Glass Cases and Ancestral Graves: Negotiating the Cultural-Modernity Dialectic in Victor Dugga's *Gidan Juju*

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the tension between tradition and modernity in Victor S. Dugga's *Gidan Juju,* centering on the contested fate of ancestral remains and the symbolic weight they carry in a postcolonial African society. The study employs a cultural–modernity dialectic framework to examine how the drama stages competing ideologies: the preservation of indigenous customs rooted in communal memory versus the imperatives of modernization and global museological practices. Through close textual analysis, the paper unpacks the interplay between sacred burial traditions, ancestral reverence, and the commodification of heritage within state-sanctioned cultural institutions. It argues that *Gidan Juju* dramatizes not merely a conflict, but an ongoing negotiation in which cultural identity is redefined under the pressures of modern governance, global visibility, and historical preservation. The work reveals how the African stage becomes a space for negotiating belonging, legitimacy, and the moral economy of memory in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Glass Cases; Ancestral Graves; Tradition and Modernity; Victor Dugga; Dialectics

Introduction

The encounter between culture and modernity remains one of the most persistent tensions in African postcolonial discourse, manifesting across literature, politics, and performance. In the arena of African drama, this tension often emerges as a site of both contestation and negotiation, reflecting the struggles of societies seeking to retain their indigenous values while adapting to the demands of a rapidly globalizing world. Victor S. Dugga's *Gidan Juju* (The Museum) is emblematic of this thematic preoccupation. The drama stages a heated debate over the fate of ancestral remains; whether they should be reburied according to traditional rites or preserved in a museum for public display; thereby crystallizing the broader conflict between sacred traditions and institutionalized modern heritage preservation.

African drama, from the works of Wole Soyinka to those of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Femi Osofisan, has consistently been a cultural battleground where modernity's promises and perils are tested against the resilience of indigenous customs. In *Gidan Juju,* Dugga situates this battle within a ceremonial and political frame, allowing both traditionalists and modernists to articulate their moral claims. The king's eventual decision to house his great-grandfather's remains in a newly established museum speaks to the allure of modernization as a tool for cultural visibility, yet it simultaneously raises ethical questions about the desacralization of the dead and the commodification of cultural memory.

The symbolic potency of ancestral remains in African societies extends beyond mere physicality; they are the material anchors of identity, community cohesion, and spiritual continuity. In many African cosmologies, the dead maintain an active presence in the lives of the living, acting as guardians, moral authorities, and custodians of cultural ethos. To disturb their resting place is to risk spiritual imbalance and communal discord. Yet, in a modern museological framework, particularly one influenced by Western heritage practices, ancestral relics become artifacts, objects of study, and public exhibition. Dugga's play thus stages not simply a binary opposition but a cultural–modernity dialectic: a dialogue in which both systems of thought attempt to legitimize themselves through appeals to history, morality, and progress.

The relevance of this discourse is heightened by ongoing real-world debates surrounding the repatriation of African artifacts and human remains from European

institutions to their countries of origin. The cases referenced in *Gidan Juju,* including the remains of Saartjie Baartman and the preserved bones of "Lucy", position the play within a transnational conversation about ownership, dignity, and cultural sovereignty. Dugga's text asks whether cultural heritage is best preserved through sacred burial rites that honor ancestral traditions, or through institutional preservation that promises public education and global recognition.

This paper approaches *Gidan Juju* through the lens of the cultural–modernity dialectic, arguing that the play's central conflict encapsulates the broader struggle of postcolonial African societies to reconcile heritage preservation with the demands of modern governance and globalization. Through close reading and engagement with African performance theory, the paper will examine how Dugga dramatizes the ideological stakes of this encounter, and how the resolution offered in the play reflects the complex compromises that define the African modern experience.

Contextual Background

African drama has long been a crucible for negotiating the fraught intersection of cultural heritage and the modern state. In the wake of colonialism, newly independent African nations found themselves grappling with questions of identity, authenticity, and progress. Writers and dramatists have often located these tensions in symbolic spaces: palaces, marketplaces, shrines, where the authority of tradition meets the machinery of modern institutions.

Victor S. Dugga's *Gidan Juju* belongs to this lineage, but it brings the debate into the domain of museology, a modern discipline deeply tied to colonial histories of cultural acquisition. The play's central plot, whether ancestral remains should be preserved in a museum or reburied according to tradition, serves as an allegory for the choices postcolonial societies must make when confronted with Western heritage models.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the cultural–modernity dialectic as its primary analytical lens. Dialectics, in the Hegelian sense, are not simply oppositions but processes through which opposing ideas engage and potentially synthesize. In African drama, this often translates to staged confrontations between modernizing impulses (education, technology, institutional governance) and traditionalist values (ritual, oral history, communal authority).

In *Gidan Juju*, Dugga does not present tradition and modernity as fixed, monolithic blocks. Instead, each is internally diverse. The modernists are not entirely dismissive of tradition; they frame the museum as a way to preserve and honor the past. The traditionalists are not wholly anti-modern; they recognize the importance of legacy but insist on its sacred custodianship. The dialectic is thus about negotiation, not annihilation.

The Drama of Return: Coronation, Authority, and the First Tension

The play opens in the wake of a long absence: a kingdom that "remained without a king for one century" rejoices at the return of Aren Awasku II. The coronation and the public reappearance dramatize the restoration of lineage and the immediate tension between heritage as lived experience and the modern trappings that accompany the returned monarch (pp.15–20). Even in these early scenes, Dugga subtly introduces modernity: Aren's past life abroad, his technology (a laptop), and the discourse of international heritage (talks with UNESCO and returns of artifacts) signal an individual who straddles worlds. His opening words, about rains falling, nests repaired, and the sun shining, situate him as a traditional king in rhetoric, while his embodied identity (educated abroad, with a software company history) complicates expectations of what "traditional" kingship looks like in the contemporary era (pp.15–18).

The coronation passage also previews the play's recurring motif: who speaks for the past? Ashe Ekopo and the Custodian insist on ritual forms and the sanctity of ancestral processes (pp. 16–19). The kingmakers advise prudence, invoking the wisdom of elders and the inviolability of custom. Yet Aren's demeanor (measured, inquisitive, and open to administrative counsel) hints at a leader who will use modern instruments of power to reconfigure the symbolic register of kingship (pp. 17–20). The early tension, then, is between the expectation that rites will re-establish the traditional order and the reality that a modernized subject (Aren) now occupies the throne. The rhetorical seeds of the museum-versus-grave debate are thus planted at the outset: the ancestor's continuity will have to be reinterpreted in light of new historical and institutional claims.

Beauty Pageant, Harem, and Shifting Gender–Custom Dynamics

One of the earliest and most visible ruptures between tradition and modernity in the play is Aren's approach to the selection of queens. The Kingmakers initially outline a

customary process: a "beauty parade" of eligible maidens (ages 15–25), a practice explicitly defended by several elders on grounds of continuity and privilege. The Custodian rationalizes the selection in terms both ritualistic and protective: "No palace is complete without a harem" and the king "has to be seen, not heard" (pp.22–26). Such statements articulate a heavy patriarchal logic linking kingship to polygynous authority and ritual centrality. They also reveal how tradition can objectify women as instruments of dynastic policy.

Nevertheless, Aren's approach is strikingly modern. He questions the ethics of choosing minors ("Fifteen? Is eighteen not the age of consent here anymore?") and later explicitly rejects the arranged parade in favor of meeting the women and speaking with them directly (pp.23–27; p.47). This decision upends an entrenched hierarchy. Dugga stages the exchange where the king insists on personal interviews, contrary to the Custodian's claim that "an egg never sits on a hen" (that is, ritual autonomy), to illustrate how modern notions of agency, consent, and individual encounter destabilize collective ritual forms (p.48). The king's controversial choice exposes the deeper dialectic: modern ethical reasoning (concern for minors, individual rights) clashes with customary prerogatives (the king's exclusive privileges and the ritual normalcy of harem-building).

The interviews with women such as Manyi, Shezi, and Ekeangbo further elaborate these tensions. Manyi's frank commodified ambition: "to end up a queen in the palace and never again have to work for one day in my life" (p.53), reflects the potent modern economic logic that redefines marriage as social mobility rather than ritual continuity. Shezi's candid account of economic survival (running a bar as a strategy against male exploitation, p.54–55) voices modern economic precarity and entrepreneurial agency that complicate simplistic moral judgments about women's roles. Ekeangbo's academic pursuits (plant science) and refusal to be chosen (p.57–59) introduce yet another modern dimension: education, environmental ethics, and autonomous refusal. The social texture of these interviews shows women as active agents in modern social economies; their presence in the palace event stages how modern social choices rework traditional structures.

These incidents also reveal the political stakes of modernization: when Aren privately interviews and ultimately refuses to be constrained by the orchestrated harem selection (p.62–64), he is not simply enacting

personal preference; he signals a broader recalibration of the functions of kingship, no longer merely ritual patriarch but also modern moral actor. Dugga uses the harem episode to demonstrate how modernity modifies not just the public architecture of power but also the private forms of social reproduction.

The Legend, the Curse, and Colonial Unhealed Wounds

Interwoven with the palace's contemporary dilemmas is the play's backstory: the exile of King Awasku I and the subsequent legend of a curse that afflicts the land. The flashback scenes (Scene Four) recount a violent colonial encounter: a British district officer seizes the king, deposes him, and the king pronounces a curse upon the land: "This land shall never profit you nor your queen!", before being exiled with his sacred objects looted (pp.39–46). Dugga's dramatization of the punitive expedition and the ransacking of the palace staggers modern claims to sovereignty with colonial dispossession. The looting of objects (gold, bronze, ritual paraphernalia) and the forced exile of the king are historical ruptures that render contemporary debates about repatriation and museum display not merely rhetorical but ethically urgent.

The curse motif produces a paradox: the bones' return is promised as the prerequisite to removing the curse, yet the bones' return also raises anxieties about death, contagion, and spiritual vengeance. The kingmakers repeatedly invoke the legend: "the curse that would be lifted after he (Awasku I) is returned and buried" (p.61), and this belief conditions their fear of innovation. The colonial theft thus functions as both material injury and metaphysical displacement, setting up the return-of-artifacts moment as recovery and possible re-traumatization. The specter of the curse means that any modernist solution must reckon with the sacred economy of the ancestors, not only with the diplomatic and administrative logistics of restitution.

Repatriation, Diplomacy, and the Museum Proposal

Aren's campaign for repatriation, assisted by Pepe and UNESCO, is one of the play's most explicit modern interventions. The narrative of activism; "for the past ten years, Pepe and I have campaigned and led an activism for the return of illicitly acquired African cultural heritage" (p.65), situates Aren as a modern postcolonial actor who

moves through diplomatic and institutional channels. The arrival of confirmation letters, DNA evidence, and UNESCO funding ($150,000 to facilitate re-entry and installation) evidences a global modern infrastructure that makes restitution conceivable (p.65). Dugga's inclusion of these bureaucratic details reminds the audience that modernity provides the means of recovering stolen pasts even as it reframes how those pasts will be displayed and interpreted.

Aren frames the solution in terms that marry commemoration and civic pedagogy: he will create "The Great Aren Awasku Museum of Gwangwalla" (p.94–95) in the renovated palace hall, converting sacred palatial spaces into institutional displays. The king's rhetoric: "a living evidence to teach continuing valuable lessons to our people" (p.95), emphasizes modern educational objectives. Yet the proposal raises immediate ethical and ritual questions: will the bones retain their spiritual efficacy if enclosed behind glass? Can a museum be a living shrine? Dugga stages this tension so that modern restitution emerges as a double-edged sword: politically redemptive, yet potentially desacralizing.

The Masquerade, the Custodian, and the Fatal Collision of Systems

The most consequential intersection of culture and modernity unfolds in Scene Seven: the events at the masquerade grove. Ekeangbo's research-driven intervention (she goes to the grove to document and observe) brings academic modernity into the ritual precinct. She insists she has "a right to go anywhere I want in this town; you can't stop me" (p.71), reading ritual spaces through a modern lens of inquiry and civic mobility. The Custodian, however, experiences Ekeangbo's presence as sacrilege: in full masquerade regalia, he interprets her presence as a desecration and pursues her into the palace, where his whip inadvertently strikes Queen Pepe (pp.70–72). The ensuing scene, where the Custodian is publicly unmasked under royal command, speaks in cryptic ancestral language, and then collapses to his death, crystallizes the play's warning about the fragility of ritual authority when it is exposed to modern scrutiny and political humiliation (pp.72–83).

The Custodian's unmasking is a performative transgression of tradition's own rules. Within the ritual economy, the mask is not merely costume but the locus of ancestral agency; unmasking the masquerade in public is taboo, a ritual inversion reminiscent of

earlier sacrilegious moments dramatized in African plays (cf. Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*). Dugga intensifies the stakes when the Custodian dies in his masquerade attire after being forced to remove his headgear: the dramatic logic signals not only the ritual consequences of exposure but also the social consequences of modern authority bestowing legitimacy by force (pp.80–83). The elders' paralysis after his death: who will carry out the funeral, who will bear the risk associated with touching the corpse, exposes how modern religious pluralism and legalism (Islamic and Christian leaders declining participation) have eroded the communal reservoir of ritual specialists (pp.81–86).

That the youth ultimately step forward to bury the Custodian (pp.86–87) is critical to Dugga's dialectic: the new generation reconstructs ritual through pragmatic courage. The youth's improvised act (sang a morale-raising song and carried the body) transforms fear into a civic ritual that lacks the old formalism but accomplishes the necessary communal function. Dugga thereby suggests that continuity survives not only through strict adherence to tradition but through adaptive civic action.

Museum as Modern Shrine: Re-naming, Display, and the Politics of Memory

Once the bones and artifacts are returned (Scene Eight), the debate returns to the question of site: burial or museum? The cultural-modernity dialectic becomes even sharper when the play juxtaposes the bones' fate with historical examples of contested remains. Aren himself listens to various viewpoints, citing historical precedents such as the preserved remains of Lucy's bones in Addis Ababa and the repatriation of Saartjie Baartman's body to South Africa:

> EZEANGBO: Your royal highness. There are precedencies. The oldest human fossil bones named 'Lucy' were recovered during excavation and are currently displayed at the museum at Addis Ababa. The second example - the remains of Saartjie Sarah Baartman who was pornographically exploited and dehumanized in life and death in Europe were returned to South Africa and buried. Maybe because she deserves a rest after the physical, moral and racial abuse she suffered in life and in death. (pp. 93-94).

These examples are deliberately "confusing," as Aren admits, because they point to different resolutions of the same dilemma: preservation versus reburial. In doing so, Dugga invites the audience to see that the clash between tradition and

modernity does not yield easy answers but demands contextual negotiation.

The play's dialogue lays bare the rhetorical registers of each position. Ashe Ekopo emphasizes the ancestral claims: "He returns in a way no one would want to return home – only bones, dry bones. But he returns home" (p.89); and frames burial as restorative dignity. Pepe, armed with UNESCO documentation and DNA evidence, argues for public authentication and for leveraging modern institutions to return honor to the dead (pp.88–90). Aren's final decision to preserve the bones in a transparent display, "The bones shall remain transparently showcased as a memorial to a great nationalist… a living evidence to teach continuing valuable lessons to our people" (pp.94-95), reflects both his modern nationalist instincts and commitment to public pedagogy.

The language of transparency is significant: it reveals the modern state's confidence that making the past visible will create legitimate national knowledge. But Dugga's stage directions, when the crowd ululates and the stage "freezes" on the king's proclamation: "The king has spoken!" interrogate whether a public decree by a political leader can replace the slow, ritual-based communal processes of legitimation (p.95). The museum's glass case becomes both a practical solution and a symbol of postcolonial ambivalence: it secures material heritage and grants national visibility, yet it also arrests living memory, turning ancestors into objects of historical pedagogy.

Dugga does not suggest that the museum is a total betrayal. By naming the museum after his great-grandfather and by placing the bones alongside robes and historical narratives, Aren attempts to institutionalize memory in a way that will endure. Ekeangbo's appointment as curator (p.91) further complicates the narrative: a young, scientifically trained woman, representing educated modernity, becomes the keeper of the kingdom's cultural and environmental memory. This hybrid appointment functions as one model of resolution: tradition is conserved, but within and through modern institutions staffed by new kinds of custodians.

Synthesis: Dialectic, Not Defeat

Throughout *Gidan Juju,* Dugga stages moments of rupture (the colonial looting; the harem conflict; the masquerade death) and moments of adaptive synthesis (the youth burial, the museum plan, the curator's appointment). The play's power lies in showing how modernity both undermines and enables culture. Modern institutions like

UNESCO, museums, DNA authentication, provide the technical and diplomatic resources to return looted objects and reconstruct stolen histories. Yet these very processes also demand translation: ancestral meaning must be rearticulated into museum labels, display cases, and pedagogic narratives. Dugga's dramatic imagination is sensitive to both dangers and opportunities; his king's choice is a political attempt to reconcile them.

Importantly, the play keeps returning to voice and authority: who gets to interpret the past? The palace elders ask for ritual solutions; the religious leaders demur; the youth improvise; the queen offers pragmatic trust; Pepe and Aren move in global institutional networks. Dugga's conclusion: bones in glass but remembered; a curator from the younger generation, suggests that the cultural–modernity dialectic does not culminate in annihilation of one term by the other, but in a negotiated co-existence that is imperfect, provisional, and politically mediated.

Conclusion

Victor S. Dugga's *Gidan Juju* stages a complex and urgent conversation about how postcolonial societies manage their cultural inheritance. Through a sequence of carefully staged incidents: the coronation, the disruption of bridal tradition, the masquerade tragedy, the youth's act of burial, and the establishment of a museum, Dugga narrates the thin line between preservation and appropriation, reverence and visibility, secrecy and pedagogy. The play resists facile resolution. It recognizes modernity's capacity to restore and to educate, while also insisting on the spiritual and social grammars that animate ancestral life. The museum in *Gidan Juju* functions as a provisional compromise: it recuperates looted heritage and converts it into national memory, but only on the condition that such a display is cognizant of and accountable to the ritual and communal logics that originally gave those objects life.

In emphasizing adaptation over purity, Dugga offers a pragmatic ethic for postcolonial cultural politics: protect and exhibit, but do so in ways that respect the rhetorical, spiritual, and communal languages of the past. The weeks after the play's final freeze are left implicit; Dugga's drama teaches that the ongoing work:

education, ritual renewal, curatorship, and intergenerational dialogue, must continue beyond the closing curtain if the glass cases and ancestral graves are to remain in productive, not destructive, relationship.

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