

Leisure corrupted: an artist's portrait of leisure in a changing society

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Abstract:

Theoretical arguments that leisure is the basis of any culture are available. Yet, scarcity in the literature of serious consideration of leisure in non-Western societies demonstrates that the topic has been neglected. One possible explanation for the failure to achieve progress in cultural comparisons of leisure is the lack of data. At least three approaches permit this type of comparison. This paper focuses on a literary approach by investigating how East Africa's most prominent creative writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, treats leisure in his most important English language novels. This analysis centers on two of his novels, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*. The two novels are complex, intricate stories drawing heavily on Western philosophy and literature as well as African folklore. Although Ngugi suggests that leisure is the foundation of civilization, the fibre that makes the cloth of society, he portrays leisure distinctively in social terms likely to surprise those familiar with Western traditions of leisure.

Article:

Introduction

Two concepts of leisure now compete in Western societies. One conceives leisure as that which is done after work: a reward for work, a recreation, and a preparation for yet more work. Reacting to this economic definition of leisure, an existential interpretation is emerging which stresses contemplation, individual transcendence of materialism, and the individual's pursuit of full and free self-expression (Murphy, 1987). Though contrasting dramatically, both stress the individual's relationship to leisure and neglect the classical or humanist view, best expressed by Josef Pieper (1952), that leisure is a cultural matter, in fact the basis of culture, too important to be left to the whims of individual taste.

Leisure's obvious conceptual disparity demands inquiry into the actual experience of leisure in a variety of cultural settings. Indeed, such considerations seem to have been initiated. At least one recent undergraduate text on leisure (Ibrahim, 1991) has attempted to approach the subject entirely through cultural comparison while a major American recreation journal has recently devoted much of an issue to examining recreation in a multi-cultural context (*Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 1989). Yet, scarcity in the scholarly literature of leisure's serious consideration in non-Western societies demonstrates the fact that the topic has been neglected.

One cause of failure to achieve progress in cultural comparison of leisure is undoubtedly the lack of data. At least three approaches permit cultural comparison of leisure. The first is, of course, the conduct of original field investigation by Western and non-Western scholars. Another method would be to re-evaluate early anthropological and ethnographic reports available in the West. The efficacy of this approach has recently been demonstrated in an evaluation of the concept of wilderness in the philosophy and religion of Kenya's Highland Bantu based upon fresh examination of early ethnographic reports (Burnett and Kamayu, 1993). A third approach would be to examine the thoughts of the contemporary, non-Western intellectual elite, particularly novelists, on the subject of leisure. Hultsman and Harper (1992) use this literary approach to interpret the nature and significance of recreations and pastimes in the American South. In the present paper, this literary approach is taken by investigating how East Africa's most prominent creative writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, treats leisure in his most important English language novels. The method used is that of standard literary criticism in which the

author's texts are searched for incidents, allegories, symbols and metaphors that reveal how the author or the author's characters approach a phenomenon, in this case leisure.

Criticism of non-Western literary achievement is sparse and at least initially it may be the most productive approach to the study of leisure in non-Western society. In the humanistic pursuit of leisure, Lahey (1991) advocates a return to literature as a source of data and insight, as well as an object of leisure in its own right. The West is accustomed to studying its own story-tellers and recognizes that these individuals reflect both the situation of mass culture and, to some degree, shape its future. However, the West seems less inclined to extend such recognition to the creative writers of other cultures. There is much to suggest, however, that the story-teller is extremely important in non-Western societies.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels are well suited at both of Lahey's levels. Ngugi tells entertaining, complex tales, offering a leisure experience in their own right. Beyond this, Ngugi explores many aspects of the leisure condition in a rapidly changing society and draws creatively on African folklore to critique several Western concepts — most notably classicism, Christianity, existentialism and Marxism. Hence, his novels emerge as excellent supplementary reading to standard texts in leisure philosophy, such as Dare *et al.* (1987), Goodale and Godbey (1988), and Kelly (1987).

The author

Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born in 1938 in Limuru, Kenya. He attended the prestigious Alliance High School in Nairobi and continued on to the Western-oriented Makerere University and then to the University of Leeds, in the United Kingdom. He has been described as a 'novelist of the people,' for his works show his concern for the common masses of Kenya (Gaiownik, 1977).

Ngugi, throughout his career, has worked to free himself from the effects of such non-African influences as colonialism and Christianity. In the late 1960s Ngugi was one of the faculty members who successfully convinced school officials at the University of Nairobi to transform the English Department into the Department of African Languages and Literature. His commitment to the Kenyan culture was further demonstrated by his declaration to write only in Gikuyu or Swahili, as opposed to English. As a professor and writer, his work has stirred controversy with his consistent anti-colonial theme cultivated and woven expertly in his novels. His outspoken criticisms of contemporary Kenyan politics have posed threats to his personal security. His home was searched in 1977 by Kenyan police who then detained him. After his release a year later, he left his country for a self-imposed exile in London.

Ngugi is best known in the West for five English language novels: *The River Between* (1965), *Weep Not Child* (1964), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), *Petals of Blood* (1977), and *Devil on the Cross* (1983). Taken together, the five novels examine Kenya from the late pre-colonial period through to the early years of nationhood. This analysis centers on two of these novels, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* (cited as AGOW and POB hereafter). These are narrative, realistic 'whodunnits' stylistically most available to Western readers. *A Grain of Wheat* concerns the events in a single village immediately prior to *uhuru* (independence), and at its simplest level it investigates the betrayal of Kihika, a fictional Mau Mau hero. A murder mystery, *Petals of Blood* investigates the fire and political murders at a house of prostitution in Nov Ilmorog. The two novels are complex, intricate stories drawing heavily on Western philosophy and literature as well as African folklore.

Ngugi is a major, accomplished and controversial writer who has elicited a considerable critical response. The leisure reader need not be concerned with Ngugi's criticism, but for any reader intent on serious textual interpretation, it is unavoidable. Two monographs on Ngugi (Killam, 1982; Cook and Okemnimkpe, 1983) examine the purpose and design of each novel as well as subtleties of Ngugi's method. Among those subtleties is Ngugi's intricate use of subjective symbols (where the symbol is manufactured by a character) and objective symbols (where the symbol is inherent in the nature of the object itself). This aspect of Ngugi's art is examined by Jabbi (1985). Many of Ngugi's symbols, and indeed many aspects of his plots, depend on clever uses of

African folklore and traditions that are unavailable to most Western readers. This difficult subject is examined by Haring (1984).

An aspect of African tradition that Ngugi uses particularly well is the position of women in society. Cruelly overworked and often abused, they remain the pivot about which society turns. Cochrane (1984), consequently, examines the character development and plot influences of Ngugi's women, themselves allegories of freedom. Finally, Ngugi's novels are essentially political statements; however, his Marxism is that of the African farmer rather than the urban proletariat. This political posture is examined by Ngara (1985, pp. 75-85) and Sharma (1988), though Muhoi (1973) is useful in that he allows Ngugi to express his political ideas himself.

The Gikuyu

Ngugi is a Gikuyu and the subject of his artistry is the change faced by the Gikuyu as first they succumb and respond to British imperialism and then as they contend with the new independent state of Kenya, a political entity Ngugi clearly regards as little more than a client of global capitalist neo-imperialism. The Gikuyu (also Kikuyu), the largest ethnic group in Kenya, are a Bantu speaking people who have long inhabited the Kenyan Highlands south and southwest of Mount Kenya. The Bantu migrations in East Africa, as well as other aspects of Bantu history are summarized by Maxon (1989, pp. 68-74; 99-101) while Muriuki (1975) deals with the Gikuyu specifically. Their ethnography has been thoroughly examined by Kenyatta (1965), Kenya's hero of independence and first president, in a now classic anthropological study, the first such study of an African people conducted by an African.

As is true of the Bantu generally, the Gikuyu have been an agricultural rather than a pastoral people. However, their association with surrounding pastoralists have introduced them to many elements of pastoral culture as well as having considerably elevated the status of livestock ownership in Gikuyu society. Oral tradition, age-sets and councils of elders have determined social convention, but the Gikuyu were 'stateless,' lacking centralized leadership, and acknowledging no political authority beyond the clan, and even that with considerable reservation.. Their traditional communities were dispersed family homesteads scattered along the numerous mountain ridges of Gikuyuland.

The Gikuyu, occupying the agriculturally productive Highlands, took the brunt of British colonial penetration into Kenya and then led the resistance to it in the 'Emergency,' as the British called the Mau Mau Rebellion. During Mau Mau, the British, in order to protect the Gikuyu from their rebellious brethren, the Forest Fighters, and in order to diminish the people's support for the rebels, reorganized the ridge communities into centralized villages.

Leisure idealized

Using a single one of these new villages, Thabai, as the stage, *A Grain of Wheat* reveals the Gikuyu on the verge of *uhuru* and through a series of complicated flashbacks that make time into a labyrinth, it examines the social situation leading up to *uhuru*. The Gikuyu's leisure lives are presented in this atmosphere of constant social transitions and drastic transformations.

Ngugi portrays the pre-colonial life of the Gikuyu, including their leisure and recreation, idealistically and romantically. He is bluntly nostalgic for the past, a past that probably never was. Romanticizing the past and developing a nostalgia for it is anathema to any socialist, certainly any socialist as totally committed as Ngugi, whose dealings with the past have disturbed some of his literary critics (e.g. Ngara, 1985; Sharma, 1988). Nostalgia, idealization of the past and the expectance of its return with *uhuru*, however, undoubtedly accurately portrays the attitude of the masses on the verge of Kenyan independence. The construction of a lost paradise and the expectance of its restoration allow Ngugi to develop a powerful metaphor based on the central theme of *A Grain of Wheat* that *uhuru* is fundamentally flawed.

Consequently, independence puts the past to rest and heralds the people to a future-demanding their action and their acceptance of responsibility for the world they are now free to build. The parallel that runs between the

upheaval and change in the Western world and that in the world of Ngugi's novels widens their appeal. Awareness of the continued search for the age-old dream of leisure and freedom through recreation, raises the question explored by Ngugi of whether people can abide in a world of their own creation.

Martin (1978) argues that recreation and meaning are intimately associated, an unpopular idea in reward-oriented capitalist societies where recreation is trivialized by its non-utilitarian emphasis. Ngugi, concurring with Martin, links recreation first and most fundamentally with labour, particularly craft. The labourers, not yet robbed of their craft, embody the freedom, creativity, and spontaneity of leisure. Gikonyo, the village carpenter, for example, is portrayed enraptured by his work, ' . . . the touch of the wood always made him want to create something.' (AGOW, p. 81). But even those engaged in less skilled labour speak with reverence of their work. The women of the village list with pride, their duties:

We have got to live . . . Yes, we have the village to build . . . And the market tomorrow and the fields to dig and cultivate ready for the next season . . . And children to look after (AGOW, p. 242).

Some adjusted to colonial rule and transferred their work ethic to their new masters' estates. Pathetic is Ngotho:

. . . working in the farms, the way the old man touched the sod, almost fondly, and the way he tended the young tea plants as if they were his own . . . (*Weep Not Child*, pp. 29-30).

However, for most, colonialism's final indignity is experienced as work activities, formerly a labour of love, are transformed to virtual slavery leaving the Gikuyu corrupted and alienated. Ngugi's emphasis on the dignity of labour, a subject about which the school teacher, Munira, lectures his pupils in *Petals of Blood* (p. 21), arises from the peculiarly social nature of labour in pre-colonial Gikuyu society. Labour may feed an individual but more significantly labour builds the social order. This social foundation of activity carries directly into recreation. Neither work nor recreation, as a means by which the acquisitive ego achieves, has the slightest relevance for self-actualization. Rather, to the Gikuyu, achievement is social and consequently, recreation and work are social as well. Gikuyuland is awash in tradition. Elaborate ceremonies, rich with dance and song, and communal prayers embroider market gatherings, plantings, cultivation and harvests, and thereby build a strong and healthy social order. Especially in the markets, a social and recreational attitude prevails:

. . . where women from various ridges congregated to sell and buy food and exchange gossip, (AGOW, p. 70).

Or among the herders who would:

. . . descend on the store and drink and talk and sing about their cows and goats, (POB, p. 8).

The new railway station becomes a focal point for leisure,. . . a meeting place for the young . . . ' where on Sunday, . . . people just went there to meet one another, to talk, to gossip, to laugh . . . (AGOW, p. 71). And from there:

. . . they, normally went to dance in Kinenie Forest overlooking the Rift Valley. Guitar players occupied a place of honor in this community; beautiful girls surrounded them and paid tribute with their eyes (AGOW, pp. 71-72).

The pride radiating from Gikuyu ceremonies is reflected in the warmth and pleasure of their story-telling gatherings:

. . . a common entertainment in their family . . . home was especially a nice place when all the brothers and many village girls and boys came in the evening and, sitting around the fireplace in a big circle, they would gossip, laugh and play (*Weep Not Child*, pp. 21-22).

These sessions, in many ways equivalent to school in the West, decorated with legendary tales and rich folklore, eventually become dominated by stories of patriotism and the Freedom Fighters in their struggle against imperialism. Storytelling sessions created heroes:

They remembered heroes from our village, too. They created words to describe the deeds of Kihika in the forest . . . (AGOW, pp. 203-04).

It is in such story-tellings, that Kihika develops his revolutionary will:

Kihika's interest in politics began when he was a small boy and sat under the feet of Warui listening to stories of how the land was taken from black people . . . Unknown to those around him, Kihika's heart hardened towards 'these people,' long before he had even encountered a white face . . . Kihika fed on these stories: his imagination and daily observation told him the rest; from early on he had visions of himself, a saint, leading Kenyan people to freedom and power (AGOW, p. 83)

In the time of war, Wambui, an elderly female character, reflects on the importance of these sessions:

It is like our elders who always poured a little beer on the ground before they themselves drank . . . why did they do that? It's because they always remembered the spirits of those below. We too cannot forget our sons (AGOW, p. 20).

The Gikuyu maintain a view of leisure that elevates labour and they preserve a story-telling tradition that equals education. Therefore, Western-style education in its most complete form would be viewed by the Gikuyu as unconnected to leisure. The reader is told: 'Education is the light of Kenya' (*Weep Not Child*, p. 39). But doubts quickly arise:

'Education is everything' Ngotho said. Yet he doubted this because he knew deep inside his heart that land was everything. Education was good only because it would lead to the recovery of lost lands (*Weep Not Child*, p. 39).

And later, in *Petals of Blood*, many of the characters begin to recognize Western education, functionally, as merely demeaning propaganda:

The education . . . was meant to obscure racism and other forms of oppression . . . it was meant to make us accept our inferiority so, as to accept their superiority and then rule over us (POB, p. 165).

In fact, among Ngugi's protagonists exposed to Western education, all are failures as a result of rebellion against its authoritarian minions while those who succeed at Western education are generally identified with the increasing and threatening number of collaborators.

People are certain that political freedom is prerequisite to their leisure and the world they idealize. Warui speaks of it directly, 'Our people, is there a song sweeter than that of freedom? Of a truth we have waited for it many a sleepless night'. (AGOW, p. 21) and then Koina sings:

we shall never rest
without land
without freedom true
Kenya is a country of black people (AGOW, p. 21).

But *uhuru's* arrival reveals it as intensely flawed; Mugo, a village hero is exposed as a fraud, traitor and murderer; a strange and dreary drizzle possesses the land; and Warui reflects directly on the disappointment:

Something went wrong . . . , it was like warm water in the mouth of a thirsty man. It was not what I had waited for, these many years (AGOW, p. 241).

Wambui too reflects on her disappointment, recognizes the imperative for action, but fails to respond:

Wambui was lost in a solid consciousness of a terrible anticlimax to her activities in the fight for freedom. . . . Then she shook herself, trying to bring her thoughts to the present. 'I must light the fire. First I must sweep the room. How dirt can so quickly collect in a clean hut!' But she did not rise to do anything (AGOW, p. 243).

The story closes as an exhausted Wambui, refusing the call to action, leaves the reader perplexed and anxious about an uncertain future.

Leisure corrupted

That uncertain future arrives in *Petals of Blood*, acclaimed as a remarkably clear ideological statement and a major achievement in socialist literature (Ngara, 1985). In it, Ngugi calls the people to collective action for the collective good, a call from within a capitalist world dominated by the selfishness of the individual. *Uhuru* delivers Kenya to the collaborators and their allies, international capitalists. The collective good is sacrificed for the benefit of a few unscrupulous villains while the people are frozen by their inaction. It is an ugly, corrupted world where even the land is a red, eroded and lacerated master of a helpless people.

Far from the peace and harmony hoped for in *A Grain of Wheat*, leisure in *Petals of Blood* is transformed into a commodity, a commercialized tool of international capitalism and neo-colonialism that corrupts the people and maintains their alienation. Four friends, hurt refugees from a world of chaos, flee the collective angst to a small, isolated village. But even here, torn as they are by their individualism, they fail to achieve the sense of community that is so idealized in *A Grain of Wheat*.

At the most basic individual level, the four main characters of *Petals of Blood* are imprisoned by a world dominated by alcohol. Alcohol is Ngugi's metaphor that speaks directly to the debasement of Western society where it is integrated into sports and college life, and where it forms the basis of the entertainment industry. In Ilmorog, its use and eventual abuse is interwoven into the very structure of society so that story telling, for example, breaks down into debauchery. The local butchery, bar and beer hall, a single shop, becomes the centre of town life where guests are expected to spend the night drinking *Theng'eta*, a home brew with some characteristics of hashish. Eventually mass-produced, its brewing is commercialized and the drink foisted on the working class.

Prostitution accompanies alcohol abuse. The few wealthy former collaborators use their riches to seduce and impregnate their neighbours' teenage daughters. The community wrath falls on the girls while their seducers escape any consequence, often finding ways, in fact, to turn their deeds to their political advantage and profit. Wanja, one of the four characters in Ilmorog, the setting for *Petals of Blood*, is such a 'fallen woman'. She eventually opens a house of prostitution and it is this house that becomes the victim of arson and associated murder upon which the novel turns. The theme of chaotic lives, in which leisure becomes a perversion and headlong escape from freedom and responsibility, is extended beyond the individual to society in general. The citizens of Ilmorog, in desperation, eventually take this situation to the politicians in Nairobi. Their effort attracts the full fury of 'development.' Plots are carved from the various farms to make a shopping centre and as shops are planned, people are required to apply for building permits. A mobile van from the African Economic Bank arrives to explain to the peasants and herders how they can acquire loans. The loans, of course, sour and eventually town ownership is concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few while the citizens become debtors and servants in their own home.

Tourism plays a special role in the development of the 'new' Ilmorog and attracts Ngugi's special wrath. Tourism turns the ritual and ceremony of society into a commodity, prostituting the very fibre of it, a prospect

first noted with disgust by Karega (POB, p. 104), the voice of socialist awareness. Ilmorog becomes a place where:

. . . tourists came to hire private planes for a quick venture into the interior to see the wild game parks and return to the city before dark (POB, p. 161).

In the hotels the women come to perform the song and dance that had previously bound society together (POB, p. 292). The prostitution is often more literal than symbolic, for young girls are offered to tourists as 15 year-old virgins (POB, p. 175). The exploitative impacts of tourism lead villagers to conclude:

This is what happens when you turn tourism into a national religion and build it shrines of worship all over the country (POB, p. 134).

The new Ilmorog degenerates into a dehumanized town of:

. . . neon light; of bars, lodgings, groceries, permanent sales, and bottled Theng'eta; of robberies strikes, lockouts, murders and attempted murders, of prowling prostitution in cheap night clubs, of police stations, police raids, police cells . . . (POB, p. 190).

Dehumanization is symbolized by, 'The juke-box had driven out all the live bands' (POB, p. 303), replacing the guitarist with his human frailties and creativity so admired by the girls with beautiful eyes in *A Grain of Wheat*.

Leisure restored

If Ngugi provided the reader with only an exploration of leisure's demise in an absurd, selfish world, he could be dismissed as an interesting but inconsequential bantering nihilist. Ngugi rises above this by offering to a world gone mad with its own self-conceit, a solution through the voice of the socialist, Karega, the one character to achieve something of an existential awakening. Karega beckons us to create a new world:

'Must we have this world? Is there only one world? Then we must create another world, a new earth,' he burst out, addressing himself to all the countless faces he had seen and worked with (POB, p. 294).

Karega's new world is a call to action but it goes beyond the existential awakening of the individual to call the masses to collective action for the common good; as such, it rejects individual self-actualization as a goal and transfers the requirement of existential achievement to society:

. . . since the only thing he had now was his two hands, he would somehow sell its creative power to whoever would buy it and then join with all the other hands in ensuring that at least they had a fair share of what their thousand sets of fingers produced (POB, p. 302).

This labour in pursuit of collective good annihilates the self and returns the individual to communal being:

'Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they enjoying and loving creative labour. . . .' For a minute he was so carried on the waves of this vision and of the possibilities it opened up for all the Kenyan working and peasant masses that he forgot the woman beside him . . . and he knew he was no longer alone (POB, pp, 344-45).

In Karega's awakening, Ngugi brings the reader full circle, returning at last to the social order of the pre-colonial village but in so doing, he rejects romantic nostalgia and returns to a village oriented to the future and eager for change. Karega makes the point clear:

. . . we must not preserve our past as a museum: rather, we must study it critically, without illusions, and see what lessons we can draw from it in today's battlefield of the future and the present. But to worship it —

no. Maybe I used to do it. But I don't want to continue worshipping in the temples of the past without tarmac roads, without electric cookers, a world dominated by slavery to nature (POB, p. 323).

Implications

Literary criticism performs several functions. At its most unremarkable level, through the book review, the critic seeks to unite the author with a potential readership, to bring together the producer and the market. Lahey (1991) suggests that leisure studies should turn again, in the humanistic tradition, to literature as a source of experience and of insight into the process and meaning of leisure. It is hoped that critical essays focused on leisure will provoke that interest, as is the case with Hultsman and Harper (1992). With Ngugi wa Thiong'o, serious students confront artistic application of leisure that is compatible with major Western presentations in, for example, Kelly (1987), Dare *et al.* (1987) and Goodale and Godbey (1988), but in a context that is startling. If nothing else, Ngugi, while freely using Western philosophical insight, is non-Western to the verge of being anti-Western. Consequently, students of leisure who have the opportunity to read his novels are required to examine leisure in a highly critical fashion, allowing no complacent acceptance of Western heroes promulgating tenets that are seldom as obvious as they seem. In other words, Ngugi's views are comprehensible yet shockingly foreign to Western students, forcing them to re-examine their own actions and beliefs with new insights.

At an entirely different level, literary criticism seeks to discover and disclose the full complexity of an artist's creation, thereby enhancing the serious reader's understanding and appreciation of the creation. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is not obviously concerned with leisure and never uses the term directly. Rather, he is concerned with social and political change in his culture; therefore, his interest in leisure is limited to its cultural context. As an African, Ngugi ultimately portrays leisure distinctively in social terms likely to surprise those familiar with Western traditions of leisure. Possibly closest to Pieper (1952) among Western philosophers, Ngugi agrees that leisure is the foundation of civilization, the fibre that makes the cloth of society. Pieper argues (p. 17) that culture depends on leisure, indeed *is* leisure, but that leisure is possible only when linked to *cultus*, devine worship. As a Catholic philosopher, Pieper clearly understands that *cultus* is a collective social enterprise. Ngugi merely substitutes the rites of society for Pieper's *cultus*. Indeed, since the rites of society are linked to the ancestors, one might argue that Ngugi maintains in fact, Pieper's link of leisure to devine worship.

So profound is Ngugi's insight that he refuses to trivialize leisure with a definition or to make any effort to distinguish it from labour. He passionately empathizes with the sense of achievement the individual acquires from labour and leisure: his characters' voices tremble with passion, they feel the unity of earth and heaven, and they ride on strange waves that carry them to bear glad tidings (AGOW, p. 78). However, unlike Western existentialists, Ngugi quickly dismisses individual achievements derived from leisure and labour as the incidental by-product of the social order. The individual achieves a meaningful sense of being through, and only through, a society that works for the common good. Leisure is, consequently, worthwhile only in its social context, a characteristic of African recreation generally (Burnett, 1989), rewarding when the society pursues the common good, a perversion in a society that panders to individual egos. This idea need not be accepted as dogma, but its assertion in Ngugi's novels is a challenge to any serious Western student or scholar of leisure. Endeavoring to meet this challenge naturally widens intellectual horizons and compels rejection of ethnocentric views in pursuit of leisure philosophy.

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