Revis(it)ing Ritual
The Challenge to the Virility of Tradition in Works by Efua Sutherland and Other African Writers

R I T U A L S , B Y T H E I R V E R Y N A T U R E , are archaic, but human society that invents rituals to punctuate its life on earth and beyond is dynamic. Practised since time immemorial, rituals are carried out in accordance with the precedent of earlier generations, even though circumstances may have changed. Their meaning is symbolic, and celebrants are less conscious of a ritual’s substance than of the function it serves in the fabric of the society. Because of the dynamism of human society, rituals, as quintessential bearers of cultural tradition, are eventually affected by pressures of movement and change. Hence, some rituals might be lost, others may remain but lose their substance or become perverted. For African societies, the pressures on culture exerted by the exigencies of contemporary life are cutting into the fabric of traditions with each generation. If rituals are to retain their symbolic validity in punctuating the individual’s and society’s life, in the face of such cultural pressure, then the substance of the rituals must be made to accommodate the dynamism of society itself. They must be consciously revisited with an eye towards making indicated revision.

The issue of the relevance, retention, and reform of communal ritual is central to Efua Sutherland’s pair of co-generic works, the short story “New Life at Kyerefaso” (1960) and the play Foriwa (1967) (hereafter frequently referred to together as “New Life”/Foriwa). In more recent decades we see this same issue being treated by other writers, notably the Cameroonian Werewere Liking, particularly in her “chant-novel” Elle sera de jaspe et de corail (1983) and the Senegalese Aminata Sow Fall in her novel Le jujubier du patriarche (1993).¹ For all these

¹ Werewere Liking, Elle sera de jaspe et de corail (Journal d’une misovire) (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1983); Aminata Sow Fall, Le jujubier du patriarche (Dakar: Editions Khoudia, 1993).
writers, the revisit/revision treatment of traditional ritual is realized through a structural accommodation of the text, no matter what the genre.

Consistently, the metaphor for the revisiting and revision of the ceremonies is some form of 'rebirth' or 'regeneration.' For Sutherland the centrality of the theme is indicated from the very title of the short story "New Life at Kyerefaso" and from the opening lines of the prologue of the play Foriwa, spoken by the young "foreigner" Labaran: "Kyerefaso has long been asleep.... The town has slept itself to raggedness." Whereas the short story treats this theme implicitly rather than explicitly — hence the utility of the title's pronouncement — the play articulates the 'regeneration' theme repeatedly: in fact, in the mouth of every major character. It is this very repetition of the theme in Foriwa that signifies the 'contagion' of the concept among the townspeople, underscoring its centrality in the writer's vision. With Werewere Liking, the theme of regeneration through ritual is converted into the very form and substance of the "chant-novel" Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: journal d'une misovire, becoming the fabric of the work. The title proclaims, through geophysical metaphor [of jasper and coral], the qualities, the "stuff" from which the future "new race" is to be moulded explicitly within the text. The objective of the narrative is the execution of an 'initiation' of the townspeople, by calling for a new: ie refashioned, language, a new discursive form, to communicate the society's desperately needed cultural regeneration. With a somewhat different focus; Aminata Sow Fall's Le jujubier du patriarche 're-constitutes' an extinct ritual, because the traditions formerly supported by it had eroded to a state of barrenness. Dwelling on the perversion of family caste heritage and its regressive power with regard to the common weal, Sow Fall invokes the socially therapeutic power of community ritual for regeneration. While Efua Sutherland's play opens with the pronouncement of the urgency for regeneration which will ultimately stimulate the revisiting and revising of the ritual, Aminata Sow Fall's novel begins at the end, or objective, with the reconstituted ritual.

Besides the general thematic interest in regeneration through ritual that the four works share, the phenomenon that is most striking in comparing them is the fact that, in all four, the ceremony in question is presented twice, in absolute or in referenced action: ie revisited or re-enacted twice within each text: once to review the state of decay that its celebrant community has reached in terms of the meaning of the ceremony, and again in its restored, revived form. Thus, with each of these texts the theme of re-investing the ceremonial rituals with a contemporary validity drives the structure of revisiting and revising. The modalities are diverse: Sutherland's idealistic didacticism of the short-story-in-folktale-form "New Life at