

## Decolonising African Indigenous Medicine: A Complementarity of Past and Future in Aramide Segun's *Eniitan, Daughter of Destiny*

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### Abstract

Decolonisation of any kind is as futuristic as it is concerned with erasing the effects of colonial legacies on a culture or nation, although it has largely been treated merely as the reversal of colonial legacies. The concept of decolonisation has not been satisfactorily examined for futuristic tendencies. Therefore, this paper examines how the decolonisation of African indigenous medicine projects into the complementarity of its past and future. The Postcolonial theory is adopted as the theoretical framework of this study while data is derived from Aramide Segun's *Eniitan, Daughter of Destiny*.

This paper argues that the decolonisation of African indigenous knowledge, which is a slice of the decolonisation of African tradition as a whole, is not merely an effort to rid it of colonial legacies, it is rather an effort to create a future from a reawakened past. From its findings, this paper argues decolonising African medicine also entails treating it as part of the African future.

**Key words:** Decolonisation; African indigenous medicine; Complementarity; Past and future

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### INTRODUCTION

There is the need to channel the discourse of decolonisation in a new direction from the conventional

idea of a reversal of colonial legacies left on independent countries. Decolonisation has correctly been defined and treated as the effort to rid independent countries of legacies of colonialism such as an inferiority complex. The likes of Chakrabarty argue that there is more to decolonisation other than the mere reversal of colonial legacies. This paper, therefore, argues that African decolonisation should be steered towards the future rather than made to concentrate on events that have happened and left their impacts. To decolonise Africa, therefore, would not only mean to focus on the residue of colonization but also project into the future. In the selected novel – Aramide Segun's *Eniitan, Daughter of Destiny*, the author shows how in an attempt to decolonise an aspect of tradition – indigenous medicine – *Eniitan*, the protagonist marries the past, which is symbolic of the knowledge and practice of indigenous medicine, with the future. This implies that the enterprise of decolonisation is no longer looking into the past alone, but is bringing the past into a future significance. In exploring the African decolonisation process as creating her future from the revival of her past, this paper focuses on indigenous medical treatment.

Hopkins (2008) notes that decolonisation begins from independence and is marked by the change in national anthems and flags to indicate that the country has gained independence from her colonial masters. He cites the example of Malay, Nigeria and Jamaica. However, Ngugi (1987) notes that decolonisation is not limited to the end of colonization and the attaining of independence because colonization, from whose grip a country seeks freedom, is not restricted to the territorial domination of a country but is even more prominently expressed in the culture. He lays emphasis on the need to decolonise the mind and free it from its covert slavery to the imperial culture. Hargreaves (2014) defines decolonisation as this “measure intended eventually to terminate formal political control over colonial territories and to replace it by some

new relationship” (p. xvii). His definition implies that colonisation, which is the natural parent of decolonisation, is largely political. However, this definition does not fit very much into Ngugi (1987)’s perspective on decolonisation. He asserts strongly that since colonization is more cultural than political, the effects of colonisation on the culture of the independent nation should be at the centre of the decolonisation process. Hargreaves (2014) states that in 1957, Leopold Sedar Senghor defined decolonisation as “the abolition of all prejudice, of all superiority complex, in the mind of the coloniser, and also of all inferiority complex in the mind of the colonised” (p. 2). Senghor’s definition includes the inferiority of the colonised, and not only the superiority of the colonizer. This implies that the process of decolonisation should involve efforts at demystifying the superiority of the colonisers as much as it should involve disabusing the minds of the colonised of inferiority complex. However, he agrees with Fanon (1963) that the process of decolonisation is yet to be complete.

Chakrabarty (2005) asserts that decolonisation should not be misunderstood as a simple reversal of the effects of colonisation. Using the example of Badung, he states that “Both Myrdal and Wright’s Parisian friends appear to have misjudged what decolonisation was all about. It was not a simple project of cultivating a sense of disengagement with the west. There was no reverse racism at work in Bandung. (p. 4813). Although the situation in Badung is slightly different from the context of Ngugi, Senghor and Hargreaves’ arguments, the root cause is the same: colonialism. Chakrabarty’s illustration is based on the racial crises that was prevalent in Badung at the time. However, this can be easily traced back to colonialism and its undertones of racial imbalance which also falls within the purview of decolonisation. This implies that there is more to decolonisation than the mere reversal of the effects of colonisation. Instead, there should be a restoration of cultural expression, one of which is Indigenous knowledge.

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## POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND DECOLONISATION

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Postcolonial theory is concerned with the effect of European colonialism around the world. A restoration of cultural, economic and political values and major aspects of a culture which are heavily influenced and eroding by colonialism such as aspects of Indigenous knowledge, an example of which is the practice of indigenous medicine, becomes necessary after the end of colonisation. This is the purpose of decolonisation- to erase the influence of colonialism on the culture of formerly colonised societies and establish postcolonial consciousness. Bressler (2003) notes that “in interaction with the conquering culture, the colonized or Indigenous culture is forced

to go underground or to be obliterated” (202). This necessitates the revival of obliterated or nearly-extinct cultures and practices in former colonies. The beginning of independence should not only mark the beginning of political freedom, but should also restore the culture to its rightful place amongst the people.

African decolonisation will involve the various efforts to decolonise African cultures, education, indigenous knowledge, politics, and economy amongst others. This will necessarily produce a consciousness that is futuristic in the freedom from colonial legacies and the development of Africa. This is reechoed in Fox (2016)’s perception of the postcolonial consciousness in her article where she argues that it could be used to cause a revolutionary change in postcolonial societies. Her idea of the postcolonial consciousness reflects the decolonisation of culture in a way that reveals that these two concepts are related on the basis that they both advocate the demystification of the colonial and imperial stronghold on a former colony which is responsible for the obliteration or debasing of aspects of their culture. She notes that “the language of postcolonialism, with its deep interpretations of societies in flux, has facilitated a necessary shift of consciousness” (69). What African decolonisation implies as it is used in this paper is the shift of consciousness, first, from the past alone to a marriage of both past and future and secondly, to bring to the fore, the awareness of the relevance of Indigenous knowledge such as the indigenous practice of medicine and specifically, the place of herbs and other indigenous methods of medical treatment.

Decolonisation became necessary when territorial colonization officially ended and there was the need to look into the intrinsic values of Indigenous cultures in order to preserve them from obsolescence. In *Decolonising the Mind* (1983), Ngugi argues that more dangerous than territorial colonization is the colonization of the mind. This implies that colonization is not only territorial or geographical, it can also be, and indeed is first, of the mind. He argues that this is largely responsible for the death of cultures on their own soils. He asserts that decolonisation is more cultural than political, in fact.

Decolonisation is more of a social than a political process (Laenui, 2000). Laenui (2000), amongst many other postcolonial writers and critics, submit that the process of decolonisation begins after colonization ends. He suggests five processes of decolonisation: rediscovery and recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment and action. Arguing that each stage can be happening simultaneously with others or experienced independently, he maintains that decolonisation should, as a matter of necessity, involve these stages. Four out of the five of these stages are evident in the novel- rediscovery and recovery, dreaming, commitment and action. The selected novel presents traditional medicine as a significant part of the Yoruba tradition that is almost fading out. The weight of popular opinion against it shows that it is

not only disregarded, it is fast wearing off in the face of modernity. However, in the novel, Iya, Eniitan's grandmother, recovers the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine, and attempts to maintain it. She does not only recover and maintain the knowledge and practice of traditional and herbal medicine, she also builds and sustains a dream for it which Eniitan eventually materialises. Iya's dream for the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine is for it to be maintained, recognized for the significant part of the culture that it is and for it to regain its popularity and acceptance within her society. She is therefore committed to seeing the fruition of this dream. She does this by growing a garden of herbs and transferring her knowledge to her cousin, Iya Adunni, who carries on her work on the estate after she dies. Her commitment is displayed in how she secures the estate and how while she was in her vibrant days, administered traditional and herbal medicine to the people who came to her for it. Abike testifies that while she was young, the estate was always boisterous with people who came in search of herbal healing. Iya Adunni, after her cousin's death, takes further actions towards realizing the dream to restore traditional and herbal medicine into full blossom. Iya, Iya Adunni and Eniitan become symbols of every effort at the decolonisation of the knowledge of traditional and herbal medical treatment as depicted in the novel.

Segun's *Eniitan, Daughter of Destiny* depicts the initial friction between the Yoruba indigenous medical practices, which used to be appreciated in pre-colonial era, and the place of this indigenous medicine in the future, and an eventual merging of the two. What she achieves with this novel is the presentation of the idea that the past and the future are complementary rather than opposites. The protagonist and central character, Eniitan, is treated as a social anomaly for the unusual colour of her skin which marks her out as a bronze albino but mainly because she finds herself attracted to traditional and herbal healing practices, as her grandmother was known for, against the largely Westernised climate of her society. Segun depicts the dilemma of Eniitan, whose passion tends greatly towards traditional and herbal treatment, as she falls out with Abike, her sister, because she assumes there is no future for such profession.

Memmi (2006) notes that "in the colonies it was said, sarcastically, that the job of the sheiks, local leaders recruited from the ranks of the colonized, was to grab the goats by the horns so they could be milked more easily, goats here symbolizing the colonized" (4). This aptly captures the mechanisms of neocolonialism which he argues is the reality of postcolonial countries in the stead of decolonisation. His claim is that neocolonialism has replaced decolonisation, which is in fact, more reasons why the process of decolonisation should be reinitiated and maintained. Many postcolonial writers such as Achebe have argued that postcolonialism as it implies

the end of colonialism is an illusion. Decolonisation, therefore, is expected to not only help postcolonial countries to recover from the effects of colonialism but also to disarm neocolonialism.

Oelofsen (2015) also agrees that there is more to decolonisation than political independence. She observes that the reason for decolonisation is to completely break free from colonial legacies that may remain after colonization has officially ended. Some of these legacies include the structure of the economy of the formerly colonized taking after the pattern of the former colonizer's structure of government and social and political worldviews. Oelofsen (2015) also argues that the colonized, especially the blacks, suffer complexes as a part of the psychological effect of colonialism. She cites Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* to drive home the point that psychologically, the colonized is never the same as what they used to be before colonisation, hence the need for decolonisation. She notes that Fanon's book maintains that one of the complexes, which is economic inferiority, could develop into a psychological pathology. Segun's *Eniitan, Daughter of Destiny* also reflects the complexes that Fanon referred to in his book. This explains the death of traditional and herbal healing in Kinseko and its surroundings. There is a constant comparison between traditional medicine and modern medicine in the novel. The first mention of this is found in the description of Iya's profession as she "was reputed to have great healing powers" (Segun, 2014:9) that healed a man who was sick with hiccups which orthodox medicine could not heal. Another instance is in the conversation Eniitan has with her sister, Abike, in the kitchen about the futility of pursuing a career in traditional and herbal medicine. Their conversation depicts their society's disposition and attitude towards traditional medicine as Abike wants Eniitan to complete her university degree programme while Eniitan desires to be a mortician and traditional herbalist. Later in the novel, Iya Adunni's profession as a traditional herbalist is subtly contrasted with her daughter's profession as a paediatrician. Indigenous medicine becomes a victim of these complexes and is gradually forgotten and largely disrespected owing to the popular perception within Iya's society that modern orthodox medicine is superior to traditional medicine. It, therefore, follows that decolonization addresses complexes responsible for the inferiority that African practices, such as medical practices, are subjected to.

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## **DECOLONISING YORUBA INDIGENOUS MEDICINE IN SEGUN'S *ENIITAN, DAUGHTER OF DESTINY***

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African traditional medical practices have been a victim of colonialism as much as other disciplines

such as governance, economy and education. Holistic decolonization efforts would, therefore, involve reviving African medical practices from obscurity which it has suffered owing to the effect of colonization (Abdullahi, 2011). The decolonization of African traditional medicine is reflected in African literature in the works of Achebe (1958) and Segun (2014) amongst others, where it is given a reimagining. This paper takes Yoruba indigenous medicine as a microcosm of African indigenous medicine. The idea of decolonisation has spread beyond the confines of political landscapes into other areas like disciplines such as sociology, education, indigenous psychology, critical theory, feminism; university curricula, economics amongst others. Connell (2018), for instance, advocates the decolonisation of sociology while Juan (2006) advocates the decolonization of indigenous psychology. The decolonisation of tradition is embedded in the decolonisation of culture which is reflected in Ngugi (1987)'s argument, and which is no less important than the decolonisation of concepts and disciplines. From Ngugi (1987)'s discussion on the decolonisation of the mind, the decolonisation of culture refers to the erasing of the legacies and holds of colonial and imperialistic control over the traditions of an indigenous culture. This would then include liberating certain aspects of tradition that has been taken over by the colonial culture and replacing the standard of its credibility by its own presence and relevance to the culture from where it originated.

Svensson (2021) argues that "the process of decolonising in an all-encompassing sense is yet to be fully achieved: dependencies remain, imperial aspirations persist..." (368). Fanon (1963) argues that it is a process that spans a long period of time and in most cases, is a violent and bloody enterprise. Fanon identifies decolonisation as a disruption of an already existing order-one which suppresses people: "decolonisation, which sets out to change the order of the world, is obviously, a program of complete disorder...Decolonisation as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear in itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content. Decolonisation is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature..." (1961, p.36).

Segun is careful not to present Yoruba tradition and European culture as sharp contrasts but she subtly makes reference to the preservation of traditional and herbal medicine alongside western medicine until the end of the novel when Eniitan combines the both. Decolonising Yoruba traditional medicine also involves portraying it as science- only, it is not Western science. In a conversation with Abike, Eniitan tells her that mortification and other things that Iya Adunni does on the estate are scientific. This implies that all sciences do not have to be Western. The science of herbal healing appears to be mastered by

Iya and her cousin, Iya Adunni, who are wary of Western knowledge.

Before the decolonisation of tradition can take place, there must have been the colonization of tradition. Segun highlights the colonization of the tradition of herbal healing and how this has shaped its perception and acceptance in Kinseko, the community where Eniitan and other major characters in the novel live. Abike voices the belief of her society when she expresses her disappointment at Eniitan's interest in Iya Adunni's profession: "don't you know that you have to be initiated into witchcraft like Iya Adunni before you can handle dead bodies?" (50). Their society perceives mortification and herbal medicine as witchcraft, therefore, they stigmatise people who practice it. Abike, for instance, tries to sever whatever connects her to her grandmother and grand aunt who practice traditional and herbal medicine because of the stigma that anyone who openly associates themselves with it suffer. The author presents Kinseko's perception of traditional and herbal medicine as a misconception. Taibatu, for instance, believes that "herbs and animal parts [are used] for preparing traditional medicine" (61), which implies that she, as other members of their society, considers traditional medicine as some sort of witchcraft.

Abike, who had held on to her opinion of Iya Adunni as a witch as her society has shaped her view, realizes otherwise and for the first time, sees Iya Adunni as a woman and mother; she sees Iya Adunni's humanity for what it is after Iya Adunni helps to solve the problem between her husband – Tunde – and her. She returns to Iya Adunni on the estate and begs her for forgiveness. Abike now sees Iya Adunni as the guardian of the knowledge and practice of traditional and herbal medicine which is a part of tradition that should not be allowed to succumb to obsolescence imposed on it by Western colonialism. The character of Eniitan is created to challenge the prejudices that face Yoruba traditional medicine. This is the means by which the author decolonises the practice of herbal medicine which is a significant part of the tradition of society. Later in the novel, Eniitan falls into a trance when she sleeps in Iya's grave in her bedroom on the estate. In this trance, Eniitan sees how the past – Yoruba indigenous medicine in its splendor – fits perfectly into the future of medicine in their society. She, therefore, builds a research facility in honour of Iya where indigenous knowledge of medicine is used to facilitate contemporary medicine.

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## CONCLUSION

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The decolonisation of tradition medical practices is a significant part of the process of decolonisation as a whole. It lays emphasis on the restoration of the medical aspects of a culture to its rightful place of recognition and acceptance. In Segun's novel, she creates Iya, Iya Adunni and Eniitan, and the events around them to drive home the

point that aspects of tradition such as the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine should not be allowed to fall into obsolescence. One of the findings of this study is that embracing the knowledge and practice of traditional and herbal medicine in such societies like Kinseko as Segun created, is in fact, central to the decolonisation of tradition.

Iya Adunni merges the past of Yoruba indigenous medicine with the future in Eniitan. Through the vision, Eniitan understands that a way to save the knowledge and practice of herbal and traditional medicine in her society from extinction is to begin molding the future from a reawakened past. After the vision, Eniitan finally understands her purpose – she is to be the bridge between the survival of Yoruba indigenous medicine and its sustenance and role in the future. By building a research facility that places the past of indigenous medicine at the heart of the future of medical practices in her society, she begins the futuring of Yoruba indigenous medicine and successfully contributes to its decolonisation.

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