

**BETWEEN TRADITION AND HUMANITY: A STUDY OF GUY MENGA'S
*LA MARMITE DE KOKA MBALA AND L'ORACLE***

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les pièces de théâtre de Guy Menga, *La marmite de Koka Mbala* et *L'oracle*, comme des textes dramatiques explorant l'interaction entre les valeurs traditionnelles africaines et les idéaux humanistes dans la société africaine postcoloniale. À travers ces œuvres, Menga examine comment les coutumes héritées, bien qu'essentielles à l'identité, peuvent parfois entrer en conflit avec les valeurs humaines universelles, générant ainsi des crises morales et sociales. Cette étude s'appuie sur les théories littéraires postcoloniales et humanistes pour évaluer la manière dont Menga redéfinit la place de la tradition dans le cadre de la dignité humaine et du progrès social. Tout en examinant la frontière entre tradition et droit à l'humanité ainsi que les effets des abus sociaux sur le principe d'identité culturelle, cet article analyse le concept d'humanité et les limites des valeurs culturelles par rapport à la justice sociale. Il démontre le déni des droits humains résultant des identités culturelles. L'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer l'universalité des valeurs humaines comme fondement de la réconciliation entre la coutume et la justice sociale. L'article démontre que l'appartenance culturelle a conduit à la violation de justice sociale. Au-delà du conflit de générations, qui est l'un des thèmes prédominants de ces pièces, cette étude va plus loin et explore l'utilisation de la tradition comme instrument de pouvoir. Bien qu'il ait été affirmé qu'une grande majorité d'Africains gèrent leurs affaires personnelles conformément aux lois ou injonctions coutumières, il est impératif de noter que la coutume a un impact considérable sur divers aspects de la vie humaine, notamment en ce qui concerne le mariage, l'héritage, le droit et l'autorité traditionnelle. Cependant, en raison de l'évolution constante des modes de vie, certaines de ces normes coutumières entrent en conflit avec la justice sociale.

Mots clés: Tradition, humanité, identité, coutume et justice sociale.

INTRODUCTION

In the work of Guy Menga, the tension between ancestral tradition and the human impulse for change and dignity is a central axis. Two of his major theatrical works, *La marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L'oracle* offer compelling dramatizations of this tension, as they explore generational conflicts, social justice, the plight of the youth, the role of women, and the challenge of tradition in postcolonial African societies. This study will examine how these two works articulate the conflict between tradition and humanity, how they portray power structures rooted in rituals and custom, and how they open the possibility of human dignity, emancipation, and communal progress. Guy Menga, one of Congo-Brazzaville's most significant playwrights, uses drama to critique social structures and reimagine African identity in the postcolonial era. His plays often grapple with the tension between tradition and modernity, authority and individual freedom, spirituality and reason. *La marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L'oracle* stand out as profound reflections on the struggles of African communities to reconcile ancestral customs with the demands of a changing, human-centred world.

Culture and tradition are essential to human existence. One of the means to understand people is to understand the traditions and culture that govern them. These patterns determine how they perceive and interpret the world around them. While recognizing man's desire to preserve his culture, it is important to strike a cautionary balance between traditional or customary practices found within different cultural communities and human right to life and expression. Cultural identity provides a basis for continuous adherence to certain customs or practices, which may not necessarily be convenient, but they are important because they form part of the prerequisite of belonging to a community. Man is defined by his way of life, and this is an expression of culture (Mbaegbu 223). Naturally, man is more inclined to respond to life and society according to what he has come to believe and accept, whether passed down to him from the previous generations or through a conscious adoption of a new accepted reality. However, customs and traditions in the 21st century are not without objections from modernization and human rights.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The international human right declares the freedom to life and religious expression as a right of every human being, this implies that regardless of gender, race, social class or culture, every human being deserves the right to life,

unfortunately, this statement does not hold for everyone today due to man's attachment to cultural or religious beliefs as portrayed by Menga in *La marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L'oracle*. Both tradition and humanity are inspired by human ideologies. However, this study is concerned with the fact that sometimes traditions become impediments or obstacles to the choice or the right of human beings. Modernity and globalization bring about certain changes or modifications in the way of life, and this modification includes culture (Gusfield 353). The problem often arises when culture fails to accommodate humanity. The objective of this study is to examine how societal norms or customs affect people's right to humanity using *La marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L'oracle* by Guy Menga as our reference point. The major problem this study seeks to address is the conflict between tradition and humanity as depicted in Menga's plays. In many African societies, tradition serves as the foundation of morality, authority, and communal identity. However, when these traditional values become rigid or oppressive, they can undermine human freedom and dignity. The question, therefore, is: How does Guy Menga use dramatic narratives to expose and critique the contradictions between traditional authority and humanist values? Additionally, how does he propose a balance between the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of universal human ethics?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant because it:

- Illuminates Guy Menga's contribution to African drama as a medium for moral and cultural reform.
- Highlights the ongoing relevance of the tension between tradition and humanism in African societies today.
- Encourages a balanced understanding of cultural preservation, one that upholds the human person as the ultimate measure of value.
- Provides insight into how postcolonial African literature negotiates the legacy of the past while envisioning a humane future.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: Postcolonial Theory and Humanist Literary Theory. Postcolonial criticism provides a framework for examining how Menga's works challenge inherited colonial and traditional structures of power. It allows an understanding of how African writers

reclaim cultural narratives while also critiquing oppressive elements within their societies. Humanism, as a literary approach, emphasizes the dignity, freedom, and rational capacity of the individual. Menga's plays advocate for a human-centred interpretation of culture, one that values compassion, justice, and reason over blind obedience to tradition. The paper employs a textual and thematic analysis of *La Marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L'Oracle*, examining characterization, dialogue, and symbolism to reveal how Menga dramatizes the confrontation between ancestral authority and individual conscience.

Born in 1935 in Mankonongo, a village located on the banks of the Loufoulakari River in southern Congo, Guy Menga began his career as a teacher in 1957. He gained recognition as a playwright through his works *La Marmite de Koka-Mhala* and *L'Oracle*. The former was presented at the 1966 Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, along with the latter. Both plays received awards from the OCORA (Office of Cultural Cooperation, which later became the National Audiovisual Institute) in France. Menga is regarded as one of the key figures of modern Congolese literature, especially in the post-colonial period. His use of indigenous language (Kongo/Lari) alongside French is a marker of rootedness in cultural tradition and a critique of cultural imperialism. In *La palabre stérile*, for example, he critiques empty political rhetoric and unfulfilled promises in post-colonial society. His plays often use metaphor and traditional imagery, e.g., "marmite" (cooking pot) to explore power, tradition, and community tensions. Amongst his works are: *La palabre stérile* (1968), a novel, *La marmite de Koka-Mbala* (1966), a play/drama, *L'oracle* (1967), a play, *L'affaire du silence* (1981), a youth novel, and *Cri bilingue I* (2005), poetry in French and Lari.

THE CONCEPT OF HUMANITY

The word "humanity" is from the Latin word "humanitas," which refers to human nature. Humanity is both a state of being and an idea. It is a state of being because it refers to the human race or mankind collectively. It also embodies the qualities that make us human, such as love, compassion, or the kind feelings humans often have towards each other, and the ability to make choices as well as the responsibility for the consequences that come with them. Coupland defines humanity as a character or quality of being humane; behaviour or disposition towards others, such as befits a human being (972). Humanity is also an idea because it is the measure by which human actions are characterized, either positively or negatively. For instance, when people do bad things like murder, it is assumed that they lack a

sense of humanity; meanwhile, when people give to charity, it implies a good sense of humanity, and as such, one may not be wrong to say that it is an inbuilt consciousness of what is right. It is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity, recognizing that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone. Humanity supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity with regard to their social responsibility. In this context, humanity is somewhat like the concept of humanism, which is a philosophy of life that considers the welfare of humankind more important than allegiance to a belief or custom.

TRADITION AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, the sacred pot symbolizes tradition, whose power is unquestioned and whose authority is divine. The community's reverence for the pot represents adherence to ancestral laws, yet this same reverence suppresses personal reasoning and freedom. Menga uses the protagonist's moral conflict to highlight the dangers of uncritical obedience to inherited customs. In *L'Oracle*, the playwright turns his focus to prophecy and superstition, critiquing how spiritual leaders exploit collective fear for personal gain. The oracle, once a guide for communal harmony, becomes a tool of manipulation. Through this, Menga warns against allowing cultural institutions to override human compassion and rationality. In both plays, Menga presents the voice of humanity as the moral centre, a call for a new ethical order grounded in respect for life and justice. Tradition is not rejected but reinterpreted; the playwright advocates for a dynamic culture that evolves with human experience.

The concept of tradition is one that has undergone modification over the course of time. In social theory, tradition was originally used to characterize slowly changing societies in contrast to modern ones, and to identify conservative institutions and beliefs within modern societies (Otto 199). Today, the concept of tradition has gained a wider scope; it is a dynamic process of collective learning and adaptation. Hayak believes that the transmission of values from one generation to another is a necessary phenomenon for the functioning of a free society (171). The social theory of 'Cancel Culture' argues that human institutions are not organic or liberal in nature; they are constructed specifically with the intent to subdue the weak (Lofton, "Cancel Culture"). The certainty of this is left to our individual imagination, but to a great extent, this theory depicts tradition as a tool of oppression. Tradition

refers to the process of handing down beliefs, institutions, and objects from one generation to the next. It is a pattern of behaviour or a concept of ideas that describes or governs the life and social system of a people or a society. The tradition commonly used in each society helps distinguish one culture from another. Tradition could be religious, cultural, or political. To be more specific, customs are widely accepted expectations of behaviour that are particular to a specific place. Tradition is preserved from one generation to another when members of a society or a social group learn about existing customs through a process of socialization and adhere to them.

Generally, as seen in the two plays, most people adhere to customs and traditions without any real understanding of why they exist or how they got started. In trying to understand customs, it is crucial to understand that Culture embodies the customs of a people. Customs are not in any way genetically transmitted; they are products of our learned behaviours and activities that we begin to learn in our early years of life when we absorb new information the most, and we keep on learning as well as teaching them to others throughout life (issues like our religion, language, and social traditions). The *Meriam Webster Dictionary* defines tradition as an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought or behaviour, such as religious practices or social customs relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable. Tradition encompasses both material and non-material aspects of a people's way of life, like religion, language, social habits, mode of dressing, music, art, food, political organization, educational systems, philosophy, myths, and stories. It comprises everything that makes a society unique and helps it to function.

Over time, traditions become the laws of social life, and because tradition is important to social harmony, breaking them can result in a disorder, in some cases, it can attract punishment, especially when the perceived reasons for breaking it are not genuine, as seen in *La marmite de Koka Mbala* where disobedience to the customs of a society attracts a serious consequence. A tradition is a continuing course of conduct which may by an express approval of the community observing it, come to be regarded as fixing the norm of conduct for members of society. Ndulo believes that most of the common laws that govern most African societies, both from the colonial and post-independence era, have their sources in customary laws and injunctions (74). When people find any act to be good and beneficial, apt, and agreeable to their nature and disposition, they use and practice it from time to time, and it is by frequent use and multiplication of this act that the tradition is formed.

One of the primary attributes of tradition as a rule of conduct is that it gives a sense of belonging to those who adhere to its principles. Tradition and law are closely related because they both occupy an important place in regulating human conduct in society. Akehurst believes that custom is one of the oldest sources of law-making (16), but with the progress of society, custom has gradually diminished, and legislation and judicial precedents become the main source. Tradition or customs are established by a conscious or unconscious adoption of a certain rule of conduct in the face of circumstances. For a society to function maximally, there is a need for orderliness; the authority of a tradition is dependent on its continued use and recognition by the people. *La marmite de Koka-Mbala* and *L'oracle* give us a picture of the orderliness of the African traditional society. Freedom of expression is a fundamental right of an individual; a person has the ability to act creatively and consciously in a given situation. Human beings are dynamic in nature, and so is their disposition to act differently in the face of a given situation. Not only can the actions of people in the same environment differ, but they can also be directly conflicting. This necessitates the need to unify the behaviour of people in society to an acceptable level, which in turn gives birth to tradition. Whether it is justifiable or not, we see how the boundary of tradition is set as a guiding principle in *La marmite de Koka-Mbala* where there is an established punishment of interment for any young man below the age of eighteen who looks at a naked woman. « Que dit la loi ? Tout jeune homme n'ayant pas atteint l'âge de dix-neuf ans qui lèvera les yeux sur une jeune fille ou sur une jeune femme autre que ses proches parents même quand celle-ci n'est pas nue, sera condamné à être enterré vivant » (19). People have moral values; that is, they accept standards according to which their conduct is judged as right or wrong, good or evil. The norms by which moral actions are judged vary from society to society, although some norms, such as not to kill, not to steal, and to honour one's parents, are widespread and perhaps universal. Value judgments concerning human behaviour are passed in all cultures. Whether the moral sense is part of human nature or a product of religious or cultural traditions, this universality of moral characterizes humanity. However, humanity also includes the right to life and freedom of choice as long as these choices are within the boundaries of the law.

CULTURE AS IDENTITY AND CONTINUITY

In both plays, culture is portrayed as the foundation of communal identity. It links individuals to their ancestry and gives meaning to their existence. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, the sacred pot (*marmite*) symbolizes ancestral continuity

and unity. It is not just a ritual object but the spiritual heart of the community, reminding people of their common origin and shared destiny. Similarly, in *L'oracle*, the oracle embodies the voice of the ancestors and the moral conscience of society. Through rituals and customs, culture provides a framework for social harmony and moral guidance. Menga thus emphasizes the positive role of culture as a keeper of identity. It binds generations together, ensuring that modern Africans do not lose sight of their roots. Without culture, society risks spiritual emptiness and disintegration.

CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Every society has values or traditions by which it lives. These traditions evolve or change with time due to modernism or awareness; however, the dynamism of human beings makes these changes or evolutions to be interpreted differently, which often results in opposition between tradition and modernity. Tradition involves the transmission of historical cultural practices from events or beliefs from the past; these beliefs may not be necessarily relevant to all other generations. Modernity, on the other hand, projects the imposition of reason as the basis for societal norms. How the reality of conflict of generations highlights the clash between tradition and modernity can be seen in the two plays, how the younger generation rose to defend their humanity against the oppression of tradition, and how the old generation defends their barbaric practices in their position as custodians of tradition and its values. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, we see how Bitala and the other young people oppose the superstitious domination of the old people by going as far as breaking the fetish pot, which symbolizes the spirit of the ancestors who are presumed to be the guardians of the community (47).

This courageous act proves how much the struggle for freedom and, above all, the desire to feel in one's time, in the realities of one's time, are noble and great desires that determine well-being. The ability of societies or individuals to defend themselves in the face of what they believe to be an unjust treatment, whether as a tradition or an act, has given them the means to advance. Keegan's argument that nation-states have arisen through confrontation with authority is convincing. We see this reality in the fact that, against what were the norms of the society, the youths of Koka Mbala opposed the negative customs and stood for their rights in *La marmite de Koka Mbala*. When freedom of expression depends solely on the boundaries of culture, it sometimes undermines human nature and opposes the right of individuals

to express themselves as they deem appropriate within the confines of their fundamental rights. Koka Mbala is a society characterized by inequality in the administration of justice, the traditional law is unfriendly and unpitiable to young offenders, while exonerating the old people. Bitala, a 16-year-old boy, was accused and condemned to be buried alive by Bobolo the priest and the elders as part of tradition for looking at a naked woman while she takes her bath (19).

Similarly, in *L'oracle*, we see this conflict as the author portrays the cruelty of tradition over the right to education of a teenage girl and the choice of who she must marry, because her father Biyoki believes that he owns the exclusive right to her education and the choice of whom she will marry, this is expressed in the following sentence: «je suis le père. Je suis le maître dans la case, j'ai le dernier mot» (62). We see an abuse of fundamental rights in the fact that Louaka was ordered against her choice to marry an older man, and her desire to become a nurse was almost thwarted because her father wants to give her out in marriage to make money. One important aspect of tradition is its continuity or perpetuity; it is simply accepted and adhered to, sometimes without questioning the origin or its relevance. Tradition is a viable tool for preserving social identity; however, sometimes it comes at a cost to those who adhere to it. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, we see the existence of a sacred pot that compels allegiance and creates fear in the hearts of the people (47). This became a tradition that subjected the people to bondage and deprived them of their freedom of expression.

Change is an important element of growth in a society. However, susceptibility to change or the willingness to embrace new ideas determines the extent to which positive change can be achieved. Society can only grow when there is a genuine desire to embrace positive change beyond the boundaries of tradition, but the reverse is the case in the event of the contrary. As seen in our plays, the older generation held onto a cruel tradition that has claimed the lives and destinies of vulnerable youths for ages because of their allegiance to tradition and their unwillingness to accommodate new ideas. This is perceived to be insensitive by the younger generation. As a voice of the younger generation, Bitala said, « les jeunes réclament la fin de l'oppression et de la brimade. Ils veulent être intégrés dans la société et jouir des avantages de celle-ci. » (45). Things turned around for good when the old generation embraced change. Moreover, a double standard or an unequal dispensation of justice is often a recipe for disaster or unrest. If the law or tradition upon which a society is governed remains unequal or accords certain privileges to a particular class of people and denies others, either through the consideration of age,

gender, or societal class, such law or tradition is bound to encounter opposition from people who may feel marginalized. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, we see how unequal dispensation of justice resulted in a revolt by the youths of Koka Mbala (41). The youths believed that the punishment of death penalty, which was only applicable to them, was unjust.

The sacred pot in *La marmite de Koka Mbala* symbolizes tradition whose power is unquestioned, and its authority divine. The community's reverence for the pot represents adherence to ancestral laws, yet this same reverence suppresses personal reasoning and freedom. Menga uses the protagonist's moral conflict to highlight the dangers of uncritical obedience to inherited customs. In *L'oracle*, the playwright turns his focus to prophecy and superstition, critiquing how spiritual leaders exploit collective fear for personal gain. The oracle, once a guide for communal harmony, becomes a tool of manipulation. Through this, Menga warns against allowing cultural institutions to override human compassion and rationality. In both plays, Menga presents the voice of humanity as the moral centre, a call for a new ethical order grounded in respect for life and justice. Tradition is not rejected but reinterpreted; the playwright advocates for a dynamic culture that evolves with human experience.

CULTURE AS AUTHORITY AND OPPRESSION

In these plays, we see that tradition functions as an instrument of the older generation to maintain authority and suppress younger voices; in effect, the kingdom of Koka-Mbala was governed by rigid customs. These laws were particularly enforced on the youth who bear the brunt of the punishment; some of the laws were specifically targeted at the young. For example, the law that forbade men from looking at a woman with interest was only enforced on the young men, and for a minor offense a young person could be buried alive in the public square." The grand féticheur (the traditional priest) Bobolo invents a "marmite à esprits" (spiritual pot) which amplifies fear as a tool of domination. Similarly, in *L'oracle*, a father (Biyoki) insists on giving his adolescent daughter into marriage prematurely, citing traditional obligation rather than her modern desire to continue schooling. Here, tradition becomes a means of control over the younger generation, the daughter's education, and her aspirations are suppressed by the force of tradition. Tradition in this context is not neutral; it is manipulated by the old guard to suppress the ambitions and autonomy of the young: the younger generation is seen by the older one as a threat to

the established order, and the older generation uses tradition (customs, punishments, rituals) to keep them in their place. Menga exposes the dark side of cultural authority. In both plays, traditional customs are used to justify exploitation, superstition, and inequality. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala*, the elders cling to the *marmite* not only as a sacred symbol but as a source of political power. They invoke tradition to maintain control over the people, resisting any form of reform that threatens their privileges. Likewise, in *L'oracle*, the religious institution of the oracle becomes a tool of manipulation. It silences questioning and legitimizes inhumane practices such as forced marriage or blind obedience.

The older generation resists modern or progressive ideas (the youth's desire, education, reform) in favour of maintaining the status quo. The *marmite* (sacred pot) symbolizes authority and ancestral continuity to the older generation because reform or change threatens their social position and power. Reform would mean losing control over communal life, spiritual authority, and decision-making. They see reform as a direct challenge to the "ancestral order," which has sustained their legitimacy. However, Menga does not completely demonize tradition. In *La marmite de Koka Mbala* the king eventually supports reform; in *L'oracle* the grandfather helps subvert the harmful tradition, so tradition is shown both as oppressive and as a phenomenon that needs reform.

INSTRUMENTALITY OF FEAR

According to Salas et al, when fear has an internal reason, it is easily used as a tool for oppression (573). Fear influences the way people perceive and feel about different things and events, and even how they act upon them (Robin 4). *La marmite de Koka Mbala* presents the situation of a fearful people who are tormented by the false claim of a so-called sacred pot that demands the blood of young people as a recompense for disobeying the law. This became a basis for opposition by the young generation. In some African societies like that of Congo (the author's country of origin), parents occupy an important place in the life of a child, therefore obedience to parents and their choices is a tradition in the life of a child, this means that going against the decision of parents is a taboo for a child, even when the demands of the parent is against the wishes of the child. In *L'oracle*, we see how Biyoki tries to exercise his authority as a father to instil fear in his daughter, Louaka to obey him, even when his decision to stop her from going to school, to marry an older man, was clearly against the teenager's wish of becoming a nurse. Biyoki believes that the

place of a woman or a female child in a society is to be at the centre of the will of a man.

RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

Although these plays were written in the 1960s and 70s, their themes remain deeply relevant today. Post-colonial African societies continue to grapple with generational divides, the weight of tradition, the role of the youth and women, and the challenge of reconciling identity and modernity.

The figure of the young student (Louaka) who desires education before marriage is emblematic of the contemporary push for girl-child education and empowerment. The critique of ritual and fetish practices in *La marmite de Koka Mbaka* resonates with debates around harmful traditional practices, youth marginalisation, and the need to reform rather than abandon culture. Moreover, the notion that tradition to be humanized must respect dignity is globally applicable in any society facing the inertia of tradition, the suppression of youth, and the misuse of custom for domination.

CONCLUSION

While it has been asserted that a great majority of Africans conduct their personal activities in accordance with and subject to customary laws or injunctions, it is imperative to note that custom has a great impact on diverse areas of human life. These plays under study do not advocate for the rejection of tradition; rather, they call for its renewal. The younger characters in both plays embody the desire to humanize culture, to reinterpret customs considering reason and justice. The playwright seems to agree with the popular idea that “modernity does not destroy tradition; it purifies it of its cruelties.” In this sense, culture becomes a living process, not a fixed set of rules. The question of tradition and humanity as portrayed by Guy Menga’s works is not simply a binary opposition but a dynamic interplay. Traditional practices hold communal values, but they only uphold these values when they align with the human impulse for freedom, dignity, and justice. When tradition becomes a cage, humanity must assert itself, and when humanity becomes rootless, tradition offers identity. Menga’s *La marmite de Koka Mbala* and *L’oracle* dramatize this tension and offer the hope that the human subject need not choose between the two but rather can help reshape tradition into a more humane form.

In reading these plays, one realizes that the ultimate question is: How can we hold tradition in honour while refusing that it dehumanizes us? These plays answer these questions by giving voice to the oppressed, imagining transformation. And in so doing, they honour both the roots of tradition and the aspirations of humanity.

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