *The Unbending Branch* (Radio Drama, GBC, 1980), *In the Chest of a Woman* (a play produced for the stage in 1984 and later published in 2008), *Constable no Rank* (a play produced for BBC, London Africa service and for the stage 1986), *You play me I play you* (comedy for radio, 1989), *Take me to the Altar* (about the sacred institution of marriage, 1990), *Tata Amu* (a play on the biography of Dr. Ephraim Amu 1991), *The Royals* (produced by Talents Theatre Company for NAFAC 1992), *G-Yard People* (about the undignified conditions under which black people work to sustain the economy of their nations, 1994). Mawugbe's recent plays include; *Dear Baba and Mma*; a play written for the BBC, *Upstairs, and Downstairs* (2001) *Acquired Prison Traumatic Syndrome* (2002), *Ananse Kwaku Ananse* (2004), *Sister* (2006), *Free Juice Jubilee* (2006), and *A Fractured Democracy* (2008).

Mawugbe's plays are unique in their way about their dramatic styles. Concerning the kind of theatrical genre that his plays fall under, less emphasis is placed on them. The main ideas of the playwright are very important since his artistic forms often express the contemporary issues in Ghana and Africa. The playwright is most concerned with social issues and ways by which social change can take place when brought to public attention (Seidu, 2012). Mawugbe's plays are, however, grouped into political, women empowerment, family and friendship, and story-telling categories. He is believed to have contributed greatly to the development of Ghanaian Drama and Theatre as well as inspiring students in that same field.

4. Synopsis of the play *In the Chest of a Woman*

The play is set in a fictional land called Ebusa believed to be in the Ashanti Kingdom. It is about Nana Yaa Kyeretwie who desires that at all cost she must see her daughter become the ruler of the empire after the death of the reigning King Kwaku Duah II. This passionate desire of Nana Yaa Kyeretwie evolved when her mother the Queen mother and ruler of the Kingdom denied her the opportunity to rule the community since she is the eldest child. Unfortunately, all attempts to prove her strength could not pass, convince the elders or her mother. Her display of masculinity puts the Queen Mother in a state of quandary. That is, whether she should set aside the dictates of the customs to enstool a female king—for the first time in history—or adhere to the custom. She could only do the latter regardless of how she felt. However, she made a considerable change to the law that, whoever (Nana Yaa or Kwaku Duah) gave birth to a male child first should become the next of kin to Kwaku Duah. Soon after the Queen mother's death, the king, Nana Kwaku Duah got married but unfortunately for him gave birth to a girl. Similarly, Nana Yaa made attempts of child birth but luck was not on her side either. She misses the opportunity to have a male child. However, she conceals the sex of the child and deceived everyone to believe that *she is a he*, for over a decade. The suspense of the play commences when the king (Nana Kwaku Duah) invites Owusu to the palace to undergo training to succeed him. While there, Nana convinces her daughter Ekyaa to seduce her nephew to fall in love with him. Owusu knowing well that he is a male impersonate rejects the love advances towards him. When Ekyaa notices that the love she confesses to the prince is not mutual, she intentionally gets pregnant and pushes it on Owusu to dent him. Certainly, Owusu has to face the law's full rigors as it is considered very offensive by the laws touch the princess without performing the needed rites. Therefore, his male organ had to be chopped off as punishment. Nothing he/she said could validate him and even entreating her mother to step into the situation yielded nothing. While this went on, Nana Yaa faints and is taken to the backstage, where she was later pronounced dead. By the orders of the King and agreement by all, the executioner took Owusu away to have his genitals severed. But to the amazement of the executioner, he comes back suddenly and exclaims that Owusu does not have a third leg – *he is a she*. The play is resolved with a deliberation from the community who suggests that the laws must be amended since the laws were man-made and could be turned around to suit human co-existence.

5. The setting of the play as an element of Ghanaian Culture

The cultural issues of the Ghanaian society are portrayed through the settings of this play. *In the Chest of a Woman* is written in six legs and each of the legs specifically describes how these cultural issues are portrayed. The play has a general setting in an ancient Kingdom known as Ebusa. The name Ebusa is revealed to depict a typical Akan traditional background. This name, however, emphasizes the traditional context of our being as a Ghanaian society. The play moves on to other specific settings or locales. The first leg reveals a sparsely furnished inner court of Nana Yaa Kyeretwie's palace at Kyeremfaso, where traditional stools are displayed and the palace walls are designed with Adinkra symbols. It is nearing dusk and both Mother and 'son,' are engrossed in a game of Oware. Oware is a game in our Ghanaian traditional setting which is mostly played between two persons. It is usually believed to be a game played among royals as seen in the play between Nana Yaa and Owusu.

Owusu: Whose turn is it?

Nana Yaa: Your turn of course.

Owusu: See, I have won six marbles out of three holes.

Nana Yaa: (laughs). That is what the elders refer to as serious tactical error... (p. 1)

The Oware game can also be viewed as symbolism which has been carefully chosen by the playwright. Adzei (2009) asserts that by its nature, Oware is a game of strategies, movements, and maneuvers similar to military tactics as can be seen in the Kingdom of Ebusa. As mother and child play, the former teaches the latter how the game is played, deliberately drawing the young and unsuspecting Owusu into

real warfare and contests between individuals by drawing on military imagery. It is for this reason that Nana Yaa describes Oware as a game for royals - like herself.

The second leg reveals the palace of Kwaku Duah II at Nkwanta. This name means crossroads (another native name mentioned in the Ghanaian context). The leg introduces the two palace maids. They are gossips and serve as a chorus in the play. Every bit of information concerning other characters is brought out through them. This information provides an important insight into the state of affairs of the Kingdom in general. In the context of traditional drama, the gossips constitute what is known in Akan as *mmoguo*. Thus, they act as the voice of the people. This is an important aspect of a cultural issue portrayed by the playwright.

The third leg reveals Kwaku Duah II's palace at Nkwanta where the King, his daughter Ama Ekyaa and 'nephew' Owusu Agyeman come in to take their evening meal. The properties displayed here represent the items that are normally used in a typical Ghanaian traditional setting. Such properties include; wooden trays, earthenware, wooden stools and tables, a calabash, and a pot containing water, among others. These items mentioned create a serene atmosphere of Ghanaian culture truthfully displayed. The presence of Adwoa and Akosua; the palace slaves who were positioned at the extreme corners to take orders from the King as they are authoritatively beckoned to serve them with their meals explains their role as servants in a royal Kingdom who must be ready at any time to serve their superiors. Below is an excerpt of a conversation between Ama Ekyaa the princess, the King, and Adwoa the slave respectively, which distinguishes their status in the palace.

Ekyaa: (Authoritatively) Maame Adwoa.

Adwoa: Yes, my Mistress.

Ekyaa: Did you say you also tasted this food?

Adwoa: Yes, my Mistress

Ekyaa: And you were satisfied with the salt in it, weren't you?

Adwoa: My Mistress, I swear I tasted it with my own tongue and I ...

King: Will you stop bandying words with your Mistress and run for the salt, before I get furious?

Adwoa: Yes, my Lord (Adwoa runs out). (pp. 45-46)

The fourth leg of the play reveals the outskirts of the palace at Nkwanta where the town crier comes in to announce to the citizens of the Kingdom concerning their upcoming communal labour day. Communal labour is an activity that happens in most Ghanaian societies where the community members come together with their cutlasses, brooms, and hoes to clean their environment. The King or head of that community usually gives the orders to be communicated to the citizenry to make it a point to be present, and the failure to turn up by any member will result in the payment of a penalty. This agenda is declared by the town crier who functions as a conveyer of information in a traditional society. He comes in with his dawuro (bell) to inform the members about this information. It can be noted that the 'dawuro' is the local name for a metallic instrument used for the relaying of information but the native name used for this instrument instead of its foreign name emphasizes the traditional nature of our being as a Ghanaian society.

The fifth leg is set at Kwaku Duah II's palace at Nkwanta. It is dawn in the palace and the two slaves and gossips; Adwoa and Akosua are revealed. They are seated with their clothes wrapped about them waiting to see the King inform him about an observation they have made on Princess Ama Ekyaa whom they suspect is pregnant. This scenario can be described as an interesting twist to the entire plot. They are waiting for Okyeame Boateng (The King's linguist) who has gone to inform the King concerning their mission but they end up gossiping about Okyeame Boateng while he goes in to call the King. They, however, stop when they heard him approaching. This particular setting which is during dawn creates a form of a serene atmosphere but at the same time, a tense mood since the gossips have to relay a piece of important information concerning the Princess to the King.

The sixth and final leg is set at the Kingdom of Ebusa; the palace at Nkwanta were the Elders, chiefs, the Queen Mother; Nana Yaa Kyeretwie, Owusu Agyeman, and King Kwaku Duah II are all seated in a durbar to adjudicate a serious matter concerning the Princess; Ama Ekyaa who gets pregnant out of wedlock.

In Ghanaian cultures, durbars are often held to discuss serious and important matters relating to a Kingdom. It

could be festivals, funerals, marriages, or any other serious matter which bring everybody in the community; from the King to the commonest member together. This cultural tradition revealed in this play explains the act of Ama Ekyaa; a daughter of royal blood getting pregnant out of wedlock as abominable which needs the intervention of every member of the Kingdom to help solve the issue at hand; hence the reason for the durbar being organized by the King. Below is an excerpt from King Kwaku Duah II which buttresses this point.

King: She who stands there before us is a product of my loins

Ama Ekyaa is her name. A daughter of Royal blood.

She harbours in that protruding flesh a seed secretly and wrongfully sown.

Out of acceptable wedlock. (A cry of shock and disbelief emanates from the gathering)

Oh yes!

Is that not a shameful deed for a Princess to do?

I have a good mind to slap..." (p. 80).

The above discussion indicates that *In the Chest of a Woman* is set in a Ghanaian society; specifically, an Akan cultural society. The backgrounds reveal native names such as Ebusa, Nkwanta, and Kyeremfaso, where traditions are displayed. It emphasizes that the playwright could have utilized foreign names or locales as his cultural background but since he is an African (Ghanaian) and believes in adopting the African cultures in his writings, he decides to employ native names for his settings as well as physical settings that reflect the nature of the African or Ghanaian society. Also, to indigenize the play, the playwright departs from the Shakespearean convention of dividing the play into acts and scenes. Instead, we have legs. In all, there are six legs which is an innovation and an appropriate one at that. It makes the plot a journey from the exposition to rising action to climax and finally to resolution. The expository scene is referred to as the First Leg while the concluding scene is referred to as the Final Leg.

6. Cultural Themes inherent in *In the Chest of a Woman*.

Chieftaincy and succession of kings by inheritance

In the chest of a woman by Efo Kojo Mawugbe is a play that has a typical representation of the Ghanaian Akan culture in its undiluted form. Efo Kojo organizes the story with a direct focus on the traditional authority among the Akans and how the Akans inherit the power of kingship. The author tackles how royals are privileged to benefit from both patrilineal and matrilineal lines. The Akan culture allows for the males in a royal family to inherit their maternal uncles if a male king has no male child to succeed him. However, the case of Owusu Agyemang succeeding his uncle King Kwaku Duah which is a decree by the late first female ruler of the Ebusa Kingdom and mother of both Nana Yaa Kyeretwie and King Kwaku Duah.

"My mother made one last edict.

That my brother be King after her,

But after him, any of us who first brings forth a

Son,

Shall have that son ascending the stool after

Kwaku Duah.

Even though customarily it is the nephew who

ascends a throne,

Due to the matrilineal inheritance we practice.

My mother, for once, set the custom aside.

She also had my name changed from Serwaa

to Kyerentwie,

Yaa, the leopard tamer.” (p.26)

The above extract reveals how the cultural and customary demands of the Akan society. The sustenance of the Akan culture and customs provides a reason for the Queen's mother to make a decree on who takes after King Kwaku Duah. In as much as not just anybody can be selected to be king, there is the need for proper laid down procedures in selecting successors from the royal families. This is what Efo Kojo puts to the fore so that his readers will be able to have a better appreciation of the Akan culture with regards to how royalty is practiced.

To further validate the rich culture of the Akans, Efo Kojo portrays how Kings in the Akan Kingdom just like in many other Kingdoms are served. These servants include the linguist, palace guards, and slaves. These servants have special responsibilities that they carry out for the king. In the play, both King Kwaku Duah of the Ebusa kingdom and Nana Yaa Kyeretwie of Kyeremfaso have their linguists who are referred to in Akan as *okyeame*. The *okyeame* is the person through whom traditional rulers relay information and people also speak to the chiefs through the linguist especially in public. The linguists also serve as the chief's messengers of the chief. In the play, the author chooses Okyeame Bonsu as the chief messenger of Nana Yaa Kyerentwie and Okyeame Boateng as the chief messenger of King Kwaku Duah II.

The authority of the Okyeame is also recognized by the symbol of the office which is the linguist staff. The message carried by a linguist can only be accepted and the authenticity determined by the symbol of office. At Nana Yaa Kyerentwie's palace, she requests to see his symbol of office as prove of being sent by the King and also determine the nature of the message. She says to Okyeame Boateng,

“Now, let me have a look at your symbol of office.

(She takes the linguist staff, examines it

critically for a hidden mark. Having satisfied

she gives it back to him)

I see, you are on a peace mission. Now tell me,

what does my brother, the Great King say?” (p.8)

This is a typical representation of the Akan culture in particular and Ghanaian culture by extension. The author by so doing exposes his readers and audience to the honor and respect that is accorded to chiefs and royalty in general.

Also, when the time was due for Owusu Agyemang to be sent to his uncles' palace for him to acquire training as heir to the throne, King Kwaku Duah II did not go himself. Neither did he ask his mother to bring him. Instead, he sends his linguists to Kyeremfaso to bring Owusu for that very important exercise to be carried out. The message below is what King Kwaku Duah II sends to Nana Yaa Kyerentwie through his linguist Okyeame Boateng.

“Thank you, Okyeame. Hear and let it reach

Nana that as she was able to decipher from my

Staff, my colleagues and I are on a peace

mission. Our Great King, Daasebre Kwaku

Duah II, has asked us to tell your Highness that

the time has come for her to send to his court

Owusu Agyemang, the heir-apparent to be

Trained in the art of kingship. He says

further that old age is fast catching up with him

and his eyes are failing. He therefore feels the

earlier the heir is trained the better. I am done.” (p.6)

The playwright also helps his readers and audience understand one key aspect of the Akan for that matter Ghanaian culture. This bothers on the kind of reception that is given to visitors as part of their culture. The very first thing that is offered to visitors is water. Before you listen to the message being carried by a messenger or a visitor, first you need to offer them water. This is what Okyeame Bonsu and his fellows at Nana Kyerentwie’s palace did but was not accepted by the delegation;

OKYEAME BONSU: *Nana, we of your court didn’t sidestep tradition and custom. Water was the first thing we offered them, as a token of our warm welcome, but they refused.*

OWUSU: *You mean they refused to accept the water you offered them?*

OKYEAME BONSU: *Yes. (p.6)*

Apart from the chiefs having linguists and palace guards, they also have slaves who serve them and work and the palace. Among the services rendered by these servants are cooking, washing, cleaning the palace among others. At King Kwaku Duah’s palace, the servants play a very significant role by bringing to the notice of the king about the pregnancy of the Ekyaa the princess. Two of the palace servants, Adwoa and Akosua reports their observations about Ekyaa to the King saying;

AKOSUA: *“She vomits very often, and looks sluggish;
sleeping most of the time.*

ADWOA: *But here is a case where she wants to eat a lot
of delicacies....*

ADWOA: *An insatiable appetite for white clay*

AKOSUA: *And spits about indiscriminately....*

OKYEAME BOATENG: *So, you are sure it’s pregnancy*

AKOSUA &

ADWOA: *Yes, we are.”(p.68-69)*

The above conversation is very relevant to the development of the story. This is because the presence of the servants in the palace is to satisfy the demands of culture.

Mawugbe shows us how the Akan culture makes it permissible for people to marry from within their extended families. It is against this background that King Kwaku Duah II expects Owusu and Ekyaa to get married. This form of marital engagement is what they refer to as endogamy. The practice is acceptable and common in Akan and for that matter Ghanaian culture. A son for instance is permitted to marry the daughter of a maternal uncle who is his cousin and vice versa. This is the case of Owusu and Ekyaa. Clearly, the Akan culture does not frown on this practice. It is however, King Duah’s fervent wish that Ekyaa and Owusu get married. He expresses this by saying;

KING: *Fine, and have you considered the possibility of
winning his heart?*

Well, I can’t help being blunt.

If you haven’t won his heart yet,

I say you must do so

You have my fullest backing.

EKYAA: *You know my cousin is the quiet type, very
reserved, shy-looking and, always keeping
himself to himself alone.*

KING: *I know all that.*

*You must use your female charm to entice his
heart out of its shell. The mother has fed him
with a bit of her stubborn leopard nature, I know
but go ahead.*

*I ostensibly brought him here under the pretext
of studying the art of Kingship,
but the real reason is for you to win his heart
forever.*

*That way, when he succeeds me as King,
you shall be his wife, a queen.*

*That is the hidden political angle to the whole
enterprise. (p.49)*

From the above extract, it is obvious how King Duah II is also interested in sustaining the royal status within the family. This means that if Ekyaa and Owusu succeed in getting married together, their son will also become the one to succeed Owusu. This implies that royalty will remain with them for a long time.

Another way of portraying the Akan culture is the use of traditional music with drumming and. As part of the training in the art of Kingship to prepare Owusu to take over from King Duah, he is being taken through drum language, royal dances, and battles strategies as part of his lessons.

KING: *All the same, you went through with distinction,
I am told. From the reports, I have
been receiving,
It is evident that you're doing very fine.*

OWUSU: *Well, I am doing my best.*

KING: *You can now play the fontom from drum
And dance the royal dance too*

OWUSU: *It is so, Daasebre.*

KING: *The reports also indicate that you did very well
with your lessons in battle strategies. (p.47)*

By these remarks, we are made to know about the relevance of the aspects of the customs and culture as a basic requirement for one to be deemed fit to assume the throne as king. This indicates that merely having a royal lineage does not automatically qualify you to be king. Whoever is made king must be abreast with almost every aspect of the culture of their people.

In the play, one other relevant element of culture that is being represented is games. Games form an integral part of the culture of every society. The author deliberately opens the play with Nana Yaa Kyerentwie and her son Owusu playing *Oware* popular Ghanaian games. This involves the picking of marbles from one's territory to fill up holes either in carved wood or sometimes on the ground until a required number of marbles are reached for the player to collect. Usually, two people play these games at a time. The author means to create the awareness of his readers of the cultural background of the play.

Nana Yaa: *You should have waited patiently for me to play*

*the marbles in these two holes, thereby leaving
my last three holes here with two marbles each.
That way, when it's your turn to play, you'll win
twelve marbles out of your holes.*

Hahahahaha...Hahahahaha

*You needn't look so sad; all isn't lost yet.
There might be another chance; just keep your
eyes and mind open. Hahahahaha. (p.1)*

Storytelling is another aspect of the Ghanaian culture that we see being represented in the play. At Nana Kwaku Duah's palace, so many things going on. In the evenings, we told that all the members of the royal family gather to listen to folktales. In a typical Ghanaian society, the young ones gather and listen to folklores from their grandparents and parents.

OKYEAME BOATENG: *My Lord, Daasebre has asked me to bring you.*

OWUSU: *What for? If I may ask.*

OKYEAME BOATENG: *My Lord, it is time for Anansesem. Everyone in
the palace is seated except you. So I am sent
here to bring you. (p. 57)*

This practice has a lot of moral lessons. During these moments the young ones learn so many societal values and norms from the elderly ones. Storytelling helps to preserve the culture of the society. But most importantly, it serves as a source of entertainment for those who partake. They learn new songs and ask questions about things they hear from these folktales. The author deliberately incorporates this aspect of the culture in the play to make his readers aware of some of the things that happen in the palace with that of King Kwaku Duah, not an exemption.

Moreover, the presence of the town crier and his role in the play cannot be overemphasized. The traditional ways of carrying out information in every Ghanaian society is either by the use of the talking drum or the *dawuro* which is a metal object. In most typical Ghanaian society, the gong beater carries information from the chief and his elders to the members of the community. Similarly, very vital announcements are made through the use of the gong throughout the town. It may be either the chief summons his subjects, announcement about a missing or a found item among others. In the fourth leg of the play, the communal labour which is also another key element of culture among the people is announced by the town crier.

TOWN CRIER: *Ago-o-o-o-o!*

Male and Female citizens of Abusa.

The Adontendomhene

Greets you all good morning.

Nana wants me to remind you that today

Is a communal labour day

All able-bodied men and women

Must assemble under the Onyina tree

*The men must bring along hoes, cutlasses or
axes.*

The women must bring along brooms

*Nobody is to come there empty-handed.
And anybody who fails to turn up shall be
dealt with according to custom
I am done. (p. 59)*

Communal Labour

The above information gives a clear indication that communal labour forms part of the culture of the people. This is usually done to ensure that the environment is always tidy. Because it is something that is done regularly, everybody feels obliged to participate in it as a cultural role in society. We are also made to know that, those people who would not avail themselves will be dealt with according to customs. This reveals how powerful the customs have been and applying them to ensure that people act accordingly.

Observance of Customary Laws

One other major element of culture which exposes the real identity of Owusu is the observance of customary law. Customary practices vary from one society to another. In the Ebusa kingdom, customs demand that no woman shall sit on the judgment stool unless she is enstooled and oath of allegiance in the presence of the people. But for the customs of the people, the secret about Owusu's identity would not have been revealed. Nana Oppong, one of the elders reminds us that;

*Are we deliberately pretending to be ignorant of
that age-old law?
A law as old as the Great Oracle of Kyeremfaso
which says,
"If any woman sits for a single instant on the
judgment stool
Before she had been ABSOLUTELY enstooled
and sworn an oath of allegiance in the presence of the people,
SHE SHALL DIE" (p.91)*

From the extract above, it is evident that strict adherence to this customary law becomes the basis on which Owusu's life cannot be spared after it came to bear that through his revelation that he is not a male. This incident gives Nana Oppong to defend the custom vehemently insisting that the law must take its course. Meanwhile, without him knowing the hidden truth behind Ekyaa's pregnancy. We are also made to know by Abrewanana that, it is abominable for a man who is uncircumcised to get impregnate a woman. This is the case of Ekyaa and Akwesi the son of Nana Oppong.

7. Conclusion.

In conclusion, Efo Kojo Mawugbe's *In the chest of a woman* portrays the indispensable elements of the Akan culture and customs. The dominant theme of royal inheritance focuses on how the Akans ascend the throne as traditional rulers. We are made to understand the matrilineal inheritance among the Akan culture. The customs also accord kings the honor of having servants and linguists in their kingdoms who serve the king in performing several roles. The linguists are well recognized by their symbol of office which is the linguist staff. The author presents the Akan music and dance as mentioned in the play. Storytelling and the traditional *oware* game which he uses to introduce the scene at Nana Yaa's court seeks to reveal the indispensable aspect of the culture of the people. The use of the town crier to disseminate information to the community shows the nature and background of the play. What is more binding is the fact that there cannot be a society without laws. The customary laws of the people need to be upheld hence the need for Ekyaa and Owusu to face the full rigors of the law. It is important to note that every society has its cultural practices and beliefs. This is what binds them from generation to generation.

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