

Title of the Paper: Cultural dichotomy in Okara's Piano and Drums

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Abstract

Piano and drums written by modern Nigerian poet Gabriel Okara enlightens us about the cultural and identical complexities faced by the African people. The European civilization was introduced in Africa after the arrival of the former in the 16th century. Most of the native Africans stuck to their traditions, while some of them living in the urban absorbed the behavioral pattern of the Europeans. The poet thus symbolizes the drum with the traditional African life while Piano with that of European culture. The paper will attempt to give the detailed analysis of the poem to highlight the cultural dichotomy of the native Africans by presenting the vivid picture of traditional African lifestyle and the problems faced by them after the mingling of European culture and civilization on their native soil.

Keywords: Culture, Traditions, Dichotomy.

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Introduction:

Gabriel Okara is the first renowned English language black African poet and the first African modernist writer. He was born on 1921 in Nigeria, and studied at Government College Umuahia. During this time, he was exposed to European writers and were deeply inspired by them. His most famous poem Piano and Drums deals with the cultural dichotomy of traditional and Western cultures in post-colonial Africa.

Professor Azuonye in his interview interrogated Okara whether he found Piano and drums as fascinating as the rest of his poems; the poet replied, "Well, that particular poem is about change - change brought about by the West and its encounter with our indigenous civilizations. By that I mean, the impact of Western ways on our own indigenous ways. In the first part of the poem, I was listening to the drums and thinking old ways and so on, you know. And then in the second part, I am listening to the piano...."¹

The European civilization was introduced in Africa after the arrival of the former in the 16th century. Most of the native Africans stuck to their traditions, while some of them living in the urban areas absorbed the behavioral pattern of the Europeans. The poet symbolizes the drum with the traditional African life while Piano with that of European culture. Thus causing the rise of new problems - arising between the old traditions of the Africans and the newly introduced European traditions. Okara tries to present the problems, the misconceptions, and the anxieties faced by the young generation.

The poem consists of four stanzas. The first three stanzas are telling us the story while last one gives us the conclusion. Prof Goonetilleke analyses the inception, “At dawn by the side of a river, the poet hears jungle drums, and the sound of these drums triggers off a train of perceptions and sensations. He recalls the first stages of life and visualizes a life that is primitive and dangerous. The emotions within him grow stronger and propel his mind towards childhood scenes. He sees Africa at an earlier stage of development- primitive, simple, rough, yet natural and with a human appeal.”² The theme of the poem is the effect that music has on the poet. Thus the first verse introduces the mystic rhythm of the Jungle Drums.

“When at break of day at a riverside
I hear jungle drums telegraphing
The mystic rhythm, urgent,”

The opening lines of the poem gives us the fresh morning image; we can see our poet wandering on the bank of a river, where the beating of the jungle drums attracts his ears. The very Drum, which is the symbol of their primitive culture. The metaphoric instrument has the power to recall their old days, the way they lived and their intense love for the way they lived. The placing of the word “telegraphing” here is interesting due to its difference from the rest of the diction in the stanza. It conveys us a subtle feeling that Okara is no longer part of the beating of the drum; it is implied to be a kind of message – although it brings out raw and fresh emotion in him, it is telegraphed, not played in all its purity. Then follows the phrase mystic rhythm which fills the atmosphere with complete serenity and tranquility.

The sound produced by the instrument certainly filled the emptiness that the native people had and blessed them with a spiritual rejuvenation as we can see the perfect co - ordination between the mystic rhythms of drums and the person playing it and his intense affections associated with the instrument. The urgent mystic rhythm certainly has the power to heal the hollowness of the native people.

“raw like bleeding flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning

I saw the panther ready to pounce
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunter crouch with spears poised;”

The mystic rhythm continues and the poet goes back to the “primal youth” and the scene is full of ‘raw like bleeding flesh,’ the scene introduces us to the primitive lifestyle and culture of the native Africans. The poet vividly sees the panther getting ready to get hold off leopard beautified by the phrase, ‘snarling about to leap’ and the hunter very carefully taking his position with his spears to hunt for its prey. The scene may definitely be raw but the mystic drumbeat and primitive lifestyle makes them more comfortable and gives them the heavenly feel. They are certainly happy and peaceful in their native lifestyle as the traditional African society was pantheistic in their belief.

“And my blood ripples, turns torrent,
Topples the years and at once I’m
In my mother’s lap a suckling;”

As the hunter stand poised to take action, Okara’s memory shifts from a situation of primal aggression to memories of his childhood. The beautiful imagery ‘blood ripples, turns torrent,’ shows the speed inflow of poet’s memory from the primitive lifestyle of his community to the time when he was making a gateway to face the realities of the world in his mother’s lap.

“at once I’m walking simple
path with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.”

The glorification of childhood runs throughout the above lines. However, the path the poet shows us right now was simple and without any innovation but definitely it was the moment of maxim blissful state, the absence of reason and only the presence of blessed season. The scene then develops from the lap of mother to the process of learning how to walk which in fact metaphorically means how to stand on our own feet in the life to come. He then wonderfully expresses how the baby captures the images of green leaves and wild flowers through his innocent eyes and stores in his immature yet developing brain. Thus, the beauty of Nature is captured even at the budding stage of his life.

“Then I hear a wailing piano
Solo speaking of complex ways in
Tear- furrowed concerto.”

The state of the perfect bliss is then distracted by the sound of ‘wailing piano’. It is very much interesting to note here that the sound of piano appears wailing for the poet, but the same sound of piano with its various tempos, complex musical notes and the melodious sound produced are superb and admired by the westerner. The poet’s race, culture and identity are closely attached to the traditional instrument drum, so even if the foreign instrument piano produces a superb soothing music for others but for poet and his race its appears to be wailing. For instance, a person closely connected with the heavy metal music may find the sound produced by it to be soothing and enjoying, but for the people who are least interested or alien to the music may find the same sound wailing and difficult to enjoy the rhythm. The poet does not

find any connection with the sound of the new musical instrument, but it certainly confuses his mind brought to our knowledge by the phrase ‘tear- furrowed concerto.’

As Eliot in his definition of culture says, “No culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion.”³ (p. 27) We can see here the close affinity between Culture and Religion, but when the time comes to choose to embrace one from the multiplicity of culture and religion; the case would be as Eliot further explains, “A higher religion is one which is much more difficult to believe. For the more conscious becomes the belief, so the more conscious becomes the unbelief; indifference, doubt and skepticism appear.”³ (p. 67)”

The poet is thus caught in the amalgamation of multiple culture and religion. He then speaks about wailing music of the piano, “And then the music stops at a dagger-point; by that, I mean the fights, the dissensions, the tension going on in the Western hemisphere - Western countries - the wars going on there..”¹

“of faraway lands
And new horizons with
Coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo.”

Now this is the point where the poet shows the real cause of confusion. Here, he speaks of faraway lands and new horizons, which undoubtedly refers to the mingling of the European cultures after they were colonized by the latter. It introduced in them some new ways of living and so the native people were perplexed whether to adopt the newly introduced culture or to follow the traditional life style. The use of the technical terms ‘coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint, crescendo,’ definitely adds more confusion in the present state.

“But lost in the Labyrinth
Of its complexities, it ends in the middle

of a phrase at a dagger point.”

Although the newly introduced culture represented by piano may be refined and seductive but the real connection is found only in the old culture and the beating of the drums. Therefore, this state of perplexities creates a labyrinth and its complexities reach a point where it stops abruptly, lost in itself. The state of disorder ends in a phrase (state of mind which makes sense but not complete sense), cultures are many- their own culture, cultures introduced by foreign but the real connection is lost. The word ‘dagger point’ further intensifies the fear and the undercurrent of the gradual loss of the native culture after the mingling of the foreign one. The serious blend of this culture leads to perplexity and the gradual fight back of the major and the minor.

Mikhail Bakhtin states , “ The... hybrid is not only double-voiced and double-accented... but is also double-linguaged; for in it there are not only (and not even so much) two individual consciousness, two voices, two accents, as there are [doublings of] socio-linguistic, consciousness, two epochs... that come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance...”⁴

“And I lost in the morning mist
Of an age at a riverside keep
Wandering at the mystic rhythm
Of jungle drums and the concerto.”

At the end of the poem our poet is lost, wandering aimlessly as the music of the two instruments meld around him, so mingles the two cultures. The poem ends without the end of the dilemmatic condition of the poet's mind.

Conclusion:

The flashback of past history, the image of the childhood and the amalgamation of various cultures and religions makes poet soothing at one point, innocent at other and confused after the gruesome rationality. In the first stanza, we saw the picture of traditional African life, where the hunter is about to attack the leopard snarling about to leap the panther. In the second verse, the poet, recalls the memories of his childhood lying on his mother's lap-a suckling and feels as if he's being carried back to his babyhood. The familiar sound of the drum makes him recall the memories of his youth. The third stanza depicted the poet's attitude and changes taking place with the sound of the music of the Piano. The sound of a piano with its various tempos, complex musical notes, the melodious sounds produced are superb and admired by the westerner; but to Okara it is different. His confusion of Western music is symbolized by the words 'diminuendo counter point crescendo'. The fourth verse, touches upon the views of the poet. He has no choice. He can neither flush back to the old ways and traditions nor accept the modern conceptions.

The poet has used simple diction to express his ideas spotting a few impressive words creating the typical background to highlight the discrepancy of the western musical instrument and the oriental musical instrument Piano and Drum. The sound of the drum reaches far, touching the inner feelings of the listener, awakening his emotions in an extremely impressive manner. The sound effect of the words produces the mystic rhythm carrying Okara's message to the Africans and ultimately to the whole world. The expression regarding the music of the western instrument - Piano ends in the middle of a sentence at a dagger point reflecting how the music ends in confusion and pain of mind. Thus, in the poem Piano and Drums we can vividly

visualize the cultural dichotomy between the primitive Culture and the European Cultures beautifully symbolized by the two musical instrument the piano and the drums.

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