

The impact of modernity on cultural practices in *In the Middle of Nowhere* by Ruby Yayra Goka

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Abstract :

This article examines the influence of modernity on cultural practices in *In the Middle of Nowhere* by Ruby Yayra Goka. It highlights the crises and dynamics related to the breakdown and renewal of traditions, through Dr Elaine Grant's confrontation with local values. Using deconstruction from Derrida's perspective and Greimas' semiotic analysis, the study addresses the issue of cultural hybridisation in work of Ruby Yayra Goka. Better, the analysis explains how modern practices, while not eliminating ancestral rites, promote an identity and social transformation in which loss and adjustment coexist. Ultimately, it helps to understand the sociocultural variations within contemporary African communities, emphasising the relevance of modernity as an architect of renewal in societies.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, hybridisation, renewal, loss

Résumé :

Cet article examine dans *In the Middle of Nowhere* de Ruby Yayra Goka, l'influence de la modernité sur les pratiques culturelles. Il insiste sur les crises et dynamiques en rapport avec la rupture et le renouvellement des traditions, à travers le vécu de Dr Elaine Grant face aux valeurs locales. À l'aide de la déconstruction et différence de Derrida, et le carré sémiotique de Greimas, l'étude souligne la dialectique entre tradition et modernité, attestant ainsi une hybridation culturelle. L'analyse explique comment les pratiques modernes, à défaut de liquider les rites ancestraux, favorisent une mutation identitaire et sociale dans laquelle perte et ajustement coexistent. Au final, elle aide à comprendre les variations socioculturelles à l'intérieur des communautés africaines actuelles, accentuant la pertinence de la modernité comme architecte du renouveau dans les sociétés.

Mots clés : tradition, modernité, hybridation, renouveau, perte

Date of Submission: 03-01-2026

Date of acceptance: 11-01-2026

I. Introduction

Nowadays, the concept of cultural identity, an essential pillar of community organisation, is subject to the persistent influences of changes brought about by modernity. In African literature, authors such as Daniel Mengara in *Mema* and Chimamanda N'gozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* express a keen interest in the changes taking place within local communities. Through their characters, Mema's son (Mema) and Kambili (Purple Hibiscus), they highlight the tensions that exist between the transformation of cultural values impacted by modernity and the dynamics of cultural change or adaptation to the realities of the present world.

Like her peers, Ghanaian author Ruby Yayra Goka, in her novel *In the Middle of Nowhere*, addresses the issue of the impact of modernity on cultural practices. In the plot, her main character, Dr Elaine Grant, had difficult relationships with an over ambitious mother who sacrificed her on the altar of professional career. As she grew adult, the young lady decided to take control of her destiny after completing her medical studies. To get away from her mother, she asked to be assigned to the countryside. Her encounters with local communities there allow us to analyse the upheaval of ancestral cultural practices by modernity in the light of identity changes and the dynamism of renewal.

The theoretical framework that will help us to conduct this reflection is based on two approaches: - Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and différence, which will help to deconstruct traditional binary oppositions by highlighting the instability of meanings, and Algirdas Greimas' semiotic square, which will focus on the structural analysis of semantic oppositions and the complex relationships between opposing terms. These theoretical orientations will facilitate the examination of the dialectic between modernity and cultural practices within *In the Middle of Nowhere* through the following axes: first, modernity as the origin of the decline and

rupture of cultural practices, and second, the adaptation and renewal of traditions under the stimuli of the modern era.

1- Modernity as a driver of the erosion and transformation of cultural practices

In Africa, the disruption resulting from changes in local populations' lifestyles, coupled with the rapid pace of these changes, inevitably demands thorough examination of the ongoing transformation process. Modernity, with its innovation, seems to be the obvious cause of the upheavals observed in traditional circles, where confrontations, identity negotiations and the rejection of ancestral practices are evident. Therefore, in order to analyse the revolution underway, we need to focus our thinking on the following concepts: the implications of the practice of exergue, an operating concept that consolidates Jacques Derrida's deconstructive and 'différance' approach; and the binary oppositions arising from the actions of characters, as promoted by Algirdas Julien Greimas' semiotic square. In this regard, in *De La Grammatologie* (1967:13), Derrida describes the essence of exergue. He explains that it should not only announce that grammatology (the science of writing) gives signs of liberation through discreet, scattered and almost imperceptible efforts. However, these efforts belong to their meaning and to the nature of the environment in which they operate. In a nutshell, the exergue heralds the breakdown of traditional hierarchies and rigid binary oppositions by showing that each term carries the trace of its opposite. As for the 'différance' (postponement or extension), Derrida sums it up through the verb to differ to establish, not only, the connexion between the temporal and spatial aspects of the characters' experiences, but also, to deal with the deferral of phenomena impacts on them as they experiences different situations, « *We know that the verb différer (Latin differre) has two meanings which seem quite distinct [...] to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour* » (1982:7)

This stance, interpreting the significance of the exergue, aligns with Greimas' application of the semiotic square to establish oppositions in *In the Middle of Nowhere*. Indeed, in *Du Sens II Essais sémiotiques* (1983:76), Greimas invokes a theory of modality such as that of performance covering factitive and transitive action. Developed further, these elements could lead to a theory of manipulation and a theory of action, through which we can operate the deployment of binary analyses specific to the semiotic square. The four-term structure, emerging from an initial opposition and its negation, grounded in the protagonist's experiences, aids, alongside deconstruction and différance, in exploring the shifts between tradition and modernity.

Indeed, managing the clash between traditional and modern values requires highlighting both ways of life. While tradition and modernity may appear to be in direct opposition, each lifestyle nevertheless bears the hallmarks of its opposite. In other words, there is an interconnection between new values and ancestral values. When Elaine Grant arrives in the Sandema region : « *She hoped for a place....closer to the south. Instead, she'd gotten Sandema. Desperate, she'd grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Now here she was in a land she did not know, with a people whose language she did not speak...* » (Goka 2011:25-26), she brings with her modernity, symbolised by medical innovation, whose precepts are supposed to impact the environment and lifestyle of the local populations. The mission to bring medical care to isolated, underdeveloped populations implies a strong prevalence of ancestral rites and practices inherited from the past, of which fetishists or oracles seem to be the custodians. This cultural crossroads reveals a contrast between the two lifestyles. In reality, despite the unquestionable authority of a healer in the social hierarchy in such places, local populations did not hesitate to rush to Elaine's team:

The villages here are too far for the community health nurse... Small children seeing the car in the distance, started running towards them. They were naked with protruding round shining stomachs. When they got down, the children clustered around him shouting "Tia, Tia"....A few women and some of the older men joined them. To one of the huge trees around which the village was built. (Goka 2011:104)

This clearly reveals a reality, namely the community's need to fill a gap that traditional medicine has been unable to address. Similarly, doctors are obliged to bow to the traditions of the populations they visit if they want to carry out their missions effectively. They accept, as is customary, the water offered to them as a sign of welcome.

One woman with a child strapped across her back approached with two calabashes filled with water. She gave one to Farouk, who gulped it down, and then the second to Elaine. She could feel the eyes of all those gathered on her....She hesitated raising the calabash to her mouth. The water looked clear but you never could tell. She raised the calabash to her mouth and drank as well....She emptied her calabash, "fijiem" she said and handed it back to the woman, who took it and smiled. (Goka 2011:104-105)

Under different circumstances, healthcare workers might express concerns about hygiene or infection risks when given water from a communal container, the storage conditions of which, given the area, raise legitimate doubts. Respecting sociocultural norms, rooted in tradition, thus becomes essential for meaningful community engagement. Furthermore, we can also mention Elaine's inability to convince the young bride, who prefers to wait for her husband's decision before undergoing any surgery:

Her next patient..., a thirty-three year old woman, had a grossly carious tooth that had to be extracted...Elaine explained to her that the tooth could not be saved. She could not have a filling. She'd have to take out the tooth. The woman refused to have the extraction. She said she'd have to ask her husband for permission before taking it out...Elaine wrote medication for her... (Goka 2011 :112)

At this point, it should be noted that this passage recalls the notion of a clause signed before any risky medical procedure, with a view to releasing the doctor from liability in the event of complications. Such a provision, which seems to emphasise compliance with medical procedures in modern medicine, parallels the customs and traditions that require women to respect and submit to their husbands before taking any action that could undermine traditional principles, whether medical or otherwise. This interconnection between modern and traditional practices shows that modernity does not entirely overwhelm tradition but rather recycles it, even reinterprets it, so as to present a dynamism in the dialectical relationship where loss is not total but reconfigured into a latent renewal.

In this process of transformation, it is also useful to identify the key oppositions that can be translated as tradition (A) versus modernity (non-A), as well as loss (B) versus renewal or emancipation (non-B). Through these encounters and rejections of lifestyle, we perceive the complexity of the cultural tensions carried by Dr Elaine Grant, the main character in our corpus, and her environment. When we recall, for example, her failure, as a symbol of modernity, to convince the young fiancée, tradition is thus manifested, but falls under the influence of forces generating a field of conflict leading to a hybridisation of ancestral customs that are still perceptible, albeit challenged.

Therefore, addressing the weakening of ancestral cultural foundations in the new era suggests highlighting the implicit hierarchies embodied by the domination of modern values over the customary practices of the past. The observation of a certain mutual conflictual dependence between these axes thus testifies to the density of the relationships they maintain. In reality, the traditional sphere marked by Sandema's isolation, which remoteness precludes any possibility of access to modern medical treatment, symbolises a gradual disappearance of ancestral medical rites. However, the region remains open to institutional renewal with the advent of modern medical services and contributions to community aid embodied by Elaine and her colleagues.

In addition, we see the emergence of an identity crisis resulting from the clash between modern and traditional values. Elaine's character seems to be going through a period of identity negotiation in search of a true reference point, given her tumultuous past. In fact, the modernity embodied by the doctor seems to weaken her ties to the rites and practices of her people. The rape she suffered as a teenager has developed a reflex that affects her lifestyle as a single mother, in contradiction with traditional norms. Added to this tension is another related to her style of dress (ambivalence about her identity in her choice of clothing), contributing to an image of someone who is uprooted and alienated:

Elaine scanned the content of her wardrobe. A couple of trousers, shirts and blouses...What to wear to work, she mused....She reached out to pull a hanger with a pair of striped navy blue trousers and stopped. Her hand hung in midair. This was predominantly a conservative Muslim community. Would the locals be offended if she showed up in at work in a pair of trousers? She hoped not. She tried to remember if she had noticed any woman in trousers the past week and found out she couldn't (Goka 2011 :27).

The question of the decline of tradition under the influence of modernity is also acute for the other characters, especially those living in the regions visited, in the context of bringing medical services to disadvantaged areas. In reality, Western medical education and dress codes, as well as ancestral customs and prejudices, are all part of a relationship that ostensibly undermines tradition. The renunciation or rejection of ancestral rites in the face of advances in medical science represents a persistent break with customary practices. The chapter about the baby rejected by its biological mother because of injuries caused by customary practices (a widow given in levirate marriage to her deceased husband's uncle, who had to rape her to impregnate her) bears witness to the loss of local values. This situation is exacerbated by the correction of prejudices related to early teething, thanks to the insights provided by Elaine. The postponement and instability of meaning is thus materialised by the apparent loss of ancestral beliefs in the actions of the various characters:

The woman walked for some six hours to bring her grandson here.... 'Is his mother dead? She asked.... 'No she is at home. She refuses to have anything to do with the child....She was leaving in Accra with her husband when he died. His brother inherited her. That's the tradition here....She wanted divorce...He was her husband's uncle. Her husband had no brother....To make her submissive, he raped her and she became pregnant..the old woman is her real husband's mother...He was her only son. This child, though not her blood will carry her dead son's name and inherit his property.... (Goka 2011 : 129)

And :

Her patient was a week-old baby who had teeth...The mother, almost a child herself had covered the baby completely with black cloth and refused to show her publicly....She had tears in her eyes and said the teeth were a sign of bad luck....cowries hung around her neck, arms and legs. The cow horn and cowries were for the protection of the child. Elaine got the interpreter to explain that babies were sometimes born with teeth and there was nothing wrong with it...The child was not abnormal. (Goka 2011 : 127-128)

Finally, the apparent resistance of ancestral rites embodied by women's submission to local norms against the emancipation of women advocated by modernity does not seem to be based on solid foundations. Indeed, the positions taken by the opposites in the semiotic square are gradually changing as a result of the fusion brought about by transformation. This process gives rise to the emergence of intermediate positions. The shift and fluctuation in the meaning of traditional values are thus embodied by the attitude of the old lady. Despite the drama surrounding the birth of the child, she (the grandmother of the rejected baby) decides to flee with the child in order to save it from certain death, to which traditional conventions would have condemned it.

Halfway through the analysis of the relationship between different lifestyles, it becomes clear that tradition is undergoing a clear decline in the face of modernity, despite the resilience shown by individuals. However, does the imbalance observed mean that customary rites and practices are being crushed, or is it a form of conversion and readaptation to the new dynamics of the world? In other words, does modernity only serve to bury tradition?

2 - Modernity between renewal and the abandonment of traditions

The need to improve living conditions is now stimulating innovation, and we are seeing that discoveries and other human developments that impact lifestyle are extending to values, thus creating an air of modernity. Current customs and practices are consequently reflected in the habits of individuals who, forced to adapt, are readjusting their behaviour and thus creating a process of cultural hybridisation. Lee Cronk's observations on the mutual influence of cultural values leading to a coordination of conventions highlight these transformations:

I identify in particular a content-related bias with regard to culture traits that serve to coordinate social behaviors, that is, social coordination conventions..... Such conventions play a large role in human societies, enabling people to interact successfully with one another by providing them with shared expectations regarding behavior in specific situations. The influence that social coordination conventions have on behavior contrasts with other kinds of culture traits, from whose dictates behavior may stray as a result of the influence of other factors (Cronk 2016 :36-37)

In the light of this observation (made by Lee Cronk), the middle ground of modernity, at the intersection of renewal and rejection of old customary norms, seems to be part of a process of cultural renewal and hybridisation. To this end, it is important to note that beyond the apparent antithetical configuration, the relationship between modernity and tradition presents a genuine mechanism of interactions marked by complexity and dynamism. Customary practices are extended through hybridism, in which modernity, rather than engulfing them, incorporates them. This transformation, which situates tradition in a new temporality, helps to preserve and produce a continuous extension of its impact. Roy d'Andradé emphasises the delicate nature of this process when he invokes the relationship between culture and the actions of individuals:

In current anthropological theory there is no clear relation between culture and action. Of course, I can say 'people do what they do because their culture makes them do it'. The problem with this formulation is that it does not explain anything. Do people always do what their culture tells them to? If they do, why do they? If they do not, why do not they? And how does culture make them do it? Unless there is some specification of how culture 'makes' people do what they do, no explanation has been given. (d'Andrade, 1992 :23)

In fact, the behaviour of actors in both lifestyles seems to be guided not only by the dominant cultural sphere, but also retains remnants of the dominated culture. In reality, the current rise of modernity over tradition puts it in a position to transform and harmonise old norms, even though it contributes significantly to their decline. Furthermore, the successful alignment of ancestral practices with modern norms highlights, in an unstable and delayed relationship, a coexistence of loss and renewal despite the conflictual dialogue. Elaine's demons from the past, for example, resurface in the present. She not only disguises her marital reality in order to better blend into the community, but also rushes into the breach of individualism opened by her mother to escape the call of blood ties embodied by the family. This resurgence of past conflicts serves to confirm her status as a character confronted with the difference between the dialectical tension between old and modern values. The following passages illustrate this state of affairs sufficiently:

That's enough Farouk...Yes I lied about Kuku's father.Saying he was dead was easier for both of us...I didn't want her stigmatized. I've never set eyes on my own father...I don't even know his first name ;my mother didn't want me or Kuku.I found out people are kinder to single mothers when they think their husbands are dead. People always blame the mother.I have been alone for four years...I did what I thought was best at the time....I'm sorry... (Goka 2011 :173)

And

The memories came flooding into her mind as if the dam that had been holding them back had broken. "She hit me when I told her Uncle Ato raped me. She drew me out of her house. She disowned me, never once asked about Kuku, and didn't even come to my graduation. When I went to see her in her office, she asked if I had an appointment" ... "She chose her career over me" ... "don't make the same mistakes she made" ... "I took you in Elaine ; I looked after you and your daughter.I asked for nothing in return.This is what I want from you now.Only this." (Goka 2011 :176)

Furthermore, it should be precised that the complex intersection of poles (modernity and renewal on the one hand, tradition and loss on the other) highlights a number of factors within *In The Middle of Nowhere*. In fact, the confrontation between these two spheres reveals a revaluation of cultural foundations, which, when viewed from a perspective of reduced crisis, leads to hybridism. In this regard, the narrative reveals an adaptation of ancestral practices that have remained alive through forms of cultural resilience. The case of the festival commemorating the struggle against slavery, which has become an ancestral tradition called 'Fiok' as recalled in « *Long, long ago, long before Kwame Nkrumah became president, people from other tribes wanted to catch us and sell us as slaves to white people. But our great-great-great-grandfathers did not want to be slaves, so they fought them and sacked them. We celebrate Fiok to remember the war* » (Goka 2011: 37), testifies to a reaffirmed rootedness of the local culture. As for Elaine, her reconciliation with her mother upon her return to her original environment marks her family's ability to adapt and adjust to modern and traditional values:

Kuku naked, ran into the room goggling... “Tell her about me” she implored... “ Tell her good things, Only good things”... “ Elaine, you’re my daughter. You’re just like me—we are proud women but my dear” again she cupped Elaine’s face, “ pride is a very lonely place—at the end of the day, it doesn’t keep you warm, doesn’t make you laugh and has no good memories to share with you. Don’t become like me, angry and bitter and to proud to start over...” (Goka 2011 :185)

Let’s also point out that the favourable reception given to the adjustment of old norms within the cultural framework does not exclude the importance of modernity, but rather positions it as the focus of collective and individual desires for freedom. This dual dynamic in Elaine’s and her family’s experience is reflected in the following ways: first, in the form of assertive freedoms and educational and social actions advocated by advances in medical science; and second, through attitudes that promote cultural foundations by reinventing family relationships, as evidenced by the return of love and family warmth. :

Upon her request, Katherine Mary..wanted to spend her last days surrounded by those who loved her. She’d asked for Elaine’s forgiveness. After her first brush with death, she had time to reflect on her life. She had denied justice to the one person in the entire world who meant anything to her. “I know I haven’t been much of a mother to you. I haven’t been much of anything at all of you, Elaine. I know sorry doesn’t begin to cover all I did but I am sorry, sorry I wasn’t a better mother to you, Elaine I am so sorry”...Elaine...knelt by her mother’s bedside..took her frail hand and wept... (Goka 2011 :183)

Finally, it should be noted that the pivotal role played by modernity in the renewal and breakdown of ancestral practices generates a combination that promotes trends towards autonomy while preserving or returning to tradition. At this level, we observe social advancement and a sudden return to the fundamental principles of life.

In reality, Elaine and her mother follow paths on which they pursue careers with a hint of revenge against the fate that seems to have condemned them to financial and social precariousness. While her mother Katherine sacrifices maternal love for the sake of her professional career to take revenge on the mockery and disdain of the family of her ex-fiancé and Elaine’s father, her daughter fights to prove to her mother that abandonment and sacrifice at the altar of her mother’s excessive ambition will not prevent her from achieving her life goals. However, despite the efforts of both characters to emancipate themselves, the epilogue of the work depicts a return to the sacred bonds of family under the impetus of the grandmother. The latter thus embodies, in addition to the emblematic image of cultural stability, the continuity of traditional principles despite the difficulties caused by modernity:

They were three generations of single women with daughters. She felt the tears come and did nothing to stop them.....“ Mama, why are you crying ? ”Kuku asked. Then getting no response, she started crying herself. Her sobs woke Aunty Nana up. Her mother was in some drug-induced comatose state oblivious to what was happening around her “ Elaine you came ”. Aunty Nana hugged her and hugged Kuku. Then the old lady started to cry herself. (2011 :181)

Overall, however, the compressive potential inherent in modernity has not destroyed the resilience of ancestral practices, which have remained dormant. This reality has imposed a mechanism of hybridisation, whereby the cultural environment continues to reflect a combination of both lifestyles, despite the apparent dominance of contemporary factors.

II. CONCLUSION

At the end of this analysis, we can see that socio-cultural changes in human communities are not immune to the intersection of modern and ancient values. The interest in the impact of new practices on traditions has not escaped the attention of African authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*) and Daniel Mengara (*Mema*). Their main characters, whose actions illustrate this attachment, join Ruby Yayra Goka’s experience in the person of Elaine Grant. Indeed, in her quest for emancipation from the chains of a turbulent past due to the egocentricity of her mother Katherine Grant, she experiences, after her medical studies, the confrontation between modern and traditional values in her new area of work.

This immersion in her new environment motivated us to conduct a study that focused on: the changes made to ancestral practices under the influence of modernity with regard to identity upheavals and the dynamics of renewal. Using Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and différence, followed by Algirdas Greimas' semiotic square, this analysis made it possible to develop the different relationships between new norms and the customs of the past. The demonstration of modernity as a factor that erodes and then aids the transformation of ancient practices highlighted its role in establishing a new balance of values within society. Modern practices thus become catalysts for cultural renewal enriched by ancient norms. They initiate a new configuration resulting from adaptation to contemporary values, while contributing to the determination of cultural identities being reconstituted according to contemporary values.

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