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Aesthetics of border negotiation: Examples from Wole Soyinka's *Aké* the years of childhood

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Abstract

This essay examines the themes of border and border negotiation in Wole Soyinka's *Aké: The Years of Childhood* 1981. Pointing out Soyinka's experiences and the interaction of religion, culture, and language, this analysis critiques the rigid borders imposed by colonialism and examines the social implications of these divisions. This work also explores the entanglement of identity and the potential for harmony among disparate belief systems through the lens of key characters like Wole and his family. This paper emphasizes the importance of adopting a hybrid legal framework that fosters a dialogue that embraces diverse cultures, as it speaks to the contemporary notions of a deterritorialized society articulated by theorists like Arjun Appadurai. Finally, this essay calls for transcending rigid boundaries in favor of open political discourse that celebrates the rich landscape of interconnected cultures.

Keywords: Wole Soyinka; Hybridity; Border Negotiation; Yoruba; Culture; Religion; Language

1. Introduction

The narrative in *Aké* gives insight into the social implications of borders. Soyinka critiques rigid borders by narrating his childhood experience and situating himself as the main character, Wole. He noted the influences of religion, culture, and languages in his upbringing, which were shaped by the British colonization of Nigeria.

The question of homeland ownership also emerges within the narrative. Homeland defines one's identity in a given geographical location, as it portrays where one is from. In this context, ownership raises the question of whether the colonizers have any right to claim ownership of the homeland they colonize and or establish laws to influence their governing policies. The women's collective rejection of foreign laws at the end of the novel stresses the community's resistance to alienation and advocates for a hybrid legal framework that supports rather than exploits local market women and the broader community.

Furthermore, Soyinka investigates human connections and emphasizes the complication and duality of identities. His account of the twofold identity is subsumed under Gayatri Spivak's vision of the political inclusion of minimalized voices in political discourse. Thus, this paper illustrates the need to go beyond fixed demarcation lines and engage in dialog.

2. The Subject of Border Negotiation: Religion Hybridity

As local residents engage in the ongoing effort of revitalizing their community, the variables of history, environment, and creativity offer possibilities for the emergence of new contexts (Appadurai 110). The residents of a neighborhood sustain its vitality through their daily activities, such as working, building, and engaging with one another. However, factors like history, the environment, and diverse perspectives create a constant opportunity for new ideas and

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development within the community. The hybrid nature of religion exists because, while the traditional faiths develop, it becomes possible to harbor the new ones, thus softening the rigidity of adherence to the past. This situation embodies ambivalence, as portrayed by Wole in *Aké*, through two contrasting viewpoints: one that considers the newly imported religion superior to the local belief system and another that reflects a profound observation of the old religion. Nevertheless, after his experiences with his grandfather and extended family in *Isara*, Wole had some unlearning to do. Therefore, he undertakes the task of readdressing the bias against the local religion by understanding the similarities between both religions. On the other hand, Wole's mother is hesitant to be associated with the traditional faith even though that was the belief practiced by indigenous Yorubas.

- The organ took on a dark, smoky sonority at evening service, and there was no doubt that the organ was adapting its normal sounds to accompany God's own sepulchral responses, with its timbre of the *egúngún*, to those prayers that were offered to him (Soyinka 1)

In this excerpt, the Christian religion represented by the church is compared to one of the traditional Yoruba faiths, the *egúngún*, a Yoruba spiritual ancestral masquerade that honors deceased ancestors. Both *egúngún* and the Christian God are depicted as spirits. The sound of the *egúngún* shies away from the ordinary in likeness to the nature of the Christian God. Wole draws a parallel between the organ and God's responses; this suggests that the organ's *dark, smoky sonority* produces music that adapts to the gravity and mystery of divine responses during prayers. He further alludes to the timbre of the organ as akin to the *egúngún*. This dual comparison merges Christian and Yoruba spiritual elements. It illustrates how the organ's sound not only serves as an instrument of worship but also as a bridge between the divine (Christian God) and ancestral (Yoruba *egúngún*) realms. This analysis better explains the similarities between the two belief systems and explores the negotiations present in *Aké* when various beliefs intersect.

Foucault's concept of hetero-space, in which the epochal space functions continuously, offers a revealing perspective on the constancy of religion in different places and at different times. He said, *The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed (Foucault and Miskowiec 22)*. In the past, religion has been a constant and will continue for generations to come. In the novel, through the eyes of Wole and other characters, we witness a harmonious blending of three different religions, resulting in a beautiful coexistence that maintains the order of the text.

In *Aké*, the *egúngún* can move between the spirit and human worlds. Likewise, God is depicted as an ever-present cosmos unencumbered by the restrictions of any physical boundaries. This stresses the fluidity of being between the English and Yoruba gods, even though they differ appearance-wise and conduct-wise. Wole attempts to express the notion with the following words:

- Can I come back as an *egúngún* if I die?'... 'I've never heard of any Christian becoming an *egúngún*. '... Osiki shrugged. 'I don't know. Our own *egúngún* doesn't speak English.'...The stained-glass windows behind the altar of St Peter's church displayed the figures of three white men, dressed in robes which were very clearly *egúngún* robes (Soyinka 32)

Wole tries to harmonize Christianity and the Yoruba tradition. He believes that one could see the faces of their *egúngún* in the hereafter. He thus creates an imagined picture and connection between the *egúngún* and the statues. Wole's question regarding the possibility of returning as an *egúngún* after death reveals his genuine curiosity about merging Christian beliefs, such as resurrection, with the rich Yoruba traditions associated with ancestral spirits. Osiki's response depicts that in traditional Yoruba religion, the path to becoming an *egúngún* is deeply rooted in Yoruba ancestral customs and differs from Christianity. However, Wole tries to create a linkage with his perceptive observation that the *stained-glass window figures' robes* resemble *egúngún* robes, which shows the unexpected connections between these belief systems while still maintaining their unique meanings and identities. Similarly, Wole's father represents the fusion of disparate religions in different spheres. While a member of the *Ogboni cult* of traditional methods, he also practices Christianity with utmost devotion. He claims that his Christianity does not hinder relations with the *Ogboni*, and he negotiates effectively between these worlds.

At the end of the novel, during the women's demonstration against high taxes by the colonial government, their cries merge into a song, notwithstanding their differing faiths. Be it *Orisa*, Allah, or Christ they were praying to, these women felt united to fight for one cause. As the text shows, they move within these religious spheres. The text reflects the powerful unity between Christians, Muslims, and believers of *Orisa*. Each woman, regardless of their faith, sang together peacefully.

Lord, take our hands

Doer of great deeds, take our hands

He who follows without deserting, take our hands

Lord, take our hands.

(Soyinka 217- 218)

3. The Construct of Cultural Hybridity

Cultures and physical environments are intertwined as each fabricates and molds itself for the other in different ways. The relationship is not permanent but changes with the tides of time under external factors such as globalization, migration, technological advancements, and historical occurrences. When cultures come together and adapt to their environments, they formulate a model of habits, beliefs, and values guided by the undercurrents of local tradition and external influence. It does not matter whether urban vantage or rural vistas; it is through this relationship between cultures and environments that the fluidity of the very identity of cultures and the transformation of spaces are manifested.

Greetings play a vital role in the Yoruba culture. Not only is greeting essential. But how it is carried out. A trained male child, according to the Yoruba custom, is expected to prostrate to greet an elder, and likewise, the female child is expected to kneel. Any greeting that derails from this pattern is regarded as disrespectful. Such a child is perceived as one who traditionally lacks a proper upbringing and manners. As reflected in the text, prostrating to greet the elders is a strange traditional practice to Wole:

- ...the elders of *osugbo* who pierced one through and through with their eyes, then stood back to await the accustomed homage. "They don't know how to prostrate. please don't take offence (Soyinka 126)

This excerpt depicts Wole's cultural misunderstanding or lack of adherence to traditional Yoruba customs. The elders of *osugbo* expect the traditional gesture of homage, Wole's prostration, as a sign of respect. However, he fails to perform it, prompting the chaperon to apologize and ask the elders not to take offense. Due to his upbringing, Wole does not know how to prostrate. When they travel to *Isara* for the Christmas and New Year celebrations, his father, from the royal family, is expected to know his father's and his ancestors' traditions. Unfortunately, Wole was only taught and brought up in Western customs, and he learned little about his traditions and culture. It leads the elders of *Isara* to refer to him and his siblings as the rector's children, ignorant of their traditions and speaking in a foreign language. It further depicts the tension between traditional expectations and cultural unfamiliarity. Wole sees no problem in this, as he regards this *dobale* as an unclean form of greeting.

- If I don't prostrate myself to God, why should I prostrate to you? You are just a man like my father aren't you ?' (Soyinka 128)

When Wole attended Sunday service, he never learned about the tradition of prostrating before the elders. He believed that one should only prostrate before God, but he realizes that during church services, no one even prostrate. The idea of prostrating before a stranger who is not above God and is only human, like his father, is difficult for him to accept.

- At the end of that vacation, Essay decreed that full prostration should commence, not only in *Isara*, but in our *Aké* home. (Soyinka 128)

This transition signals a change in routine in Wole's household compared to how things were. Prostrating on the ground is a traditional gesture in Yoruba culture that expresses deep respect or shows that one understands and upholds the culture. The instruction to prostrate in *Isara* and *Aké* means this cultural custom will now extend to other places. For Wole's father, the above event opens his eyes to the gaps in his children's education. In order to appropriately include his children in the Western and traditional forms of greeting, Wole's father enforced these new rules that they now need to prostrate at home and away whenever they greet elders. This also indicates a strong emphasis on traditional values and the importance of respecting older community members.

According to Stuart Hall, the concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already 'the same', identical to itself across time (Hall 3). Therefore, this concept refutes the argument that identity is static and unchanging. Instead, it suggests that identity is not a stable core that stays the same throughout history but something that evolves and adapts over time as it constantly shifts between borders. Likewise, the boundaries between identity, culture, and language are blurred, thereby creating a hybrid identity when the various variants intermingle. An example of this is noted in the text:

- The hawkers' lyrics of leaf-wrapped moin-moin still resound in parts of Ake and the rest of the town but, along Dayisi's Walk is also a shop which sells moin-moin from a glass case, lit by sea-green neon lamps. It lies side by side with McDonald's hamburgers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, hot dogs and dehydrated sausage-rolls (Soyinka 156)

The *hawkers* are associated with a unique cultural tradition in which people sell their goods from place to place. *moin-moin*, a type of meal is highly appreciated in the local Yoruba culture, as evidenced by the presentation being very appealing as opposed to the regular leaf-wrapped version. This contrast begins with *Aké*, a greater distinction between the norm and the new in light of the several cultural influences in the city, where local food merges with fast foods from Western culture. It also showcases contemporary global influences in a well-maintained cohabitation, thus giving rise to cultural enrichment and blending. Hence, *Aké* portrays these occurrences as a mixed equilibrium of related cultures.

Finally, Wole achieves a peculiar blend of traditional and Western cultures, as his relationships with the people around him depict. For example, *Soyinka's playmate Bukola is an abiku; another playmate, Osiki, has his own egungun at home, and the young Soyinka's Uncle Sanya is an oro* (O'Neill 61). This close connection and interaction with both worlds enables Wole to find his way in different spaces quickly and to draw on the hybridity of Western influences and African structures.

4. Conception of Language Hybridity

According to Appadurai, "Neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods." (Appadurai 107) Drawing from this, a neighborhood is special because it possesses a unique identity that sets it apart from the surrounding areas. This distinct characteristic of a particular neighborhood sets it apart, and the people within such a community regard it as a part of their identity that influences their language and behavioral patterns. When new neighborhoods arise, they often get inspired by and build upon the foundation of older ones. Similarly, when a language variant emerges, it reflects on its predecessors. This is evident in the variant of Yoruba that Wole Soyinka uses in his novel *Aké*, which showcases a blend of the Yoruba language with the local dialects of *Ijebu* and *Egba*. As Wole learns English and Western religious concepts, he consistently relates them to his cultural and linguistic background. This process sometimes clarifies his understanding but can also lead to confusion. Despite his hybrid understanding, he steadfastly maintains his neighborhood identity.

Similarly, Waldenfels notes that a special kind of internal diversity characterizes Europe because of the fluidity of languages among the European countries. He further emphasizes that Anyone who feels, behaves, and confirms themselves as European submits to bilingualism or multilingualism (Waldenfels 139). Waldenfels' view portrays Europe's internal diversity, rooted in how close the countries are and how their languages mix and interact. It emphasizes that being European involves embracing bilingualism or multilingualism because adapting to different languages is a big part of being European. Similarly, Nigeria is a multilingual country, and many variants characterize each primary language. A multitude of regional variants characterize the Yoruba language. Wole's family epitomizes multilingualism and switches between Yoruba and English daily, creating a rich multilingual environment to facilitate the synchronous assimilation of both languages. The family is well-versed in the standard Yoruba language and has a deep understanding of the *Egba* dialect while being familiar with other variations. Such skills express their intimacy with their culture and language while highlighting the variations in the Yoruba language in general. Wole's parents contributed majorly to the promotion of the language in its various aspects and cultures. They appreciate the essence of cultural heritage and put great effort into ensuring that Wole and his siblings acquire fluency in Yoruba and English. Such dedication marks the broader mindset that glorifies linguistic heritage. Yet, it keeps the other side of the coin open, whereby English equally becomes prominent and a means of communication beyond the confines of the Yoruba tribe.

The family's commitment to multilingualism enhances communication skills among Wole and his siblings through upholding cultural identity. Such an approach underlines the coexistence of Yoruba and English Languages without tension and the antagonistic cohabitation of age-old and foreign ideologies.

5. Conclusion

Wole Soyinka engages primarily in an exploration of the interrelation of culture, religion, and language through the shifting identity of Wole, the postmodern subject. He chronicles the trouble of the postmodern subject oscillating between the borders of culture, religion, and language by reflecting on these dynamics to negotiate Wole's identity. The multilingualism within Woles' family represents the devotion to the preservation of linguistic heritage on the one hand and the promotion of global communication on the other.

The discourse of border negotiation in Wole Soyinka's *Aké* shows the reader many social borders. Soyinka underscores diverse connections, encourages an inquiry into strict borders, and emphasizes hybrid cultures by highlighting the importance of diversity in contemporary discussions about identity and social norms.

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