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Change through Tradition in the Work of 'Zulu Sofola Rehearsal Presentation Outline

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When I use the terms tradition and western culture or westernization, these are not to be understood in a reified sense, but as systems with active agents, i.e. people like you and I behind them and driving them into existence.

Introduction:

This paper highlights the struggle Nigerian playwright, 'Zulu Sofola underwent to impart her message. She attempted to confront gender oppression through tradition without contradicting herself in her play, *Wedlock of the Gods*. 'Zulu Sofola wrote commentaries about social problems and the influence of Western culture. Her goal was to maintain a traditional framework in the face of encroaching Western perspectives. She advocated enacting change through tradition, irrespective of Western ideologies about change. Sofola focused on gender oppression as a social problem. She intended to address gender oppression rooted in tradition by teaching traditional customs to her audience first in order for audiences to make informed and progressive decisions about what to change within traditional practices; and thus, her traditionalist approach to change requires cognizance and recognition of tradition as an initial step. Sofola argued against the influences of Westernization that shift the focus of change from confronting customs through tradition to confronting customs through Western ideology.

Synopsis of the play, *Wedlock of the Gods*:

Set in the nineteenth century, *Wedlock of the Gods* is about two ill-fated lovers, Ogwoma and Uloko, who defy tradition in order to consummate their love for each other. Ogwoma is forced to marry an older and wealthier suitor, Adigwu, in order to secure a bride wealth to obtain medicine for her sick brother. Adigwu eventually dies and Ogwoma becomes free of her unhappy life. However, according to tradition, Ogwoma must mourn her deceased husband for three months and then marry his brother. During her second month of mourning, it is revealed that Ogwoma is pregnant. The father is her paramour, Uloko. Immediately the course is set for Ogwoma to meet her fate by the trickery of Adigwu's revengeful mother, Odibei, who invokes magic to eliminate Ogwoma. The community clashes with the two lovers about their actions and expresses deep distress. The community works to restore peace and to find a resolution to hurt feelings and defiance of tradition. In the process of restoring peace, Ogwoma's family blames Uloko's family and Uloko's family blames Ogwoma's family. Yet, all are united to make sure Ogwoma and Uloko are safe and alive, given Odibei's threats to do harm to Ogwoma. With the aid of an incantation, Odibei puts Ogwoma under a spell to follow her nefarious plan. Odibei concocts a poisonous drink and directs Ogwoma to drink it. Ogwoma dies and Uloko avenges her death by killing Odibei and then takes his own life by drinking the same poisonous drink to reunite with Ogwoma in heaven. [The play is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*].

Who was 'Zulu Sofola:

'Zulu Sofola is a deceased Nigerian female playwright. As Nigeria's first prominent female playwright, Sofola laid the foundation for social protest literature aimed at confronting gender oppression. Given Sofola's heritage as a member of the Igbo ethnic group, we can only assume she advocated confronting gender oppression within traditional Igbo culture, and ostensibly traditional Nigerian culture in general, cutting across the several ethnic groups present in Nigeria. Yet, Sofola's aims of female empowerment was a moderately tempered goal geared toward a synthesis of constructive components of traditional value systems and the influences of westernization present in the post-colonial era. The goal with this approach was to maintain the constructive means of the past and fuse them with the needs of the present and future.

What was 'Zulu Sofola's goal (s):

For a basic understanding, Sofola advocated change through tradition in an effort to cast out westernized notions of change that deteriorated or nullified traditions of the past without a proper examination and understanding of those traditions. Through her play, *Wedlock of Gods*, Sofola advocated the preservation of tradition in light of the competing influence of western culture in Nigeria. However, Sofola advocated tradition for reasons contrary to what one may think. She pointed out that traditional values systems, a culture itself, is fluid and capable of malleability at the behest of its adherents. In essence, tradition, and by tradition, I mean, Igbo tradition and its followers, needs the chance to change and develop its customs to the current signs of times, ushered in by a zealous new generation of social activists and writers. However, this new generations of thinkers need to give tradition that chance by working within the traditional realm, first by learning about specific traditional Igbo practices that are oppressive. As emphasized earlier, the prescription is education and synthesis.

Why did Sofola advocate change the way she did:

I argue education and synthesis for two reasons. I will start by explaining the latter. I believe Sofola clearly understood that she cannot completely and successfully reject the presence of western culture in Nigeria. First, she wrote in English. Second, the very act of rejecting western culture is recognition of western culture in itself. Cultural destruction and repression of speaking ethnic dialects during colonialism had a lot to do with this. As Kenyan playwright Thiong'o wa Ngugi argues, during imperialism, "...African languages were suppressed. They were deliberately underdeveloped and European languages... [became] the inevitable vehicle of African peoples' self-definition" (8). Ngugi further asserts, "African literature cannot be understood outside the framework of consistent anti-imperialism," and regardless of the language utilized to convey this message (12). This may help explain why Sofola remained adamant about preserving traditional frameworks within Nigerian literature and society—to re-establish and re-affirm what imperialism denied and destroyed—tradition and a sense of organic Nigerian culture and identity. Sofola counterbalanced this reality by weaving customs, rituals, and magic in her plays unique to Nigerian culture. This technique used by Sofola served a purpose other than connecting with the greater Nigerian community and rejecting the west, but also served to educate the masses about those specific customs and rituals, especially those that were oppressive.

How did Sofola present her message for change:

Her process of confronting gender oppression was both didactic and twofold. Interlaced in her play, *Wedlock of the Gods*, Sofola presented her audience with what I term, “tradition lessons.” Throughout the play, different characters give the audience an insight into traditional customs through the dialogue. In order to further explain this concept, I will now like to turn your attention to the following power point slides.

(Present PowerPoint)

Sofola’s flaw is that she was not explicit about what changes needed to occur. Her message was underlying and needed to be sought in between the lines. Her message was and is one easy to misinterpret and, thus, it is easy to misunderstand Sofola and her advocacy for women’s liberation. If reading the play, *Wedlock of the Gods*, engagement with the text and critical thinking is needed. And watching the play acted out may necessitate a different set of requirements. Yet, if we consider the political context in which Sofola wrote, there is reasoning behind her ambiguous writing. From 1966 to 1999, military dictators ruled in Nigeria. *Wedlock of the Gods* was published in 1972. Any overt, critical indictments of the status quo and recommendations for change, most likely would have warranted censorship and political persecution or even death. One only needs to think of fellow writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa who was executed by the Nigerian government because of his social activist activities. We must remember Sofola is among a generation of writers such as the aforementioned Ken Saro-Wiwa, Thiong’o wa Ngugi, and other prominent African writers and playwrights around the African continent that faced persecution and censorship from their governments because of the content of their works.

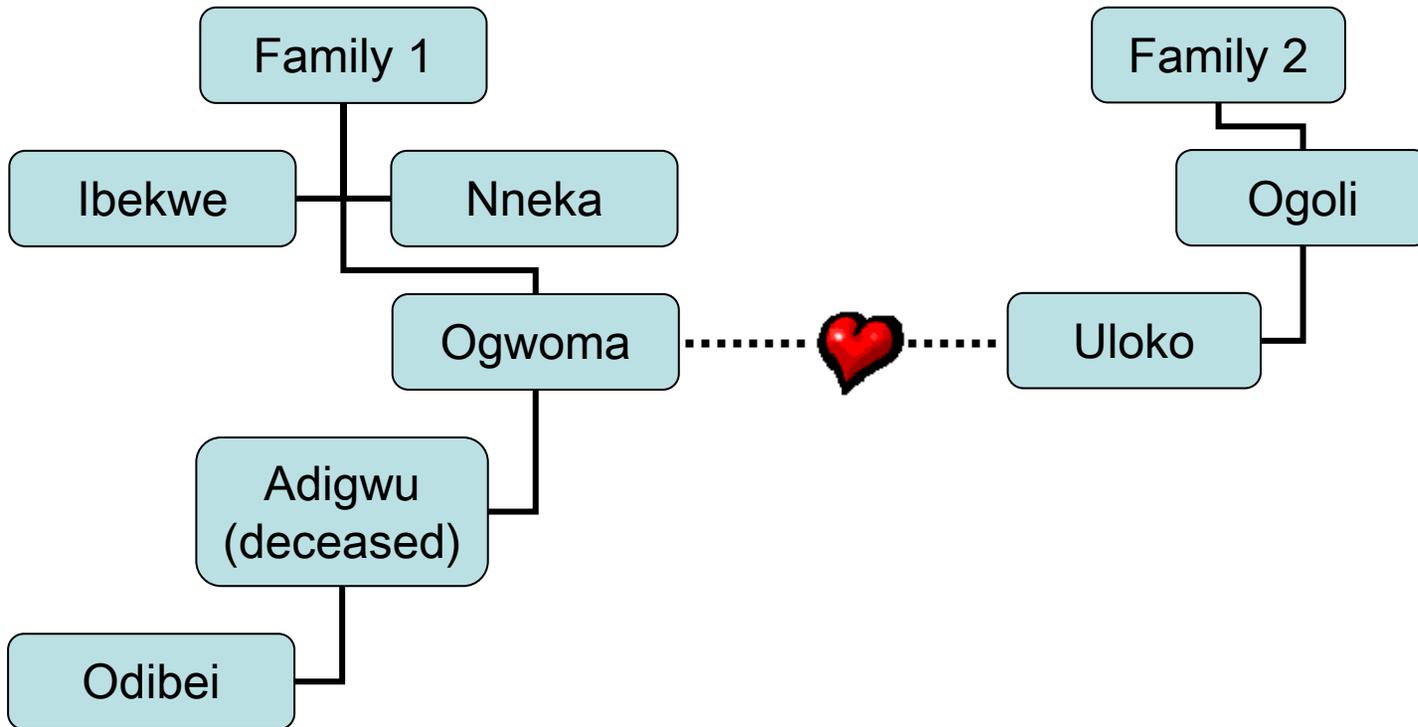
Conclusion:

As a final point, *Wedlock of the Gods* takes place in the 19th century and has no mention of the west. And the fact that there are no overarching contradictions in Sofola's work proves her works are not a disguise of a conservative agenda to preserve oppressive traditions. Sofola's choice of setting and disregard of the west in *Wedlock of the Gods* functions to create a framework accessible to Nigerians. Sofola was speaking to Nigerians first and foremost in an effort to communicate a community consciousness about change through tradition. Sofola raised awareness about the status of women and traditional Nigerian practices that needed reformation. What is controversial is her method of articulating change in post-colonial Nigeria. Sofola used history to inform the present, to illustrate that "Consciousness of the bad was an essential prerequisite of the promotion of good" (Singh 172). Sofola was about taking the traditional and using it against itself to arm women with the appropriate knowledge to change society, or in other words, "using the system." Her unique and controversial play, *Wedlock of the Gods*, is about the Nigerian audience developing critical thinking in order to develop counterintuitive responses to the way she employed tradition in her plays. Sofola's underlying message called for a cooperative coalition of the competing value systems. She had the same goals as her literary cohorts, but she encouraged a different ideological map about how to navigate Nigerian society toward that goal.

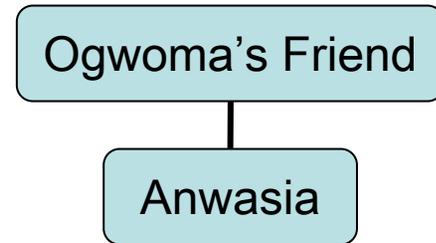
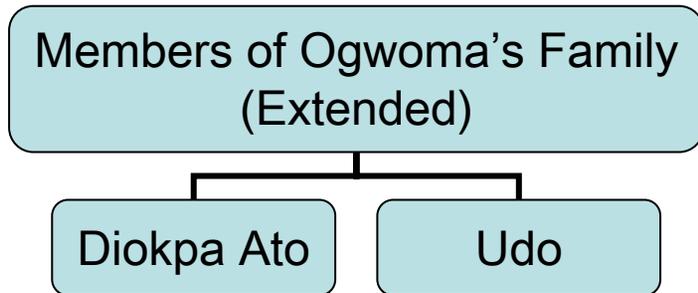
Tradition Lessons

Character Tree

The families involved in the conflict



The Voices of Reason



- Tradition lesson #1:

ANWASIA—Look, a woman's honour lies in her name and her sense of shame (8).

- Tradition lesson #2:

ANWASIA—Ogwoma, our people say that a man's daughter is the source of wealth to him. *[Your parents needed the money for a very expensive sacrifice for your brother whom sickness almost killed. You should have been happy that your money saved the life of your own brother]* (9).

- Tradition lesson #3:

NNEKA—Do you know that the punishment for this deed is a swelling of the body with water leaking from everywhere? Do you know that nobody will agree to treat you for fear they might also catch your curse? Do you know that even after death no forest will accept your body?... (19).

- Tradition lesson #4:

ANWASIA—Listen, Ogwoma, a friend must always be honest and truthful. It is a common thing that when a man dies his brother takes his wife and makes her his wife. This is what our people do. Everyone knows that (21).

- Tradition Lesson #5:

ANWASIA—Adigwu had no child by you. His people want a child for him by a woman who was his wife. You are that wife and his brother can have that child for him by you (22).

- Tradition Lesson #6:

ATA—...Our people say that the man who ignores his family is the one who stands alone in the rain (25).

- Tradition lesson #7:

UDO—What often destroys young men is rash and hasty action. A woman who loses her husband must not be visited by any other man until she has been cleansed. Any action against this is an abomination and our gods deal very severely with such offenders (35).

Summary of Tradition Lessons

1. Women's honor equated with name and humility (sense of shame).
2. Bride price/bride wealth is a source of income.
3. Aversion to breaking taboos; defiance=social stigmatization.
4. Intrafamilial adoption of widows.
5. High expectations for child birth.
6. Family/community comes first.
7. Mourning and purification period must be observed.