

Ritual and realism in Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different*

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Abstract. In Nwapa's novel, Dora and Rose are both confronted with the rituals of Tunde, but engage with them in different ways. I attempt a somewhat pained contrast: Dora's way is closer to that of the functionalist participant observer, whereas Rose's way is closer to that of earlier armchair anthropologists who sought the origins of rituals. I also note a puzzle to do with literary realism.

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"My view of his system of rules

Is: not for me, but for fools."

In Flora Nwapa's *Women are Different*, Dora is the lover of Tunde but regards him as more suitable for Rose, who agrees but no love relationship arises between them. Both are confronted with the rituals of Tunde, but approach these rituals differently. In that respect, they bear a partial comparison with anthropologists, but to different kinds of anthropologists. Below I wish to elaborate on this point.

This is Dora's description of Tunde and his rules:

'Sometimes when I am with him, I see an invisible set of rules which he hands to whoever tries to come close, even me, saying in effect, "These are my rules, take them or get out."

'He washes his clothes, irons them, buys his food in the supermarket once

a month. He labels everything neatly and piles them neatly into the freezer. He cannot eat any oil that is not imported. I used palm oil to cook for him once and he politely refused to eat, and since then, I have not had the courage to cook for him. He has ways of cooking his vegetables, a way of eating his fruits, and no other way will do.

‘His day begins at five in the morning. He says his prayers, does his exercises while one of his numerous classical pieces is playing. And you know Rose, no matter how much I pretend, I will never like those classical records. After his exercises, he goes downstairs, makes himself a cup of coffee, using a percolator. Once he allowed me to make him coffee, I did, when I brought it upstairs, he smiled, gave me a peck on the cheek, took me downstairs and proceeded to lecture me on how to brew coffee. When I did not get it right at the third attempt, I gave up.’ (1992 [1986]: 103)

In relation to food preparation rituals, Dora is more like the functionalist anthropologist who engages in participant observation. She seeks to participate in the rituals and regards them as an unchangeable structure. Unfortunately, she does not succeed in meeting their requirements and gives up.

Rose, on the other hand, is like the earlier armchair anthropologists in seeking to know about the origins of these rituals. This is Rose and Tunde interacting:

‘Your cooking is good. Who taught you how to cook?’ Tunde hesitated and smiled sadly then said, ‘My late wife whom I killed in a ghastly motor accident taught me how to cook. She...’ He choked. ‘Care for more vegetables?’

‘Yes please.’

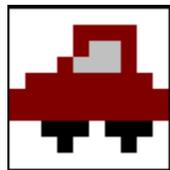
Nothing was the same after that. They were silent, but the silence was deafening... Rose could share with him his type of music, his books and even his solitude, but the memory of his wife and his guilt over her death, she could not share.' (1992 [1986]: 138)

But all this they can share complicates my simple contrast somewhat! It is more difficult to pull off than it seemed! Anyway, the later functionalist anthropologists gave up on research into ritual origins because of lack of documentation (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 3), but in this case one is faced with another reason for not looking into origins: there is a traumatic event in the vicinity and to uncover it spoils one's relations with ritual participants.

I end with a note. A realistic novel, according to one conception, feels like life, but one can have an experience while reading a realistic novel in which one thinks, "This is really real" about one part especially. But why react like that, if a novel is in its entirety a realistic novel?

- (a) A realistic novel feels like life.
- (b) If a realistic novel feels like life, then there is equal reason to judge each part of it as taken from life (in the absence of observed convergences).
- (c) But one part in particular gives this impression, or a few parts do.

I have the thought "This is really real" in relation to the description of Tunde and his rituals.



References. Nwapa, F. 1992 (originally 1986). *Women are Different*. Trenton: Africa World Press; Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.